

EVERYONE'S ALL-AMERICANS: RACE, MEN'S COLLEGE ATHLETICS, AND
THE IDEAL OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

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ABSTRACT

GREGORY JOHN KALISS: *Everyone's All-Americans: Race, Men's College Athletics, and the Ideal of Equal Opportunity*
(Under the direction of Professor John F. Kasson)

Reactions to the integration of college sports provide a unique perspective on shifting attitudes toward race, manliness, equality, and the quest for civil rights. As previously-white institutions of higher learning gradually (and grudgingly) opened their playing fields to African-American athletes in men's basketball and football, black and white spectators interpreted mixed-race team sports in often contradictory ways. This dissertation analyzes the public discourse that surrounded five black male pioneer athletes at predominantly white schools. It reveals the anxieties, hopes, frustrations, and triumphs of ordinary Americans on both sides of the color line as they encountered new public representations of black masculinity, negotiated the changing terms of racial identity, and reconsidered the American ideal of equal opportunity. Although often relegated to the realms of entertainment and leisure, college sports were central to discussions of fairness and equality in American life, as observers consistently employed sports metaphors, such as the "level playing field," to discuss the ideal of equal opportunity. Just as countless Americans debated, and continue to debate, policies such as affirmative action, differing expectations of sports as a model for society revealed the tensions that underlay the significant changes in the nation's racial politics. The range of these diverse reactions can be seen in the project's five case studies: Paul Robeson at

Rutgers College, 1915-19; the 1939 University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) football team; Wilt Chamberlain at the University of Kansas, 1955-58; Charlie Scott at the University of North Carolina (UNC), 1966-70; and the integration of football at the University of Alabama, 1969-73.

To Leigh, with thanks and love.

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Introduction

College Sports and the “Level Playing Field”

In the November 1939 issue of *The Crisis*, the monthly publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an editorial named a rather unusual “honor roll.” Instead of successful black students, or even black businesses or schools, the list consisted of predominantly white southern universities: Southern Methodist University, Texas Christian University, Duke University, the University of Oklahoma, and the University of Maryland. What had these schools done to deserve being so honored? All had played football games in the previous year against racially-integrated teams from schools in the North and West. Considering the tenacious hold of Jim Crow segregation over the South, and the exclusion of African-American athletes from every major professional sports league, including Major League Baseball (by far the most popular and lucrative professional circuit), these contests were indeed significant developments in the realm of sports. But the editors of *The Crisis* saw implications beyond the playing field, writing: “Fair play in sports leads the way to fair play in life. May the honor roll increase!”¹

Although the NAACP’s emphasis on encouraging racial integration in American society helps explain the editors’ eagerness to assign larger meanings to these football games, they were hardly alone in their assessment of sports’ potential to model fairness in American life. In countless publications, observers throughout the twentieth century

¹ “Editorials: Football Honor Roll,” *Crisis*, 46, no. 11 (November 1939), 337.

identified the “level playing field” of sports as a realization of the “American dream” of equal opportunity. The notion of a meritocracy, deeply embedded in American culture, seemed best realized in athletic competition, an arena many hoped could be free from the racial and class prejudice that affected millions of Americans’ opportunities in business, politics, and social life. When barriers to participation fell—when, for example, blacks could compete against, or later for, white southern schools—the path seemed clear for players to succeed on the playing field or court by merit alone. Their effort and ability, not the color of their skin, would determine their standing as athletes. Many observers on both sides of the color line clung to this ideal as proof that the American democratic system could work, that an equal opportunity society was, in fact, possible.

That faith constitutes the central theme of this study, which explores Americans’ responses to changes in the nation’s racial politics. By analyzing the public discourse surrounding men’s college athletics from 1915 to 1973—in black and white newspapers, national magazines, school publications, memoirs, legal documents, and correspondence—I trace how Americans on both sides of the color line used sports to discuss and contest issues of race, equality, and masculinity. The range of these diverse reactions can be seen in my five case studies: Paul Robeson at Rutgers College, 1915-19; the 1939 University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) football team; Wilt Chamberlain at the University of Kansas, 1955-58; Charlie Scott at the University of North Carolina (UNC), 1966-70; and the integration of football at the University of Alabama, 1969-73. As the varied responses to these pioneering athletes will illustrate, sports, and college sports in particular, far from being a leisure activity disconnected

from individuals' sense of their culture and identity, were absolutely central to how many people conceived of American society.²

This project builds on scholarship that identifies popular culture's capacity to encompass a wide range of cultural values, and is rooted in the belief that popular entertainment plays a vital role in "culture" as historian Warren Susman defines the term: "the *forms* in which people have experienced the world—the patterns of life, the symbols by which they cope with the world."³ Although residing in the leisure-time realm of "fun" and "play," supposedly remote from the everyday world and its consequences, spectator sports grew tremendously in popularity in the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, often mirroring the altered rhythms of everyday life as American society shifted and changed. In watching sports, in reading about the games, and in discussing the performances afterward, people drew entertainment value from the competition, but they also used sports as a shared cultural language to help them understand their world. In this context, Elliott Gorn writes in *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* that sports history is enmeshed with "ideology,

² Throughout this dissertation, I use the term "integration" to refer to the process by which black athletes fought for the right to play for athletics teams at predominantly white universities and colleges. Although some civil rights scholars argue that desegregation is a more appropriate term, because true and equitable integration remain an unrealized ideal in American life, the vast majority of the commentators I discuss in this project believed in, and articulated, a vision of racial integration. Indeed, that faith, as expressed through college sports, lies at the heart of this study.

³ Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003), 185. Some of the better works that consider the cultural implications of popular entertainment include: John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); W. T. Lhamon, *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990); Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986); and Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

ethnicity, social class formation, violence, urbanization, gender roles, religious world views, productive relationships”—and we must include racial identities.⁴

As historians’ interest in sports has burgeoned in recent years, the relationship between American sports and the social construction of race has constituted a key subject of scholarly inquiry for historians and sociologists alike.⁵ Many scholars have focused their analysis on sports’ ability—or inability—to change racial beliefs. This topic has dominated sports history, particularly in recent years, as historians, sociologists, and journalists have sought a middle ground between two competing, and often overly simplistic, arguments.⁶ On the one hand, some analysts and commentators have found sports to be an advanced model for social change, emphasizing its function “as an even field of fair play, one that rewards merit in an unbiased fashion and, in doing so, serves to break down social divisions and boundaries.”⁷ Historians John Bloom and Michael

⁴ Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 12.

⁵ There are many excellent scholarly works that address the confluence of sports and race. See, for example: Joseph Dorinson, “Black Heroes in Sport: From Jack Johnson to Muhammad Ali,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 31, no. 3 (1997): 115-135; D. Stanley Eitzen, *Fair and Foul: Beyond the Myths and Paradoxes of Sport*, 3d ed. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006); Elliott Gorn and Warren Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sports* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993); C. Richard King and Charles Fruehling Springwood, *Beyond the Cheers: Race as Spectacle in College Sport* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001); Patrick B. Miller and David K. Wiggins, eds., *Sport and the Color Line: Black Athletes and Race Relations in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Jules Tygiel, *Baseball’s Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Jules Tygiel, *Extra Bases: Reflections on Jackie Robinson, Race, and Baseball History* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); and David K. Wiggins, *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in a White America* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

⁶ Racial integration in sports has become a hot topic in recent years for journalists and Hollywood film producers. Book-length treatments include: Barry Jacobs, *Across the Line: Profiles in Courage: Tales of the First Black Players in the ACC and SEC* (Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2008); Nelson George, *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992); and William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete* (New York: Crown, 2006). Hollywood films include Boaz Yakin, dir., *Remember the Titans* (Buena Vista Pictures, 2001) and James Gartner, dir., *Glory Road* (Buena Vista Pictures, 2006).

⁷ John Bloom and Michael Nevin Willard, eds., *Sports Matters: Race, Recreation, and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 2. For a good summary of some of the principal works on sports and

Nevin Willard have argued that the media, “driven by the market demand to sell a product to audiences,” tends to take this position, “[portraying] sports institutions as benign agents that promote a ‘color-blind’ social vision.”⁸ On the other hand, other scholars have emphasized the limitation of sports to effect change, and have even suggested that sports act more effectively as a barrier to progress. Thus, Bloom and Willard caution that “sports have served to shore up social distinctions and identities as often as they have served to break them down.”⁹ For example, in his controversial book *Darwin’s Athletes*, John Hoberman argues that sports “probably do more than anything else in ... public life to encourage the idea that blacks and whites are biologically different in a meaningful way,” which sustains negative stereotypes such as supposed black intellectual inferiority.¹⁰ Similarly, journalist Robert Lipsyte cautions that success in sports: “probably has been detrimental to black progress. By publicizing the material success of a few hundred athletes, thousands, perhaps millions, of bright young blacks

race, see Jeffrey Sammons, “‘Race’ and Sport: A Critical, Historical Examination,” *Journal of Sport History*, 21, no. 3 (Fall 1994), 203-78. See also Steven A. Reiss, “The New Sport History,” *Reviews in American History*, 18, no. 3 (September 1990), 311-25.

⁸ Bloom and Willard, *Sports Matters*, 2. See, for example, Charles H. Martin, “The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow in Southern College Sports: The Case of the Atlantic Coast Conference,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, 76, no. 3 (July 1999), 253-84; Larry Platt, *New Jack Jocks: Rebels, Race, and the American Athlete* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); Ron Thomas, *They Cleared the Lane: The NBA’s Black Pioneers* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

⁹ Bloom and Willard, *Sports Matters*, 2.

¹⁰ John Hoberman, *Darwin’s Athletes: How Sports Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), xiv. Hoberman’s book—particularly his critique of the black middle and upper class—generated a firestorm of controversy and protest. For an effective critique, see Jeffrey T. Sammons, “A Proportionate and Measured Response to the Provocation that is *Darwin’s Athletes*,” *Journal of Sport History*, 24, no. 3 (1997): 378-88. For examples of other scholars skeptical of sports’ ability to change racial beliefs, see Donald Spivey, “The Black Athlete in Big-Time Intercollegiate Sports, 1941-1968,” *Phylon*, 44, no. 2: 116-25 and Neil J. Sullivan, “Baseball and Race: The Limits of Competition,” *Journal of Negro History* 83, no. 3 (1998): 168-177.

have been swept toward sports when they should have been guided toward careers in medicine or engineering or business.”¹¹

Any serious study of race in American sports requires recognizing the possibilities and the limitations of sports to effect significant change in racial attitudes. While many have identified the symbolic value of integrated athletic competition, of blacks and whites coming together to achieve success and earning acclaim from mixed-race audiences, others have noted the ways that observers could compartmentalize black athletic achievement, ascribing black success to “natural” or “primitive” qualities.¹² As historian Donald Spivey notes, these conflicted responses to black athletic achievement have a long history in college athletics. As early as the 1890s, black stars encountered both praise and derision, being “simultaneously scorned and loved,” and enduring a curious “dual existence” that mirrored many African Americans’ experiences outside the realm of sports.¹³ All five case studies amplify this theme, as fans, journalists, and even

¹¹ Robert Lipsyte, *SportsWorld: An American Dreamland* (New York: Quadrangle, 1975), xi.

¹² Although a number of scholars have taken a cautious approach in considering the influence of sports and other forms of entertainment, Pamela Grundy and Brian Ward offer particularly compelling models of analysis. Grundy, in her book on the history of sports in North Carolina, argues that on the one hand, “athletic success could promote the kind of pride that gave individuals the confidence to challenge the status quo, and the solidarity of team play could offer an inspiring example for collective endeavor.” On the other hand, athletic success did little to resolve long-standing economic inequalities and to change significantly long-held beliefs in racial inferiority. Indeed, she contends that “when it came to the details of forging plans for a more just, diverse society, the model of competition and individual effort embodied in athletic games offered limited guidance and could even prove an obstacle.” See Grundy, *Learning to Win: Sports, Education, and Social Change in Twentieth-Century North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 301. Brian Ward’s analysis of rhythm and blues music offered a similar caution for assessing popular music’s capacity to inspire change. Ward warns that “genuine admiration” by whites “for black music did not necessarily challenge basic white racial beliefs and assumptions at all, but frequently served to reinforce them.” Because whites often associated black music “with the unremittingly physical, passionate, ecstatic, emotional and, above all, sexually liberated black world of their imaginations,” they emphasized long-held stereotypes about blacks instead of seeing African Americans as equals. See Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 14.

¹³ Spivey, “Black Athlete,” 116-7. Spivey links this response to black athletes to Martin Luther King’s observation that American society “both loves the Negro but is repelled by him.”

other players and coaches responded uneasily to the presence of black athletes in their midst. These conflicted reactions also spoke to the changing terms of racial egalitarianism over the course of the twentieth century.

Black Americans, particularly members of the black press, have been aware of this dual reading of athletic achievement for decades. When black Olympians were permitted to perform with the U.S. national team in the 1936 games, the black editors of the *St. Louis Argus* could not help note the irony that African-American men could represent their country on the playing field, but could not vote in many states, and were systematically denied employment opportunities and legal protections across the nation. They ruefully observed: “Negroes in the United States are and are not. They are granted citizenship rights in some things but are denied citizenship rights in others—a kind of subsidiary existence.”¹⁴ In spite of these criticisms, the black press embraced integrated athletic competition as a means of promoting African-American advancement in other areas of life, at least through the mid-1960s. Pursuing a strategy of “muscular assimilation,” many black leaders hoped black success in sports would lead white Americans to recognize the potential of African Americans to contribute meaningfully in all aspects of society.¹⁵ As my research reveals, black publications across the country, including *The Crisis* in New York, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Kansas City Call*, and the *California Eagle*, celebrated black athletic achievement, lamented incidents of discrimination, and expressed their hopes that sports would open up ever-more areas of American life to equal black participation.

¹⁴ Wiggins, *Glory Bound*, 71.

¹⁵ Patrick B. Miller, “To ‘Bring the Race Along Rapidly’: Sport, Student Culture, and Educational Mission at Historically Black Colleges during the Interwar Years,” in Patrick B. Miller, ed., *Sporting World of the Modern South* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 129-52 (quotation on p. 131).

Those hopes would become more cautious in the 1960s and 1970s, and articles in *The Carolina Times* and the *Birmingham World* reflected the growing unease with integration's unintended effects on black-run institutions while still finding hope in black athletic success.

Mainstream white newspapers did not generally promote athletics as a way to advance black civil rights. However, they nonetheless consistently praised sports as an arena free from prejudice and bigotry, where sportsmanship dictated fair play between all participants. Often ignoring racial slights and the verbal and physical abuse levied on black athletes, these publications clung to the idea of sports as a color-blind institution in American life. Yet their own coverage belied those ideals, as sportswriters consistently identified black athletes' race (never doing so for white athletes) and often employed language that linked black achievement to natural or primitive qualities—trends easily observed in the case of Robeson at Rutgers, and manifesting themselves more subtly in later years. Blackface minstrelsy's popularity left an indelible mark in the world of sports reporting as well, as images and accounts of black athletic performance frequently employed the exaggerated physical features and malapropisms characteristic of the minstrel stage.¹⁶ Coverage of the 1939 UCLA team showcased this tendency in particularly evocative ways.

College sports provide a unique opportunity to explore differing perceptions of racial and civic identity, black masculine endeavor, and equality. In an era when professional basketball and football had yet to reach a broad national audience and

¹⁶ See, for example, Michael Oriard, *King Football: Sport and Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio and Newsreels, Movies and Magazines, the Weekly & the Daily Press* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), and William H. Wiggins, Jr., "Boxing's Sambo Twins: Racial Stereotypes in Jack Johnson and Joe Louis Newspaper Cartoons, 1908-1938," *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 1988).

achieve the heightened levels of income and stardom we know today, college sports, principally football and men's basketball, were tremendously popular and important to many communities, as fans connected team success to a sense of civic pride. Football games, for example, were often surrounded by weekend-long social events that brought fans from across an entire state together. Since fans often saw local college stars as emblemizing how their team, school, and even region were better than those of their competitors, college athletes were particularly intense receptacles for hopes and anxieties. College star athletes were also icons to their fans, who followed their exploits closely, and all five of my project's case studies were superior talents widely recognized for their skills. Moreover, college sports reached across the nation in a way that professional sports did not. Even Major League Baseball remained an upper Midwest and Northeast phenomenon until it gradually started to move west and south in the mid-1950s. Because men's college athletics were popular across the country, their contests illuminated responses to desegregation in locations and time periods often absent from traditional civil rights histories.

The athletes being discussed in these varied locations were almost exclusively male—a sign of traditional gender assumptions and the dearth of opportunities available to women athletes throughout most of the twentieth century. Men's basketball and football, both in the past and into the present day, constituted the most popular and financially-lucrative sports in the collegiate realm, and thus provide the focus of my five case studies. The gendered nature of these sports naturally affected people's perceptions of athletic achievement. Historian Gail Bederman has noted, for example, that nervous whites in the early decades of the twentieth century “were obsessed with the connection

between manhood and racial dominance” and often looked to public spectacles such as athletics to affirm their beliefs.¹⁷ Those white anxieties manifested themselves in sports coverage throughout the twentieth century. For black leaders, sports offered the possibilities of claiming access to positions restricted to white male citizens and disproving stereotypes of black male inferiority. As historian Pamela Grundy argues in her history of twentieth-century North Carolina sports, athletics could lead to “a shift in the images of black manhood circulating through North Carolina society.” Instead of falling back on “deep-rooted stereotypes of African Americans as shiftless, undisciplined, overly emotional, and potentially dangerous,” white southerners were forced to see black males in particular in new lights as they “began to show themselves in public in new ways” through both athletic achievement and civil rights activism.¹⁸ The discourse surrounding the athletes in all five case studies reflected this potential.

Black athletic success could also be seen to have important ramifications regarding citizenship. Although athletics were seemingly far-removed from the realms of politics and the law, they had the potential to alter people’s conceptions of African-Americans’ place in society, what the political theorist Judith Shklar has referred to as the idea of citizenship as “standing.”¹⁹ Having a black man earn praise and recognition as a star athlete indicated a certain level of respect that most African Americans, and other suppressed minority groups, aspired to. This understanding of citizenship helps explain

¹⁷ Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 4.

¹⁸ Grundy, *Learning to Win*, 282.

¹⁹ Judith N. Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 2. By standing, Shklar means: “one’s place in a hierarchical society,” for Americans, “their relative social place, defined by income, occupation, and education.” Citizenship as standing requires at least “a minimum of social dignity,” what I have referred to as “respect.”

why so many black leaders continued to believe in athletics' transformative possibilities: public respect and admiration for African-American achievements and contributions to society revealed blacks and whites on an even plane, overcoming symbolic and legal barriers that relegated African Americans to an inferior position. It is worth noting that efforts to claim white male prerogatives through sports usually built on traditional gender ideals that emphasized the man's power within the family, building on the ideal of the (white) male breadwinner.²⁰ Understanding citizenship as standing in this way also underscores why whites beholden to Jim Crow attempted to minimize, and denigrate, the achievements of black athletes—threats to the privileged position of the white male breadwinner were not taken lightly.

Given the many contradictory readings that observers made of integrated sports competition—including proof of black male potential, a justification for the continued degradation of African Americans, and, as we will see, a host of responses in between these polarized reactions—it is no small wonder that commentators on both sides of the color line continued to turn to sports as a powerful symbol of equal opportunity in action. These shared hopes for sports' inherent fairness, expressed by writers across the nation and over the course of many decades, often, however, masked very different readings of some key ideals. In particular, the malleability of the term *equality* made it possible for observers to assign different meanings, and draw different lessons, from the achievements of black sports figures. Even when a variety of people all lauded sports as being a proving ground for equality, or equal opportunity, they often had conflicting ideas of what those terms meant. Indeed, as the political theorist Bernard Williams has

²⁰ Steve Estes, *I Am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 7.

noted, even bigots generally believe that all human beings share certain fundamental characteristics that make them deserving of fair and equal treatment. Prejudiced people simply operate from the assumption that something such as a person's race correlates with "other considerations which are at least candidates for relevance to the question of how a person should be treated: such as insensitivity, brute stupidity, and ineducable irresponsibility."²¹ This way of thinking helps explain how white southern writers could praise the "democracy" and "equality" of the United States while still supporting the legal system of Jim Crow segregation that relegated African Americans to an inferior position in society. Their visions of "democracy" and "equality" rested on rarely stated assumptions of white superiority in a variety of human characteristics. However, as commentators discussed black stars in their respective contexts, they often outlined a more precise vision of those ideas, circumscribing athletics' importance or "explaining" success by falling back on damaging stereotypes.

Even among those opposed to segregation or the idea of racial bigotry, the notion of "equal opportunity" was a slippery concept that accommodated a wide range of meanings. As Williams argues, although most express support for "the ... equal opportunity for *everyone in society* to secure certain goods," a variety of interrelated factors often make achieving that goal impossible, and open the door to a wide range of interpretations.²² For example, a state university could consider black students for admission on equal terms with whites and insist that it was fulfilling the goal of equality of opportunity. However, if most black high school students in the state went to under-

²¹ Bernard Williams, "The Idea of Equality," *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 97-114. Quotation from 100.

²² Bernard Williams, "The Idea of Equality," 109.

funded, segregated schools, leading to lower test scores and admission rates, one might wonder if black students in the state truly had “equal” access to state schools. According to Williams, people need to do more than agree to a nebulous goal of equality of opportunity: instead, they have to ask, what manner of opportunity is enough? The central challenge for a society attempting to reward all of its citizens on the merits of their efforts alone is to address pervasive inequalities in upbringing, wealth, and education. Complexities such as these were rarely discussed in the press, but sports provided an opening for this dialogue. In their competing interpretations of these athletes’ careers, including Chamberlain’s role as a “race leader” at Kansas, black and white writers (often unwittingly) wrestled with competing definitions of equality and equal opportunity precisely because of the widespread belief in sportsmanship and the level playing field

College sports, then, had the capacity to contain a wide range of meanings regarding race, manliness, citizenship, and equality. A popular activity among diverse spectators—young and old, men and women, black and white—college sports could serve as a lingua franca for many Americans, a more accessible mode of communication than the relatively abstract languages of law and politics. When people discussed the experiences of these black athletes, they articulated their sense of how American society worked, and how it ought to work. The discussions of these stars both epitomized larger trends in the long struggle for black equality and also revealed local idiosyncrasies and exceptions that shed light on the diverse experiences of Americans along the color line.

Chapter One, “An Athlete in a Time of War: Paul Robeson and the Meanings of Race, Manliness, and Equality,” explores reactions to Robeson’s career as an All-American football player at Rutgers College from 1915 to 1919. Although Robeson would earn considerable fame later in life as an actor, singer, and activist, his first entry in national public discourse came from his considerable talents on the football field, where he helped pull perennial also-ran Rutgers briefly into the ranks of the elite. In the waning years of “Muscular Christianity,” just after black boxer Jack Johnson’s loss of the heavyweight championship, and as the U.S. prepared for war in Europe, Robeson’s extraordinary career inspired black and white observers, although the terms by which they discussed his career suggested very different conceptions of black men’s proper place in the nation.

Chapter Two, “The Talk of the Season: Race, Democracy, and the 1939 UCLA Football Team,” studies responses to the very successful football squad fielded at the University of California at Los Angeles in the fall of 1939. With three black starters—Kenny Washington, Woody Strode, and Jackie Robinson—this team offered hope to many blacks and whites who saw the New Deal era as an ideal time to craft a new civic nationalism that could welcome the contributions of ethnic and racial minorities. The increasing threats of Hitler’s fascist regime, and its hate-filled rhetoric, fueled discussions of how this team might (for good or ill) represent an expanded sense of American egalitarian democracy.

Chapter Three, “A Tall Order: Wilt Chamberlain, Race Relations, and the Politics of Black Masculinity in the Heartland, 1955-1958,” explores the extraordinary response to the legendary 7-foot basketball player during his time at the University of Kansas. As

the modern civil rights movement began in earnest, with the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* acting as a catalyst, Chamberlain's reception by blacks and whites prodded observers to consider the barriers to full black male citizenship. Recruited explicitly by area black leaders to help improve "race relations" in the area, Chamberlain attempted to perform a number of tasks in the glaring media spotlight that accompanied him: lead his team to a national championship, set a good example for African-American youths, and convince whites to abandon racial segregation (which existed in the supposedly "free state" of Kansas).

Chapter Four, "Un-Civil Discourse: Charlie Scott the Integration of College Basketball, and the 'Progressive Mystique,' 1966-1970," analyzes black basketball star Scott's experiences at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Although North Carolina, and the town of Chapel Hill, especially, had reputations for "progressive" attitudes regarding race and equality, Scott's experiences revealed the resistance of southern whites to black claims for civil rights. Attempting to balance his desires to help his team, convince southern whites that racial integration was feasible, and advocate on behalf of African Americans, Scott found little support in the state's mainstream media, who avoided generating conflict and refused to discuss racial issues frankly. Scott's frustrations spoke to the challenges faced by African Americans attempting to break through the numerous, and often invisible, barriers of the Jim Crow South.

Chapter Five, "'To End the Racist and Discriminatory Practices': Alabama Football and the Struggle to Integrate, 1969-1973," analyzes the long process of desegregating one of the South's most popular college football teams. Celebrated head coach Paul "Bear" Bryant's hesitance to integrate his highly-successful squad angered

many, particularly because his stature, esteem, and racially-moderate views appeared to make him an ideal candidate for such a task. Hemmed in by the words and actions of avowed segregationist governor George Wallace, however, Bryant cautiously waited to welcome black athletes to his squad. In the summer of 1969, the student group the Afro-American Association took matters into their own hands, filing a lawsuit in federal court to force the school to seek out black athletes for its prestigious program. In the years that followed, the team showed both the possibilities and limitations for sports to model an integrated society in the Deep South, as debates over affirmative action and black activism presented considerable obstacles for southern whites and blacks to overcome in the waning years of the civil rights movement.

Despite the very different cultural, political, and economic contexts these pioneer athletes lived through, observers on both sides of the color line consistently turned to them as symbols of change, some seeing them as models of hope for an equitable society and others as harbingers of doom for an established way of life. These diverse reactions help us understand the issues that were at stake as these athletes moved onto previously privileged courts and fields—nothing more or less than the definitions of U.S. citizenship, the place of athletics in American life, the proper roles of universities and colleges, changing definitions of gender and racial identities, and the fundamental contours of American democratic society. As these players achieved great success—all of them earning the rank of “All-American” on at least one occasion—while facing racial abuse and idealized praise, they channeled ordinary Americans’ aspirations of what their nation might be.

The changing tenor of responses to these celebrated black athletes reveals the gradual evolution of Americans' sense of egalitarian democracy. When Paul Robeson took the field for Rutgers in the 1910s, prominent northern and southern white leaders had no qualms marking out full citizenship as the exclusive preserve of white, educated men. Many key black leaders, including Robeson himself, limited their own calls for black equality to basic legal, political, and economic rights, willing to forego, for the moment, social integration. By the late 1930s, many black and white Americans hoped for a more expansive civic nationalism that welcomed the contributions of previously-disparaged minorities, including African Americans. The negative response to Jackie Robinson and his teammates at UCLA indicated that that vision of American democracy had not yet taken hold as the dominant ideal.

But by the mid-1950s, after the pivotal events of World War II and the start of the modern-day civil rights movement, increasing numbers of black and white Americans called for a society in which blacks and whites shared not only equal legal protection, but also access to the same social spaces. Although some attempted to cling to segregated society, support was slipping. However, certain issues remained contentious—who would lead this newly-integrated society? Whose social spaces and economic institutions would remain intact when the walls of segregation came down? What steps were necessary to insure African Americans' economic equality with whites? These debates increased in urgency from Wilt Chamberlain's time in Kansas, to Charlie Scott's career at UNC, to the torturous process of integration at the University of Alabama. In many ways, those questions have been left unanswered. The color-blind society aspired to by supporters of an expansive civic nationalism has been attained in some respects—in laws

prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations, education, and housing—but has proved elusive in others. Although many white Americans continue to affirm the reality of the American dream of equal opportunity, most African-American leaders and other social critics are more skeptical. The dialogue surrounding the experiences of these black athletes helps explain why those significantly different interpretations exist, revealing the contentious issues surrounding civic leadership, social activism, and affirmative action that divide Americans even to this day.

Chapter One

An Athlete in a Time of War: Paul Robeson and the Meanings of Race, Equality, and Manliness

Spectators at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn, New York, on the afternoon of November 24, 1917, witnessed a remarkable sight: deliriously excited white Rutgers College football fans storming the field and carrying a black player by the name of Paul Robeson on their shoulders in celebration. The occasion was Rutgers' stunning 14-0 victory over the Newport Naval Reserves, a veteran All-Star squad that had dominated some of the best teams in the Northeast. That the upstart Rutgers College team won was quite an achievement; that its best player was a black man, the only black player on either squad, made the event even more significant. In an era when African-American men were often depicted as mindless brutes or shiftless criminals, and as the nation's armed services joined the fight to "save democracy" in World War I, Robeson's achievements engendered debates about the meanings of equality and had the potential to upend conventions of manliness and race. Indeed, his success in this contest, and the white fans' post-game enthusiasm, inspired one black writer to suggest sending an article about the game to Assistant Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, who had recently snubbed black men for prime positions within the U.S. Navy.¹ Leading an integrated team to victory, and earning the praise and adulation of white fans and media members alike, Robeson, in this moment and throughout his career, provided an entry point into on-going

¹ Lester A. Walton, "Robeson Latest Football Star," *New York Age*, 29 November 1917, p. 6.

debates about the nation's sense of its egalitarian ideals, debates that nearly always intersected with gender and racial beliefs.

Robeson's career, and the many responses to it, reveals sports' centrality to discussions of fairness and equality in American life. Although Robeson was not the first African American to participate in major college sports, he was among the first national black stars in college football, rising to prominence in the sport as it reached an ever-wider audience, and earning significant media coverage because of his proximity to the numerous publications centered in New York City. As black and white observers, especially newspaper writers, covered Robeson's career, they drew lessons that extended well beyond the playing field. At the tail end of the era of "muscular Christianity," during the build-up and commitment to World War I, and directly immersed in a time of white male anxiety about cultural supremacy (particularly in the wake of the controversial African-American heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson), Robeson's achievements provoked diverse reactions. Through the numerous voices, on-campus and off, that discussed this athlete over the years 1915-1919, we hear vital debates about racial equality, claims for full citizenship, masculinity, and the proper functions of higher education.

Muscles, Race, and War: U.S. Culture in the 1910s

The years surrounding U.S. entry into World War I are a particularly rich historical moment to consider the intersection of inter-racial college sports with these larger issues. The cultural historian Clifford Putney has identified these years as the denouement of the religious cultural movement dubbed "muscular Christianity," which

was, roughly defined, “a Christian commitment to health and manliness.”² Many religious leaders, worried about “the supposedly enervating effects of urban living,” promoted a vision of godliness that entailed vigorous physical activity. Their efforts increased the popularity of groups such as the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), spawned new organizations such as the Boy Scouts, and led to the popularity of such noted preachers as former baseball player Billy Sunday.³ By the late 1910s, this movement had attained widespread popularity across the country, particularly with white Protestant Christians. Many supporters of Muscular Christianity linked this idea with broader concerns about white manliness in general, fearing that the Anglo-Saxon stock was losing its physical vigor. As more women moved into the workforce and clamored for the right to vote, and as African Americans sought true equality in American democratic institutions, many Anglo-Saxon white men felt threatened, fearing that they were losing the status and power associated with their privileged place in the nation’s citizenry. As a result, these white men made repeated efforts to promote the virtues of white masculinity in a variety of cultural outlets, from sports, to the World’s Fair, to fictional figures such as the popular Tarzan of the Apes.⁴ Cultural definitions of manhood were changing as well, for both blacks and whites, as Victorian ideas of

² Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 2. Secular leaders also picked up on this interest in the moral values of physical activity. Charles Thwing, in the *North American Review*, for example, argued that playing college football improved athletes’ ethical values by teaching focus, teamwork, and work ethic. See Charles F. Thwing, “The Ethical Functions of Foot-Ball,” *North American Review*, 173 (November 1901), 627-31.

³ Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 1.

⁴ See Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 4, and John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

manliness based on character and production shifted to a modern masculinity based on consumption and the body.⁵

In this climate, sports could have potentially far-reaching implications. Many African-American leaders hoped to pursue a strategy of “muscular assimilation,” where black success in sports would lead white Americans to recognize the potential of African Americans to contribute meaningfully in all aspects of society.⁶ Anxious white Americans, alternatively, often saw white success in sports as affirmation of white males’ supposedly intrinsic superiority. A writer for the *North American Review*, for example, analyzed the results of the 1906 Olympics and concluded that athletes of Northern European backgrounds fared much better than those of other ethnic stocks, leading him to argue that “blood must be constantly recruited from Northern Europe” into the U.S. in order to prevent a “race-suicide.”⁷ In this strain of analysis, sports affirmed both the superiority, and the endangered status, of Anglo-Saxon stock. White fears of racial defeat and the claim for “muscular assimilation” came from two markedly different perspectives and were often incompatible with one another. In debating these ideas about sports’ significance, writers inevitably wrestled with meanings of race and national identity.

⁵ As Martin Summers argues, a number of scholars have suggested this transformation. Summers believes Warren Susman’s analysis of the new “culture of personality” is vital to understanding this shift. See Warren Susman, “‘Personality’ and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture,” in Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003). For an interesting analysis of the shifts in black masculinity in this era, albeit one that gives sports short shrift, see Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁶ Miller, “To ‘Bring the Race Along Rapidly,’” 131.

⁷ Charles E. Woodruff, “The Failure of Americans as Athletes,” *North American Review*, 186 (October 1907), 199-204. Quotation from 204.

Two events in the 1910s drew particular attention to these issues and made the careers of athletes such as Robeson strike an even more resonant chord: Jack Johnson's claiming of the heavyweight championship in 1910 and U.S. involvement in World War I. Much has been written about the life and career of Johnson, who was not only the first black heavyweight boxing champion, but also a man who delighted in thumbing his nose at racial mores.⁸ Marrying white women, driving expensive cars, and wearing fine clothes, Johnson refused to accept any limitation imposed on him because of his race—an attitude that greatly upset many white observers.⁹ When on July 4, 1910, Johnson defeated former white boxing champion James Jefferies (who had been coaxed out of retirement solely to “restore” the championship to the white race), his victory appeared to many to reveal “that the heirs of Shakespeare were not the manly, powerful beings they had thought—that ‘primitive’ black men were more masculine and powerful than ‘civilized’ white men.” In the wake of Johnson's victory, numerous race riots broke out across the nation as white men indiscriminately attacked black people, threatened by Johnson's symbolic victory.¹⁰ Coming in the immediate aftermath of Johnson's defeat for the heavyweight championship by white boxer Jess Willard in 1915, Paul Robeson's athletic career garnered extra attention because of the racial controversies associated with Johnson's rise to prominence. Now that Johnson was no longer champion, would another black athlete challenge white male prerogatives?

⁸ See: Al-Tony Gilmore, *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1975); Thomas R. Hietala, *The Fight of the Century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002); Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York, Free Press, 1983); and Geoffrey C. Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (New York: Knopf, 2004).

⁹ Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 5.

¹⁰ Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 42.

World War I also raised the stakes for Robeson's athletic career. Even before the U.S. officially entered the conflict in the spring of 1917, build-up for the war effort had begun, and numerous commentators saw the war as an opportunity to prove American virtue and hardiness on the battlefield. As Putney notes, even ministers joined in the fray, overwhelmingly supporting the war.¹¹ Military leaders saw sports as helpful training exercises for prospective soldiers, believing that rope-climbing, gymnastics, boxing, swimming, and other athletic contests would create healthier men and would improve their "smartness, activity, and precision."¹² When the war started, both the U.S. Army and Navy created athletics' departments within the Commission of Training Camp Activities. These officials worked with the YMCA to create a variety of activities that would keep soldiers fit and occupied. The leaders of these groups hoped that sports would "promote and maintain military efficiency and morale" by providing a number of benefits beyond being a healthy diversion. Some believed that soldiers "developed a quality of courage and aggressiveness" from taking part in sporting contests, and others believed that soldiers learned "persistence" by taking part in physical competitions. Sports could also help undue the feminizing effects of civilized society, creating a "harder, stronger masculinity" among the troops.¹³

¹¹ Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 163.

¹² See Wanda Ellen Wakefield, *Playing to Win: Sports and the American Military, 1898-1945* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 6-7. Some took this belief in sports' war-time practicality even further: one commentator, for example, believed that throwing a baseball was good practice for tossing a hand grenade. In some baseball games in army camps, players for both teams wore gas masks, to diminish their fear of gas and get them used to performing while wearing them. See Wakefield, *Playing to Win*, 26.

¹³ See Wakefield, *Playing to Win*, 12-14. Military leaders hoped, in part, that athletic activities would prevent soldiers from drinking and acquiring sexually-transmitted infections in their spare time.

As discussions of manliness pervaded war-time discourse, many black leaders saw the war as an opportunity to prove black equality through heroic performances on the battlefield. Historian Mark Ellis argues that many black leaders supported black involvement in the war to protest the attempts of many whites, particularly southerners, to keep blacks from being drafted; these black leaders wanted to prove that men of their race were capable of serving, and would serve, loyally and effectively.¹⁴ Noted African-American author and activist James Weldon Johnson argued, for example, that the actions of a typical black man as a soldier would “increase his feelings of equal citizenship and strengthen his claim to equal citizenship.”¹⁵ These beliefs regarding military service carried over to support for sports participation as well. Although some athletic programs, such as those at Harvard and Yale, canceled their football seasons to focus on war preparation, the military generally supported the continuation of both professional and college sports during the war, because of their value as a training ground for future soldiers.¹⁶ In this light, the achievements of black athletes could either support or refute black claims for equality in a broad spectrum of manly activity, including war-making. As the metaphors of war circulated through sports discourse, including the use of terms such as “bomb,” “clash,” and “battle,” athletic contests such as football games seemed to indicate the capacity of the races to participate in the protection of the nation—in other words, to determine who qualified to serve as a citizen-soldier.

¹⁴ Mark Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance: African Americans and the United States Government during World War I* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 4-14.

¹⁵ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 13.

¹⁶ Wakefield, *Playing to Win*, 20-21.

As black and white commentators described the athletic achievements of stars such as Robeson, they inevitably linked these men's performance on the gridiron to the broader concerns of their time. Black writers consistently saw athletics as an arena in which African-American male equality could be tested, and tried to apply its lessons directly to major issues of the day. Black publications took two major approaches.¹⁷ First, they attempted to utilize integrated athletic competition as a model for other aspects of society, where allowing blacks to compete equally would enable African Americans to prove their equality with whites. Second, they used the careers of African-American scholar-athletes to contest long-held pejorative stereotypes of black men by emphasizing these athletes' well-rounded character. White observers, on the other hand, appeared to support egalitarian ideals, suggesting that sports were free from racial prejudice, but were often uncomfortable with using sports to instill lessons for other aspects of life. As a result, they tried to minimize black athletic achievement by assigning credit to other white teammates or coaches, or by emphasizing "primitive" qualities that supposedly enabled black success.¹⁸ Although there were exceptions, both groups tended to see athletics as an arena in which male vigor and virtue could be tested; their desired outcomes, however, were quite different. While one group hoped to indicate African-American equality in all walks of life through athletic excellence, the other desired to

¹⁷ For purposes of this paper, I have focused on four different African-American publications; the *New York Age*, which covered Robeson's and Pollard's exploits largely because they played in the New York area and were thus a local attraction; the *Crisis*, the official voice of the NAACP, which was white-owned but was edited by noted black leader W.E.B. DuBois and purported, at least, to speak for and to African Americans; and the national black newspapers the (Baltimore) *Afro-American* and the *Chicago Defender*.

¹⁸ In the local community, I have used the Rutgers College student newspaper, the *Targum*, the New Brunswick (N.J.) *Daily Home News*, letters of university administrators, scrapbooks, and yearbooks. Given the proximity of Robeson to New York City, I have also analyzed three mainstream papers from that city: the *Tribune*, which covered sports in the most depth of the New York papers; the *Times*; and the *Sun*. I have also noted articles from other white publications, including newspapers from other cities and also more specialized publications such as alumni magazines.

minimize the implications of that excellence as much as possible by confining its relevance to a fairly limited area. Meanwhile, Robeson added another powerful voice to these debates, outlining his own vision of blacks' capabilities. Using his success and status to articulate the legal, political, and economic manifestations of racial prejudice, Robeson challenged negative images of black men through his varied accomplishments and perseverance through emotional and physical abuse. At stake was the dominant cultural belief that future virile white male leaders would continue to carry the banner of civilization (and white supremacy) throughout the world.

A Black Athlete at a White School: Unwelcome Guest, Beloved Star

Paul Robeson was the youngest of six brothers and sisters, the son of a minister. Born in Princeton in 1898, he and his father (his mother died when he was very young) moved to Somerville, New Jersey in 1910, where he attended an integrated high school. Excelling as a student at sports, academics, and the arts, Robeson also learned, according to biographer Martin Duberman, "that accomplishment [could] win respect and applause but not full acceptance," and he carefully controlled his demeanor so as not to seem too boastful or proud.¹⁹ Robeson was also unable to participate in social activities with white students, a division he seemed to accept without complaint but which certainly caused him inner tension and turmoil.

When Robeson arrived at Rutgers on an academic scholarship, the all-male private college had an enrollment of 484 students, and Robeson was the only African-

¹⁹ Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 15.

American student.²⁰ Although not recruited by the team's coaching staff, Robeson decided to try out for the football team, and persevered through brutal (and apparently racially-motivated) hazing from his future teammates to make the team. Robeson played sparingly as a freshman, earned regular minutes as a sophomore, and received national recognition as a junior and senior. Rutgers' 14-0 victory over the Newport Naval Reserve team in November 1917 brought the spotlight to both Robeson and Rutgers football in general. Robeson was named an All American by football innovator and leading national football commentator Walter Camp in 1917 and 1918, and was considered by many one of the greatest football players in the game's history. Robeson's accomplishments extended well beyond the football field: he was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, debate societies, and starred in baseball and basketball.²¹ He also gave the Commencement Oration at his graduation in June 1919.²² Well-liked by his peers, Robeson left Rutgers as one of the most accomplished students in the school's history.²³ Naturally, he attracted attention from those on campus, including administrators and students, because of his race and his remarkable achievements. His varied experiences, from his triumphs to his frustrations, reveal some of the possibilities and limitations for racial integration in the Northeast at this moment in time.

²⁰ Enrollment totals fluctuated during Robeson's four years at the school, with the number of students never reaching 600. As will be discussed later, two other black students attended the school alongside Robeson in later years, but the school's all-male environment and lack of racial diversity made the campus a space dominated by white masculinity. For enrollment totals, see: *Rutgers College Catalogue for 1915-1916* (New Brunswick, NJ), 266, and subsequent volumes.

²¹ Despite his later fame as a singer and actor, Robeson was not a member of the Glee Club at Rutgers—a fact addressed later in the chapter. Although he sang with the group on occasion, he was not a member because he was not invited to travel and could not attend mixed-race social events after performances.

²² Robeson gave the speech at the request of Rutgers President William Demarest, who invited him after the first student in line became ill.

²³ See Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, Chapters 1 and 2, 3-30.

When Robeson made the decision to try out for the Rutgers football team at the start of his freshman year, he must have been aware of the challenges he would face as the lone black player on the squad, but the physical abuse he suffered at the hands of his future teammates shook him deeply. Although all rookies hoping to make the varsity squad faced tough hazing from veteran players, Robeson took a vicious beating from the others on the field, who piled on him after plays had ended and targeted him for extra-rough physical treatment. Suffering from a number of injuries, Robeson was bed-ridden for a week and considered quitting. When he returned, one player deliberately stepped on his out-stretched hand at the conclusion of a play, stripping the fingernails off of his hand and nearly breaking multiple bones. Infuriated, Robeson responded by targeting that player in subsequent drills, attacking him so aggressively that Head Coach George Foster Sanford halted play to let Robeson know that he had made the team in an effort to calm him down.²⁴

Wife Eslanda Goode Robeson's account of these events, published in 1930, suggest some of the reasons Robeson's white teammates responded as violently as they did. She related how the white players "were surprised" when a black man showed up for practice and were still "even more surprised and disconcerted" when Robeson excelled in practice competition with the scrubs, fearful that they might "lose" their

²⁴ Robeson originally related this account of his attempts to join the Rutgers team in a 1944 article in the *New York Times*. See Robert van Gelder, "Robeson Remembers," *New York Times*, 16 Jan. 1944, p. X1. When this account was published, Robeson's teammates denied the charges, believing that Robeson had been treated the same as any other "scrub" attempting to make the squad. Duberman contends that the evidence supports Robeson's version of events. See Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 20-21. Given that Robeson's wife's biography, published in 1930, contained a similar (although apparently little-read) version of these events, it does seem likely that Robeson experienced a particularly brutal hazing because of his race. See Eslanda Goode Robeson, *Paul Robeson, Negro* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1930), 30. Robeson's teammates' defense of their actions suggests how many hoped to cling to the ideal of sports as free from the taint of racial prejudice.

position on the team “to a Negro.”²⁵ For men raised in a culture that lauded white male superiority, and that viewed physical prowess as a defining attribute of that superiority, Robeson’s accomplishments on the field emasculated his white teammates by pulling them down from their privileged position. As sociologist Michael Kimmel has argued, white men were often beset by anxiety over their own manliness, and the college environment, with young men newly from home seeking to prove their masculine worth in an all-male enclave, would have heightened these feelings of inadequacy. In this context, Robeson’s dominance on the field would have had unsettling implications.²⁶ Robeson’s experiences also pointed to some of the unacknowledged limits of sports as a level playing field. Far from being given the same opportunities as his white teammates, Robeson was made to undergo trials above and beyond the norm, a complaint that numerous black athletes would repeat over the course of the twentieth century.

²⁵ Eslanda Goode Robeson, *Paul Robeson, Negro*, 30.

²⁶ Kimmel argues that while many feminist scholars have seen in American manhood a “drive for power, for domination, for control,” anxiety was actually more characteristic of white manliness. Indeed, Kimmel sees “the fear of others dominating ... [or] having power or control over” white men as being a more apt description of American manliness. See Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 6.



Figure 1.1. Paul Robeson, in his practice attire for the Rutgers team. Photograph available online at Rutgers University's Robeson Cultural Center web site. See: prcc.rutgers.edu/images/robeson-football.jpg

Gradually earning his teammates' acceptance, Robeson earned increased playing time during his freshman and sophomore seasons and became one of the team's top players as a junior and senior. As he did so, the university administration monitored his progress, apparently concerned how the school's lone black student was faring in the company of all-white teammates and how he was representing the university in off-campus contests. M. A. Blake, the school's horticulturist and the treasurer of the Rutgers

Athletic Association, occasionally reported on Robeson to President William Demarest. Traveling with the team, Blake wrote Demarest that Robeson was “gaining a wide circle of friends,” which he took to be a “marked tribute to the man.”²⁷ Apparently concerned that Robeson would not fit in, or perhaps worried that a black man would be poor company for white elites, the administration seemed pleased (and perhaps surprised) that Robeson enmeshed himself so well in the football team. Blake later wrote Demarest that he “may be interested to know” that Robeson was one of several players on the football team who did “not smoke or drink,” another sign of his good character.²⁸ On another occasion, Blake wrote Demarest regarding outsiders’ perceptions of Robeson. Describing events during and after a game against Fordham College in October 1917, Blake wrote that a Fordham alum approached during the game “and asked the name of our colored player, said he was playing a great game and a very clean one too.” The Fordham fan praised Robeson for refraining from falling “heavily upon a Fordham player who was crashing” to the ground. Reports of this sort must have mitigated anxieties about Robeson’s representation of the school; they also showed the impact Robeson had on white fans outside of Rutgers. One can hear a certain pleasant surprise in Robeson’s sportsmanship and “clean” playing. Within the locker room, meanwhile, Robeson had clearly endeared himself to his teammates: in that same letter, Blake wrote that after the team had supper together following the game, the players “asked Robeson to sing.”²⁹

²⁷ M. A. Blake to William H. S. Demarest, October 23, 1917, in the Records of the Rutgers College Office of the President (William H. S. Demarest) 1890-1928, Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries, Box 3, folder 36.

²⁸ M. A. Blake to William H. S. Demarest, December 10, 1917, Demarest Papers, Box 3, folder 36.

²⁹ M. A. Blake to William H. S. Demarest, October 29, 1917, Demarest Papers, Box 3, folder 36.

The extra attention given to Robeson by school administrators and opposing fans speaks to the added pressure he faced as a lone black athlete in an all-white school. Robeson was under constant scrutiny as a curiosity to white fans, and a symbol of hope and achievement to many black leaders (including his own father). While the Fordham fan expressed admiration that Robeson played as “clean” as he did, there was, in a sense, no other option for him. With all eyes on him, Robeson had to play cleaner, and live cleaner, than his white counterparts, in order to maintain his (relatively) privileged position and continue to earn the support and esteem of the black community. The extra burdens must have been difficult for the eighteen-year-old to shoulder.

Although the administration seemed pleased with Robeson’s performances on the field and off, an incident in Robeson’s sophomore year starkly revealed the limits of the school’s egalitarianism. As the school approached its weekend-long sesquicentennial celebration, Washington and Lee University, Rutgers’ scheduled football opponent, indicated that it did not want to play against a black athlete. Grudgingly, Coach Sanford agreed to sit Robeson out, even though the game was being played in New Brunswick. The southern men of Washington and Lee, whose entire social structure of legally-sanctioned Jim Crow depended on an affirmation of white racial superiority, were clearly unwilling to accept a black player as a worthy opponent, or to put their manhood to the test against Robeson. Rutgers’ willingness to appease the southern school simultaneously revealed economics’ importance to college athletics. The school was hoping to raise “a million dollars in endowment and property” for its 150th anniversary, and losing the revenue from the football game, if Washington and Lee backed out, would have

significantly impinged that fund-raising drive.³⁰ As a result, Sanford indicated that Robeson had been injured in practice and would not play in the game, an excuse that many in the local press accepted without question.³¹ Robeson's absence hindered the team's fortunes in the contest, which ended in a 13-13 tie, and his bitter disappointment about being denied the chance to participate was almost certainly heightened by the game's symbolic significance. As the centerpiece of the university's three-day celebration, preceded by a number of parades and followed by a gala reception, the football game meant more than an ordinary contest.³² With the stadium filled with past and present students and luminaries, Robeson's forced absence highlighted the persistence of racial intolerance and bigotry despite his presence on the team. It also revealed the revenue-generating power of the sport, even then, to university administrators who quickly eschewed egalitarian principles in favor of bringing in needed funds for the school.

Robeson was deeply disappointed by the experience, and pondered quitting the team in protest.³³ He was not alone in feeling betrayed by the team and school for their

³⁰ See "President's Statement," Celebration: 150th Anniversary, 1916-1918, Demarest Papers, Box 6, folder 18. Duberman comments briefly on the financial implications of the school's decision as well. See Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, "Chapter Two: Rutgers College, 1915-1918," 19-30.

³¹ See, for example, "Rutgers 13, Washington and Lee 13," *Targum*, 18 October 1916, p. 40-41.

³² For a good account of the decision to sit Robeson for the game, see Sheila Tully Boyle and Andrew Bunie, *Paul Robeson: The Years of Promise and Achievement* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 59. According to interviews conducted by Boyle and Bunie with some of Robeson's teammates, Coach Sanford let the players decide whether to forfeit the game or play without Robeson. However, since some of the recollections contradict one another, it is not entirely clear if that was actually the case.

³³ Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 23. According to Fritz Pollard, Robeson "was still mad as anything" about the Washington and Lee game when Rutgers and Brown squared off against one another the following week. Apparently the symbolic importance of that game, of the ability to play in any game, meant a good deal more than other racial slights: anecdotal evidence from interviews conducted by Boyle and Bunie suggests that Robeson also faced segregated eating establishments while traveling with the football team—something he apparently tried to brush off by boasting about the amount of food he was served in the

refusal to allow him to play; two and a half years later, as Robeson graduated from Rutgers, fellow black alumnus James D. Carr wrote Demarest to complain about Robeson's treatment, inspired to do so by a similar event that had recently occurred at the University of Pennsylvania. Complaining that the school "prostituted her sacred principles" by agreeing to hold Robeson out of the game, Carr thought it was bitterly ironic that the school would accede to the demands of southern men, "whose progenitors tried to destroy this Union," and in the process took away "equality of opportunity and privilege" from a black student "whose progenitors helped to save the Union." He was offended by the "injustice" done to Robeson, believing that he had been "robbed of the honor and glory of contending in an athletic contest for college before an assembled multitude composed of representative men and women, of various avocations, from all the corners of the earth." Not only Robeson suffered as a result; according to Carr, "his race ... was deprived the opportunity of showings its athletic ability, and, perhaps, its athletic superiority." Understanding the circumstances—the large crowd in attendance and the game's special importance because of the celebration—Carr was particularly distressed that Robeson could not prove publicly African Americans' worth on the football field. The school failed to maintain its "ancient traditions by denying to one of her students, solely on account of his color, equality of opportunity and privilege."³⁴

kitchens in comparison to the meager amounts his teammates received. It is unclear how frequently issues such as this arose. See Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 54-55, 60.

³⁴ James D. Carr to William H. S. Demarest, June 6, 1919, Demarest Papers, Box 43, folder 6. Demarest responded to Carr's letter, although he attempted to brush Carr's complaints aside. Although the President wrote that he was "sorry that there was any incident such as you relate," he attempted to dodge the issue by indicating that he could not recall "the exact details" surrounding the decision. He shifted attention instead to "the highest regard" people at the school had for Robeson. "Among the students in athletic relations and otherwise he has been much respected," Demarest wrote. "If there was a single untoward incident in his four year's record, I am sorry." William H. S. Demarest to James D. Carr, June 16, 1919, Demarest Papers, Box 43, folder 6.

Although the university administration did not live up to the ideals of the level playing field, at least Robeson's fellow students seemed to embrace him (and the fame he brought the school) with earnest enthusiasm.³⁵ In covering Robeson's football career, the writers for the school newspaper *The Targum* lauded Robeson's accomplishments.³⁶ A story about the team's loss to Syracuse University in October 1917, for example, indicated that Robeson and three other players were "especially deserving of credit" in the team's efforts. Referring to Robeson by his widely-used, and affectionate, campus nickname "Roby," the story indicated that Robeson "figured in nearly every play; it seemed almost impossible to stop him, once he got under way."³⁷ A wrap-up of the entire 1917 football season, Robeson's junior year, featured a large photograph of him catching a pass with the caption "Roby" next to its article "Our All-Americans," and the article referred to him as "the first of all ends."³⁸ Robeson was also one of only five individual players spotlighted in the season review, reflecting his importance to the

³⁵ Contrary to some published accounts, Robeson lived on campus with his fellow white students. Although some, including Robeson's son Paul Robeson Jr. and his eulogist, Bishop J. Clinton Hoggard, indicated that Robeson was forced to live with an African-American family because of his race, university records list him living in three different dormitory rooms on campus throughout his time at the school, all in Winants Hall. For a copy of Robeson's eulogy, see: Records of the Rutgers College Office of the President (Richard P. McCormack), "Paul Robeson" folder. Robeson, Jr. wrote that his father had to live off-campus for his freshman year, but then lived in the dorms the remainder of his time at college, but cites Hoggard as one of the sources for that information. See Paul Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist's Journey 1898-1939* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2001), 20, 26. For Robeson's official on-campus addresses, see: *Rutgers College Catalogue*, for each year. According to Boyle and Bunie, in Robeson's first two years, he lived in a dorm room by himself. His junior year, he lived with the other two black students at the school: Robert Ritter Davenport of Orange, NJ (class of 1920) and Leon Harold Smith of Saugerties, New York (class of 1921). In his senior year, he lived with a white Jewish student named Herbert Miskend (class of 1922). See Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 55-56.

³⁶ One interesting feature of the school newspaper's coverage of Robeson's career is that it did not mention the star athlete's race (unique among the area newspapers), perhaps because he was the only black man attending the relatively small school. As will be discussed later, other newspapers took pains to point out Robeson's race, referring to him as "dusky" or a "giant Negro."

³⁷ "Syracuse Triumphs," *Targum*, 17 October 1917, p. 64-65. Quotation from 64.

³⁸ "The 1917 Season," *Targum*, 19 December 1917," p. 273-85. Quotation from 282.

team's success.³⁹ The paragraph-long assessment of Robeson reveals the esteem and friendly familiarity felt by the students towards him:

Our own "Roby." As a football man he stands out as the best in the country today. As a receiver of forward passes he stood out head and shoulders above all others. As defensive quarterback he is in a class by himself. His greatest compliment comes from Coach Sanford, who says he is the greatest player of all times. When "Roby" hit them they stopped coming. And there are eight teams in the country which will tell you the same. He has been picked as the leading player in the country and as All-American end by practically every foot-ball authority throughout the east. As everybody knows, "Roby," you're there.⁴⁰

Despite the abuse Robeson suffered when he attempted to join the team, this passage suggests that many Rutgers students felt a kinship with him as he rose to fame. In referring to Robeson as "Our own 'Roby,'" the newspaper's staff embraced him as one of their own, even if the parental tone betrayed a hint of condescension. Of course, part of Robeson's appeal was that he "knew his place," as he did not attempt to attend mixed-race social events and he refrained from joining the glee club because of racial dynamics.⁴¹ As the only black man on campus for much of his time at Rutgers, Robeson hardly threatened the dominant social order that placed whites in a superior position—one exceptional black man did not necessarily portend an upheaval of white men's privileged place. Still, even this limited acceptance and praise of Robeson was remarkable in some ways for its apparently color-blind perspective.⁴²

³⁹ "1917 Season," p. 284-85.

⁴⁰ "1917 Season," p. 285.

⁴¹ Boyle and Bunie argue that Robeson was never in the Glee Club at Rutgers "because of the socializing (with female choruses from other schools with whom Rutgers would sing in joint concerts) that followed performances." Robeson was certainly aware of the peculiarity of his situation. According to his friend Mal Pitt, he once said, ironically: "Sure, I can play sports but can't join the Glee Club because that's too *social!* Ha! Ha!" See Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 54.

⁴² Two scrapbooks in the Rutgers archives suggest that Robeson did, indeed, insinuate himself into everyday campus life, at least in his role as athletic star. Both Paul Rexford Molineux and Royal F. Nichols, contemporary white students of Robeson's, had photographs and newspaper stories dealing with

Those warm feelings extended beyond the football field. Over the course of Robeson's career, particularly as he approached graduation, the *Targum* and the school yearbook, *The Scarlet Letter*, effusively praised the wide range of his accomplishments. The yearbook for Robeson's junior year, for example, celebrated him in verse: "All hats off to 'Robie,' men;/ All honor to his name;/ On the diamond court or football field/ He's brought old Rutgers fame."⁴³ The following year, Clifford N. Baker, a junior football player, called Robeson in his recap for the 1918 football season "the greatest and most versatile player of all time," and also highlighted the broad range of his accomplishments, noting that Robeson had earned varsity letters in three other sports, was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and was "one of the best orators in college."⁴⁴

The *Targum* was even more enthusiastic about Robeson's wide-ranging achievements, praising him at length as he graduated in June 1919. Lauding Robeson for being an excellent athlete, a tremendous student, and a morally upright person, the newspaper's editors were especially impressed that although "most athletes are not students," Robeson "starred in both" academics and athletics. At the same time, the editors' precise wording reveals both the high esteem, and the race-specific expectations, that students at the school had for him. The writers extolled Robeson for his morality, indicating that he was "a man through and through" and that he possessed "moral stamina." They concluded:

Robeson's athletic success in their scrapbooks, alongside photographs of white Rutgers athletes. Indeed, one of the few sports clippings in Nichols' scrapbook was a story about Rutgers' 5-1 victory over Princeton in June 1919 that emphasized that the game was Robeson's last sporting event for the school (and Rutgers' first victory over Princeton in any sport in nearly fifty years). The scrapbooks are located in the Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

⁴³ Maxwell, Titus B., ed., *The Scarlet Letter* (East Orange, NJ: Abby Printshop, 1918), 83.

⁴⁴ Clifford N. Baker, "Review of the 1918 Football Season," *The Scarlet Letter* (East Orange, NJ: Abby Printshop, 1919), 143-46. Quotation from 145.

Now Paul, as you pass from our midst, take with you the respect and appreciation of us who remain behind. May your success in life be comparable to that of college days. In you other members of your race may well find a noble example, and this leadership is your new duty.

May Rutgers never forget this noble son and may he always remember his Alma Mater.⁴⁵

Certainly impressed by Robeson, and willing to acknowledge Robeson's manliness, the newspaper editors nonetheless saw a relatively limited leadership role for Robeson, one specific to African Americans. That perspective was embodied in his class prophesy as well. Looking approximately twenty years into the future, prophesy writer Francis Lyons predicted: "Paul Robeson is the governor of New Jersey. He has dimmed the fame of Booker T. Washington and is the leader of the colored race in America."⁴⁶ For these white students, who were undoubtedly bowled over by Robeson's many athletic and academic accomplishments, there was still a limited realm in which Robeson could express his influence. On the one hand, they foresaw a great future for Robeson as the leader of the state; on the other, they could not get past seeing him primarily as a leader of black men.

The issue of leadership influenced on-campus discourse in other significant ways. As much as his fellow Rutgers students welcomed Robeson's contributions to their school, they appeared uncomfortable with positioning him as a school leader, perhaps because that would have would have put him in a position of authority over white students. On multiple occasions, *Targum* writers and editors hesitated identifying Robeson as the best player on the football team, the one most responsible for its success, despite the fact that he was the most decorated player in the school's history. After the

⁴⁵ "Paul Leroy Robeson, '19," *Targum*, June 1919, p. 566.

⁴⁶ Francis E. Lyons, "Prophesy of the Class of '19," *Targum*, June 1919, 574.

victory over the Newport squad, for example, the *Targum* did not single out Robeson for praise, even though nearly every other major newspaper spotlighted his starring role: “It would be difficult to choose from the varsity any individual star. There was one huge star—the team.”⁴⁷ Similarly, in their 1917 season re-cap, the *Targum* staff emphasized Sanford as being the key to Robeson’s success, saying he had “done more for the gridiron than any other football man.”⁴⁸ Following the 1918 season, the paper fretted that “Individual mention is a dangerous thing. It seems to give much of the credit to a few,” but then pinpointed Coach Sanford as “The man who has done more for the athletics and spirit of this college than any other.”⁴⁹ Perhaps individual mention of a black man was a “dangerous thing,” whereas acknowledging a white male leader was acceptable. Other evidence supports this interpretation: despite being the best player by far on the football team, Robeson was not elected team captain during his senior year. According to his son’s account, “his name was never even mentioned from the floor during the nominations.”⁵⁰ Robeson was certainly beloved by his peers and accepted by the school’s superiors, but there were limits to their recognition of him.

African-American Newspapers: Robeson and “Fritz” Pollard as “Race Men”

⁴⁷ “Rutgers Triumphs,” *Targum*, 28 November 1917, p. 223-25, 228. Quotation from p. 224.

⁴⁸ “1917 Season,” p. 278.

⁴⁹ “The Season,” *Targum*, 4 December 1918, p. 173.

⁵⁰ Robeson, Jr., *Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 30. Boyle and Bunie list a number of other reasons why Robeson was not selected as team captain, despite the fact that he was the best player returning for his senior year: “Robeson as team captain would have presented one problem after another: a black man doing the coin toss before games, speaking at pep rallies, meeting alumni, shaking hands with opponents—all almost impossible to imagine.” See Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 68.

Although Robeson was very much alone as a black man on Rutgers' football team, he was not the only black college football star at the time. His career intersected with that of Frederick "Fritz" Pollard of Brown University, a remarkably agile halfback who earned widespread coverage and acclaim during the 1915 and 1916 seasons. Because the two were often discussed in connection with one another by both the black and white press, Pollard's relatively brief career at Brown provides a useful comparison and helps to illustrate broader patterns regarding black athletes.⁵¹ Almost single-handedly raising the athletic profiles of their respective schools, Pollard and Robeson both earned significant acclaim and attention from the media, in the process provoking discussions of race and manliness.

Frederick Douglass "Fritz" Pollard, named for the former slave and most famous African-American leader of the nineteenth century, was born in 1894 in Chicago, and was raised in the Rogers Park section of the city, a northern, nearly all-white area. The Pollards were a relatively well-to-do and accomplished African-American family, with many of Pollard's seven siblings achieving noteworthy successes in both athletic and non-athletic fields. Pollard's brother Leslie, for example, played football for one year at Dartmouth in 1908, helping the team to an upset victory over Princeton. Fritz Pollard, playing for an integrated high school in Chicago, Lane Tech High School, starred in a

⁵¹ Even before these two men achieved national renown, other black athletes had been successful in integrated sports. William Henry Lewis, who would become the Assistant Attorney General under President Howard Taft, earned All-American status for the Harvard football team in the 1890s, and George Jewett starred for the University of Michigan's team in the 1900s. Howard Drew had also gained national acclaim as a sprinter for the University of Southern California in the early 1910s. However, black athletes were still a rarity by the time Robeson and Pollard played, and both men were distinct minorities at their respective schools. Lewis actually played a pivotal role in helping Pollard get admitted to Brown University. See John M. Carroll, *Fritz Pollard: Pioneer in Racial Advancement* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 41-56. For more on Lewis, see Gregory Bond, "The Strange Career of Will Henry Lewis," in David K. Wiggins, ed., *Out of the Shadows: A Biographical History of African American Athletes* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006), 38-57.

number of sports and earned a modicum of fame throughout the city.⁵² For two years after graduating high school, however, he was a vagabond student-athlete, traveling from college to college in the hopes of getting accepted so that he could play football. In the end, after stops at Northwestern, Brown, Dartmouth, Harvard, and Bates College, Pollard was finally admitted to Brown as a full-time student and enrolled in the spring of 1915. At the time, Brown was a fairly small school with only about 1,000 undergraduate students, and Pollard was one of only two African-American students on campus. Although there had been other black football players at Brown—Edward Stewart was the first in the mid-1890s, and another man named Herbert Ayler died from playing the sport a few years before Pollard—none had been as successful as Pollard would become.⁵³ Indeed, after a rocky start, straightening out his eligibility issues and dealing with his own teammates' racism, Pollard quickly became a star on campus, where students gleefully celebrated his remarkable runs on the football field. In particular, Pollard's role in Brown's victories over Yale and Harvard during the 1916 season vaulted him to national fame and earned him a spot on Walter Camp's All-American team—only the second African American ever to make the team, and the first from the more celebrated backfield positions. A hero in the African-American community across the country, Pollard agreed to a number of speaking engagements following the 1916 season; so many, in fact, that by the fall of 1917, his academics had slipped to the point that he failed to retain his athletic eligibility. As discussed later, this would make him a more complicated figure

⁵² For more information about Pollard's early years, see Carroll, *Fritz Pollard*, 1-40.

⁵³ Carroll, *Fritz Pollard*, 41-60. There is no indication that Ayler's death was the result of his being targeted by players because of his race. Football was a remarkably violent game from its inception, and deaths were not infrequent, particularly in its early years. Pollard actually met Robeson in the summer of 1915 while working at Narragansett Pier (where Robeson was also working) and became good friends with the burly athlete.

for the African-American press. Pollard finally left Brown in spring 1918 for a position in the U.S. Army as a Y.M.C.A. physical director.⁵⁴

Pollard's and Robeson's achievements on the football field proved inspiring to many in the black community because the football players challenged the racial discrimination faced by African Americans across the country. Historian Patrick Miller argues that the black press trumpeted the achievements of black athletes in integrated sports in order to impart broader lessons about the potential for African-American advancement, hoping "that black athletes might engage white society in a broad-based dialogue about democratic principles and practices."⁵⁵ Black leaders and black newsmen certainly celebrated black athletic achievement in segregated sports as well—indeed, sports pages in African-American newspapers devoted considerable attention to football games involving schools such as Howard University, Morehouse College, and other all-black schools. However, leaders took particular delight in noting the achievements of black athletes in integrated team sports because they spoke to one of the key controversies of the day, showing that black men and white men could work together effectively as equals. Thus, many black newspaper editors and writers depicted star athletes on integrated teams, such as Pollard and Robeson, as "race men," the natural leaders of African Americans at large. In this context, black newspapers represented Pollard and Robeson not merely as superior athletes, but as well-rounded individuals who

⁵⁴ See Carroll, *Fritz Pollard*, 103-06, 111-19.

⁵⁵ Miller, "To 'Bring the Race Along Rapidly,'" 131. African-American leaders at times voiced concerns about the place of athletics in college life. One 1917 article from the *Crisis*, for example, criticized "the old time trainers and coaches who were employed to turn out winners at any sacrifice of health or character" at southern all-black schools. See V. D. Johnston and E.B. Henderson, "Debating and Athletics in Colored Colleges," *Crisis*, 14, no. 3 (July 1917), 129-30. On the whole, however, black newsmen depicted black athletic participation in a positive light.

indicated the widespread capabilities of African Americans in general, linking the players' success to broader claims for African-American male citizenship.

A lengthy article from the *New York Age* from December 1915, about black football player Gideon Smith, offers a telling perspective in this regard. Smith, who starred for Michigan Agricultural College (later known as Michigan State University), earned considerable praise from a number of publications, black and white, for his performance as a tackle, and *Age* writer Phil Waters used Smith's story to represent a continuum of black success for students admitted to white schools: "In every university or college where there are colored students they invariably win honor and fame. Not only in the intercollegiate debates the oratorical contests and high scholarship, but in the strenuous athletic battles, particularly football, some hero in ebony is continually bursting forth as a star of the first magnitude." Mentioning a number of other black athletic pioneers, including Pollard (who had played his first half-season for Brown that year), Waters saw equal access to white institutions as key in enabling blacks to achieve equality with whites. The success of Smith, Pollard, and others, showed that blacks could successfully compete with whites, in a variety of fields—academics, oratory, and athletics. By praising Smith's coach, Johnny Macklin, for being "unprejudiced" and for "giving every candidate for his team an equal show regardless of color, race or his pocketbook," the story affirmed the potential of sports to offer a model of equal access for African Americans in all aspects of American life.⁵⁶

Pollard and Robeson were ideal models for using sports to indicate broader African-American capabilities, as both provided ample material for black newspaper

⁵⁶ Phil Waters, "A Foot Ball Wizard," *New York Age*, 23 December 1915, p. 6.

editors and writers eager to pursue this angle. After Pollard's scintillating performance in Brown's surprising 21-0 upset victory over Harvard in 1916, for example, the *New York Age* devoted one of its main editorials to him, praising Pollard for his ability to overcome "obstacles and handicaps" to become "the center of all eyes in the athletic world."

Clearly finding value in Pollard's performance beyond his role in his team's victory, the editorial concluded: "The Age takes off its hat to Mr. Pollard, and wishes him a long career and still greater victories on the gridiron, and in the struggle of life. Mr. Pollard is doing a very great deal to help solve the race problem."⁵⁷ Just how was Pollard solving the race problem? Part of the answer lay in his ability to overcome the many barriers erected to prevent black athletic advancement—which many saw as representative of the legal and social restrictions placed on blacks in economic, political, and everyday life. Another lesson of Pollard's story, though, was his determination; in re-printing two stories about Pollard's exploits on the field, the *Age* made sure to emphasize one story from the *New York Evening Globe* that praised Pollard's "quiet deportment, grit and stamina." The story also noted that Pollard ran and operated a tailoring business to help pay his way through school, highlighting this aspect of his life as a testament to his work ethic.⁵⁸ The *Chicago Defender*, particularly attuned to Pollard's achievements because he had been a high school star in Chicago, took a similar approach in describing Pollard's accomplishments. A front-page paragraph celebrating his placement on Camp's All-American Team noted that he was not only "a player of wonderful ability," but also "a

⁵⁷ "Fred Pollard," Editorial, *New York Age*, 23 November 1916, p. 4.

⁵⁸ "Pollard Sensation of Football Season," *New York Age*, 23 November 1916, p. 6.

clean sportsman,” and “a scholar.”⁵⁹ Similarly, the accompanying story in the sports section emphasized that he was “a quiet, unassuming lad” who “talks little, works hard with his books and his pressing shop.”⁶⁰ Implicitly contrasting his character with that of the brash former heavyweight champion Johnson, the paper set Pollard up as a role model for both blacks and whites—a modest, hard-working athlete who succeeded by persevering. This characterization fit well with the ideals espoused by black leader Booker T. Washington, who emphasized black self-uplift through hard work and moderation. By stressing other aspects of Pollard’s life off of the playing field, using athletics as a conduit to illustrate larger points about him, these black papers attempted to open even more realms of civic life to black participation.

Black papers across the nation described Pollard’s success in ways that drew larger lessons about the possibilities of African Americans working on equal terms with whites. In 1915, the *Defender* overtly championed Pollard and other black athletes, placing them in the “galaxy of race men” on account of their roles in pushing forward African-American progress by having “the courage to play football ... along with their white brothers.”⁶¹ Not only were the athletes “race men,” but the use of the term “white brothers” (a phrase never mimicked by the white press) affirmed these black athletes’ equality with their white teammates. *The Crisis* used similar language in discussing Pollard’s accomplishments. In introducing a re-print of an article from the *Yale Alumni Weekly* about Pollard’s accomplishments in the 1916 season, the newspaper made sure to emphasize Pollard’s equality with his white teammates and competitors: “It is not that

⁵⁹ “Fredrick Douglas Pollard,” Photograph, *Chicago Defender*, 30 December 1916, p. 1.

⁶⁰ “Pollard Given Place on ‘The All-American,’” *Chicago Defender*, 30 December 1916, p. 5.

⁶¹ “Football Stars With Eastern School,” *Chicago Defender*, 18 December 1915, p. 7.

Fritz Pollard is a ‘colored’ football player, but that he is a football player.” Subtly minimizing Pollard’s racial difference in this brief excerpt, *The Crisis* affirmed that Pollard’s accomplishments deserved acclaim, regardless of race.⁶² He had proved his equality with white men on the virile testing ground of the college gridiron.

In Robeson’s case, black papers often emphasized his intelligence on the football field, in the process depicting Robeson as a football player who succeeded more because of his brain than his brawn. Although white newspapers also noted this aspect of Robeson’s play, their coverage tended to emphasize his (for the time) “giant” stature.⁶³ Six feet-two inches in height, and weighing approximately 190 pounds, Robeson’s muscular body undoubtedly impressed observers, since most of his teammates stood five-foot-nine or shorter, but black papers such as the *New York Age* made sure to credit Robeson’s accomplishments to “his superb strength augmented by a knowledge of both the theory and practice of the finer points of football.”⁶⁴ Similarly, the *Baltimore Afro-American* argued that Rutgers’ success owed much to “the brilliancy of [Robeson’s] execution and the alertness of his brain,” and emphasized that most “of the big white football critics” consider him one of “the brightest and best players of the year.”⁶⁵ By emphasizing Robeson’s intelligence on the field, these papers could combat stereotypes of African Americans as intellectually inferior to whites.

⁶² “The Looking Glass: Pollard,” *Crisis*, 13, no. 3 (January 1917), 139.

⁶³ “Rutgers Too Strong for Holy Cross Men,” *New York Tribune*, 5 November 1916, p. II-3.

⁶⁴ “Robeson On All-American,” *New York Age*, 8 December 1917, p. 6. For Robeson’s size relative to his teammates, see Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 20. For photographs of Robeson’s body from the 1920s and 1930s, see Hazel Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 48-66.

⁶⁵ “Sporting Gossip: Robeson Stars Again,” *Afro-American*, 1 December 1917, p. 6.

Robeson, because of his many talents outside the football field, was a perfect candidate for the black press to laud as a race man. *The Crisis* emphasized Robeson's achievements as a scholar in its coverage, a strategy in line with editor W.E.B. Du Bois' goal of illustrating black equality through various cultural outlets. When the paper named Robeson as one of its "Men of the Month" in March 1918, the editors focused on Robeson's academic achievements as well as his athletic ones. After describing his exploits on the football field (and his many awards), Robeson's write-up praised his "high scholastic record," and noted that he had "won the class oratorical prize for two years, a feat never before accomplished in the school." The paragraph also mentioned his other sports achievements and singing skills.⁶⁶ By depicting Robeson as a well-rounded individual, *The Crisis* used his celebrity as an athlete to draw attention to the intellectual and artistic capabilities of African Americans in general.

⁶⁶ "Men of the Month: Paul Le Roy Robeson," *Crisis*, 15, no. 5 (March 1918), 230-31.

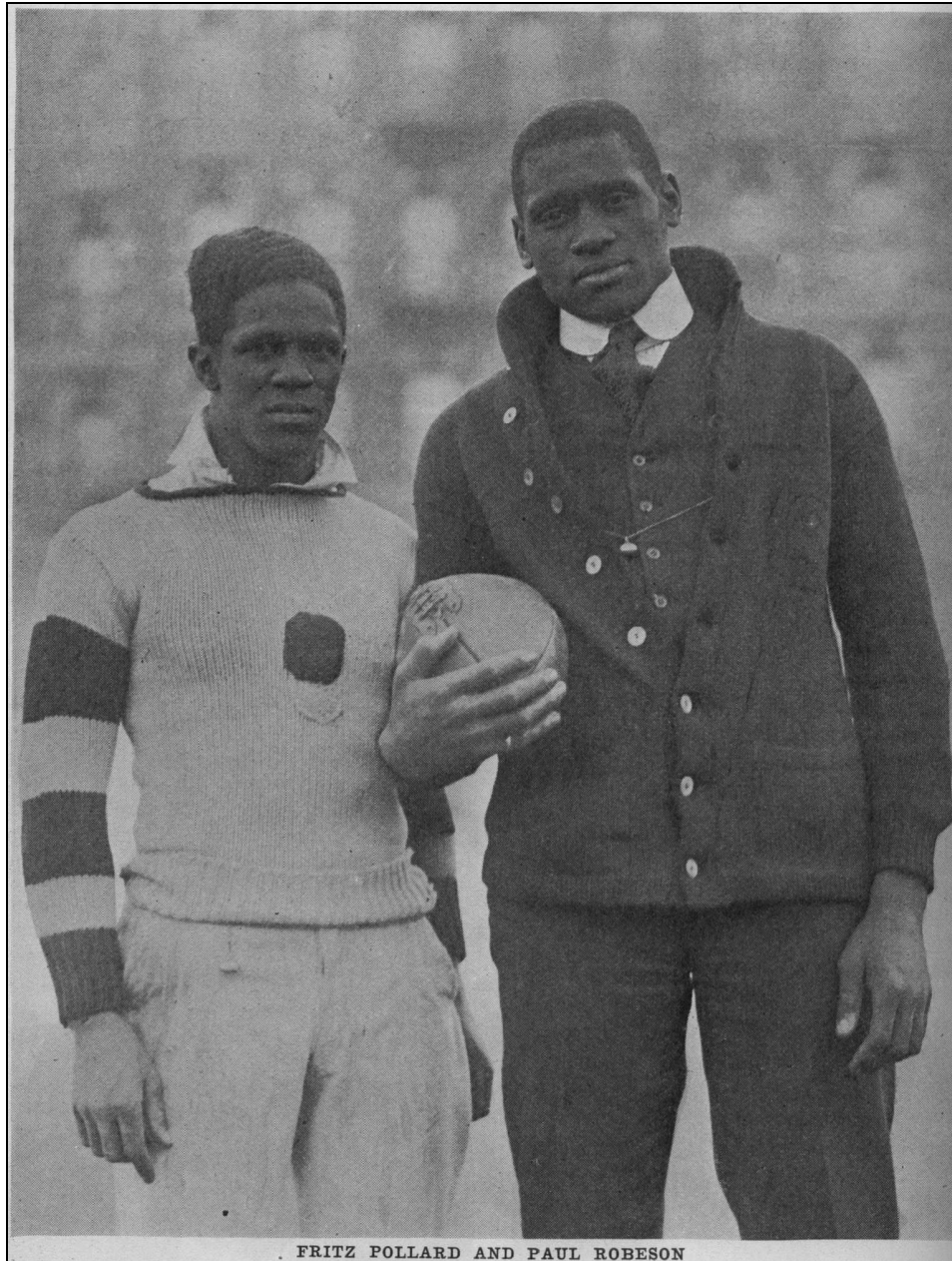


Figure 1.2. Photograph of Fritz Pollard and Paul Robeson. This image appeared in *The Crisis* when the publication selected Robeson as one of its “Men of the Month” in March, 1918.

The editors would repeat that emphasis when he graduated in 1919, giving the black star special billing in the publication’s annual issue about black graduates. Although most students simply had their name listed and, occasionally, their yearbook photograph,

Robeson received a fairly lengthy write-up listing his numerous accomplishments on and off the athletic field alongside his yearbook photograph.⁶⁷ The members of the black press were not the only ones to take pride in Robeson's versatility: some black New Jersey residents recalled being specifically told to emulate his academic and athletic success.⁶⁸

In contrast to Robeson's well-rounded stardom, Pollard represented a challenge to the black press because of his academic struggles following his break-out season in 1916. As a result, African-American writers and editors tended to downplay Pollard's scholastic difficulties and focus on Robeson's burgeoning success instead. The *Age*, for example, dealt with Pollard's academic struggles in one sentence and then literally, and metaphorically, switched its focus to Robeson: in an article headlined, "Football Has A New Colored Star," the un-named writer described Robeson as being the heir apparent to Pollard, who "is not allowed to play with Brown this year, having failed in his studies." The story then noted Robeson's importance in Rutgers' win over Fordham, and printed an excerpt about the game from the *New York Times*.⁶⁹ Quickly brushing aside the academic struggles of the nationally-known star Pollard enabled the paper to keep its focus on athletics as a potential means of uplift for African Americans.⁷⁰ The *Afro-American* pursued a similar strategy. In its wrap-up story about the 1917 football season, "Sportsman" wrote that he was "shocked" to discover that Pollard had been unable to

⁶⁷ "The Horizon: Education," *Crisis*, 18, no. 3 (July 1919), 150-51.

⁶⁸ Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 66-67.

⁶⁹ "Football Has A New Colored Star," *New York Age*, 1 November 1917, p. 6.

⁷⁰ One might wonder why black papers mentioned Pollard's academic struggles at all, particularly because they were apparently so damaging to the goal of "muscular assimilation." Given Pollard's celebrity following his junior year, however, it would have been very difficult for black papers to ignore him altogether as many curious readers probably wondered what had become of the star.

play football that year “because of the backwardness in his studies.” The writer was most disappointed in Pollard’s inability to play that year because he could not “show to the world that the color of a man’s skin and the texture of his hair have nothing whatever to do with his abilities and accomplishments in the world about him.” Thankfully, for the writer, the cerebral Robeson emerged as a star that year, showing an “uncanny” skill “to size up plays, quickly get to the point of danger, handle forward passes, plug up holes from one end of the line to the other, and faultlessly perform almost every play of the game.”⁷¹ Passing the torch of success from the academic underachiever Pollard to the intellectual and athletic Robeson enabled these black newspapers to continue to insist that black athletic accomplishment proved African Americans’ worth on and off the field.

Those claims extended to issues of African-American male citizenship. When World War I started in 1914, most black newspaper editors and writers, like most Americans in general, were hesitant for the United States to get involved in the conflict. However, by the time the U.S. officially entered the war in April 1917, most black papers (with some notable exceptions) had lent their support to the war effort. Their motives varied: as Ellis has argued, some black leaders simply believed that “loyalty” was an important moral code that had to be followed regardless of the circumstances, and that blacks should be loyal to the “nation,” if not the hated Wilson administration. Others, however, pragmatically wanted to counter claims that blacks were being duped by German agents to revolt against the U.S. Many African-American leaders also supported the war because of an interest in proving blacks’ competence as soldiers, especially because many whites, particularly southerners, tried to limit African American participation in the war effort. By attempting to prevent blacks from serving as soldiers,

⁷¹ Sportsman, “Sport Comment: Review of 1917 Football Season,” *Afro-American*, 8 December 1917, p. 6.

racist whites attempted to restrict black men's access to the manly role of citizen-soldier. As Ellis argues, "in condemning the drafting of blacks, whites expressed widely held southern beliefs about the political and economic need to limit the scope of black citizenship." Although not all black leaders believed that black people would experience significantly better treatment as a result of their participation in the war, many of the new leaders such as DuBois clearly believed that this would be the case (even if, it should be noted, many everyday African Americans did not believe this rhetoric).⁷²

In this context, black newsmen saw an opportunity to use athletic success to "prove" the viability of black soldiers, building on widely-held assumptions regarding sports' implications for manliness. For example, Edwin B. Henderson, who wrote the first articles about sports to appear in *The Crisis*, and who for several decades extolled the virtues of black athletic achievement in articles and books, saw black basketball leading to "strong, virile manhood" among African-American youth.⁷³ On Rutgers' campus, Robeson won the Senior Competitive Extemporaneous Speaking Contest by orating on the subject of "The War's Effect on American Manhood."⁷⁴ Since, in many cases, white leaders feared black soldiers precisely because they appeared to validate black men as equals, as real men, black leaders could argue that African Americans' success in integrated team sports revealed blacks' capacity to serve in the military. In March, 1917, for example, *The Crisis* featured a photograph of Pollard in between a photograph of a statue of Abraham Lincoln and a photograph of "Lieutenant-Colonel Young" (a black

⁷² See Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 4-5, 10, 14.

⁷³ Edwin B. Henderson, "The Season's Basket Ball," *Crisis*, 12, no. 2 (June 1916), 66.

⁷⁴ "Robeson Wins Extemporaneous Speaking Contest," *Targum*, 30 April 1919, p. 515.

military officer).⁷⁵ In this representation, Pollard was part of a continuum of heroic figures who were fighting, or who had fought, for black equality. Although black leaders became increasingly frustrated by white military leaders' hesitance to employ black soldiers in combat duty, they still hoped that World War I would open new doors to African Americans. Black leaders thus supported the placement of celebrities such as Pollard with military units, even if these notable athletes and entertainers were there primarily as peacekeepers sent to soothe racial tensions among troops.⁷⁶ The symbolic value of having a star athlete such as Pollard in a leadership role as a YMCA physical director was too noteworthy to pass up.

Black writers certainly weren't the only ones making this connection: Rutgers Athletic Association Treasurer M. A. Blake argued in the fall of 1917 that the team's football players (including, apparently, Robeson) were "certainly receiving training that will be of great value to them if they later serve at the front."⁷⁷ That same fall, Rutgers Coach Sanford chided his team captain, Rendall, because the players were not "[taking] the military drill very seriously."⁷⁸ The students also supported athletics' importance to military matters: in the wrap-up of the 1917 football season, the *Targum's* editors argued in defense of continuing football the following fall, believing that if any of the players were drafted into the armed services, "their physical training will have fitted them better to serve their country." They were pleased that Coach Sanford (along with U.S. President Woodrow Wilson) supported sports' continuation during the war: "It will not

⁷⁵ "Pollard: That's All!," *Crisis*, 13, no. 5 (March 1917), 230.

⁷⁶ Carroll, *Fritz Pollard*, 118-19.

⁷⁷ M. A. Blake to William H. S. Demarest, November 15, 1917, Demarest Papers, Box 3, folder 36.

⁷⁸ M. A. Blake to William H. S. Demarest, October 23, 1917, Demarest Papers, Box 3, folder 36.

thwart our patriotic motives. How sensible are those who realize the importance of physical preparedness! Every college man, whether athletically inclined or not, should bend every effort to make himself stronger, and thus better able to meet the needs of this present crisis.”⁷⁹

By the fall of 1918, the connections between military service and on-campus activities were made stronger by the military’s presence at the school. Robeson signed up, along with 450 other Rutgers men, for the Student Army Training Corps (SATC), which essentially took over the campus in the fall of 1918, converting buildings into training facilities and storage sites. Members of the SATC received \$30 a week from the government and went through a rigorous schedule that involved morning reveille at 6:00 AM, followed by room inspection and then a series of drills and duties.⁸⁰ It is little wonder, then, that a *Targum* staff writer employed military metaphors in covering Rutgers’ loss to the Great Lakes Naval Reserve squad that fall. The writer saw a valuable lesson in the fact that the team had continued to fight even as the outcome of the game was no longer in doubt, writing that the “spirit” the players showed was a sign of “an unquenchable interest and a determination to stand with our team through thick and thin.” He equated it to the refusal of soldiers to “[give] up when his armies face defeat.”⁸¹

Given the enthusiasm of these white administrators and students to connect athletic excellence to military prowess, it makes sense that black newsmen would eagerly employ black athletic success in support of black male military capabilities. The best example of that enthusiasm came in the November 29, 1917 issue of the *Age*. When

⁷⁹ “Football,” Editorial, *Targum*, 20 June 1917, p. 692.

⁸⁰ Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 71.

⁸¹ “Football Season Ends,” Editorial, *Targum*, 4 December 1918, p. 170.

Josephus Daniels, the Assistant Secretary for the Navy, issued a letter calling for “several thousand... ONLY WHITE MEN of good physique” to join the navy to work in the engine room, and “about fifteen hundred Negro mess attendants to serve as OFFICERS’ SERVANTS,” the newspaper’s editors howled with rage. The paper’s main editorial for that day noted that African Americans “possess a physique equal to that of the whites and are just as able to fire the engines.” Furthermore, it argued that “equality of selection, training and service have been found to work well with the land forces of the country, and there is no reason why it should not do the same on the sea.” The editorial concluded: “The Negro is not asking for any special favors, only for his share of the ‘real Democracy,’ that the world is fighting for.”⁸² Daniels’ demeaning letter attempted to relegate African-American men to a second-class role in the war, just as many whites had attempted to limit black men’s status politically, socially, and economically. James Weldon Johnson, the paper’s editor, refuted that notion of second-class status by emphasizing African Americans’ proud history of military service, noting that blacks “have taken part in every great sea fight which the United States has fought,” but, despite this tradition, the Navy under Daniels only wanted African-American men “as servants.” Johnson wrote that “something should be done” to get the Navy Department in line with the War Department and insure equal treatment for African Americans in the navy.⁸³

The paper found the perfect way to prove its argument about African Americans’ equality in that week’s sports section. Describing the biggest victory of Robeson’s career, Rutgers’ triumph over the Newport squad in November 1917, Lester A. Walton

⁸² “Partiality in the Navy,” Editorial, *New York Age*, 29 November 1917, p. 4.

⁸³ James W. Johnson, “Views and Reviews: There Is Also A Navy,” *New York Age*, 29 November 1917, p. 4.

argued that Robeson's performance earned him a spot "in the athletic hall of fame alongside" other black athletes such as former Harvard football player William Henry Lewis and Pollard. After quoting, at-length, two white newspapers, the *Brooklyn Eagle* and the *New York Tribune*, in their praise of Robeson, Walton concluded the article: "At the close of the contest Robeson and Whitehill, left end and full back for the New Jersey team, who scored the only touchdowns of the game, were carried off the field by a wildly serpentine [sic] mob of rooters." Clearly pleased by this image, Walton added: "P.S.—The above paragraph, in fact, the entire article, is respectfully referred to Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels for perusal."⁸⁴ In Robeson's achievement, and in his ability to work with and be embraced by white people, Walton saw a lesson for how black people could play a prominent and successful role in the war. Robeson had led his team to victory and had earned the acclaim of his white peers; his athletic success proved the inaccuracy of stereotypes that labeled black men as shiftless or only capable of performing menial tasks. Robeson had joined with his white teammates to achieve a brilliant victory. He had followed the "orders" of his head coach. He had used his physical prowess and his savvy to lead his team to victory over the "enemy" team—a team comprised, no less, of naval reserves. In short, Robeson's athletic achievements proved that African-American men could be effective leaders and soldiers.

Because black leaders invested so much in praising successful African-American athletes, they took special delight in noting examples when white audiences, and particularly white leaders, appeared to recognize black men as equals. In his article about Smith at Michigan State, for example, Waters reprinted a letter from Michigan Governor Woodbridge N. Ferris to Smith:

⁸⁴ Lester A. Walton, "Robeson Latest Football Star," *New York Age*, 29 November 1917, p. 6.

I like you because you are a success in football. Go ahead. I am sure that you are now realizing in a measure of your ambition, and I am also sure that the future is rich with promise for you. I congratulate [Michigan Agricultural College] upon having a man of your ability on their team.⁸⁵

Even though the note from the governor was a rather qualified letter of praise (Ferris congratulates Smith on his “success in football” and his “ability” rather than his character or intellect), Waters chose to reprint it in its entirety. Doubtless, he and his editors found special significance in the state’s governor recognizing the achievements of a black athlete. By praising Smith, Ferris acknowledged, to some degree, the athlete’s humanity and manliness. Had any members of the black press been present at the pep rally following Brown’s 21-0 thrashing of Harvard in November 1916, they almost certainly would have been interested to hear Brown University President William Herbert Perry Faunce praise the “manhood” of the football team and remark that “There is no bigger white man on the team than Fred Pollard.”⁸⁶ Affirming Pollard’s equality with his white teammates by referring to him as a “white man,” Faunce of course fell back on cultural conventions that affirmed white male superiority and whiteness as the highest standard of civilization. But he also did what many black press leaders hoped that whites in positions of power would do after viewing athletic success: he affirmed Pollard’s equality, as a man, with his white teammates.

Delighting in such affirmations, the black press took a particular interest in emphasizing the applause of white fans during Pollard’s and Robeson’s careers. It is not a coincidence that Walton deemed the paragraph about white fans carrying Robeson on their shoulders after Rutgers’ win over Newport Naval a particularly appropriate passage

⁸⁵ Waters, “Foot Ball Wizard,” p. 6.

⁸⁶ Carroll, *Fritz Pollard*, 106.

to send to Assistant Secretary of the Navy Daniels. The *Age* also made sure to include excerpts from white papers that acknowledged the enthusiastic applause Pollard received, especially from white fans of rival schools such as Yale and Harvard.⁸⁷ The *Afro-American*, in its coverage of Pollard's performance against Yale in 1916, mentioned that his punt return for a touchdown "brought the entire crowd of 30,000 rooters to their feet in a spell of wonder and admiration."⁸⁸ Similarly, the paper printed an excerpt from the *Baltimore Star* which noted that following the Brown-Harvard tilt that year, "the crowd arose as one and accorded [Pollard] an ovation rarely heard ... on a collegiate field."⁸⁹ There was a symbolic value in white fans gleefully cheering on the exploits of black athletes. The *Defender's* article about Pollard's placement on Camp's All-American team also highlighted the fact that he had earned rousing ovations from both the Harvard and Yale crowds.⁹⁰ Pollard's hometown paper also printed brief letters of admiration from various luminaries following Pollard's performance in the win over Harvard, and although they did not explicitly define each letter-writer's race, it is possible that some were white.⁹¹ African-American newsmen eagerly highlighted these examples of white fan admiration because they showed that athletes could transcend, at least temporarily, the barriers of racial prejudice. When fans from the nation's two most prestigious universities, Harvard and Yale, enthusiastically applauded Pollard's performances, they

⁸⁷ "Pollard Sensation of Football Season," *New York Age*, 23 November 1916, p. 6.

⁸⁸ "Gridiron Notes," *Afro-American*, 18 November 1916, p. 4.

⁸⁹ "Pollard a Sure All-American Man," *Afro-American*, 25 November 1916, p. 4.

⁹⁰ "Pollard Given Place on 'The All-American,'" *Chicago Defender*, 30 December 1916, p. 5.

⁹¹ "Press Comments On Brown-Harvard Game," *Chicago Defender*, 25 November 1916, p. 5.

appeared to implicitly recognize Pollard's manliness, and to forget stereotyped images of black men as inferiors.

The designation of a player as an "All-American" carried particularly heavy weight with black newsmen. The title itself elevated athletes to the highest esteem, suggesting their membership in an exclusive club of the nation's elite. Earning a spot on Camp's team was especially prestigious. Considered by many as the leading spokesman for football, an advocate of football's virtuous effects on American manhood, and a former confidante of President Theodore Roosevelt, Camp was revered by most sportswriters and fans. His team, in short, represented for many a cross-section of the manliest young Americans. These factors help explain why the *Defender* printed a front-page photograph with accompanying caption announcing Pollard's selection to Camp's All-American team, what they called "the highest award in the football world."⁹² Pollard, earning his position on Camp's team one year before Robeson, was treated like royalty by the black leaders of the day, having a banquet in his honor at a club called the Libya in New York (an event attended by famous bandleader James Reese Europe and *Age* Editor James Weldon Johnson, among others),⁹³ and being "'lionized' by the society debutantes" in Chicago.⁹⁴ Black All-Americans symbolically claimed full standing as citizens, and forced white observers to acknowledge the contributions of black Americans to the nation as a whole.⁹⁵

⁹² "Fredrick Douglas Pollard," Photograph, *Chicago Defender*, 30 December 1916, p. 1.

⁹³ "To Banquet Football Star," *New York Age*, 30 November 1916, p. 6.

⁹⁴ "Pollard Guest Of Forty Boys Club," *Chicago Defender*, 30 December 1916, p. 5.

⁹⁵ Although the "All-American" awards seemed to have particular relevance, black athletic champions in other sports inspired similar feelings in the black press. In this vein, an un-named writer for the *Afro-American* lamented the retirement of sprinter Howard Drew because of illness, and recent losses in meets

All is not Fair: The Black Press and the Injustices of Sports

Although generally celebratory of sports' egalitarian opportunities, black newspapers were also attuned to the fact that the games themselves did not always illustrate the proper behavior of good sportsmanship and fairness. Indeed, one of the major differences in coverage between black and white papers was the willingness of black writers to point out examples of unsportsmanlike behavior. While white writers tended to shy away from anything that depicted sports in an unsavory light, black writers made sure to note when black athletes were being treated unfairly. After all, sports only worked as an integrationist metaphor if whites actually provided blacks equal opportunities and afforded them equal treatment on the playing field.

Or in the boxing ring. Many black commentators at this time championed efforts to reestablish integrated boxing in order to give African Americans an equal opportunity to pursue the fame (and prize money) associated with the popular sport. Because of the controversy surrounding former heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, many states in the 1910s outlawed interracial boxing matches, a fact that angered many black newspaper reporters and editors. Lester Walton, writing in the *Age*, bitterly criticized whites fearful of permitting inter-racial fights, because, he argued, they did not want to lose the championship to a black man again. According to Walton, this fear undermined notions of fair play: "The white race or no other race has a 'corner' on the heavyweight championship title. It belongs to the *human race*. Whether it is held temporarily by the

by track star Royce F. Morse, because at that time "not a single man of color" could "claim the championship in any branch of field or track athletics." See "Colored Athletes Lose At Newark: National Senior and Junior Championships Result Disastrously For Colored Runners," *Afro-American*, 16 September 1916, p. 2.

colored race or the white race is incidental.”⁹⁶ When New Jersey lifted its ban against interracial bouts in 1918, both Walton and the editors of *The Crisis* celebrated the ruling which afforded “Negroes equal opportunities for titles”; in fact, *The Crisis* printed the news under the heading of “Social Progress” in its monthly survey of African-American news from around the country.⁹⁷ Allowing African Americans to participate on equal footing against whites in athletic contests was one small step towards allowing blacks equal opportunities in other areas of life.

The on-going inequality of college sports, however, was often revealed in the hesitance of some universities to schedule games against teams that had black athletes. Black newspapers were much more likely to call attention to these incidents, distressed that sports were not as color blind as many wished to believe. The lead editorial of the *Age* on November 23, 1916, denounced Princeton University for purportedly refusing to schedule a game against Brown because of Pollard’s presence on the team, noting that “Woodrow Wilson was for many years President of Princeton and during his regime colored applicants were refused admission because of their color.” The school’s refusal to play against Brown made it clear that Wilson’s “influence as an enemy of the Negro still lives at Princeton.” With Wilson unwilling to accept African Americans as equals, the paper’s editorial caustically highlighted the irony that the President’s rhetoric in speeches indicated that he was “for ‘unity’” and was “a disciple of ‘justice.’”⁹⁸ This story did not appear in mainstream white papers. Similarly, when Washington and Lee

⁹⁶ Lester Walton, “Mixed Bouts,” *New York Age*, 17 February 1916, p. 6.

⁹⁷ See: Lester A. Walton, “Mixed Bouts Now Permitted in New Jersey,” *New York Age*, 5 October 1918, p. 6; and “The Horizon: Social Progress,” *Crisis*, 17, no. 2 (December 1918), 87.

⁹⁸ Editorial, *New York Age*, 23 November 1916, p. 4.

University refused to play against Rutgers in 1916, the white press largely ignored the racist demands of the southern school, but black newspapers such as the *Age* made certain to mention the snub. In a recap of the 1916 season, the paper revealed that Robeson “played every minute of every game Rutgers played ... except the game with Washington and Lee of Virginia, which team refused to play against him because of his color.”⁹⁹ The paper, unlike the local white press, would not let this slight go unmentioned. Because sports could only serve as a metaphor for black equality if whites agreed to participate against African Americans, black papers emphasized what they saw as violations of the tenets of fair competition.

Harsh treatment of African Americans on the playing field manifested white racism and ongoing inequality in another way, and the black press paid careful attention to examples of white abuse. The *Defender* selected excerpts from white papers, for example, that described the unnecessary roughness committed by Harvard players against Pollard during the Brown-Harvard game of 1916. After Pollard dazzled the crowd with several long runs, three Harvard players tackled him out of bounds in the second half, driving him up against the stadium wall and earning a 15-yard roughing penalty (Pollard, fortunately, was unharmed).¹⁰⁰ Although some of the major white newspapers (such as the *Tribune*) made no mention of the violence, the *Defender* selected papers that noted the rough play, allowing its readers to see the difficult conditions that black athletes faced as they tried to integrate popular sports. Indeed, earlier in that season, the *Defender* had printed a distressing account of a Princeton-Tufts game in which the all-white Princeton team had violently targeted two black players on the Tufts squad. Although the Princeton

⁹⁹ “Robeson, Star At Rutgers,” *New York Age*, 28 December 1916, p. 6.

¹⁰⁰ See Carroll, *Fritz Pollard*, 105.

team grudgingly agreed to play Tufts, its players “went after both” African Americans “with vengeance, determining to put them out of the game.” According to the account, one of the black players “went into convulsions between the halves, so rough did they treat him.” Meanwhile, the other black player complained several times to the referee about “the filthy and vile language the Princeton players were using against him.”¹⁰¹ Unwilling to sugarcoat the experiences of black athletes, papers such as the *Defender* made sure to highlight these examples of on-going inequalities in order to make whites abide by principles of good sportsmanship and fairness.

By contrast, white newspapers were hesitant to reveal the limits of fair play and decorum in sports: when Robeson was roughed up and verbally taunted by the Great Lakes Naval Training School in 1918, the *Tribune* made no mention of the violence against him even though the *Defender* claimed it was, “according to the consensus of . . . local sports writers . . . one of the most outrageous occurrences that has happened on the gridiron in many a moon.” Indeed, Robeson’s teammates were so upset by the “injustice and unsportsmanlike tactics” that “they began slugging” and were penalized as a result.¹⁰² White newspapers could have pursued this story as a sign of teammates coming together, crossing racial lines, but they did not. It was left to the black press to show the on-going difficulties faced by black athletes trying to get fair play on the football field. African Americans knew all too well the many double standards employed against them in everyday life, and while sports could be a helpful sign of progress, they also provided a cautionary tale about the slow pace of change.

¹⁰¹ “Princeton May Bar Tufts From Games,” *Chicago Defender*, 28 October 1916, p. 5.

¹⁰² “Robeson Stars, Although Rutgers Is Defeated,” *Chicago Defender*, 30 November 1918, p. 5.

White Newspapers and the Tortured Ideal of Sports Equality

During Robeson's and Pollard's careers, local white newspapers tended to cover sports in two contradictory ways: on the one hand, most white sportswriters tended to emphasize sports as a fair testing ground for people of all races and praised sports as being free from prejudice. On the other hand, they deliberately skewed their coverage, as the examples above indicate, to "prove" the idea of sports' inherent fairness. As a result, they often failed to acknowledge the limits sports offered for social transformation. By minimizing the persistent limits to black advancement, these newspapers (perhaps unwittingly) contributed to an on-going belief that African Americans could lift themselves out of poverty if they only worked hard enough—after all, writers seemed to imply, black sports stars had achieved success, why couldn't everyday African Americans? Although the white press seemed to want to see sports as a noble, fair arena in which men proved their worth according to color-blind rules of sportsmanship, these writers operated in a culture dominated by the belief in white racial supremacy. For all of the laudatory coverage of black athletic achievement, then, there were also numerous reminders of prejudice's shadow in the language used to describe black athletes and in the papers' hesitance to feature African Americans positively in photographs.

As with African-American newspapers, white newspapers' attitudes towards the sport of boxing reveal some of their feelings towards race's place in sports. At times, white sportswriters criticized those who refused to fight black boxers as an example of poor sportsmanship. "Daniel," a regular columnist for the *Sun*, used a December 5, 1918 column to rebuke boxers who used the color line as an excuse to avoid fighting black boxers. Believing that "fighters do not draw the race or creed line," Daniels argued that

“Once two men get into the ring the question of color is of no especial value.” He was dismayed that fighters such as heavyweight champions Jack Dempsey and John L. Sullivan, who refused to fight black boxers, did so to avoid losing to African Americans such as Harry Wills (in Dempsey’s case) and Peter Jackson (in Sullivan’s case). He also criticized white boxers for placing too much emphasis on “the financial line,” avoiding black boxers so that they wouldn’t hurt their reputation and thus their ability to earn more money by fighting in title bouts.¹⁰³ Believing the idea of sports as an arena free from the taint of racism, prejudice, and greed, Daniel argued that boxers should fight the best challenger, regardless of race.

Other white sportswriters, however, took a different stance, fearing that sports could potentially threaten notions of white male supremacy. Writing in the *Tribune*, W. H. McGeehan excused then-champion Jess Willard’s unwillingness to fight African-American challengers for his title. Using degrading language in referring to the leading black contender as “the hoary headed Senegambian, Sam Langford,” McGeehan understood why Willard was “naturally peeved at the suggestion that he box a black man.” Because he “answered the call to bring back the title to the white race,” McGeehan wrote, Willard was puzzled “why the same persons that clamored for him to take the title from [Jack] Johnson are so anxious for him to jeopardize it in a bout with another dark one.” Although McGeehan confidently asserted that Willard would beat Langford, since he “beat the best of the dusky ones in Johnson,”¹⁰⁴ his column reveals the larger meanings that people of the time placed on athletic achievement. To be a

¹⁰³ Daniel, “High Lights And Shadows In All Spheres Of Sport: The Color Line Is Purely a Personal Affair,” *New York Sun*, 5 December 1918, p. 13.

¹⁰⁴ W. G. McGeehan, “Willard Peeved at Idea of Boxing with Negro,” *New York Tribune*, 24 November 1916, p. 13.

heavyweight champion was to make a claim of racial superiority, and some whites expressed anxiety as to what black athletic achievement might mean outside the ring or the playing field. Indeed, black writer Lester Walton quoted Jack Kearns, Dempsey's manager, as saying that "Willard squelched the colored heavyweight division when he squelched Jack Johnson in Cuba. Why resurrect it again?"¹⁰⁵ For some whites, it was unclear why anyone would "resurrect" the figure of the black male champion. Why open up a symbolic arena where white male supremacy could be challenged? Indeed, why fights blacks at all, since agreeing to a bout with a black boxer affirmed some level of equality and opened up a realm of white life to black participation? These anxieties clouded white coverage of athletes beyond the boxing ring, making their way into the coverage of football stars such as Pollard and Robeson.

It should be noted that white reporters could—and did—praise African-American athletes for their talents and even intellect on the playing fields. During the 1916 season, *Tribune* writer Frank O'Neill referred to Pollard as "one of the outstanding stars of the year"¹⁰⁶ and the newspaper placed Pollard on its "An All-Eastern Football Eleven" for that season.¹⁰⁷ The paper also consistently praised Pollard as a "brilliant" player.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, the *New York Sun* referred to Robeson at one point as "the best end in the country."¹⁰⁹ And, following Rutgers' stunning upset victory over the Newport Naval

¹⁰⁵ Lester A. Walton, "Mixed Bouts Now Permitted in New Jersey," *New York Age*, 5 October 1918, p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ Frank O'Neill, "Only One Team Left in Brown's Pathway," *New York Tribune*, 26 November 1916, p. II-4.

¹⁰⁷ "An All-Eastern Football Eleven," *New York Tribune*, 10 December 1916, p. II-3.

¹⁰⁸ "Vermont Weak, So Brown Wins Easily," *New York Tribune*, 31 October 1915, p. II-2.

¹⁰⁹ Daniel, "High Lights and Shadows In All Spheres of Sport: Sanford in Ecstasies Over Rutgers Eleven," *New York Sun*, 12 October 1918, p. 17.

Reserves, the *Tribune* referred to him as: “a veritable Othello of battle, who led the dashing little Rutgers eleven to a 14 to 0 victory.”¹¹⁰ The New Brunswick *Daily Home News* particularly lauded Robeson for his many achievements while in school. After Robeson graduated, the newspaper printed a brief farewell to the big star, sad to see him depart Rutgers, and lamented: “there passed from the undergraduate ranks one of the biggest all-around college men and athletes that this country has ever known.” The unnamed writer was especially impressed that Robeson was one of the few who were “great athletes” and “great scholars” at the same time, and he concluded his story by writing: “A man who has accomplished so much as an undergraduate in so many different lines ought certainly to make good when he gets out into the world.”¹¹¹ Such praise seems genuine in retrospect—white writers were deeply impressed by both the physical skills and mental attributes that Pollard and Robeson possessed. Indeed, Louis Lee Arms indicated that Rutgers Head Coach George Sanford called Robeson “the smartest man he has ever seen on a gridiron,” and Arms himself praised Robeson for “diagnosing plays and holding aloof from tricks and threats.”¹¹² In praising these athletes so effusively, these white writers lent credence to the idea that sports could be free from racial prejudice. Using militaristic terms (“Othello of battle”) and acknowledging intellectual capabilities indicated, on some level, an acceptance of the idea that black men could measure up to white men as well-rounded individuals.

¹¹⁰ Louis Lee Arms, “Rutgers Blanks Newport Navy: Dashing Robeson Humbles Black’s Noted Warriors,” *New York Tribune*, 25 November 1917, p. II-1.

¹¹¹ “A Whirl Through Sportdom,” *Daily Home News*, 16 June 1919, p. 10.

¹¹² Louis Lee Arms, “George Foster Sanford Again Attains the Heights as Football Coach: Rutgers a One-Man Team And His Name Is Robeson,” *New York Tribune*, 26 November 1917, p. 13.

However, white newspapers betrayed their own ambivalence about the broader lessons of sports in failing to report white abuse of black athletes on playing fields. Columnists rarely if ever condemned the extra-rough treatment that Pollard and Robeson (and other black athletes) were forced to endure. The major New York papers also made no mention of the fact that schools such as Princeton and Washington and Lee refused to play Brown and Rutgers, respectively, because of the presence of black athletes on the squads. Even poor fan behavior—the use of racial slurs, for example—went unreported by the white newspapers. For example, white writers turned a deaf ear to Yale fans screaming “Catch that nigger” or “Kill that nigger,” every time Pollard returned a punt in the 1915 match-up between the two schools.¹¹³ Although the legal notion of “hate speech” had not yet entered legal discourse in the United States, white sportswriters clearly knew that such languages was offensive, demeaning, and indeed threatening.¹¹⁴

Political theorist Judith Shklar’s concept of a liberalism of fear helps explain this behavior by white fans, and the hesitance of white newsmen to report it. In Shklar’s formulation, a truly liberal society—by which she means a fair and just democracy—would enable all people to make decisions based on their personal interests and beliefs, without the threat of fear from others or from a government agency. Recognizing two “basic units of political life,” “the weak and the powerful,” a truly liberal state would “secure . . . freedom from the abuse of power and intimidation of the defenseless this

¹¹³ Carroll, *Fritz Pollard*, 72.

¹¹⁴ After all, the term “nigger” had been used as a term of derision for African Americans since the early decades of the nineteenth century. For a legal history of hate speech, see Samuel Walker, *Hate Speech: The History of an American Controversy* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994). For the origins of the term “nigger” and its negative connotations, see Randall Kennedy, *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 4-5.

difference invites.”¹¹⁵ From this perspective, the white fans, players, and coaches who employed racially-motivated verbal threats, and created an atmosphere of hostility towards these athletes, affirmed their strength as a group over the weaker racial minority. They publicly exercised their greater power in society. Because most white sportswriters consistently praised the fairness and openness of American society, and of the sporting world in particular, they did not report this “un-sportsmanlike” language. Doing so would have indicated the limitations of sports to effect lasting change and would have pointed out that the “level playing field” was fraught with inequalities, as black athletes had to endure taunts and abuse that their white counterparts did not.¹¹⁶ When viewed from that perspective, sports as a metaphor for society at large would have revealed that systemic changes needed to occur before African Americans could achieve social and economic equality with whites. That was a lesson even liberal whites were not, on the whole, interested in exploring, and so they kept these issues out of their coverage.

In fact, these newspapers at times went overboard in emphasizing sports’ inherent fairness. In one breathless paragraph about Rutgers’ 1916 game against West Virginia, Harold E. O’Neill in the *Home News* described the game, and the players, as being “clean” five different times. In addition, he called the action “perfect football,” with teams playing “fair,” and with players acting “like gentlemen.”¹¹⁷ This account contradicts Robeson’s recollection, who remembered the game as being particularly

¹¹⁵ See Judith N. Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” in Nancy L. Rosenblum, ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: 1989), 21-38. Quotation from 27.

¹¹⁶ Of course, some white newspaper writers may have been as bigoted as the worst fans in the stand, and thus saw no issue with the poor behavior.

¹¹⁷ Harold E. O’Neill, “West Virginia Tried Eighteen ...” *Daily Home News*, 13 November 1916, p. 10.

rough because some West Virginia players were upset about competing against him.¹¹⁸

Was O’Neill covering for the behavior of the West Virginia players? O’Neill’s assertion that he “hoped that relations [would] be continued” in the future between the two teams suggests that he was inspired that a game featuring Robeson against a southern school had proceeded without any major incidents, and might explain his eagerness to paint a positive picture of the game’s action.¹¹⁹

White newspaper writers did more than just ignore abuses against African-American athletes; they also slyly undercut black athletic achievement in a number of ways. In particular, the employment of natural imagery and animal metaphors by white sports writers reveals how bigoted racial attitudes could influence sports discourse, by upholding pervasive beliefs in African, and African-American, primitivism and by reinforcing damaging stereotypes about African-American men. Although sports writing in general from this time period employed (in contemporary terms) over-the-top metaphors and overly descriptive language for nearly every athlete and sport, white papers tended to use naturalistic language and animalistic more frequently in covering black athletes—and certainly used that language more frequently than black newspapers did. For example, the *Yale Alumni Review* referred to Pollard as “a human eel” after he helped lead Brown to victory over Yale in 1916.¹²⁰ Similarly, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*

¹¹⁸ Robeson indicated that one of the West Virginia players warned against touching him and called Robeson a “black dog.” See Heywood Bruon, “It Seems to Me,” *Cincinnati Post*, 2 October 1929. Documentary filmmaker and critic Pare Lorentz, at the time a young fan of West Virginia, attended the game and his recollections support Robeson’s: soon after the start of the game, “a number of West Virginia fans began hollering ‘Kill that nigger! ‘Kill that nigger!’” See Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 64.

¹¹⁹ O’Neill, “West Virginia Tried Eighteen...” p. 10.

¹²⁰ Clipping from *Yale Alumni Review*, un-dated, reprinted in “The Looking Glass: Pollard,” *Crisis*, 13, no. 3 (January 1917), 139. The term “dark eel” certainly has phallic implications as well, particularly since so much white anxiety focused on black men’s supposedly insatiable sexual drive and phallic power.

used a host of (rather mixed) animal metaphors to describe Pollard's performance against Yale: Pollard was "the lion of the day," according to the paper. The Yale would-be tacklers, according to the *Inquirer*, were like "cats ... and pounced on [Pollard] whenever they had a chance, but he was as elusive a greased eel."¹²¹ Although the paper used cats to describe the white Yale players as well, Pollard's skills seem to come from his association with the primitive, the animalistic; his elusiveness as a "greased eel" was not intellectual, but natural.

White writers used similar language in describing Robeson's exploits, although instead of comparing Robeson to a beast, they often linked him to storms and shadows. Charles A. Taylor, writing for the *Tribune*, extensively employed the metaphor of a "dark cloud" in writing about Robeson's performance against Fordham University in October 1917. In describing Robeson's impact on the game, for example, Taylor wrote: "The dark cloud was omnipresent," and "The dark Cloud used up three opponents in the course of the battle." His conclusion returned to Robeson and the "Dark Cloud" metaphor: "It would be wrong to say that Robeson is the entire Rutgers team. The aggregation is too well balanced for that, but it was this dark cloud that cut off all the sunshine for the Fordham rooters yesterday."¹²² Depicting Robeson as a menacing shadow, even in admiration, had the potential to reduce him to a natural phenomenon, instead of a thinking, hard-working human being. Other writers employed similar language; Louis Lee Arms wrote that Robeson "rode on the wings of the frigid breezes; a grim, silent and

¹²¹ "Gridiron Notes," 18 November 1916, *Afro-American*, p. 4.

¹²² Charles A. Taylor, "Maroon Grid Warriors Smothered by Rutgers: Robeson, Giant Negro, Plays Leading Role for Jersey Eleven in Defeating McCaffrey's Charges by 28 to 0—Sanford Team Plays Brilliantly," *New York Tribune*, 28 October 1917, p. II-1.

compelling figure” in describing his performance against the Newport Naval Reserves.¹²³ An un-named *Tribune* writer referred to Robeson as “a dark streak” in covering another Rutgers game.¹²⁴ Even O’Neill, writing in the *Home News*, called Robeson “the incarnation of fury” in describing the Newport game.¹²⁵ Similarly, nearly every mention of Robeson in the *New York Times* referred to him as “giant”—not necessarily an offensive term, but one that, when used repeatedly, seemed to indicate that Robeson was something other than human. By depicting Robeson as a force of nature, the *Tribune* and other papers undercut their own praise of Robeson’s intellectual abilities. The consistent use of natural imagery fit in well with contemporary racial beliefs among many whites who saw African Americans as more primitive and thus able to connect to a sort of primordial, but uncivilized, strength.¹²⁶

Beyond overtly metaphoric language, even mundane descriptions in these newspapers carried with them the freight of racial prejudice. The consistent use of terms such as “dusky” to refer to Pollard and Robeson were an attempt to mark out for readers that these athletes were African Americans—as though white writers were drawing arrows to these players’ race, making an extra effort to note their racial exoticism, their otherness. The *Home News*’ coverage of Robeson’s final game for Rutgers, a 5-1 baseball victory over Princeton, for example, praised Robeson effusively as he concluded his career, despite the fact that he had had little impact on that particular victory.

However, the un-named writer still felt the need to point out Robeson’s race *twice* in two

¹²³ Arms, “Rutgers Blanks Newport Navy,” p. II-1.

¹²⁴ “Rutgers Too Strong for Holy Cross Men,” *New York Tribune*, 5 November 1916, p. II-3.

¹²⁵ Harold O’Neill, “Rutgers Team’s Great Victory Sends Thrills Throughout City,” *Daily Home News*, 26 November 1917, p. 9.

¹²⁶ Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 23. See also Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 6.

paragraphs, referring to him as “the big colored fellow from Somerville,” and “the dusky giant.”¹²⁷ Coach Sanford, when reaching for a player to compare Robeson to in November 1917, selected Bemus Peirce, a famous tackle, even though Robeson played the different position of end. Why would he select Peirce? Because Robeson’s “all around work always” reminded him “of that great Indian player.”¹²⁸ In connecting Robeson to past stars, Sanford could not help but select another member of a racial minority. These examples, in and of themselves, did not necessarily indicate prejudice or the employment of stereotypes, but they did reveal the importance of race to these players’ identities in white minds, and the ways in which all members of racial minorities were marked, no matter what uniform they wore.

The notation of race could also subtly, or explicitly, undercut black players’ achievements. A Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* story that genuinely celebrated Robeson’s accomplishments in the 1917 season, and his academic prowess off the field, also referred to him as “the colored boy, who George Foster Sanford has developed into an end with All-American possibilities.”¹²⁹ In this instance, the white coach received the credit for the success of the “colored boy.” Mainstream papers also, from time to time, employed overtly demeaning terms; one example was a *Tribune* story that referred to

¹²⁷ “Rule Pitches Rutgers To Win Over Princeton,” *Daily Home News*, undated in Royal F. Nichols scrapbook.

¹²⁸ Harold O’Neill, “Rutgers Depending on Closer Unity of Play to Defeat Black’s Newport Eleven,” *Daily Home News*, 23 November 1917, p. 18.

¹²⁹ Brooklyn *Eagle* excerpt, re-printed in Harold E. O’Neill, “Sporting Topics,” *Daily Home News*, 18 December 1917. Although the use of the term “boy” may have had racial connotations—southerners often used the term to denigrate black manhood—newspapers consistently employed the term “boy” with white college athletes as well.

Robeson as “the towering darky end” for the Rutgers team.¹³⁰ By the 1910s, “darky” was an offensive term to many black leaders, who vigorously protested its use.¹³¹ Although a comparatively rare phenomenon, referring to Robeson and Pollard with terms such as “darky” enabled white papers to reach out to white readers who wanted to dismiss the accomplishments of star athletes such as Robeson and Pollard. “Darky,” in other words, reminded white readers that these athletes, for all of their athletic abilities, were still “only” African Americans.

White newspapers also subtly diminished African-American athletes’ achievements by minimizing photographs of them, even acknowledged stars, in their coverage of collegiate sports. Too pervasive of a pattern to be merely coincidence, the lack of photographs of black athletes was particularly noticeable in the coverage of Robeson in the *Tribune*, although other newspapers showed a similar bias.¹³² One clear example came at the close of the 1917 football season, when the *Tribune* featured an article by Louis Lee Arms in which he chose the best eleven players he saw during the season. One of them was Robeson, a player Arms praised effusively. In his story, he even criticized a Philadelphia writer who placed Robeson on his second team without ever having seen him play, calling the decision “laughable.” In fact, Arms identified

¹³⁰ “Rutgers and West Virginia in Tie Game: Sanford Team Escapes Defeat by Only Two Yards,” *New York Tribune*, 4 November 1917, p. II-1.

¹³¹ For example, the *Crisis* made note of “protests” against “the use of the word ‘darky’ by the white press when referring to Negroes,” and celebrated that some white papers had agreed to no longer use the term. See “The Horizon: Social Progress,” *Crisis*, 16, no. 5 (September 1918), 242.

¹³² That the *Tribune* would be so unwilling to feature Robeson in its sports photographs is remarkably surprising given the newspaper’s editorial board’s apparently liberal attitudes towards race. In a November 1917 issue, the newspaper featured an editorial calling for the end of racial prejudice as a result of the Great War, arguing that in asking blacks to fight in the war, the U.S. was essentially affirming the equality of black men, and it was therefore incumbent upon whites to treat them as equals. Apparently, that belief in equality did not extend to their coverage of black athletes. See: “Race Prejudice and the War,” Editorial, *New York Tribune*, 18 November 1917, p. III-2.

Robeson as “the best football player I have seen this season.” Although Arms also included another player from Rutgers on the team, a man named Rendell, he made it clear in the story that Robeson was the superior player.¹³³ However, as if to balance out this apparent openness to Robeson and his race, the paper also featured photographs of five football “Stars” in a montage to accompany Arms’ story. Not only was Robeson not pictured, but one of the players featured was the white Rendell.¹³⁴ One might dismiss this example as an oversight, but it happened continually throughout Robeson’s career. For example, although the *Daily Home News* identified Robeson as the “star” of the 1916 game against Washington and Jefferson, he was not pictured. Two white players were instead.¹³⁵ Even more egregiously, early in the 1918 season, Robeson’s senior year, the *Tribune* finally featured a photo montage of the Rutgers team (the first time it had done so, as, previously, the paper had only had printed photographs of Coach Sanford)—with one picture in the middle of their starting eleven, and five individual photographs of “star” players from the team. Robeson, stunningly, was not one of the five stars pictured! Although present in the team photograph, at the end of the line and looking up at the camera, the newspaper excluded Robeson in an individual portrait, despite the fact that he was universally considered the best player on the team.¹³⁶

¹³³ Louis Lee Arms, “Eleven Stars of Gridiron Picked From Year’s Crop,” *New York Tribune*, 2 December 1917, p. II-3.

¹³⁴ “Five College Stars Among the Top-Notchers,” Photograph, *New York Tribune*, 2 December 1917, p. II-3.

¹³⁵ Harold E. O’Neill, “Rutgers Loses to W. and J. . . .” *Daily Home News*, 1 December 1916.

¹³⁶ “Line-Up of Rutgers Football Team And Five of Their Star Players,” *New York Tribune*, 6 October 1918, p. II-2.



Figure 1.3. Photo spread of the Rutgers football team in the *New York Tribune*. Robeson did not appear as one of the team's five "star" players.

There were limits to which white newspapers would go in praising black manliness—and providing a flattering photograph of a black athlete in a starring role apparently crossed a line at the *Tribune*.

Coverage of Pollard's career showed similar trends. Even when Pollard was a star athlete in high school, he was not immune from unflattering depictions in the white-

run media; a cartoon from the school newspaper depicted him in his track outfit with exaggerated lips and wild, kinky hair.¹³⁷ After Pollard nearly single-handedly led his team to victory over Harvard, the *Tribune* sung his praises, but still refrained from showing him in action in game photographs. The game story noted his role in its headline: “Brown Crushes Harvard, Pollard Leading Attack.” Pollard scored two touchdowns, had an interception, and generally outplayed everyone else on the field. In fact, the story noted that when Pollard was taken out of the game late for a substitution, “the colored hero of Brown was the recipient of a wild demonstration on the part of the large contingent of Brunonians who helped to make up the 23,000 persons at the game.”¹³⁸ Still, the paper offered no photographs of him, despite a montage of three other white athletes under the heading of “Three Remarkable New Backfield Men of Present Gridiron Season.”¹³⁹ Perhaps the most “remarkable” backfield player in college football that season, Pollard was invisible to *Tribune* readers. The image of a black man triumphing over white athletes was too threatening, a visible reminder of the fallacies of white supremacy.

In contrast, African-American newspaper editors went out of their way to include photographs of black athletic success. *The Crisis* featured very few photographs, particularly in its early years, but offered pictures of both Pollard and Robeson on multiple occasions. The *Defender* featured photographs of Pollard on its *front page*

¹³⁷ See Carroll, *Fritz Pollard*, 29-30.

¹³⁸ “Brown Crushes Harvard, Pollard Leading Attack,” *New York Tribune*, 19 November 1916, p. II-1, II-3.

¹³⁹ “Three Remarkable New Backfield Men of Present Gridiron Season,” Photograph, *New York Tribune*, 19 November 1916, p. II-4.

numerous times.¹⁴⁰ In fact, the *Defender* even re-printed photographs of relatively obscure football games such as the Tufts-Harvard game from 1916, simply because Tufts had two African-American players on its team—and the paper drew in arrows to point out the black players in action.¹⁴¹ An image of black men physically dominating whites instantly challenged stereotypes of black men as shiftless, lazy, and weak. While black newspaper editors celebrated this potential of athletic photographs, their white counterparts appeared much less inclined to do so—perhaps to avoid stirring up the ire of white readers.

Robeson’s Perspectives on “Loyalty” and the Quest for Equality

The voices of newspaper writers, university administrators, and fellow students were not the only ones to comment on Robeson’s significance in the context of black aspirations for equality, World War I, and changing conventions of manliness. Robeson himself, as a scholar and speaker, also publicly outlined his beliefs in a number of forums. Through public speaking contests, his honors thesis, and his Commencement Address, Robeson charted a moderate path for black advancement, outlining a civil society in which whites would recognize the contributions, and un-tapped potential, of African Americans in broader American society, even if they were unwilling to embrace blacks as social equals.

Robeson was a very skilled orator, sweeping to victory every year in class oratory contests, and he often engaged many of the key issues circulating in public discussion of

¹⁴⁰ See, for example, Mr. Fan, “Brown’s Wizard Defeats Harvard,” *Chicago Defender*, 25 November 1916, p. 1, 5.

¹⁴¹ “The Tufts-Harvard Football Game,” Photograph, *Chicago Defender*, 21 October 1916, p. 7.

athletics.¹⁴² Although those speeches were not recorded, the *Targum* printed a rather lengthy account of his junior year entry, when he selected “Loyalty and the American Negro” as his topic, and we can get a sense of how Robeson positioned African Americans in relation to World War I. After outlining the valorous deeds (and devotion to country) of black soldiers in both the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, Robeson turned his attention to the current conflict. According to the *Targum* account, he indicated:

In the present war, more than ever before, negroes are showing the loyalty and the results of their American training. They are being given commissions and are formed into large and effective units of our armed forces.

After the war the negro will still show his loyalty and ... a new growth of democracy will gain a place never before attained in this country.¹⁴³

As many of the era’s black leaders had hoped, Robeson articulated a vision whereby black accomplishment and devotion during World War I would convince white Americans to expand democracy to include African Americans as full citizens. By calling attention to the past and current service of loyal black soldiers, Robeson attempted to mitigate fears of black radicals even as he pushed for “a new growth of democracy” that was clearly meant to be a radical reconfiguring of American society. The audience was deeply moved, and Robeson “was applauded to the echo.”¹⁴⁴

Robeson’s honors thesis pursued a slightly different tactic towards expanding the terms of American citizenship and making equal opportunity a more attainable goal.

¹⁴² As mentioned earlier, Robeson’s topic for his senior year address, for example, dealt with “The War’s Effect on American Manhood.” See “Robeson Wins Extemporaneous Speaking Contest,” *Targum*, 30 April 1919, p. 515.

¹⁴³ *Targum*, June 1918, p. 727.

¹⁴⁴ *Targum*, June 1918, p. 727. The *Home News* coverage, though providing less detail regarding the content of Robeson’s speech, agreed that he “held the audience spellbound.” See “Robeson Gets First Honors at Junior Ex.,” *Daily Home News*, 21 May 1918.

Outlining the 14th amendment to the U.S. Constitution's features, history, and use in various cases, Robeson sought a legal means for broadening African-American rights. In his conclusion, Robeson argued that "the hope of the American people lies in the strength of the Fourteenth Amendment." Because state constitutions were "continually changed to meet the expediency, the prejudice, the passions of the hour," the equal rights clause of the 14th Amendment was vital to protecting American citizens. Robeson believed that if people used the 14th Amendment to its full power, "the American people" would "develop a higher sense of constitutional morality."¹⁴⁵ Freed from the "passions" of states that legally relegated African Americans to second-class citizenship, Robeson expressed his hope that the federal government could protect, and insure the availability of, blacks' rights as citizens.

Robeson's last words on these issues as a Rutgers student came in his commencement address, entitled "A New Idealism," at his graduation in June 1919. Speaking to his fellow students, their families, and university administrators, Robeson articulated his vision of a civil society in which blacks and whites could co-exist peacefully and equally.¹⁴⁶ Showing his savvy as an orator, Robeson eased his way into the issue of race relations, first explaining that the post-war era was "an unparalleled opportunity for reconstructing our entire national life and moulding [sic] it in accordance with the purpose and the ideals of a new age." Only after praising U.S. soldiers for preserving "freedom" through their heroic sacrifices in World War I, and lamenting the loss of courageous young men in service to their country, did he make his way towards

¹⁴⁵ Paul S. Robeson, "The Fourteenth Amendment, 'The Sleeping Giant of the American Constitution,'" (B.A. Thesis, Rutgers College, 1919), 23.

¹⁴⁶ The text of Robeson's speech was re-printed in the June graduation issue of *The Targum*. See Paul Robeson, "The New Idealism," *Targum*, June 1918, p. 570-71.

race and segregation. In order to preserve the freedom soldiers had fought and died for, Robeson argued, the nation needed to unite all its individuals by providing “full opportunities for the development of everyone, both as a living personality and as a member of a community upon which social responsibilities devolve.” Referring to Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, Robeson challenged his listeners to make the soldiers’ sacrifices count by striving to “carry to successful fruition the ideals for which these honored ones have sacrificed.”

Robeson then addressed race explicitly, saying that he would do his “little part in helping [his] untutored brother.” But, given the predominantly white audience, Robeson carefully used the language of Booker T. Washington, affirming: “We of this less favored race realize that our future lies chiefly in our own hands.” Plugging into the American ethos of self-help and hard work, Robeson seemed to eschew aid from white America. Or did he? Even as he argued for the importance of individual effort, he listed a host of factors that made African-American advancement particularly difficult:

we are struggling on attempting to show that knowledge can be obtained under difficulties; that poverty may give place to affluence; that obscurity is not an absolute bar to distinction, and that a way is open to welfare and happiness to all who will follow the way with resolution and wisdom; that neither the old-time slavery, nor continued prejudice need extinguish self-respect, crush manly ambition or paralyze effort; that no power outside of himself can prevent a man from sustaining an honorable character and a useful relation to his day and generation.

While emphasizing “that races like individuals must stand or fall by their own merit,” Robeson simultaneously highlighted the on-going impact of racial prejudice, slavery, and poverty to black advancement. In order for African Americans to achieve equality, Robeson argued, whites needed to exercise “compassion,” to help African Americans and to help build a stronger “community spirit.” Simply providing equal access to

opportunities would not be enough, no matter what sportswriters had argued throughout his career.

In encouraging whites to help blacks achieve political and economic equality, Robeson was careful not to argue for an entirely integrated society. Instead, he wanted a civil society, one in which blacks could rise out of poverty and enjoy material comfort and basic legal rights. Blacks and whites could share a “fraternal spirit which does not necessarily mean intimacy, or personal friendship, but implies courtesy and fair-mindedness.” Indeed, whites needed to recognize African Americans’ “fellow-citizenship and fellow-humanity.” Here Robeson stipulated that merit, that equal opportunity, did not currently dictate a person’s fate in American society. Only after whites acknowledged African Americans’ shared citizenship and humanity could there be a nation “in which success and achievement are recognized, and those deserving receive the respect, honor and dignity due them.” Robeson reached out to his audience by couching his remarks in the language of American egalitarianism, but was clear on the point that that ideal was far from a reality. He had reason to be cautious in his tenor. Events such as the July 1917 race riots in St. Louis, when white male workers, upset at the growing number of black employees in local factories, went on a rampage in the city’s black section, attacking and killing black men and women and destroying countless homes and businesses, showed that the black quest for economic equality could spark vicious reprisals from whites.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Official estimates placed the death toll at thirty-nine African Americans, although many in the area reported mass graves and unaccounted bodies in the river, suggesting that the total was closer to one hundred. Many more were injured and, as Malcolm McLaughlin notes, “thousands effectively became refugees” when their homes were destroyed. See *Power, Community, and Racial Killing in East St. Louis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2. See also Elliot M. Rudwick, *Race Riot at East St. Louis July 2, 1917* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964).

As if to ward off any rustling in the seats from those who may have resented his subtle jab at the nation's currently un-egalitarian society, Robeson then returned to patriotism, lauding the dead soldiers and echoing the Gettysburg Address in promising to "consecrate ourselves . . . to the furtherance of the great motives for which they gave their lives." But his conclusion stressed the importance of equality again, arguing that the soldiers' goals would not be fulfilled "until in all sections of this fair land there will be equal opportunity for all, and character shall be the standard of excellence." Although he did not name race a key factor in how people were judged, his more astute listeners must have surely recognized his point. If they didn't, his list of the qualities of his "ideal government" made his intentions clear. In Robeson's America, "an injury to the meanest citizen is an insult to the whole constitution." In an ideal society, "black and white shall clasp friendly hands in the consciousness of the fact that we are brethren and that God is the father of us all."¹⁴⁸

Robeson's moderate political stance in this speech is striking, in part, because of his later radical beliefs.¹⁴⁹ But they also point to the context—a time when most blacks were still trying to determine the best way to advancement, still hopeful that compassionate whites and compliant courts could open doors wide enough that blacks would be able to achieve status and wealth commensurate with their white peers.

¹⁴⁸ Robeson's use of the phrase "clasp friendly hands" also riffed on Washington's famous "Atlanta Exposition Address" of 1901. Washington appeased nervous whites by noting that "in all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." Here Robeson saw a more meaningful connection of white and black hands. For alternate interpretations and analysis of Robeson's address, see Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 76-7, and Robeson, Jr., *Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 35-9. For Washington's address, see Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, with related documents, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003), 142-45.

¹⁴⁹ Robeson became a controversial figure in the post-World War II era, as he openly supported Soviet Communism, believing that it offered a more egalitarian society. The House Un-American Activities Committee held special hearings about Robeson in 1949, and he had his visa revoked by the state department in 1950. See Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 359-62, 388-90.

Robeson built on the self-help ethos of Booker T. Washington even as his own wide ranging academic interests better represented the ideals of W.E. B. Du Bois. At this moment, fresh from a full career at Rutgers, and preparing to attend law school in the fall, Robeson was not yet ready to turn his back on the country of his birth, still hopeful that America could fulfill its democratic and egalitarian promise.

Conclusion: Black Masculinity's Contested Meanings

Paul Robeson was many things during his time at Rutgers: an unwelcome freshman try-out for the football team; a beloved senior All-American; a well-liked singer who entertained his peers at various events; and a social outcast who could not attend any of the dances held after his singing engagements. In these roles, and others, he attracted the attention of countless observers, black and white, on-campus, and off. As the star football player on an integrated team, in a sport becoming increasingly popular across the nation, he carried particularly weighty cultural baggage. When the nation entered the fray of World War I, he became an even more potent symbol—for good or ill, according to the observer—of what black men could accomplish in an integrated, competitive setting.

Inevitably, different observers drew different meanings from Robeson's accomplishments, and that of his contemporary Fritz Pollard. But as black and white people discussed his significance, they continually circled back to sports as a model of egalitarianism. No one, it seems, could escape the allure of sports as a realm where equal opportunity could be seen in action, where the notions of fair play and sportsmanship seemed to epitomize the nation's larger political ideals and social promise. As a college

athlete, supposedly free from the taint of commercialism, Robeson could represent the possibilities of a system that rewarded merit regardless of race, creed, or color. If some black observers saw the model as still incomplete, they nonetheless subscribed to its potential, hopeful that even an imperfect realization of equal opportunity could lead to greater access to the political, economic, and social privileges still reserved almost exclusively for white men. That Robeson himself made no allusions to sports in his own speeches and writings about equality, even in his commencement address, suggests that he was well aware of sports' limitations. But as he left Rutgers after four years replete with praise and honor, nearly anything must have seemed possible to those who watched him say his final words as a collegian and exit the spotlight (for the moment): an All-American athlete, a scholar, a black man, a Rutgers alum, a walking representation that maybe, just maybe, the nation could deliver on its promises.

Neither Robeson, nor the black and white observers attending graduation that day in June 1919, could have known that the nation would erupt in violence in the ensuing months as whites viciously assaulted returning black servicemen and black factory workers who hoped to capitalize politically and economically on their war-time service.¹⁵⁰ The brutal race riots of 1919 showed emphatically that the nation was not yet amenable to equal black citizenship, no matter the accomplishments of Robeson and other black athletes. The time for fair play in American civic life would have to come later.

¹⁵⁰ For more on the summer race riots of 1919, see William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*, reprint edition (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996, 1970).

Chapter Two

The Talk of the Season: Race, Democracy, and the 1939 UCLA Football Team

In the November 18, 1939 issue of the *Washington [D.C.] Afro-American*, a black newspaper, sports editor Sam Lacy could not contain his excitement. As the college football season wound down, it was not the local black colleges and universities, such as Howard University, that inspired Lacy's enthusiasm; nor was it any of the east-coast schools that featured black players, such as Cornell University. Instead, Lacy turned his attention to the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), then a relatively young school with few athletic accomplishments to its credit. The UCLA squad was undefeated, and it seemed likely that a season-ending game against cross-town rival the University of Southern California (USC) would determine which school would be invited to play in the annual Rose Bowl game, at the time the most prestigious and financially-rewarding post-season college bowl game. Lacy wrote that he would "give anything ... to see the Los Angeles lads trim the wicks of the lamps of their Trojan rivals." There were three reasons why Lacy felt so passionately about the UCLA squad: Kenny Washington, Woody Strode, and Jackie Robinson, the remarkably talented trio of African-American men who starred for the team. In an era when integrated team athletic competition was still relatively rare, to have three black starters on one squad at a predominantly white school was unprecedented. As Lacy wrote, if UCLA earned a trip to the Rose Bowl, the game would be "overrun with sepia flesh" as never before.

Thrilled by the possibility, he urged his readers to support him in saying “C’mon UCLA!”¹

Lacy’s cross-country reaction gives some sense of the close attention paid by many to the 1939 UCLA football squad. With three black starters and a key black reserve among its active roster, the UCLA team epitomized (optimistically to some, and despairingly to others) the possibilities of a multi-racial and multi-ethnic America.² As New Deal policy makers and left-wing activists attempted to craft a new civic nationalism that welcomed the contributions of previously-disparaged minorities, sports such as college football provided one key opportunity for ordinary Americans, black and white, to explicitly articulate their ideas of American egalitarianism and democracy. That the team played its games just as the Nazis began their campaign of terror halfway across the globe, one predicated on racist beliefs, only heightened this rhetoric. In a racially-mixed city during turbulent times, Washington, Strode, Robinson, and their teammates engendered a number of different reactions from fans, newspaper writers, and students—black and white, men and women. While some saw this integrated team’s success as a true representation of American democracy, others attempted to circumscribe or undermine their achievements. These numerous obstacles, on-field and off, starkly outlined the limits of the nation’s new civic nationalism. Old fractures—between the

¹ Sam Lacy, “UCLA Makes Bowl Bid,” *Washington Afro-American*, 18 November 1939, p. 26.

² Historian Lane Demas discusses the integration of the UCLA football program, and the 1939 team in particular, in his essay, “On the Threshold of Broad and Rich Football Pastures’: Integrated College Football at UCLA, 1938-1941,” in James A. Vlasich, ed., *Horsehide, Pigskin, Oval Tracks and Apple Pie: Essays on Sports and American Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2006), 86-103. According to Demas, there was a fifth black player on the team, lineman Johnny Wynne, a seldom-used reserve. However, I found no mention of him in box scores, and Strode said in later years that Wynne had left the team before the season to take an off-campus job. See Woody Strode and Sam Young, *Goal Dust* (New York: Madison Books, 1990), 86.

haves and have-nots, the privileged and the oppressed—proved too significant for sports achievements to heal entirely.

Southern California, UCLA, and 1930s American Democracy

Late 1930s southern California was a rich setting for the discussions of race, equality, and democracy surrounding the 1939 UCLA squad. Although the Los Angeles area would not experience its most substantial population boom until the start of World War II, the area had been growing consistently since railroads first brought a significant number of immigrants to the area in the 1880s. Located on the periphery of the U.S. mainland, the area attracted a multi-racial population that included Mexicans, Chinese, African Americans, Jewish Americans, and Midwestern Protestant European Americans. Although whites constituted the majority group, this diverse ethnic population made the area a particularly appropriate location to test the limits of American democratic society's inclusiveness.

The Los Angeles area had a long-standing reputation for harboring progressive racial attitudes and offering an abundance of opportunities for African Americans. In 1913, famed black scholar and leader W. E. B. Du Bois waxed poetic about Los Angeles' charms, writing in *The Crisis* that “nowhere in the United States is the Negro so well and beautifully housed, nor the average efficiency and intelligence in the colored population so high.” Du Bois' assessment of the city's racial politics may have been overly optimistic, but some unique factors made Los Angeles appealing to blacks. The relatively high level of home ownership for African Americans was one key positive trend. In 1910, according to historian Josh Sides, “almost 40 percent of African

Americans in Los Angeles County owned their homes, compared to only 2.4 percent in New York and 8 percent in Chicago.”³ There were other signs of racial progress. Starting in the 1880s, the city consistently employed a handful of black police officers on its force, a rarity for many metropolitan areas.⁴ And in the decades before 1920, blacks lived throughout the city, not confined to one segregated neighborhood. As African Americans spread positive messages about the city to relatives and friends back East, the black population climbed from 2,131 in 1900 to 38,898 in 1930.⁵

These positive attributes, however, did not mean that racism did not exist, nor did they guarantee equal opportunities for African Americans. As more white southerners moved into the area in the 1920s and 1930s, African Americans’ fortunes declined. These new immigrants, according to historian Douglas Flamming, “were aggressive advocates of Jim Crow.” Many of the southern newcomers believed “that blacks were too free in Los Angeles, [and] that the city should adopt the South’s model of segregation.”⁶ Even as early as 1912, the city passed a ruling from the city district attorney “supporting the right of business owners to discriminate.” Sides also notes that “black children ... were restricted to segregated beaches and allowed to swim in public pools only on the night before the pools were cleaned.” By the 1920s, restrictive racial covenants had also increased in number, slowly restricting blacks (and other minority groups) to ethnic enclaves. The most significant barrier to blacks in Los Angeles was in

³ Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 11, 16.

⁴ Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 6th page of photo section (between 158 and 159).

⁵ As Sides notes, however, “blacks never constituted more than 3.14 percent of the total population ... a testament to the rapid parallel growth of the city overall.” See Sides, *L.A. City Limits*, 15-16.

⁶ Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, 4-5.

the realm of employment. Black men in particular found jobs scarce, with employers preferring to hire whites first, and then ethnic groups other than blacks second. Although black women could find work as domestic servants, black men were often passed over for jobs in factory work, which was the major employment opportunity in the pre-war years. Black men instead had to find work as domestic servants, porters and waiters on trains, janitors, and perhaps in entertainment as musicians. Even Hollywood offered few opportunities.⁷ So, although the city was largely free from the excessive racial violence of the South, African Americans still faced a number of social and economic limitations.

By the 1930s, these factors combined to form a climate in which many blacks tenaciously clung to the few advantages Los Angeles had to offer, while increasing numbers of whites resented black achievement and success. The unsettled character of the city led to wide variances in racial politics, where blacks could be welcomed participants in society by some whites and brutally disparaged by others. Rachel Isum Robinson, a UCLA student in the 1940s and widow of Jackie Robinson, recalled the racial climate in the city as being “Northern-style bigotry ... unlike the South, incidents of discrimination were often unexpected and inexplicable—you never knew when they would happen.”⁸ Similarly, Strode described the racism in 1920s and 1930s Southern California as being “very subtle.” He wrote: “A restaurant wouldn’t have a sign saying, ‘Whites Only,’ like they would in the South. They’d have a sign saying, ‘We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone.’ That was their loophole. We knew where we weren’t wanted, and we didn’t go to those places.” Strode also remembered some areas of the

⁷ Sides, *L.A. City Limits*, 12, 18, 21-6.

⁸ Rachel Robinson with Lee Daniels, *Jackie Robinson: An Intimate Portrait* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1996), 24.

city being more prejudiced than others. Inglewood was particularly bad; Strode recalled signs saying “NO JEWS AND NO COLOREDS ARE WELCOME IN THIS TOWN!” Pasadena, too, was unfriendly to African Americans: “that’s where most of the rich white people lived.”⁹ Jackie Robinson also believed that there was “a lot of prejudice” of the “underhand” variety in Pasadena, the area where he grew up.¹⁰ But other sections of the city, where blacks and other ethnic groups such as Italian Americans lived, proved to be at least tolerant of racial diversity, with fewer signs of discrimination and animosity. This mixed character to the city’s racial attitudes profoundly influenced coverage of the 1939 UCLA team, as responses, even among whites, vacillated between unabashed celebration of black athletic achievement and violent antipathy.

These differences in the city’s racial attitudes were also reflected in the distinct biographical circumstances of the team’s three black stars. Strode, the oldest of the three at twenty-five years of age in 1939, had grown up in the South Central section of Los Angeles, a predominantly African-American area. Although encountering some racism as a youth, he remembered sports being one aspect of his life largely free from racial “grudges, especially between the players.” Strode’s Native-American and African-American ancestry gave him two groups with whom he felt a kinship, and perhaps explained his rather accommodating attitude towards members of other ethnicities. Washington, Strode’s best friend on the team, hailed from the Lincoln Heights section of Los Angeles, which Strode described as “a big Italian community with a few Irish mixed in.” Washington’s high school friends were nearly all of Irish or Italian descent, and

⁹ Strode, *Goal Dust*, 10.

¹⁰ Jackie Robinson, with Ed Reid, “Jackie Robinson Tells His Own Story,” *Washington Post*, 21 August 1949, p. C-1, C-3. Quotation from C-3.

Strode said that as far as he knew “the Washington family was the only black family in the neighborhood.” Strode even wrote that Washington “had an accent that was half-Italian” when he first met him. Although Washington’s father was largely absent from his life, his Uncle Rocky, a well-liked lieutenant on the L.A. police force, served an important role as a mentor. Kenny Washington was a star football player coming out of high school, and had a number of scholarship offers, including one from cross-town rival USC, but chose UCLA because of its better record with black athletes.¹¹

Jackie Robinson selected UCLA for similar reasons to those of Washington, although his background and life experiences were quite different from his two black star teammates. Growing up in Pasadena, Robinson faced bitter racism at an early age. One of his first recollections was of a rock fight with his white neighbor across the street when he was eight years old, after the young girl called him a “nigger.”¹² In later years, Robinson would see firsthand the adulation black athletes could receive from white fans but also the on-going discrimination and limited avenues of advancement opened to blacks. Older brother Mack Robinson was feted nationally and locally after winning a silver medal in track at the 1936 Olympics. A few years later, he was working as a janitor, one of the few jobs open to black men.¹³ Another older brother, Edgar, was

¹¹ Strode, *Goal Dust*, 11, 50, 61-2.

¹² Jackie Robinson, as told to Alfred Duckett, *I Never Had It Made* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1972), 17.

¹³ In earlier years, Mack Robinson had actually been employed at one of the local community pools, teaching neighborhood children to swim. However, according to brother Jackie, after a group of concerned citizens took the city to court for restricting black residents’ access to the pool for only one day out of the week, “the angry City Manager . . . proceeded to fire every colored fellow who had been hired,” including Mack. When Mack returned from the Olympics to find that he had lost his job, he became bitter—Jackie writes that the incident “broke his [Mack’s] spirit.” Indeed, Jackie Robinson’s main complaint about bigotry in Pasadena was that “it was always hard for Negro fellows to find work” in the town. See Robinson, “Jackie Robinson Tells...” p. C-3.

arrested on trumped-up charges and viciously beaten by Los Angeles police during the annual Tournament of Roses Parade on January 1, 1939.¹⁴ Robinson also had bitter personal experiences with the police. On two separate occasions, Pasadena law enforcement officials arrested Robinson under dubious circumstances. The first involved a fight after a high school football game, when Robinson threw a punch at an opposing player that used a racial slur against him. The second incident occurred just before he left for UCLA. While driving home with friends after a summer baseball game, some white youths insulted Robinson and his companions. When teammate Ray Bartlett slapped one of the offending whites with his baseball mitt, a crowd of African Americans gathered around the two cars. A local police cruiser stopped to investigate the situation and Robinson alone was jailed, most likely because of his local celebrity as an athlete, despite his having thrown no punches in the incident.¹⁵ These experiences, and others like them, made him suspicious of local whites. As Strode later recalled, Robinson “had a little more hate going than the rest of us” because of his upbringing in Pasadena.¹⁶

Despite these varied backgrounds, UCLA was, on the whole, a good fit for the three black stars. A relatively young school, with doors opening in 1919, UCLA was nonetheless big and growing by the late 1930s. In the fall of 1939, the school’s 9,762 total students made it smaller than its sister school, the University of California at

¹⁴ See “Brother Of Jackie Robinson Mauled By Pasadena Police,” *California Eagle*, 12 January 1939, p. 1-A, and Arnold Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 60-1.

¹⁵ Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, 65.

¹⁶ Strode, *Goal Dust*, 11. Another sign of Pasadena’s unfriendly attitude towards minorities came in the summer before Robinson’s first semester at UCLA, when the Pasadena Improvement Association formed. According to Rampersad, the group was “endorsed by every important business and real-estate organization in Pasadena,” and “its explicit goal was to restrict the ‘use and occupancy of property’ in the city of Pasadena ‘to members of the White or Caucasian Race only.’” See Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, 64-5.

Berkeley (Cal), which had just over 15,000 students, but still a fairly large institution.¹⁷

In its earliest years, the school had played in the Southern Conference, which included such small schools as Pomona College, Redlands University, and Whittier College.

However, as the school expanded, it eventually joined the larger Pacific Coast

Conference (PCC) in 1928. African-American athletes joined the team even in the

1920s. Just prior to the school's membership in the PCC, African-American Ralph

Bunche, who would go on to fame as a United Nations ambassador, was a star basketball player and track athlete for the school from 1925-1927. UCLA's smaller size—and lack

of athletic tradition—in comparison to Cal and USC gave it a lot of ground to make up

when it joined the PCC, and perhaps explains the school's willingness to accept black

athletes.¹⁸ By the mid-1930s, USC owned the dominant athletic program in the area, but

had a reputation for being prejudiced against black players.¹⁹ UCLA thus offered a local

institution for African-American athletes such as Strode, Washington, and Robinson to

¹⁷ University enrollment totals are from Verne A. Stadtman, ed., *The Centennial Record of the University of California* (Berkeley: Regents of the University of California, 1967), 221-22.

¹⁸ Andrew Hamilton and John B. Jackson, *UCLA on the Move: During Fifty Golden Years 1919-1969* (Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Press, 1969), 172-3. The school also faced significant financial troubles in the 1930s, which may have accounted for the administration's willingness to have star black athletes. A memo from D. G. Maclise, the Assistant Comptroller for the school, revealed that the university had accumulated a debt of \$178,159.37 by January 1, 1933, partly because of expenses incurred by the school's "new membership ... in the Pacific Coast Conference." One of the key factors cited in bringing in new revenue was the appearance of USC on the football schedule. In the first year that that happened, 1936-1937, the school went from a profit of \$5,368.37 the year before to a profit of \$28,720.70. As these numbers suggest, successful athletic teams could bring in significant amounts of money. See D. G. Maclise, un-titled memo, Series 359, Chancellor's Office, Box 64, folder 40, November 28, 1939 in Chancellor's Office Papers, UCLA University Archives, Los Angeles, California.

¹⁹ USC had two black players on its team under long-time head coach Howard Jones, including an All-American tackle named Bryce Taylor (1925) and another player named Bert Richie. According to Strode, however, after Richie had "got involved in some sort of scandal involving a white woman ... Howard Jones vowed he would never let another black kid play on his team." See Strode, *Goal Dust*, 29. Other incidents reveal that USC athletic teams on the whole were not welcoming of African Americans and other minorities. In the fall of 1936, the Hollywood League Against Nazism led a call for the dismissal of USC track coach Dean Cromwell "for asserted anti-Semitic [sic] and anti-Negro utterances." In a speech to the German-American Alliance, Cromwell said he wished he "could only be that handsome boy Hitler in New York for one hour" so that he could deal with the overwhelming "foreign population" in the city. See "Hot Demand For Removal of Dean Cromwell as Troy Track Head," *Pasadena Post*, 15 September 1936, p. 14.

participate in big-time college sports; in turn, these stars played key roles in making the UCLA Bruins competitive in the PCC.

As UCLA tried to build up its athletic programs, black sports stars across the country continued to make their mark on amateur and professional athletics. Track star Jesse Owens and boxer Joe Louis earned special acclaim, providing hope for black newspaper editors and writers. Owens became a national star after his performance in the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, when he symbolically disproved Adolph Hitler's assertions of Aryan superiority by winning two gold medals.²⁰ Louis became a hero by claiming the heavyweight championship in 1936, the first black champion in the division since the controversial Jack Johnson. Unlike Johnson, Louis and Owens were generally well-regarded in both the white and black communities because they avoided public bravado, incendiary political talk, and, of course, white women. Louis' success led *Washington Afro-American* columnist Meyer Rowan to call for him to receive the NAACP's Spingarn Medal, the organization's highest honor. Rowan supported Louis' candidacy for the award because he believed the boxer's "good character in and out of the ring" had diminished "racial prejudices" and "broken" through "the barriers" between races. He saw Louis' success as being pivotal to the U.S. Post Office's decision to honor famed black leader Booker T. Washington on a stamp, and to the spread of integrated athletic competition in a variety of sports.²¹

Even white audiences were impressed by Louis and Owens. The *California Eagle*, published in Los Angeles under the direction of long-time editor Charlotta Bass,

²⁰ See David K. Wiggins, "The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin," *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in a White America* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 61-79.

²¹ Meyer Rowan, "An Open Letter to the N.A.A.C.P.," *Washington Afro-American*, 9 September 1939, p. 23.

reprinted an American Negro Press story about white southerners' reactions to Owens' success following the 1936 Olympics.²² Although noting that "Dixie dailies" had "given due prominence" to Owens and to Louis, the ANP story spotlighted a Raleigh *News and Observer* editorial as the only southern article "to give them significant editorial treatment." The *News and Observer's* story offers an insightful look into whites' tolerance for black athletic achievement. Acknowledging that Louis and Owens were "great athletes," the editorial also insisted that people in the South were not "as surprised at the physical prowess of Negroes as some other peoples seem to be." In fact, according to the newspaper, the South had valued African Americans' "brawn" in sporting contests for a long time, even before the Civil War. What they found different about Owens and Louis was that they "served their race well beyond their acts as athletes" because they did not have "the marks of folly" that "overtook Jack Johnson." Instead, they were "well-behaved, decent young men." The editorial cautioned that their "conduct" and not their "fame" would "serve to help or hurt the race."²³ Willing to praise black athletes for their "brawn," this white newspaper nonetheless cautioned these men to, in effect, behave themselves. Outspoken black athletes would clearly not be acceptable to these white men's standards.

Like Louis and Owens, UCLA's black stars would have to negotiate the pitfalls of public perception as they embarked upon their athletic careers. Although not performing in the Jim Crow South, they nonetheless encountered numerous examples of that mindset,

²² Bass took over the *Eagle* in 1912, just before the newspaper's founder died. An avowed Republican throughout the 1930s, Bass would later move to the left politically, running for Vice President of the Progressive Party in 1956. See Charlotta A. Bass, *Forty Years: Memoirs from the Pages of a Newspaper* (Los Angeles: self-published, 1960), and Regina Freer, "L.A. Race Woman: Charlotta Bass and the Complexities of Black Political Development in Los Angeles," *American Quarterly*, 56, no. 3 (2004), 607-32.

²³ "Owens, Louis praised by Dixie daily," *California Eagle*, 28 August 1936, p. 11.

and of racial bigotry in general, in their experiences on the West Coast. The UCLA stars' participation in integrated team competition, as opposed to the individual sports played by Louis and Owens, took on added significance in this context.²⁴ The limits of the New Deal's inclusive civic nationalism, in which diverse groups of Americans could contribute equally to the nation's success, would be tested in the responses to these athletes' accomplishments. The UCLA team captured so much attention because it had the potential to model how a new civic culture—with blacks and whites working together—might operate. And as the rumblings of war began in Europe and the racist edicts and actions of Hitler's regime became more vocal and visible, the stakes for black athletic participation would grow even higher.

Preludes: Race, Democracy, and Athletic Achievements Before 1939

Strode, Washington, and Robinson all earned plaudits in the years leading to their breakthrough season, and certain key moments anticipated some of the positive and negative reactions they would encounter. As the three athletes earned fame on the football field and in other endeavors, black and white audiences marveled at their achievements. However, the lessons that observers drew varied widely, as did the stars' experiences on and off the field. These three athletes navigated the rocky terrain of integrated athletic competition as best they could: the racial bigotry from teammates, opponents, and fans; the acclaim in the media but also the stereotyped characterizations

²⁴ As Demas notes, the experiences of black athletes in team competition such as football complicate the traditional "race hero" approach to sports history, in which historians spotlight an individual such as Louis for his pioneering role. As Demas argues, "there was never a single 'color line' or integrating figure in college football, but rather a tediously slow, arduous, and non-linear process—one that spanned nearly 80 years and countless players." He argues that this integration process "more closely resembled the broader African American struggle for civil rights during the 20th century." See Demas, "On the Threshold," 88.

and demeaning nicknames; and the on-going signs of democracy's failings in local communities and even at their respective schools.

As mentioned earlier, the three black stars selected UCLA for a number of reasons, including the school's reputation for racial egalitarianism. According to Strode, "all the minorities followed UCLA because they were the first school to really give the minority athlete a chance to play. If we drew 100,000 people to the Coliseum, 40,000 of them would be black; and that was just about every black person in the city of Los Angeles."²⁵ Although undoubtedly speaking hyperbolically regarding the number of black fans in attendance, Strode's sense of the school's racial fairness was echoed in later years by black reserve player Ray Bartlett, who remembered that "UCLA was the first school to really give the Negro athlete a break."²⁶

The school's reputation for racial equality would be tested when Strode and Washington joined the freshman team in the fall of 1936. As the first black football players on the squad in a number of years, the two received a lukewarm and at times hostile response from some of their teammates. Although there were apparently no racial incidents among the freshman players, rumors reached Washington and Strode that there were "some players on the varsity saying they don't want to play with any niggers." When the two moved up to the varsity squad in 1937, two players, Walt Schell and

²⁵ Strode, *Goal Dust*, 62.

²⁶ Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, 68. The school's racial attitudes were not the only incentives for these athletes to choose UCLA. Strode acknowledged that he and Washington (and presumably Robinson, who was one of the most sought-after players in the country) received extra inducements to play for UCLA. In addition to his tuition and stipend, school officials also gave him "twenty bucks under the table so I could pay the bills at home." He and Washington were also given a car to share in addition to free books and clothes. See Strode, *Goal Dust*, 32. One might wonder whether these athletes' experiences with racial equality were exceptional. As will be discussed later, black students faced unequal treatment from the campus branch of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps during the 1939 season. And the following year, some black students expressed concern when the University Drama Society put on a dramatized version of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, distressed by the play's employment of racial stereotypes. See "Production Protested," *Daily Bruin*, 5 December 1940, p. 1.

Celestine Moses “Slats” Wyrick, recoiled at the two black players’ presence on the team.²⁷ Strode identified Wyrick, a lineman from Oklahoma, as the primary culprit. When he and Wyrick were slated to line up next to one another in practice, Wyrick refused to take the field, explaining to Coach Bill Spaulding, “I can’t play next to a nigger because my folks would disown me.” Spaulding then placed the two across from one another. When the whistle blew, Strode knocked Wyrick down, and the irate Oklahoman called Strode “a black son of a bitch.” Strode began to pummel the white lineman until the coaches called him off.²⁸

Although Strode later wrote that he and Wyrick became good friends after the incident, and that racial troubles vanished on the team, his memory may have been tinged by nostalgia.²⁹ A university report on the football team, commissioned after the 1937 season, highlighted “prejudice among some against the colored boys” as one of the key problems on the team throughout the season.³⁰ Local newspapers picked up on these tensions. A column by J. Cullen Fentress in the *California Eagle* from 1939 revealed that the UCLA squads in 1937 and 1938 had been “characterized” by “dissension,” a likely reference to racial tensions within the team.³¹ Similarly, Rube Samuelsen, writing in the *Pasadena Post* in 1938, wrote that that year’s team’s “morale is not of the best,” causing

²⁷ See Vincent Rice, “Once Over Lightly,” *Daily Bruin*, 28 September 1937, p. 3.

²⁸ Strode, *Goal Dust*, 64-65.

²⁹ According to Strode, when UCLA played the University of Oklahoma later that same season, Wyrick approached the Oklahoma players before the game and told them that Washington and Strode were his “friends” and that the Oklahoma players “better respect them for the good players they are.” In the end, Oklahoma selected Washington for their “all-opponent team.” See Strode, *Goal Dust*, 64-65.

³⁰ “Report of Student-Alumni Football Committee, January 17, 1938,” p. 7. See Series 359, Chancellor’s Office, Box 56, folder 209. Incidentally, this report helped lead to the “resignation” of Spaulding as coach and his transition to Athletic Director.

³¹ J. Cullen Fentress, “Down In Front: On The Grid Front,” *California Eagle*, 12 October 1939, p. 3-B.

the team to be “unpredictable.”³² Hesitant to identify race explicitly as the cause of this unease within the team, perhaps because the sportswriters nurtured faith in sport as a model for integrated society, these accounts nonetheless show that even athletic competition would not necessarily bring down long-standing racial barriers.

Strode and Washington were well aware of these limitations. Area journalists and opposing fans and players consistently called attention to the black athletes’ racial otherness, mocking and even threatening them. Some insults were more overt than others. Strode recalled that opposing players would sometimes try to rub Washington’s eyes in the lime they used to mark the fields, and that his teammates would then respond by going after the offending players. Strode himself fought players who called him a “nigger,” and he described one distressing incident involving the Washington State University football coach. As Washington ran down the sideline, the Washington State coach shouted out the derogatory term. The running back, according to Strode, “stopped the whole proceedings and went after the coach.” Although accustomed to verbal insults from white fans, players, and coaches, “you didn’t call Kenny Washington a nigger without a reaction. We were nice, affable people but we’d react to that.”³³ Coverage of the UCLA games against Southern Methodist University (SMU) and the University of Missouri in 1937 also revealed the racially-motivated physical pounding UCLA’s black athletes faced. Although SMU players insisted “it didn’t make a difference whether U.C.L.A. used white players or Negroes,”³⁴ *Pasadena Post* writer Charles Paddock wrote

³² Rube Samuelson, “Sport Volleys,” *Pasadena Post*, 22 November 1938, p. 8.

³³ Strode, *Goal Dust*, 65.

³⁴ United Press, “Bruins’ Negro Foes ‘Passed’ By Mustangs,” *Pasadena Post*, 16 November 1937, p. 6.

that Washington was “almost killed by the Southern Methodists” in their game.³⁵ Paddock also wrote that the Missouri players “looked awful mad” when Washington entered the game after sitting out early because of injuries, and the head female cheerleader for Missouri “got the Tiger rooting section” extra “worked up” when he made his way onto the field. After a short Washington run, “the entire Tiger line piled up on the Negro.” Although Paddock did not explicitly say that Washington was targeted because of his race, he certainly insinuated it.³⁶ In later years, white teammate Ned Mathews remembered that game as being a particularly rough affair: “some redneck Missouri players were riding Washington pretty good and they would take chalk from the sidelines and rub it in his face.”³⁷ As with the hostile fans faced by Pollard and Robeson, these white players, cheerleaders, and fans attempted to affirm their stronger position in American society through physical and emotional abuse.

Apart from the physical pounding and verbal taunting that Strobe and Washington endured in their early years with UCLA, numerous incidents and accounts showed how stereotypes of blacks as clowns and buffoons infiltrated the supposedly egalitarian realm of athletics. One example of this tendency was in the well-worn nickname the “Gold Dust Twins” used widely in the mainstream media for Strobe and Washington, and later Robinson and Washington. Although seemingly harmless on the surface, the nickname came from a brand of soap called Franklin’s Gold Dust Soap Powder, that, in Strobe’s words, “used a picture of two coal-black kids on the cover.” Similarly, one of the major

³⁵ Charles W. Paddock, “Bruins Down Missouri By 13-0 Score,” *Pasadena Post*, 28 November 1937, p. 1, 23, 25. Quotation from 23.

³⁶ Paddock, “Bruins Down Missouri,” p. 23.

³⁷ B.J. Violett, “A Giant On and Off the Field: Teammates Recall Jackie Robinson’s Legacy,” *UCLA Today*, available online at <http://www.today.ucla.edu/1997/970425TeammatesRecall.html>.

nicknames employed for Washington was “Kingfish,” a reference to one of the main black character on the (in)famous *Amos ‘n’ Andy* radio show.³⁸ These nicknames identified the players as black, marking out their race for white readers, and they also fit into a long tradition of white humor aimed at mocking blackness and black pretensions. In the case of the soap powder, blackness was linked to being dirty (and perhaps infantile). That connection might explain why the *Eagle* never used the nickname in its coverage of the UCLA team, and why black UCLA student Tom Bradley fretted in a letter to the editor to the *Eagle* that “the entire country knows us as ‘Gold Dust Twins’ and other names which designate only Negroes.” He did not like this emphasis because, he argued: “We can only have a true democracy when all races are forgotten and each human is accepted as a man offering real contributions . . . to the progress of our country.”³⁹ The humor in *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, meanwhile, derived from black characters’ inability to function successfully in their modern world, and the comedy of their pretensions to white middle-class status.⁴⁰ No wonder, then, that the *Eagle* refrained from using this nickname as well. Even as black athletes such as Washington earned

³⁸ Strode, *Goal Dust*, 63.

³⁹ Tom Bradley, “Minorities Considered,” Letter to the Editor, *California Eagle*, 9 November 1939, p. 8-B.

⁴⁰ Many African Americans enjoyed the radio series and thus might not have found anything offensive in Washington’s nickname. Not all whites would have seen anything inappropriate in its use, either: white Louisiana politician Huey Long actually embraced the title “Kingfish,” although his whiteness mitigated some of the moniker’s negative qualities. However, the *Eagle*’s avoidance of “Kingfish” in connection with Washington showed that many in the black community were troubled by its use, and a number of African-American groups protested the radio show (and its later television incarnation) for its demeaning representations of black people. For more on the controversy surrounding the show, see Melvin Ely, *The Adventures of Amos ‘N’ Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

acclaim for their performances on the field, these tongue-in-cheek nicknames subtly mocked their achievements.⁴¹

Other uses of stereotypes were less subtle. The United Press story about Kenny Washington's first varsity game with UCLA described how the team was "sparked by Kenneth Washington, a 200-pound Negro left half, who defied the superstitions of his race and wore a huge golden '13' on his blue jersey."⁴² Later that season, Stanford's football coaches applied burnt cork to the face of their scout team halfback so that he could better simulate Washington in their preparations for their game against UCLA. The local *Pasadena Post* re-printed the UP account in a humorous light.⁴³ Later in the 1937 season, Braven Dyer's column discussing the Pacific Coast Conference's football standings in the week following Cal's victory over UCLA, employed similar humor. Writing from the perspective of an alter ego named Pigskin Peter, a supposed professor of football, Dyer at first praised Washington, UCLA's "dark destroyer." But the praise was laden with demeaning stereotypes:

The lad's a wow in boldface caps, but it's mostly what he doesn't do on a football field that impresses me. He doesn't overwork, he doesn't get excited, he doesn't get those black steel muscles busy until it counts. In short, Kenny has the complete relaxation of his race. You never saw a member of his race eat a po'k chop and then go into a heavy campaign of worrying about where his next one is coming from. No, sah; he may bear down on that po'k chop, but when it's gone

⁴¹ As with Pollard and Robeson, white writers also linked black athletic performance to the primitive and natural in their writing. In the *Examiner*, for example, Bob Hunter referred to Robinson as a "grease-dipped lightning bolt" on one occasion, part of a broader pattern of language usage. Hunter also called Washington "the one-man typhoon" following another game. See Bob Hunter, "Stanford Shocks U.C.L.A., 14 to 14," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 15 October 1939, p. II-2, II-4, and "Bruins Belt Grizzlies!" *Los Angeles Examiner*, 22 October 1939, p. II-2, II-5.

⁴² UP, "U.C.L.A.'s Eleven In 26-13 Win," *Pasadena Post*, 25 September 1937, p. 6-7. Quotation from 6.

⁴³ UP, "Stanford Has 'Washington,'" *Pasadena Post*, 7 October 1937, p. 10.

he just unlaxes until the next po'k chop comes along. Well, K. Washington plays football like that, if you see what I mean.⁴⁴

The malapropisms (unlaxes instead of relaxes, etc.) were pulled from blackface minstrelsy and its many descendents, such as *Amos 'n' Andy*. And the characterization of Washington as relaxed and unconcerned about the future made him a passive figure, one incapable of leadership. He did not direct the team's fortunes but was rather pulled along by his white teammates. Black physical superiority had to be qualified through humor, and diminished by linking it to stereotypes of racial inferiority.

However, there were moments when black and white sportswriters found in athletic competition an affirmation of the pluralistic society that many hoped to create in the New Deal era. As the historian Gary Gerstle has argued, many white policy makers in the 1930s were motivated by a sense of civic nationalism that embraced ethnic pluralism. Amidst the ravages of the Great Depression, "the 1930s called for a kinder and gentler" approach to immigrants and other minority groups, one that emphasized the need "to bring diverse groups of Americans together rather than split them apart."⁴⁵ A number of cultural forms seemed to pick up on this shift in government attitude: swing music featured black and white performers (at times in integrated concerts), and absorbed a variety of influences, including Jewish klezmer music and even hillbilly instrumentation.⁴⁶ Sports were another arena where this inclusive mindset could be made manifest. Historian Lewis Erenberg argues that Joe Louis' victory over German boxer Max Schmeling was so compelling, in part, because Louis "became a hero to a growing

⁴⁴ Braven Dyer, "The Sports Parade," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 November 1937, p. A-19.

⁴⁵ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 139. See Chapter Four, "The Roosevelt Nation Ascendant, 1930-1940," 128-86.

⁴⁶ See David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

number of white Americans” as well as blacks, particularly those who “were wrestling with a new civic nationalism ... that was far more inclusive than previous American self-definitions rooted in Anglo-Saxon white supremacy.” In the wake of the Louis-Schmeling bout, some whites were troubled “that American racial ideals bore a striking similarity to those of the Nazis.”⁴⁷

From this perspective, some fans and journalists praised Washington and Strode’s athletic accomplishments from the moment they first took the field for UCLA. Fans of the team quickly fell in love with Kenny Washington; by September 1937, his first season on varsity, he was already pictured on the front page of the school newspaper the *Daily Bruin* next to the story about his team’s triumph over Oregon. The photograph’s caption even referred to him as “GENERAL KENNY WASHINGTON”—certainly a more positive nickname and one that would especially circulate in the black papers and the *Bruin*.⁴⁸ Linking Washington to the nation’s first president emphasized his capacity as a leader and citizen-soldier.⁴⁹ In November 1937, the *Eagle* printed a story about Washington’s performance against Cal in the newspaper’s main section, instead of relegating it to Section B with the other sports news. According to the story, Washington’s performance led to the crowd “madly cheering ‘Kenny Washington! Kenny Washington!’” and he earned a rousing ovation when he left the game.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Lewis A. Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmeling* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

⁴⁸ “First in Pay-Dirt,” Photograph, *Daily Bruin*, 27 September 1937, p. 1.

⁴⁹ See Michael Oriard, *King Football: Sport and Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio and Newsreels, Movies and Magazines, the Weekly & the Daily Press* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 319. The comparison to George Washington became particularly resonant when the war in Europe began and American involvement grew ever more imminent.

⁵⁰ “Kenny Turns In An All-American Performance,” *California Eagle*, 4 November 1937, p. 6-A.

Washington's 72-yard pass to receiver Hal Hirschon, completed in an early December 1937 game against USC, was considered to be the longest pass play in college history up to that time. As a result, it generated national attention and earned Washington significant praise in the mainstream and black press.⁵¹ One unidentified *Eagle* reader was so pleased with Washington's record-setting pass that the reader submitted a letter to the editor that linked Washington's "herculean" pass to "the wonderful legs of Jesse Owens ... the wonderful arms of [black boxer] Henry Armstrong, and also that fast ball of [black pitcher] Satchel Paige. They can never dig up anyone who can outclass these Black boys."⁵²

Underlining much of this praise was the familiar hope, among black and white writers, that sports represented a model for democracy. Thus, Braven Dyer, who made the allusion between Washington's running and a black man eating a pork chop, drew considerable meaning about sports' democratic potential from one play in UCLA's victory over the University of Washington in October 1938. When white player Jack Montgomery intercepted a pass, he passed the ball to Washington and continued downfield to block, a set of events Dyer saw as being representative of: "the true spirit of

⁵¹ See, for example: Associated Press, "Pass Traveled 62 Yards," *New York Times*, 6 December 1937, p. 20; J. Cullen Fentress, "Kenny Washington Astounds 'Experts' With Longest Heave," *California Eagle*, 9 December 1937, p. 3-B; David Orro, "U.C.L.A. Back Makes Year's Record Pass," *Chicago Defender*, 11 December 1937, p. 9; Rube Samuelson, "Washington Shatters Muller's Pass Mark," *Pasadena Post*, 5 December 1937, p. 22-23.

⁵² A Reader, "Kenny's Herculean Toss," Letter to the Editor, *California Eagle*, 9 December 1937, p. 2-B. As their careers continued, Washington and Strode became celebrities to both blacks and whites. The two were asked to participate in a Labor Day parade in the fall of 1938; they could get into any club for free because of their fame; legendary musician Fats Waller even brought the two backstage in between sets; and famed Hollywood actress Jane Wyman on one memorable occasion even told Strode that she was "a big fan" of him and Washington. See Strode, *Goal Dust*, 73, 83. The two were also invited to a variety of events in the black community, including special appearances alongside the likes of Louis Armstrong and Waller at winter Negro League baseball games. See "Giants Whip Kings 10-4; Kenny Guest," *California Eagle*, 9 December 1937, p. 3-B, and "Royal Giants to Battle Detroit Today," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 December 1937, p. A-11.

American football. Montgomery is white and Washington black, but true sportsmanship and team play draws no color line.”⁵³ Similarly, the *Eagle* reprinted a column by Mark Kelly of the *Los Angeles Examiner*, who reported that SMU had put both Washington and Strode as two of the eleven players on their “All-Opponent” team. Kelly considered the selections “the top gesture of the year in fellowship and neighborliness,” an interpretation apparently pleasing to the black staff of the *Eagle*.⁵⁴ Indeed, *Eagle* Sports Editor Almena Davis spotlighted fan reaction at one 1938 contest between UCLA and the University of Wisconsin as being particularly meaningful. Davis devoted most of his story to Washington’s brilliance, arguing that “laudations of Washington and the Bruins” could be heard long after the game, even though UCLA lost. He found “the most inspiring bit” to be the reactions of a white “blonde” Wisconsin fan in the stand when Washington struggled to stay in the game after being pummeled by the opposing team’s defenders:

“As our hero limped to the sidelines, the crowd and the blonde paid him tribute. ‘He wanted to stay in and give his all,’ she, the blond wailed. And to their feet the Badgers were leaping on the field, forming a gauntlet of congratulatory expressions, pumping our hero’s hand, slapping his back, shoving him on to the next ... Good old American sportsmanship.”⁵⁵

These moments showed that whites and blacks could come together on the athletic field, and could recognize one another’s shared spirit and humanity.

Even in moments of defeat, sports could provide a language for fans and observers to express their frustrations with American political culture. An un-named *Eagle* reader, distressed by the stalling of the Wagner-Van Nuys-Gavagan Anti-Lynching

⁵³ Braven Dyer, “The Sports Parade,” *Los Angeles Times*, 13 October 1938, p. A-11.

⁵⁴ “Down in Front: Football Seen In New Light,” *California Eagle*, 16 December 1937, p. 5-B.

⁵⁵ Almena Davis, “Down In Front,” *California Eagle*, 17 November 1938, p. 3-B.

Bill in the U.S. Senate because of southern filibuster tactics, could only lament: “The recent filibustering over the anti-lynch bill might be likened to one of Kenny Washington’s passes to Woodrow Strode. Kenny rares back to throw to Strode and the pass, in this case the lynch bill, is intercepted. It’s a tough life.”⁵⁶ Sports provided a shared language to discuss the potential and the limitations of a more-inclusive American body politic.

Reactions to Jackie Robinson’s athletic exploits at Pasadena Junior College show similar themes, although Robinson’s unique circumstances complicate the story considerably. A phenomenal athlete even in high school, Robinson was sought after by many major colleges but chose to attend Pasadena Junior College (PJC) to be closer to his mother. While there, Robinson dazzled fans in his one and a half years at the school. An exceptional all-around athlete, excelling at football, basketball, track, baseball, and tennis, Robinson earned the most plaudits for his performance with the PJC football squad. Although an injury derailed the first half of his freshman year, he performed well in the second half of the season. In the fall of 1938, his second and final year with the team, he was simply extraordinary, scoring more points than any football player in the country, leading his team to an undefeated season, a mythical junior college championship, and earning praise from local black and white newspaper writers alike. One writer for the *Pasadena Post* called Robinson “probably the greatest junior college player to ever don the moleskins” and raved that the team had concluded “the finest season” in local junior college history. The facts supported that argument: the PJC squad

⁵⁶ A Lynch Bill Advocate, “Football Season And The Lynch Bill,” Letter to the Editor, *California Eagle*, 16 December 1937, p. 8-B.

scored 369 points in 11 games that year, with only 70 scored against them.⁵⁷ The *Eagle* certainly took note of Robinson's accomplishments, with a number of stories about his success at the school. For example, after his final football game at PJC, the newspaper featured a photograph of Robinson running with the football, and in an accompanying story called the game "a fitting climax to a great junior college career" for "the highly adjectivized Jackie Robinson." The black paper praised Robinson for scoring 135 points on the season, "the largest individual figure in the nation."⁵⁸

Some of this coverage must have proved especially hopeful to those who saw sports as a model of fair play for society. Earlier in the season, the *Eagle* delighted in the record-setting crowd of 50,000 on hand to watch "the sensational playing of an unobtrusive youth—Jackie Robinson—Pasadena Junior College's astonishing back," in a 20-7 victory over Compton Junior College. The cheering of a mixed-race audience for the "unobtrusive" Robinson must have been especially gratifying, a sign of respect for black athletic achievement. When Robinson scored on a spectacular 45-yard run in the game, the newspaper delighted to note that "wave after wave of cheering swept the crowded stands."⁵⁹ The praise for Robinson was not exclusive to the black press. Rube Samuelsen in the *Post* even campaigned for Robinson to be named as an All-American player, an honor traditionally restricted from junior college players.⁶⁰ That a white

⁵⁷ Shavenau Glick, "Robinson's 104-Yard Run Tops P.J.C. Win," *Pasadena Post*, 24 November 1938, p. 8-9. Quotation from 8.

⁵⁸ "Robinson Sparkles in J.C. Finale," *California Eagle*, 1 December 1938, p. 3-B.

⁵⁹ "50,000 Cheer Jack Robinson in Pasadena Rose Bowl Win," *California Eagle*, 3 November 1938, p. 3-B.

⁶⁰ Rube Samuelsen, "Sport Volleys," *Pasadena Post*, 30 October 1938, p. 20-21. Quotation from 20. Apparently, others were convinced by Robinson's performance on the gridiron that fall: Samuelsen wrote: "Many fans are seconding this writer's belief that Jackie Robinson is a bona-fide All-American..."

journalist would make such a bold claim for a black athlete spoke to the possibilities of sports transcending race.

So, too, did Robinson's post-season awards. At the PJC team banquet, sponsored by the local Elks Club, Robinson was named the team's Most Valuable Player, receiving a trophy and a gold football.⁶¹ The *Post* celebrated his award by publishing a line drawing of a smiling Robinson, with no exaggerated features, and a laudatory caption that called him one of the "greatest all-around athletes in history of Pasadena school athletics."⁶² Head Coach Tom Malory also received a surprise trophy celebrating the undefeated season. A clay model made by two white football team members, the statue featured ten players at the base, meant to represent the starters on the squad. At the top, running with the ball in his hand, was a larger figure meant to represent Robinson.⁶³ Thrilled by Robinson's astonishing performance, blacks and whites celebrated his remarkable season euphorically. Voters chose him, "by unanimous selection" to play on a junior college all-star team that would compete against an all-star team from the East

However, he thought it was very unlikely that he would be picked for any teams because of the fact that he was a junior college player. Rube Samuelsen, "Sport Volleys," *Pasadena Post*, 2 November 1938, p. 6.

⁶¹ Shavenau Glick, "Robinson Named 'Most Valuable Player,'" *Pasadena Post*, 7 December 1938, p. 6. Black teammate Ray Bartlett, who would join Robinson at UCLA, also received an award, leading Strode to recall that Robinson's and Bartlett's post-season accolades with PJC were "pretty unusual: the two guys who got all the honors were black." Strode, *Goal Dust*, 85.

⁶² C. Mallery, "His Award Just A Matter Of Form," Cartoon, *Pasadena Post*, 7 December 1938, p. 6.

⁶³ "They Gave Him A Dose Of His Own Grid Medicine," Photograph, *Pasadena Post*, 14 December 1938, p. 6.

Coast.⁶⁴ And the Scott M. E. Church of Pasadena even held a “Jack Robinson Day,” where the athlete received a “handsome gold loving cup.”⁶⁵

However, there were signs that Robinson’s accomplishments were still bracketed by the limitations of racial prejudice, for those attuned to such details.⁶⁶ Despite his considerable ability and intellect, Robinson was not named team captain for his second and final year at PJC, a slight all too familiar to black athletes (such as Robeson at Rutgers) throughout the majority of the twentieth century.⁶⁷ And although local press celebrated Robinson’s football prowess, he did not have his choice of four-year schools to which to transfer after his brilliant junior college career. In the *Post*, Samuelsen reported that coach Tom Mallory hoped Robinson would not attend one of the PCC schools because he knew Robinson would “be bad news to his alma mater, U.S.C.” Samuelsen ignored the fact that USC’s anti-black policies were the only things preventing that school from recruiting Robinson.⁶⁸ These subtle examples were reminders of the inequalities present in college football. It is unsurprising, then, that Robinson selected UCLA (his coach’s angst notwithstanding)—a local school close to his

⁶⁴ “Jackie Robinson to Lead All-Stars,” *California Eagle*, 8 December 1938, p. 3-B.

⁶⁵ “Pasadena Civic Groups Honor Jackie Robinson With Loving Cup,” *California Eagle*, 22 December 1938, p. 3-B.

⁶⁶ Outside the realm of athletics, there were numerous other signs that racial prejudice and bigotry continued to limit blacks’ opportunities. For example, as Robinson was concluding his career at PJC, local black leaders filed a protest with the leaders of the Pasadena city government over the lack of job opportunities within government for qualified black candidates. City government officials argued that the number of black city employees matched the percentage of black residents in the city, but black leaders noted that those jobs were limited to janitorial positions and other low-skill, low-paying opportunities. See “Negro Protest To Be Sifted,” *Pasadena Post*, 8 February 1939, p. 9, 13.

⁶⁷ A white player named Frank Spratt was captain instead. See Shavenau Glick, “Do You Really Know Your Bulldogs?” *Pasadena Post*, 7 November 1938, p. 8. Neither Washington nor Strode were elected team captains for UCLA, either.

⁶⁸ Rube Samuelsen, “Sport Volleys,” *Pasadena Post*, 13 December 1938, p. 6.

mother and one with a reputation for racial equality. If the newspapers were aware of USC's racial bias playing a factor in Robinson's decision, they did not mention it. Instead, they celebrated his decision to stay local and eagerly anticipated UCLA's potential the following season; with Washington and Robinson, in *Los Angeles Times* writer Frank Finch's words, "two dark angels of destruction," leading the squad, UCLA's fortunes seemed promising indeed.⁶⁹

Any euphoria Robinson felt as a result of his award-winning season and his future career at UCLA must have been short-lived, as two events in the ensuing months troubled him deeply, and cast in stark relief the racial prejudice that still marked much of Southern California life. The first was the aforementioned arrest of his brother Edgar at the Tournament of Roses parade. Edgar Robinson, like many black and white residents, rented chairs to set up along the parade route for a day of lighthearted revelry. However, when two police officers asked him to produce his permit for the chairs, he was beaten and arrested before he even had the opportunity to produce the paperwork. Hauled down to the local station, a battered and bruised Robinson was booked on charges of resisting arrest and violating a city ordinance, robbed of more than \$10, and forced to spend an additional \$10 fine. Only the *Eagle* reported the miscarriage of justice, devoting a front-page story to the "latest instance of flagrant discrimination and brutal treatment of colored citizens in Pasadena by the police." The newspaper noted the irony that the assault occurred on the "Pasadena Day of Jubilee," an event celebrating "Pasadena's

⁶⁹ See: Frank Finch, "Jackie Robinson Enters U.C.L.A.; to Compete in Football, Track," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 February 1939, p. A-13-14; "Jackie Joins Bruin Forces," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 February 1939, p. A-14; "'Jack-Rabbit' Jackie Enrolls," Photograph, *Daily Bruin*, 20 February 1939, p. 3; "Robinson Enrolls at UCLA," *California Eagle*, 9 February 1939, p. 3-B; John Rothwell, "In This Corner," *Daily Bruin*, 15 February 1939, p. 5; John Rothwell, "Jack Robinson Registers in Extension," *Daily Bruin*, 16 February 1939, p. 1, 3; Maxwell Stiles, "Enrolls: Bruins Get Robinson," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 17 February 1939, p. II-5.

growth as an enlightened and cultured community.” That the brother of Olympian Mack and up-and-coming star Jackie would be treated so poorly spoke to the racial animosity in Pasadena and beyond.⁷⁰ The second event was Robinson’s own arrest in September 1939, just prior to the start of UCLA’s fall semester. Although Robinson had been little more than a bystander to the angry confrontation between blacks and whites, his celebrity made him an easy target for the police to single out, and he was hauled off to jail. These experiences and others led him to affirm that if his mother did not live in Pasadena, he would “never come back.”⁷¹

By the time Robinson started the school year at UCLA, he was in a sour mood, troubled by the limits of democracy and saddened by the accidental death of his closest brother Frank. Frustrated by unequal treatment in the law and suspicious of white people, Robinson cut something of a solitary figure.⁷² In contrast to the gregarious and affable Washington, Robinson seemed aloof to some. Combined with his recent arrest, this demeanor led some whites to see him as representative of, according to biographer Arnold Rampersad, “the stereotype of the lawless, shiftless black buck.”⁷³ What would

⁷⁰ “Brother Of Jackie Robinson Mauled By Pasadena Police,” *California Eagle*, 12 January 1939, p. 1-A. The local branch of the NAACP filed a formal protest with the city in the matter, although apparently nothing ever came of it. The *Pasadena Post*, the mainstream newspaper most likely to report on the arrest, made no mention of Edgar Robinson’s situation nor the NAACP protest. Although one brief story reported on the arrests made the day of the parade, Robinson’s story did not reach white readers. See “55 Arrested During Fete,” *Pasadena Post*, 3 January 1939, p. 13.

⁷¹ Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, 61.

⁷² Although Robinson remembered his time at UCLA as being “happy days,” Strode and UCLA graduate manager Bill Ackerman both recalled Robinson as being a loner. See Jackie Robinson, with Wendell Smith, *Jackie Robinson My Own Story* (New York: Greenberg, 1948), 9, and Strode, *Goal Dust*, 86-9. Rampersad argues that Robinson was more well-liked than Strode acknowledged, but the alternate perspectives may have been a matter of timing: given the troubling events Robinson experienced just prior to the start of the fall semester in 1939, it is not surprising that he would seem withdrawn and troubled to Strode during the one year they played together. See Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, 71-2.

⁷³ Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, 66. Rampersad borrows from film historian Donald Bogle, who defined “the brutal black buck” as the “big, baadddd niggers, over-sexed and savage, violent and frenzied,” one of

people make of a black man who would not back down, who regarded whites suspiciously? How would teammates and fans respond to a dark-skinned black man who, as graduate manager Bill Ackerman remembered, “always seemed to have a chip on his shoulder”?⁷⁴ The resonance of his arrest with white fans, and his reputation for a bad attitude during the 1939 season, suggest that many were not willing to accept a black man who would boldly confront bigotry.

As these many examples indicate, by 1937 and 1938 observers frequently used the accomplishments of this trio of black stars to comment on American democracy and equality. That trend would become even more pronounced with the team’s considerable success after Robinson joined the squad for the 1939 season. Challenging for a championship and the most prestigious post-season bowl game in the country, the integrated UCLA squad would become a symbolic focal point for the aspirations and limitations of American democracy.

The Season Begins: Black Stars, National Coverage, and Disgruntled Fans and Teammates

As the 1939 season arrived, the black stars on the UCLA squad found themselves at the center of local and even national attention. When it became clear that the squad would start three black players, African-American newspapers across the country followed the team’s fortunes closely. So, too, did white fans and writers, although their reactions were not always so enthusiastic. Indeed, as the season got underway, a mixture

five major stereotypes in Hollywood film representations of blacks. See Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2002), 9-14.

⁷⁴ Strode, *Goal Dust*, 89. White teammate Don McPherson also said in later years that Robinson had “a little bit of a chip on his shoulder.” See Demas, “On the Threshold,” 91, and Violett, “Giant On and Off the Field.”

of hopeful and distressing events and reactions followed the team: from the enthusiasm of black athletes' broadening opportunities, to the negative responses of whites to Robinson's arrest; from the acclaim given by whites and blacks to Washington's, Strode's, and Robinson's individual and team accomplishments, to the subtle slips in white papers that undermined black athletic achievement. Ultimately, writers and fans wrestled—at times explicitly—with what this team's success portended for the nature of American democratic society. And they certainly did not always agree in their assessments, outlining in the process the limits of New Deal-era civic nationalism.

A mixture of hype and hope flooded the local and national black newspapers in the fall of 1939, as various scribes surveyed the up-and-coming UCLA squad. Even before they had played a game, the integrated team had attracted the attention of national black publications: the *Chicago Defender* devoted multiple stories to the team and included a massive photograph of Strode (labeled "A Bronze Hercules" as he threw a discus in track) and one of Robinson showing up for the first day of football practice.⁷⁵ Locally, the *Eagle* bubbled over with enthusiasm, delighting that UCLA's pre-season media kit indicated that out of sixty-one players trying out for the varsity team, five were black. According to the *Eagle*, this total was "the largest number ever to play on a major university team." The article then described the five players' positions along with their heights and weights.⁷⁶ A story the next week listed the depth chart for the upcoming

⁷⁵ See "A Bronze Hercules," Photograph, *Chicago Defender*, 9 September 1939, p. 10 and "A Star Reports—Robinson Enters U.C.L.A. And Students Are Happy," *Chicago Defender*, 16 September 1939, p. 8.

⁷⁶ "61 Huskies to Answer Grid Call at UCLA," *California Eagle*, 7 September 1939, p. 3-B.

season and put the three black stars (Washington, Strode, and Robinson) in bold.⁷⁷ One sign of the *Eagle*'s enthusiasm was their decision to publish a large photograph of Bartlett, Robinson, Strode, and Washington posed around Coach Babe Horrell. A four-column wide photograph, at the top center of the sports page, the photograph must have stood out to readers.⁷⁸ Sports Editor J. Cullen Fentress, in his weekly column, dubbed the UCLA team "probably ... the most colorful outfit" on the West Coast.⁷⁹ That colorful quality led to a deluge of coverage in the newspaper, far more than any other college football (even all-black) teams. Just before UCLA's first game of the season against Texas Christian University (TCU), Fentress explained why: "We devote a lot of space to the UCLA entry because it is the only major institution on the coast on whose football squad there are four Negro athletes. We hope that in the future other institutions follow the Westwood lead."⁸⁰

⁷⁷ "UCLA Football Squad Made Up of 'Home Town' Talent," *California Eagle*, 14 September 1939, p. 3-B.

⁷⁸ Atlas Photo Service, "Four Bruins and 'Papa' Bruin," Photograph, *California Eagle*, 21 September 1939, p. 3-B.

⁷⁹ J. Cullen Fentress, "Down In Front: A Colorful Outfit," *California Eagle*, 21 September 1939, p. 3-B.

⁸⁰ J. Cullen Fentress, "Down In Front: Those Enthused Bruins," *California Eagle*, 28 September 1939, p. 3-B.



Figure 2.1. *California Eagle* photograph of UCLA's four black players. This photograph was printed on multiple occasions in the *Eagle*—a sign of the newspaper's interest in the team's fortunes.

If white newspapers did not explicitly call for the UCLA team to serve as a trailblazer for other institutions' football squads, they nonetheless buzzed with excitement over the team's potential. Before the team's first game, the *Daily Bruin* printed a photograph of Strode, Washington, and Robinson wearing their uniforms and smiling under the heading "Gold Dust Trio." Given the relative rarity of sports photographs in the newspaper, the attention paid to the black players spoke to fans'

excitement.⁸¹ Robinson's presence made for especially colorful copy. After the Bruins had held their first few practices, Al Santoro, sports editor for the *Examiner*, wrote: "It's deer season—and we hope that somebody doesn't shoot Jackie Robinson for an antelope. Tales come out of the Westwood village that Robinson is tearing up the turf."⁸² Although following the familiar trope of using an animal metaphor for the speedy Robinson, Santoro seemed genuine in his admiration of his skills. In a later column, he referred to Washington as the "standout" back in practices, but also predicted that Robinson would "run 100 yards up the sideline—if no one sticks out a foot and trips him."⁸³ Another story noted that Robinson and Washington would likely start together, which meant "that the greatest possible power will be tossed into the Bruin scoring engine at the same time."⁸⁴ It also meant that the two most prestigious skill positions on the field—the left and right halfback roles—would be filled by black players, a fact the newspaper did not mention, but one that would have been apparent to sports fans.⁸⁵

Although the mainstream newspapers did not emphasize the preponderance of black players on UCLA's team (there were no stories in the *Examiner*, *Times*, or *Post* that discussed the unprecedented number of African-American stars on the team, nor did they print the photograph of the black players with Coach Horrell), they did hint that there was

⁸¹ "Gold Dust Trio," Photograph, *Daily Bruin*, 29 September 1939, p. 5.

⁸² Al Santoro, "To The Point," Los Angeles *Examiner*, 19 September 1939, p. II-3.

⁸³ Al Santoro, "To The Point," Los Angeles *Examiner*, 26 September 1939, p. II-3.

⁸⁴ "Bruins Impress Horrell," Los Angeles *Examiner*, 18 September 1939, p. II-7.

⁸⁵ Although most contemporary observers consider the quarterback position the most prestigious role, in earlier years the halfbacks earned more fame, as forward passing was less common. Indeed, in the "single-wing" offense run by UCLA in 1939, the left halfback (Washington's position) usually received the ball from the center on offense, either running with it, handing it off to another back, or throwing it downfield. The quarterback called the plays, but his primary offensive task was blocking for the halfbacks. For a description of UCLA's offense, see Strode, *Goal Dust*, 58.

racial harmony on the squad. One story in the *Examiner* noted that the team's attitude had improved from previous years. An unnamed veteran player was quoted as saying that "he has never known such a harmonious spirit on the club." Similarly, Samuelsen, writing in the *Post*, indicated that the UCLA team "showed a 100 per cent improvement in morale over last year."⁸⁶ Even in not naming race, the emphasis on depicting a united squad spoke to the possibilities of integrated teamwork, a point that fit in well with the widespread hopes for a pluralistic civic nationalism.

And yet for all of the stories emphasizing the possibilities embodied in this squad, a cloud seemed to follow Robinson because of his recent arrest. Although many of the area newspapers did not cover the incident, the *Los Angeles Times* did, printing a brief story in the back pages of its main news section. Beneath a headline reading "Pasadena Grid Player Arrested," a sub-heading called attention to the locally-famous football player: "Jackie Robinson Held on Charge of Resisting Motorcycle Officer." The story evinced little sympathy, indicating that Robinson "assertedly [sic] resisted the officer's attempts to disperse a group of Negroes who were threatening a white man."⁸⁷ Robinson believed that the events were well-known and cast him in a negative light. The arrest "followed me all over and it was pretty hard to shake off," Robinson recalled wistfully in later years.⁸⁸ Strode agreed, writing that the story of Robinson's arrest "followed Jackie

⁸⁶ See Bob Hunter, "Bruins Boast of Night Grid Mark," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 25 September 1939, p. II-7, and Rube Samuelsen, "Sport Volleys," *Pasadena Post*, 29 September 1939, p. 6. Both of these stories also noted that players compared new UCLA trainer Mike Chambers to Simon Legree, the vicious slave master from Harriet Beecher Stowe's classic novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Even metaphorically lumping black and white players into the role of slave under a demanding master spoke to some sense of equity among the players, although one wonders if the Legree analogy would have been used for an all-white team.

⁸⁷ "Pasadena Grid Player Arrested," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 September 1939, p. I-14.

⁸⁸ Jackie Robinson, with Ed Reid, "Being an Athlete Gets Robinson Out of a Jam," *Washington Post*, 22 August 1949, p. 8-9. Quotation from 8. See also Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, 66.

out to UCLA and hurt his reputation.”⁸⁹ Some facts support these memories. By the time Robinson’s case finally went to trial, he was in the midst of football season, and UCLA boosters arranged to have the case dismissed in exchange for Robinson changing his plea to guilty and forfeiting his bond. Unaware that the arrangements were taking place, Robinson was relieved to find that the case was over with, and recognized that his stature as an athlete had given him favorable treatment. Others in the community were not so pleased. One white female UCLA fan, Billie C. Schindhelm, wrote University of California President Robert Sproul to complain that “the scrapes some of [the football players] have gotten into” reflected badly “upon a university such as ours,” an apparent reference to Robinson’s arrests.⁹⁰ James R. Bowen was less circumspect, sending a clipping of the *Pasadena Star-News* coverage of the case dismissal along with a letter indicating that Robinson: “is known as a very undesirable citizen in Pasadena. There have been other disorders which have not appeared in the papers.” He added that Robinson was in need of “a good citizen class” in order to become “a worth while boy,” and warned that “further praise will ruin him.”⁹¹ Distaste for Robinson also led some to

⁸⁹ Strode, *Goal Dust*, 89.

⁹⁰ Letter from Billie C. Schindhelm to Dear Sirs, Series 359, Chancellor’s Office, Box 71, folder 101, undated.

⁹¹ Letter from James R. Bowen to Robert G. Sproul, Series 359, Chancellor’s Office, Box 71, folder 101, November 6, 1939. To his credit, UCLA Vice-President and Provost E. R. Hedrick did not give Bowen much satisfaction in his reply, writing that he “had known of the situation” mentioned in the letter and that he hoped that Robinson would “learn through his contacts here to conduct himself in such a way that he may re-establish himself in the community.” Although acknowledging that Robinson acted inappropriately (which is debatable), Hedrick did not suggest that he would punish Robinson in any way, nor that he deserved punishment. Letter from E. R. Hedrick to James R. Bowen, Series 359, Chancellor’s Office, Box 71, folder 101, November 13, 1939. The letter was returned as undeliverable.

believe, according to J. Davis Walsh of the *Examiner*, that he “was a prima donna who fretted and became fractious” while playing a secondary role to Washington.⁹²

Why would Robinson have elicited such responses? As mentioned before, Robinson’s demeanor and personality were part of the reason. He refused to play the role of the compliant black who accepted insults and slights without responding, which made him threatening to some whites.⁹³ The local newspapers also did not help. The stories about Robinson’s case being dismissed made no mention of the fact that police arrested Robinson for little more than being present at an argument between other young men. Only the *Eagle* reported that Robinson “reportedly essayed the role of peacekeeper” in the incident.⁹⁴ Robinson’s supposed bad attitude and “bad nigger” persona would have significant consequences as the season unfolded, a counterbalance to the supposed racial harmony on the team.

As that drama played itself out behind the scenes, the season started impressively for the squad, with a 6-2 upset victory over TCU, a highly-regarded team. From the outset, the local and national black media latched on to the UCLA squad, barraging readers with stories and photographs, and delighting in the team’s racial make-up. Nationally, papers such as the *Afro-American* and the *Defender* reported on the team’s successes to readers across the country. Although the *Afro-American* generally focused

⁹² Davis J. Walsh, “I Speak My Mind,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 27 September 1940, p. II-4.

⁹³ An incident in Robinson’s sophomore year revealed this aspect of Robinson’s personality clearly. While playing basketball for UCLA against Cal in Berkeley in February 1940, Robinson was subjected to racial abuse from fans in the stand. Black UCLA graduate Tom Berkeley, then at Hastings Law School in San Francisco, attended the game and reported to a university administrator that Robinson provoked the crowd by talking back to them instead of laughing off the insults. Although he wished that Robinson could have restrained himself, he sympathized with his plight, writing: “it is not always easy to smile at ‘Take the nigger out of there,’ ‘Down with the colored race,’ ‘Look out eightball’ and so on.” See Jim Lash to Robert Sproul, March 6, 1941, Series 369, Chancellor’s Office, Box 124, folder 101.

⁹⁴ “Case Against Jackie Dismissed,” *California Eagle*, 19 October 1939, p. 1-A.

its sports coverage on southern black schools, boxing, and Negro league baseball, they followed the 1939 UCLA outfit from the start. Following the win over TCU, the newspaper printed a photograph of Robinson preparing to throw a football while jumping in the air, with the headline “Coast Sensation.”⁹⁵ The paper continued to provide more prominent and more expansive updates on the UCLA team than on any other national college sports team.⁹⁶ The *Defender* similarly kept a close eye on UCLA for the 1939 season. After the big win over TCU, the paper printed a photograph of Kenny Washington in action, and the game story emphasized that the three black players had all been in the game “at one time” against “the Texas team.” There was symbolic significance to an integrated team squaring off against an all-white team from the South.⁹⁷

As the team continued to win games, the effusive praise in the black and white press suggested that sports might in fact reveal the possibilities of an integrated, pluralistic society. White and black writers, opposing white coaches and players, and fans of both races lauded the black athletes on the team for their performances. In the *Examiner*, Bob Hunter gave Robinson and Washington credit for “almost single handedly” leading the team to victory over TCU and later praised Washington for being an “All-American” performer.⁹⁸ Fentress, writing in the *Eagle*, delighted that “Kenny

⁹⁵ “Coast Sensation,” Photograph, *Washington Afro-American*, 7 October 1939, p. 23.

⁹⁶ ANP, “Work of Washington and Robinson Brings Victory to UCLA,” *Washington Afro-American*, 14 October 1939, p. 26.

⁹⁷ See “General Kenny Washington Goes To Town,” Photograph, *Chicago Defender*, 7 October 1939, p. 8, and “Kenny Washington-Jackie Robinson Help Beat T.C.U.,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 October 1939, p. 9.

⁹⁸ See Bob Hunter, “Overlin Scores Touchdown in Third After Long Drive,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 30 September 1939, p. II-3, and “Cantor Saves Bruins,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 26 November 1939, p. II-3, II-6. Quotation from II-3.

and Jackie had the stands in an uproar” over their remarkable offensive performance in that same game. As with Robeson and Pollard, mixed-race cheers for black athletic achievement appeared to have special significance to Fentress and others in the black press. Fentress also speculated that “every [African-American] football fan, loyal as he may be to his favorite club,” would be “pulling for the lads from the hills of Westwood.”⁹⁹ He was probably correct: when the team traveled to Washington for a game in early October, the Brown Bombers, a local black band, held a “football jam session” to honor Washington, Strode, and Robinson.¹⁰⁰ Opposing players were inspired by the black players’ skills as well: according to Santoro, “OSU players were convinced Kenny Washington was all the All-American everybody on the Coast believes him to be.”¹⁰¹ Paul Zimmerman, writing in the *Times*, argued that “you have to throw racial prejudice out the window when a couple of gentlemen like Jackie Robinson and Kenny Washington do the things they do.”¹⁰² These moments, and other examples of the enthusiasm these black athletes generated, the “ravings and rantings”¹⁰³ they inspired, suggested that sports could be a place free from racial prejudice and bigotry.

It was left to the *Eagle*, however, to forcefully draw the connection between the integrated team’s success and the contours of American democratic society. Inspired by the performances of “Messrs Washington, Strode, and Robinson of the UCLA Bruins,”

⁹⁹ J. Cullen Fentress, “Down In Front: Those Surprising Bruins,” *California Eagle*, 5 October 1939, p. 1-B.

¹⁰⁰ “Seattle Jam Session Fetes UCLA Grid Heroes,” *California Eagle*, 12 October 1939, p. 5-A. The band itself was likely named in honor of Joe Louis, whose nickname was the Brown Bomber.

¹⁰¹ Al Santoro, “To The Point,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 27 November 1939, p. II-3.

¹⁰² Demas, “On the Threshold,” 93. See Paul Zimmerman, “Sports Post-Scripts,” *Los Angeles Times*, 9 October 1939, p. A-11.

¹⁰³ J. Cullen Fentress, “Down In Front: On The Grid Front,” *California Eagle*, 19 October 1939, p. 3-B

the newspaper devoted an editorial to them, praising the athletes as “glorious symbols of rising Negro Youth, harbingers of a new era of economic, political and social recognition.” The editors hoped that “the three gentlemen” would be “stalwart torch bearers in the forward march of Racial Progress (!).” Recognizing that those “high sounding analogies” might be a tad overdrawn, the editors affirmed that, on a more simple level, they were “very proud of these boys.”¹⁰⁴

One week later, Fentress made his own case for the black players’ significance off the field. Looking ahead to the possibility that the team might play in the Rose Bowl, Fentress argued that UCLA’s appearance in the prestigious game would be a wonderful event not only for West Coast college football, but also for “the nation” because, in Fentress’ view, sports were the “most logical media through which to effect world peace.” Linking the struggles against fascism abroad to the team’s performance, Fentress hoped for UCLA’s continued success that season in order to “prove to this nation that its peoples can play together in the most approved manner as sportsmen, upholding as they do so the democratic principles as outlined by the signers of the Declaration of Independence.”¹⁰⁵ To Fentress and the other editors of the *Eagle*, the black stars of the UCLA team were significant because of their athletic ability and team success, but only insofar as that success proved the feasibility of a pluralistic society that welcomed contributions from all of its peoples, regardless of race. As the season went on, that message came to dominate the newspaper’s coverage of the team. It helped to mitigate the bad news coming from UCLA’s campus—such as the report that black students were

¹⁰⁴ “Do You Know?” Editorial, *California Eagle*, 2 November 1939, p. 8-B.

¹⁰⁵ J. Cullen Fentress, “Down In Front: Bruins And The Bowl,” *California Eagle*, 9 November 1939, p. 3-B.

being denied promotions in the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program.¹⁰⁶

When Washington, Strode, Robinson, and other black athletes were feted at a mixed-race banquet held in their honor in mid-November, it proved that “sportsmanship and fair play” might yet help bring about a society that provided opportunities for all and recognized achievements equally.¹⁰⁷

Those messages not only failed to make it into the white mainstream press, they were also undercut by familiar slips in language and photographs. In addition to the tendency to employ variations on the “Gold Dust Twins” nickname, many of the newspapers frequently inserted phrases and terms to highlight the players’ race in derogatory ways. A UP story in the *Post* from October 1939, for example, referred to Robinson and Washington as “the midnight express twins.”¹⁰⁸ An *Examiner* story from the same day called Washington “Shufflin Kenny Washington,” an allusion to the comic black characters of minstrel shows and Hollywood films.¹⁰⁹ Examples such as these were sprinkled throughout the mainstream newspapers, marking race and often making references to black stereotypes. And although some newspapers, such as the *Examiner*, did not shy away from including photographs of the black UCLA players in action, the *Post* almost never depicted the black stars in its pages. When photographs accompanied stories about the UCLA team, they almost invariably featured white players or the team’s

¹⁰⁶ “Claims Undesirable Policy Comes to Light on Campus,” *California Eagle*, 30 November 1939, p. 3-A.

¹⁰⁷ J. Cullen Fentress, “Down In Front: Commendable Spirit,” *California Eagle*, 16 November 1939, p. 3-B.

¹⁰⁸ UP, “New Grid Machines Get Test,” *Pasadena Post*, 14 October 1939, p. 6.

¹⁰⁹ “Washington Tops Scorers,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 23 October 1939, p. II-3.

all-white coaches.¹¹⁰ That the Pasadena newspaper would be the most hesitant to depict black athletes in action suggests the degree to which racial animosity was heightened in that section of greater Los Angeles.

A second, and to some degree more distressing, sign of sports' limitations to model equality and a pluralistic society came when Robinson was injured in practice on November 1. As Robinson neared the sideline, two members of the team's "goof" squad—the scout team that mimicked the opposing team's offense and defense—tackled him forcefully, severely spraining his knee in the process. Although injuries were and are a regular part of football because of the game's physical nature, evidence suggests that the white players in fact targeted Robinson and attempted to hurt him. Hank Shatford, then a writer for the *Daily Bruin*, insisted in later years that the players deliberately set out to hurt Robinson, explaining that many felt Robinson was an uppity player getting too much press. According to Shatford, UCLA coaches were "furious" after the incident, recognizing that the injury had been intentional.¹¹¹ Bob Hunter's reports in the *Examiner* support Shatford's claim. He wrote: "Robinson was tackled viciously near the sidelines by two members of the goof squad and arose limping. Ray Richards, line coach, was actually white about the mouth and Babe Horrell and Jim Blewett were shaky for the rest of the day." His use of the adverb "viciously," not a word he used regularly in his writing, suggests that he saw deliberate intent.¹¹² None of the other papers reported the

¹¹⁰ One prime example of this tendency came before the Santa Clara game, when the *Post* featured a large photograph of reserve lineman Mladin Zarubica in action, an unlikely choice, to say the least. See "How Burly Bruin Would Ride Santa Clara Bronco," *Pasadena Post*, 18 November 1939, p. 6.

¹¹¹ Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, 70-1.

¹¹² Bob Hunter, "Robinson Hurt in Practice," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 2 November 1939, p. II-7, II-8. Quotation from II-7. The next day, when Hunter reported on Robinson's injury status, he similarly wrote

specific circumstances of Robinson's injury, likely because they didn't have reporters covering a mid-week practice. Regardless, the story would have been a troubling one to publish: for all of the talk of sportsmanship modeling fair play in American life, even Robinson's own white teammates appeared to resent his success and his uncompromising attitude. What lesson did that offer for the rest of society?

These many contrasting examples of sports' egalitarian possibilities and on-going limitations were also manifested in two letters fans sent to University of California President Robert Sproul in December 1939. Billie C. Schindhelm was not pleased by the presence of "so many colored boys on the U.C.L.A. football team," and apparently she was not alone. According to her, this facet of the team was "the chief topic of conversation for the entire season." In fact, Schindhelm was so distressed by the number of black players on the 1939 team that when she went to her first game that year, against Stanford in Palo Alto, "so many colored boys turned up that we were forced to throw our support to Stanford." Token integration did not appear to bother Schindhelm—in one of the two versions of her letter she sent Sproul she praised Washington as "outstanding ... a very fine gentleman and a clever football player." But apparently seeing three starters on the UCLA squad was too much for her—and others—to take: letters from fans in the East, according to Schindhelm, cautioned that "unless you curb the Negro rush to the U.C.L.A. team you will eventually find it difficult to schedule games." If Schindhelm was willing to accept some degree of integration, she clearly was not in favor of a

that Robinson was injured "when tackled viciously by two goof squad members." Bob Hunter, "Robinson Limps," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 3 November 1939, p. II-5.

pluralistic society in which blacks played significant roles; only token participation by African Americans would place institutions “above reproach.”¹¹³

Michael Joseph Hart’s letter to Sproul featured an entirely different reading of the UCLA squad. A resident of Phoenix, Arizona, Hart found the success and example of the black athletes on the UCLA team to be inspirational. Explaining that he was writing “because of the remarkable colored players on the U.C.L.A. team,” Hart believed that their presence on the squad proved “U.C.L.A.’s consistency with Old Glory’s principles and our beloved Democracy.” In contrast to Schindhelm’s anxiety about the mixed-race quality of the team, Hart’s enthusiasm for the team rested on their fulfillment of American democratic ideals. He celebrated the “white folks” on the team who were “with those fine colored comrades 100%.” Although hopeful that the black players would be: “humble, modest and proud,” he also insisted that they “avoid any *inferiority complexes*” [emphasis his]. The team was a model of interracial cooperation, in which whites and blacks participated equally. In short, UCLA’s mixed-race team showcased “sincere patriots” and “decent citizens” working together to achieve a common goal.¹¹⁴

These conflicting responses of anxiety and hope would only amplify as the season’s end drew near and UCLA’s remarkable team faced a winner-take-all showdown with cross-town rival USC.

The Season Ends: The Homecoming Display, the All-American Controversy, and the Big Game

¹¹³ Letter from Billie C. Schindhelm to Robert G. Sproul, Series 359, Chancellor’s Office, Box 71, folder 101, letter dated December 13, 1939. There are actually two nearly identical versions of this letter, one addressed to “Dear Sirs” (cited previously) and one addressed to Sproul.

¹¹⁴ Letter from Michael Joseph Hart to Robert G. Sproul, Series 359, Chancellor’s Office, Box 71, folder 101, December 4, 1939.

Although Robinson's injury weakened UCLA's explosiveness on offense, the team continued to perform admirably throughout the season. In addition to beating favored TCU, UCLA also defeated a good University of Oregon team, 16-6, convincingly beat perennially-strong Cal, 20-7, and earned hard-fought ties against Oregon State and independent power Santa Clara. Robinson returned to play in the team's final two games leading up to the USC match-up, the 13-13 draw against Oregon State and a 24-7 win over Washington State University. Students reveled in the team's success, and even "jammed auditoriums to watch film footage from road games."¹¹⁵ Heading in to their final game of the season, the team's record stood at five wins, no losses, and three ties. USC, meanwhile, entered the final game with a record of seven wins, no losses, and one tie, making the two squads the only undefeated teams in the PCC, and thus the favorites to earn their conference's bid to play in the prestigious Rose Bowl. It was understood that whoever won the game would then play against one of the East's best teams (and receive the Rose Bowl's large financial pay-out). As the game approached, local newspapers, black and white, gushed with enthusiasm. In the dailies, stories appeared every day in the week leading up to the game, previewing various angles of the contest. Students at both schools exulted in their respective teams' success, celebrating with rallies and with acts of vandalism against the other school.¹¹⁶ On the day of the game, December 9, 1939, the *Examiner* devoted *eight* stories to the game, an indication of its cultural relevance to the Los Angeles community. The *Examiner's* front-page story, the second most-prominent story that day (behind only an article about the

¹¹⁵ Demas, "On the Threshold," 90.

¹¹⁶ See, for example, "Bruin Pre-Game Rally Friday," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 5 December 1939, p. I-16, and "Trojan Faculty Warns Raiders," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 5 December 1939, p. I-15.

on-going war in Europe), outlined the day's festivities. Both bands would play before the game, followed by the national anthem, and then kick-off. Sports Editor Santoro predicted a "record-shattering attendance of 103,303."¹¹⁷

The meeting of the two schools had inherent dramatic flair. *Examiner* columnist Davis J. Walsh described it in these terms: "In the case of U.S.C., the college patrician with just a touch of condescension in its attitude toward the other, and U.C.L.A., the alleged up-start and social climber, it's the kind of thing well calculated to make the feuds of the Hatfields and McCoys pale and insipid by contrast."¹¹⁸ But the struggle between the established athletic power and the up-and-coming underdog was heightened by a number of sub-plots that emerged in the weeks leading up to the game, each calling into question the ideal of sports as a model of fairness and equality: a bigoted homecoming display on USC's campus; controversy over All-American teams; and stories of southern schools' hesitance to play against the integrated UCLA squad. The additional intrigue created by these issues added to the frenzied atmosphere in the press, and forced readers to consider the limits of American egalitarianism.¹¹⁹

The first event that explicitly addressed the pluralistic nature of UCLA's football team occurred two weeks before the game, during USC's homecoming week. As part of the week-long festivities, one of the school's fraternities created a memorable display

¹¹⁷ Al Santoro, "Trojans Favored 2-5 Over U.C.L.A. in Today's Game," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 9 December 1939, p. I-1, II-5.

¹¹⁸ Davis J. Walsh, "I Speak My Mind," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 9 December 1939, p. II-4.

¹¹⁹ Of course USC's poor reputation regarding black athletes added to the drama, particularly for black writers. In the *Eagle*, Fentress had been perturbed when USC Coach Howard Jones demurred from giving a definite answer regarding Robinson's skill because he had only seen the night game against TCU that season and "couldn't see Jackie so well" as a result. Fentress interpreted that comment to be a derogatory reference to Robinson's dark skin. Fentress hoped that "the remark occasioned a 'blackout' of USC" when the two teams played. See J. Cullen Fentress, "Down In Front: Bruins Continue To Improve," *California Eagle*, 23 November 1939, p. 3-B.

saturated with racial and ethnic bigotry, and meant to mock UCLA's team. The *California Eagle*, alone among the local newspapers, reported the existence of the display and the furor it generated. Created by the Phi Kappa Psi fraternity, the scene featured three "grass huts," one titled "Alpha African" (a reference to the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity to which UCLA's black players belonged) with "gaudily painted figures of black savages wearing football helmets" looking out from inside the huts. Meanwhile, one of the huts bore a sign indicating that it was "Cantor and Cohen Food Shoppe, Inc.," which referred to two Jewish players on the UCLA squad, Leo Cantor and Jack Cohen. A replica of a ship, captained by a Trojan, was in front of the huts; the ship bore the name "S.C. Slave Ship." Meanwhile, the fraternity brothers also "nailed grotesque figures to a giant palm tree in the center of the lawn." These figures, with "features ... distorted to produce a minstrel effect," were apparently intended to represent Strobe, Washington, and Robinson, since their football numbers were included. Meanwhile, effigies of the Jewish players also hung from the tree by their necks.¹²⁰

Predictably, some local residents responded with outrage, but their specific responses—and those of the fraternity—reveal how sports could fit into broader discourse about the nature of American society. Tellingly, the *Eagle* explicitly linked the outrageous imagery to Nazism, equating American racial prejudice to Hitler's brutal fascist regime. The story's headline referred to the display as a "Nazism Attempt," and writer Fay Jackson called the exhibit "one of the most flagrant displays of Hitlerism [sic] ever offered under the aegis of an American university group."¹²¹ Building on Joe Louis'

¹²⁰ Fay M. Jackson, "U.S.C. Officials Quash Nazism Attempt," *California Eagle*, 30 November 1939, p. 1-B.

¹²¹ Jackson, "U.S.C. Officials Quash Nazism," p. 1-B.

popularity as an American symbol in contrast to German boxer Max Schmeling, these efforts attempted to make use of unease with the Nazi regime to call attention to racial prejudice at home.¹²² Others made that connection. A number of groups, including the NAACP, Alpha Phi Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, and the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, all protested the display, eventually causing the university administration to force the fraternity to take it down.

Curiously, the local daily newspapers made no mention of the controversy in their reporting. Although both the *Post* and the *Examiner* commented on various USC homecoming activities during the week, the fraternity display and reaction against it earned no coverage—perhaps because the incident pointed to sports’ failure to bridge racial and ethnic divides. Only when reader Warren Morton wrote a letter to the editor in the *Post* did the news make the white newspapers. Morton, disgusted by the behavior of the USC students, wondered how it was that “the sons of our ‘bettah’ people,” had joined a fraternity that “seemed to have a brain of its own and it happened to have been hatched, originally, somewhere in the deep South or in Nazi Germany.” He saw the display as “just a glimmer of the danger to civil liberties for minorities that can be found resting gently under the surface of even this institution of higher learning. It takes times like these, with wars and Dies Committee running rampant, to bring out the worst dangers.” Gratified that various groups had protested and had succeeded in getting the display removed, Morton called on his fellow readers to “preserve our Constitution and its Bill of Rights” in light of such distressing events.¹²³ Another reader, Charles Amin, responded

¹²² See Erenberg, *Greatest Fight*, 3, 160-61.

¹²³ Warren Morton, “Preserve Constitution, Bill of Rights,” *Pasadena Post*, 24 December 1939, p. 8. Morton refers to the House Committee on Un-American Activities, chaired by Texas Representative Martin

to Morton's letter, questioning the value of sports in higher education. He disputed those who argued that sports promoted good sportsmanship, noting that he "heard [his] fellow S.C. alumni acrimoniously referring to U.C.L.A. as 'Harlem University.'" He lauded Morton for calling attention to the incident and for criticizing it, believing "that sort of spirit that will help save real Americanism, if it is saved."¹²⁴ For these men, and for the members of the *Eagle* and the various groups that protested, the struggles of UCLA's multi-racial and multi-ethnic team represented a wider struggle—that of minority groups in a pluralistic society. The homecoming display was one more sign of the resistance to a democracy that welcomed the contributions of all of its constituents.

The response of the Phi Kappa Psi brothers to the episode reveals an alternate perspective. On the one hand, the denigration of Strode, Washington, Robinson, Cantor, and Cohen, was meant to mark the UCLA team as inferior because of its racially and ethnically diverse team. Black players were connected to the primitive and savage, and the Jewish players linked to miserly store owners. As with the hate speech directed at Pollard and Robeson more than twenty years earlier, the figures hung in effigy were meant to intimidate—to remind minorities like the black UCLA stars of their weaker position in society. One might read this as a distinctly anxious response to the pluralism of American society—the preserves of white Christian male citizenship seemed under

Dies, Jr., a Congressional committee convened in 1938 to investigate Nazi sympathizers in the U.S. Under Dies leadership, however, the group became more concerned with identifying communist sympathizers in government organizations such as the Works Progress Administration, and subpoenaed a number of government employees. For more regarding the so-called Dies Committee, see Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 158-62.

¹²⁴ Charles Amin, "Discusses Chicago University Football Action," Letter to the Editor, *Pasadena Post*, 7 January 1940, p. 8.

attack.¹²⁵ But the Phi Kappa Psi brothers went one step further, implicitly outlining a hierarchy of supposed inferiors in their response. When reprimanded by the school in the wake of the protest, the fraternity initially attempted to resolve the situation by removing the caricatures of the Jewish players and leaving the black figures un-touched. Perhaps sensing that the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League would curtail its efforts once disparaging references to Jews were removed, the fraternity brothers must have been disappointed when protests continued. Michael Elkins, working for the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, did not take the bait, saying, “The Lamprooning of Negroes is just as horrible to us and we shall continue our protests in their behalf.” When their attempt to fracture the coalition of ethnic and racial groups failed, the fraternity removed the scene altogether and put up a “censored” sign in its place.¹²⁶ For the moment, a more inclusive vision of American society had won out, but the display itself, and the mainstream media’s silence regarding it, suggested that many sympathized with, or at least condoned, the fraternity brothers’ perspective on racial equality.

Another controversy began to brew just as the furor over the homecoming display was quieting down: the role of race in the selection of the most prestigious All-American teams. This debate also suggested the limits of sports as a model for an egalitarian society, and ultimately pivoted around the impending match-up between UCLA and USC. Kenny Washington was at the heart of the story. As the season drew to a close, nearly all of the local media outlets campaigned for Washington to earn first-team All-

¹²⁵ In later years, Strode dismissed the incident as a sign of “fear” on the part of the USC fans, but saw no racial overtones. However, he seemed not to remember the presence of Cantor and Cohen in the display, and clearly did not recall the furor in the *Eagle*, so his memory may have been clouded by the passing of more than forty years. See Strode, *Goal Dust*, 97.

¹²⁶ Jackson, “U.S.C. Officials Quash Nazism,” p. 1-B.

American status, an honor he had narrowly missed out on in previous years. In the *Examiner*, Santoro believed Washington was an obvious choice, and wrote optimistically that he was “one gent who just won’t miss” being picked for the first team.¹²⁷ In the *Eagle*, Fentress similarly trumpeted Washington’s case to be UCLA’s first All-American selection.¹²⁸ *L.A. Times* writer Al Wolf made his own case for why Washington should be named an All-American halfback: “His passes are poison, his tackling fierce, his blocking ‘heavy’ and his squirming, shifty fast-away running a despair to defenders.” According to Wolf, Washington deserved “a wider recognition” than simply being named to the All-Coast team (which he’d been named to the year before).¹²⁹ One reader wrote in to *Times* sportswriter Dick Hyland to thank him for championing Washington as an All-American. Reader “J.H.C.” wrote of Washington: “His slow, twisting runs through a broken field are a miracle to behold.”¹³⁰ Recognizing Washington’s value to the undefeated UCLA team, and rewarding his status as a senior player in his final year of football, these media outlets all considered him as deserving of first-team status.

When the major teams were announced, however, Washington’s name was not on them; instead, he was named to the second team by most major organizations. Even more surprising to many was that Grenville Lansdell, a white starting back for USC, had been named a first-team player on the Hearst All-American team, one of the most prestigious squads in the country. Supporters of Washington were outraged. In the *Bruin*, Milt Cohen lamented Washington’s exclusion from the first team, saying that

¹²⁷ Al Santoro, “To The Point,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 11 November 1939, p. II-3.

¹²⁸ J. Cullen Fentress, “Down In Front: Shorts In Sports,” *California Eagle*, 16 November 1939, p. 3-B.

¹²⁹ Al Wolf, “Washing Nominated For All-American Recognition,” *Los Angeles Times*, 13 November 1939, p. A-10.

¹³⁰ Dick Hyland, “Behind the Line,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 November 1939, p. 29.

various All-American teams made him “laugh” because their selections were so poor. In particular, he noted that Washington was far superior to Lansdell. In his opinion, “nine out of ten” western newsmen “would tell you that Lansdell couldn’t walk on the same field with Washington.”¹³¹ Others were less strident, but still disappointed. In the *Eagle*, Fentress complained that the All-American teams announced by NEA, UP, and Hearst (among others) failed “to give Kenny Washington his just due,” and he was particularly baffled by Lansdell’s selection.¹³² In the *Times*, Hyland wrote that he was sorry “that Washington was not given the credit he deserved and earned on the football field before our eyes.”¹³³ Walsh in the *Examiner* tried to be diplomatic, writing that both Washington and Lansdell deserved to make the Hearst first team (which he had helped to choose).¹³⁴ However, he later responded to readers who complained about Washington’s absence from the team: “People ... seem inclined to blame me for the fact that Kenny Washington didn’t get on the All-America team. But let’s pass that, with the succinct statement that he’d get on mine, if I had one. In fact, I’d start with him.”¹³⁵

However, for all of the support Washington received from these local writers, they hesitated to blame racism—one obvious explanation—for Washington’s failure to earn first-team honors. In the *Bruin*, Cohen chalked up the poor voting to “eastern pickers” unfamiliar with west coast football, and an editorial in the paper similarly

¹³¹ Milt Cohen, “Here’s Our Angle,” *Daily Bruin*, 4 December 1939, p. 3.

¹³² J. Cullen Fentress, “Down In Front: Shorts In Sports,” *California Eagle*, 7 December 1939, p. 2-B.

¹³³ Dick Hyland, “Hyland Picks All-Coast Team,” *Los Angeles Times*, 17 December 1939, p. A-11, A-13. Quotation from A-13. Similarly, Paddock believed Washington “has had everything that it takes to make an All-American player” and expressed his disappointment that he “did not gain the highest recognition of all” by making first-team All-American. See Charles Paddock, “Spikes,” *Pasadena Star-News*, 9 December 1939, p. 18.

¹³⁴ Davis J. Walsh, “I Speak My Mind,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 3 December 1939, p. II-3.

¹³⁵ Davis J. Walsh, “I Speak My Mind,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 9 December 1939, p. II-4.

blamed east coast bias for the vote.¹³⁶ Other writers, including Fentress in the *Eagle*, offered no explanation as to why Washington had not been selected. Walsh was the only writer to mention the specter of bigotry explicitly, and he dismissed it outright, writing that there could “be no question of discrimination.” He believed that Pollard’s selection as an All-American in 1916, even when he had a poor game late in the year, proved the color-blindness of the selection process, as did the choice in later years of Iowa University’s Duke Slater. He thought that Washington did not get picked because he “spent half the season being out-headlined by another spectacular Negro back on his own team, Jackie Robinson, which is bad for ballyhoo.” And he believed that “you had to see [Washington] often to fully appreciate him,” which many sports writers in the East did not do.¹³⁷ Beholden to the myth of the level playing field, to a vision of sports as an arena free from prejudice, most of these writers ignored the elephant in the room. For every writer like Hyland, who criticized “political” All-American teams (an apparent reference to racial politics), there were two or three who simply let the insult slide.¹³⁸

It is unclear what Washington himself felt about the snub. Both the *Times* and the *Examiner* devoted lengthy stories to him as he approached the end of his career, but he made no comment on the All-American selections, even though the early results had started to trickle in. Instead, he reflected on his time at UCLA and his plans for the future. Ever the moderate, Washington told the *Times* Chester Hanson that he hoped he could help his “people” after he finished school: “I think I can do something there. I

¹³⁶ See “All-American Football—Bunk!,” Editorial, *Daily Bruin*, 12 December 1939, p. 2 and Milt Cohen, “Here’s Our Angle,” *Daily Bruin*, 4 December 1939, p. 3.

¹³⁷ Davis J. Walsh, “I Speak My Mind,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 3 December 1939, p. II-3.

¹³⁸ Dick Hyland, “Behind the Line,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 November 1939, p. 29.

think I have the confidence of the white people and also of the Negroes. I think that both sides to the problem are sometimes 'off side' and I might be able to help out there." He also demurred when asked if black players received more abuse on the field because of the race (a fact he surely knew to be true), noting that the opposing players "go after" white players "pretty hard" as well.¹³⁹ If Washington had been frustrated by the lack of recognition he received, he did not indicate it in these interviews, nor did he confide in his close friend Strode. In later years, Strode wrote: "If it ever bothered Kenny I don't know, he never showed it. The whole thing was a big joke."¹⁴⁰ But Washington surely must have been disappointed.

However, there were some moments of redemption for Washington. After he was snubbed by the sportswriters for All-American honors, his peers voted him in unanimously in *Liberty Magazine's* All-American team, which was voted on by 1659 players.¹⁴¹ Bill Stern, a radio broadcaster whose team appeared in *Life* magazine, also selected Washington as a first-team player, an event that generated national acclaim in the black press.¹⁴² Finally, the venerable *Crisis* would not let the slight go by unmentioned. In its January 1940 issue, an editorial lamented the numerous affronts Washington had received. Although Washington "led the nation in ground gaining" and "sparked his team through a hard schedule," he did not receive his just due. The editorial argued that Washington fulfilled all the criteria for an All-American selection, except for

¹³⁹ Chester G. Hanson, "Determination Grid's Gift To Washington," *Los Angeles Times*, 8 December 1939, p. 22. See also Bob Hunter, "Washington Dubs Fame Fickle Dame," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 6 December 1939, p. II-3, II-5.

¹⁴⁰ Strode, *Goal Dust*, 96.

¹⁴¹ "Washington On All-Star Team," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 December 1939, p. 22.

¹⁴² "Bill Stern Names Kenny Washington All American," *Chicago Defender*, 2 December 1939, p. 24.

“one thing wrong with him: he was several shades too dark.”¹⁴³ The attention of this national publication to the event marked the importance of equal recognition to leaders in the black community: fair play and equal opportunity meant that all shared in their deserved rewards, regardless of race. In Washington’s case, that ideal did not hold true.

As the USC game drew nearer, then, Washington’s slight and Lansdell’s selection added intrigue to a contest already laden with meaning. A story in the *Examiner* even referred to the upcoming game as the “Battle of All-Americans,” and focused on the important roles that Lansdell and Washington played for their respective teams. Showing how even minor details could color people’s perceptions of athletic performance, the two small thumbnail images of each player that appeared with the story conveyed markedly different messages. Lansdell looked off to the side at a three-quarter angle, a look of determination on his face, with no helmet on. Washington, on the other hand, was wearing a helmet, and the profile shot featured him with mouth open, as though yelling. It was a study in contrast between the cool, collected, and determined Lansdell and the emotionally-charged and wild Washington. Even though the story praised both players for “the All-American recognition” they received, the images told a different story.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ “Editorials: Wrong Color,” *Crisis*, 47, no. 1 (January 1940), 17.

¹⁴⁴ Allan Dale, “Washington vs. Lansdell Brings Season’s Classic,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 4 December 1939, p. II-6.



Figure 2.2. Thumbnail images of Granny Lansdell and Kenny Washington from the *Los Angeles Examiner*.

One final issue associated with the game drew attention to the significance of UCLA's racially-integrated team: the possibility of a Rose Bowl bid. The numerous reactions from observers locally and across the nation suggested a wide range of responses to the pluralistic society represented by the squad. On the whole, African Americans delighted in the possibility that the integrated team might play in the Rose Bowl, hopeful that the team's success would open other doors to black advancement. Thus, Lacy in the *Afro-American* gushed about the potential game, wondering rhetorically "who ... wouldn't like to see those three colored boys ... given a chance in the feature event of the annual Tournament of Roses."¹⁴⁵ Hart's letter to Stroud showed a similar enthusiasm. The Phoenix native hoped that the team would defeat USC and earn a berth in the game so that they could "produce the greatest color and sensation ever

¹⁴⁵ Sam Lacy, "UCLA Makes Bowl Bid," *Washington Afro-American*, 18 November 1939, p. 26.

produced in the Rose Bowl.” The popularity and pageantry of this event marked an important public moment to recognize black achievement and to, in Hart’s words, reaffirm “Old Glory’s principles and our beloved Democracy.”¹⁴⁶ Closer to home, Fentress expressed his excitement that a UCLA victory would mean that a black player would participate in the Rose Bowl for the first time since Pollard in 1916. He also saw larger ramifications from the team’s success: “UCLA’s democratic football team should be a hint to local promoters of professional football and baseball teams. Fans turn out to watch talent, not red talent, or blue talent, but TALENT.”¹⁴⁷ Cleverly substituting the U.S. flag colors of red and blue for race markers of black and white, Fentress explicitly saw the team as the embodiment of the nation’s citizenry, and as proof that people of different races could work together as equals and succeed. He urged the power brokers in American sport to grant equal opportunity regardless of race. As these examples indicate, many in the black community saw the “democratic” squad as symbolic of black potential and earnestly hoped that the team would earn the prestigious Rose Bowl bid.

Not everyone was so enthusiastic about that potential outcome. Across the nation, many worried that racial politics might complicate the selection of teams for the Rose Bowl. The University of Tennessee was considered by most to be the best team in the eastern half of the country, and thus most deserving of an invitation to the game, but many worried that southern Jim Crow politics would prevent them from playing against the Bruins. White writers addressed the issue in the days leading up to the game, as rumors swirled first that Tennessee was unlikely to play against UCLA, and then that

¹⁴⁶ Letter from Hart to Sproul.

¹⁴⁷ J. Cullen Fentress, “Down In Front: Shorts In Sports,” *California Eagle*, 7 December 1939, p. 2-B.

they would play whoever won, since there was precedent for Southern teams to play integrated squads outside the South.¹⁴⁸ To black writers, the possibility that Tennessee might not accept an invitation would certainly have been galling. Although they did not address the issue in their papers before the game (apparently hopeful that the matter would be resolved amiably), black sportswriters and fans expressed outrage when schools did enforce Jim Crow segregation in sports. For example, that November, Boston University held its black player Charlie Thomas out of a game against Western Maryland University, leading Art Carter in the *Afro-American* to criticize the school for permitting “jim crowism ... to creep into the collegiate athletic picture.”¹⁴⁹ Reader Dawsey Johnson, of Newark, NJ, in response to that same incident, wondered in a letter to the editor whether “Southerners” would have the same attitude towards blacks during the (seemingly inevitable) war: “will they say put the colored boys on the bench and let us win the war?” Believing that blacks would join with whites to protect the nation, he wondered “why shouldn’t the entire country be on an equal basis?”¹⁵⁰ When Boston College similarly held its star black player out of the prestigious Cotton Bowl game against Clemson University, *Defender* writer J. Don Davis labeled the school’s decision

¹⁴⁸ For a sampling of these stories, see: George Kirksey, “Sugar Bowl To ‘Challenge’ Local Classic?” *Pasadena Post*, 21 November 1939, p. 6-7; Rube Samuelson, “Troy Still Suffers From Shock But Eyes Rose Bowl Problem,” *Pasadena Post*, 3 December 1939, p. 20; “Tennessee To Meet Coliseum Game Winner,” *Pasadena Post*, 7 December 1939, p. 10; Davis J. Walsh, “I Speak My Mind,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 14 November 1939, p. I-18. Demas notes that *New York Times* reporter Allison Danzig reported that Tennessee would “definitely” not play in the Rose Bowl if UCLA earned the West Coast bid. See Demas, “On the Threshold,” 94.

¹⁴⁹ Art Carter, “From The Bench,” *Washington Afro-American*, 4 November 1939, p. 29.

¹⁵⁰ Dawsey Johnson, “When, and If War Comes,” Letter to the Editor, *Washington Afro-American*, 25 November 1939, p. 20.

an “un-American” one.¹⁵¹ In short, the black press saw these moments of Jim Crow segregation in sports as representative of broader inequalities in American society.

Rarely did white writers critique Tennessee for even considering backing out of the game, despite its obvious violation of the tenets of fair play and sportsmanship. Most reported the dilemma without comment, passing up an opportunity to consider sports’ limitations. In the *Pasadena Star-News*, Paddock merely wrote that Robinson, Bartlett, Strode and Washington “could not qualify under the strict eligibility rules made necessary by Tennessee’s geographic location,” accepting segregation’s potential influence on the game.¹⁵² Only Hyland in the *Times* criticized the white southern mindset—and even he refrained from directly addressing racism or bigotry. What angered Hyland was a column in the Birmingham, Alabama newspaper the *Post* that lamented that Tennessee and Tulane University (another strong team that year) would probably be unable to play in the bowl game should UCLA win. The column also suggested that, if forced to play against the black players, the southern whites would likely set out to injure UCLA’s black stars, a point that agitated Hyland significantly. Arguing that the *Post* story “never should have been written,” he called on his readers to respond “as they are motivated by each respective conscience.”¹⁵³ Far from an explicit

¹⁵¹ J. Don Davis, “Montgomery Won’t Play In Cotton Bowl Game; Won’t Be Allowed On Bench In Uniform,” *Chicago Defender*, 23 December 1939, p. 22.

¹⁵² Charles Paddock, “Spikes,” *Pasadena Star-News*, 6 November 1939, p. 14. In the same newspaper, sports writer Bob Foote dismissed concerns that Tennessee would refuse to play UCLA on the grounds that the “very satisfactory custom in effect between Northern and Southern schools”—whereby northern schools played black players in games in the North and sat them out for games in the South—would dictate the arrangements for the Rose Bowl as well. Bob Foote, “Foote-Loose in Sports,” *Pasadena Star-News*, 6 December 1939, p. 20. Note that Foote thought this arrangement was “very satisfactory.”

¹⁵³ Dick Hyland, “Behind the Line,” *Los Angeles Times*, 28 November 1939, p. A-11. Whether or not the Tennessee players would have protested playing against UCLA or would have deliberately set out to injure UCLA’s black stars remains, of course, speculation. However, Bob Wilson of the *Knoxville Sentinel-News* reported that Tennessee coaches and officials were “pulling for Southern California to win or get a tie” as

attack on southern bigotry, Hyland's column at least publicly expressed disappointment with the situation. The larger point here is not that white newsmen were bigots or even cowards for refusing to take a stand on the matter. Rather, one could see that Jim Crow politics were so ingrained in American society that even in obvious instances when they prevented fair play, when they undermined sports as a model for equality of opportunity and pluralistic society, white newsmen accepted the situation without comment.

The mainstream newspapers also did not print any letters from white fans anxious that a racially-integrated squad would earn the prestigious Rose Bowl bid, although there were surely many who had that mindset. Schindhelm's letter to Sproul included one anecdote that revealed this perspective. According to her, a UCLA graduate "connected with the Navy in high command" and living in Washington, D.C., had written her expressing his belief that a UCLA appearance in the Rose Bowl "would be a disgrace" because the school would be "represented by so many Negroes."¹⁵⁴

Finally, as these various controversies swirled around the two teams, it was time for the game itself. On a typical Southern California day, sunny and warm, the only two undefeated squads in the PCC squared off before more than 103,000 fans in the Los Angeles Coliseum. According to the *Defender*, 14,000 African Americans attended the game.¹⁵⁵ Strode recalled the over-flowing crowd: "All the Hollywood royalty showed up. Douglas Fairbanks and Joe E. Brown. Jane Wyman and all the stars Kenny and I met at Warner Bros. were there. ... And the noise was deafening, like the static from a blank TV

they listened to the game on the radio. Clearly, the idea of matching up with UCLA's integrated squad was not an appealing one. See Demas, "On the Threshold," 100, and Bob Wilson, "Sports Talk," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 6 December 1939, p. B-12.

¹⁵⁴ Letter from Schindhelm to Sproul.

¹⁵⁵ "When Robinson Stopped Lansdell's Touchdown Mark," *Chicago Defender*, 16 December 1939, p. 24.

station times a hundred thousand.”¹⁵⁶ The first half belonged to USC, but they were unable to capitalize by putting points on the scoreboard. Using their superior line, the Trojans ran the ball well against UCLA’s defense, and a Washington fumble gave USC excellent field position. A few plays later, however, as Lansdell ran for the end zone, Robinson flew in from the secondary, hitting him so hard that the USC back fumbled for the first time all year, and Strode recovered the ball. As the game entered the fourth quarter, it remained a scoreless deadlock. With only minutes left in the game, Washington’s passing and Robinson’s running drove UCLA inside the USC five-yard line. A touchdown and sure-fire berth in the Rose Bowl seemed imminent. But the USC defense tightened, and on fourth down from the two-yard line, the UCLA players (in a six-to-five vote in the huddle) decided to try for the touchdown instead of kicking a field goal. Washington’s pass was batted away, and USC took over. It was the last best scoring chance for either team, and the game ended in a 0-0 tie that left the spectators breathless and the UCLA team crushed. With a final record of 5-0-4, compared to USC’s 7-0-2, there would be no Rose Bowl for the remarkable UCLA squad.

¹⁵⁶ Strode, *Goal Dust*, 100.



Figure 2.3. Game photograph from the *Los Angeles Examiner*. This photo captured the moment just after USC’s Lansdell fumbled near the goal line. Robinson continues diving forward after applying the hit, while Strode (27) and Washington (13) look on in the background. See *Los Angeles Examiner*, 10 December 1939, p. II-1.

In the days that followed, sports writers across the nation debated the decision to try for the touchdown. However, UCLA had struggled with extra points in the preceding games, so the decision was not as puzzling as it might seem in contemporary times. But no one—white or black—faulted Washington, Strode, or Robinson for failing to win. Indeed, the tie with a USC team considered deeper and stronger than UCLA impressed many observers. The black press, disappointed in the outcome, nonetheless praised the team effusively. The *Afro-American* called the tie “a moral victory” for the school.¹⁵⁷ In the *Eagle*, Fentress admitted that UCLA’s failure to win and earn a Rose Bowl bid left “an empty sort of feeling way down deep in us,” but he also lauded Washington’s play in

¹⁵⁷ ANP, “Washington Hailed by Coast Fans,” *Washington Afro-American*, 16 December 1939, p. 26. The *Examiner* also considered the tie a “moral victory” for UCLA. See Davis J. Walsh, “Deathless Deadlock, Moral Victory for Bruins,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 10 December 1939, p. II-2, II-4.

the game, and Robinson's role in forcing the crucial fumble.¹⁵⁸ The *Defender* published a large photograph of Strobe, Robinson, and Washington huddled up in uniform and smiling. The caption described the game in great detail, and noted wistfully that "a victory would have put the U.C.L.A. team in the Rose Bowl on New Year's day as host and would have also given the Bruins the Pacific coast championship."¹⁵⁹ Still, *Defender* sports editor Fay Young was happy that the black players "had come through—and gloriously."¹⁶⁰ Having performed well on a national stage, the black players had made the black press proud.

One final event made its way into both the black and white coverage of the game, and must have been heartening to those who saw the UCLA team as validation of a new kind of pluralistic civic nationalism. With fifteen seconds to play, and no opportunity for UCLA to score, Coach Horrell substituted for Washington so that the crowd could pay its respects to the player as his career ended. As he left the field, tens of thousands of fans stood and applauded, a deafening ovation that dazzled black and white sportswriters. Lansdell and USC teammate Harry Smith (a fellow All-American lineman) stopped Washington to shake his hand. It was, Strobe later wrote, "the most soul-stirring event I have ever seen in sports."¹⁶¹ For the moment at least, the bi-racial crowd joined in

¹⁵⁸ See J. Cullen Fentress, "Down In Front: Shorts In Sports," *California Eagle*, 14 December 1939, p. 2-B., and J. Cullen Fentress, "UCLA's Exciting Bruins and USC's Trojans Battle to 0-0 Deadlock," *California Eagle*, 14 December 1939, p. 2-B. Others were similarly disappointed. As Demas notes, writers in the *Amsterdam News* lamented that UCLA's tie meant that the "Rose Bowl Remains as White as a New Lily." And UCLA athletic officials rued the team's second-place finish as well: the brochure for the team's annual banquet indicated that the team had been "two yards from heaven." See Demas, "On the Threshold," 101, and Daniel, "And Rose Bowl Remains as White as a New Lily," *Amsterdam News*, 16 December 1939, p. 101.

¹⁵⁹ "It Was 27-28-13 But The Combination Couldn't Win," *Chicago Defender*, 16 December 1939, p. 4.

¹⁶⁰ Fay Young, "The Stuff Is Here ..." *Chicago Defender*, 16 December 1939, p. 22.

¹⁶¹ Strobe, *Goal Dust*, 104.

celebrating one of the most remarkable black athletes ever to play football on the West Coast.

That Washington's professional opportunities were far more limited than either Smith or Lansdell probably occurred to few that day, although they were a reality he would have to live with as his career ended. For the moment, the game provided people such as *Examiner* reader Robert C. Hume an opportunity to put aside the on-going racial inequalities in American civil society, and to have hope for a future when racial difference would not determine the limits of opportunity. In a letter to the editor headlined "Still Hope Here," Hume wrote:

There is still hope for America when 103,303 rabid football fans forget home, business, friends and worry to enjoy to the fullest one of our national sports. The fine and loyal tribute paid each team by their supporting fans was beautiful to see. And those two teams, magnificent to a man, fighting heroically to the last second for victory and their alma mater. The display of real sportsmanship and fairness during those 60 minutes of tense excitement and strain deserves the plaudits of every football fan in the country. Forgetting color, race or creed, they carried on splendidly.¹⁶²

In the wake of the momentous game and Washington's stirring ovation, such an appraisal seemed plausible, a heartening sign of what the nation might be.

After the Season: Awards, Limited Opportunities, and the Struggles of 1940

The season's end, disappointing as it was, did not conclude the story of the 1939 UCLA football team, and certainly did not mark the end of the spotlight for its three black stars. In the days, weeks, and months that followed the "moral victory" over USC, people continued to comment on the team, a sign of the squad's symbolic resonance. Post-season awards and professional opportunities, in particular, provided additional

¹⁶² Robt. C. Hume, "Still Hope Here," Letter to the Editor, *Los Angeles Examiner*, 15 December 1939, p. I-16.

material to consider the meanings of UCLA's "democratic" team, and the limits of America's commitment to racial equality.

Although the All-American voting had illuminated some of the ways race could influence the assessment of athletic performance, many in the white press had hesitated to identify prejudice and bigotry as the cause of Washington's snub. When the East-West Shrine Game announced the rosters for the annual contest on New Year's Day in San Francisco, writers had no such recourse. Washington was explicitly barred from the West team because of his race. UP reports of the initial team selection indicated that Washington was "a conspicuous absentee," and coyly noted that the committee "considered all contributing circumstances" in selecting the team, an apparent explanation for Washington's absence.¹⁶³ The reaction in the black press suggested those "contributing circumstances" were not difficult to discern. As the game drew nearer, committee members for the game explicitly acknowledged race's role in the decision to exclude Washington, believing that "an invitation" to him "might cause friction with the Southern players on the Eastern team."¹⁶⁴

Many in the media, black and white, lambasted the Shrine Game organizers for acceding to Jim Crow customs, but the black press was particularly vocal and ascribed a great deal of significance to the story. In the *Eagle*, Washington's snub was the second most prominent story in the December 28, 1939, issue. According to the story, a host of organizations complained bitterly about Washington's absence from the game, including "sports scribes, labor unions, college societies, leading citizens and others." Two UCLA

¹⁶³ See UP, "Western All-Stars Virtually Selected," *Pasadena Post*, 14 December 1939, p. 10 and UP, "West Shrine Team Named," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 14 December 1939, p. II-3.

¹⁶⁴ UP, "Western Football All-Stars Underdogs Against East In Annual Shrine Contest," *Pasadena Post*, 25 December 1939, p. 12.

groups, the UCLA Student Committee on Civil Liberties and Academic Freedom and the American Student Union at UCLA, sent letters of condemnation to Babe Hollingberry, the chair of the selection committee. Meanwhile, the Maritime Federation of the Pacific, a labor organization, also denounced the selection, indicating that it was obvious that Washington had been left off of the team “solely because he is a Negro.” Betty Sherman, the chairman of the UCLA Student Committee, wrote that the “discrimination” apparent in the snub was “unsportsmanlike, un-American and a threat to democratic procedure.” For these activists, this case represented a failure of the nation’s ideal of equal opportunity for all in a multi-racial America. The *Eagle* story also spotlighted two white writers who had been particularly vociferous in their arguments against the Shrine Bowl: Dick Hyland of the *Los Angeles Times*, and Ned Cronin of the [Oakland] *Evening News*.¹⁶⁵ Fentress also denounced the reasoning of the game’s officials, arguing that if the players who were selected for the teams had “not learned ... the spirit of tolerance and fair play” during their four years in college, “then education ... is a failure.”¹⁶⁶

Curiously, some white reporters refused to pick up the story, hesitant to critique southern racial politics even when those biases were readily apparent. Walsh’s silence in the *Examiner* was particularly significant. After all, he had quickly assured readers that prejudice had not been the cause of Washington’s All-American snub; now, when it was clear that racial animosity was the sole reason Washington was not invited to the Shrine game, he declined comment. His co-worker at the *Examiner*, Bob Hunter, wrote that

¹⁶⁵ “All-Star Selectors Still Under Fire,” *California Eagle*, 28 December 1939, p. 1-A. The story was picked up by the national black press as well. Fay Young, writing in the *Defender*, lamented the absence of Washington, Strode, and Robinson from the game as evidence of “the apparent color line in big time college football.” See “The Stuff Is Here ...” *Chicago Defender*, 30 December 1939, p. 18, 20. Quotation from 20.

¹⁶⁶ J. Cullen Fentress, “Down In Front: Your Answer, Gentlemen,” *California Eagle*, 21 December 1939, p. 8-A.

Washington “was rudely spurned by officials of the East-West game in San Francisco,” but he neglected to identify race’s role.¹⁶⁷ As in countless newspapers across the country over the course of the twentieth century, these men did not discuss the racial inequities in assessing athletic performance, unwilling to undermine sports’ potential as a model for fairness and equality. At this historical moment, such a revelation would have indicated that the quest for a new kind of civic nationalism would require more than simply opening doors for opportunity; it would require citizens to change their beliefs, to shed traditional conceptions of race and male citizenship. In short, it would require hard work on the part of white Americans to remove the many unstated barriers to black advancement that appeared throughout American society and culture.

The limited professional opportunities for Strode and Washington (and black athletes more generally) also spoke to the numerous obstacles blacks faced in American life, and provided another opportunity for observers to consider the limits of American democracy in the late 1930s. Although feted after the season by various local groups, senior starters Washington and Strode faced difficult decisions as their college careers ended.¹⁶⁸ How could they best capitalize on their fame and athletic ability? Unlike their white USC counterparts, who were observed by scouts from the National Football League during the big game between the two schools, Washington and Strode could not aspire to play for the most prominent professional league in the country, as an un-written

¹⁶⁷ Bob Hunter, “Bruin Star Due for Two Games,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 21 December 1939, p. II-5, II-6. Quotation from II-5.

¹⁶⁸ See: J. Cullen Fentress, “Down In Front: Shorts In Sports,” *California Eagle*, 14 December 1939, p. 2-B; Dick Hyland, “Behind the Line,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 January 1940, p. A-11; “Kenny Named Greatest Back Of Year; Strode Most Improved,” *California Eagle*, 25 January 1940, p. 1-A; and “UCLA Stars Honor Guests at Jefferson Football Rally,” *California Eagle*, 21 December 1939, p. 8-A.

agreement barred blacks from competition.¹⁶⁹ Although there were other professional football leagues, especially on the West Coast, that permitted black athletes to play, salaries were relatively modest. The story of Mack Robinson, Jackie's older brother, was a cautionary tale for Strobe and Washington. Fentress re-visited Mack Robinson in January 1940, just after the season's end. In his regular column, Fentress lamented the fact that the track star was looking for a job with few options available to him: there was something "radically wrong with a system wherein an athlete is the toast of a race, a nation and the world one year and a few years later, a 'forgotten' man." As Fentress noted, "the medals, trophies," and other acclaim from athletics did not "carry over into" more pressing concerns, such as "feeding and clothing a family and providing it some measure of security."¹⁷⁰ These were weighty issues that Washington and Strobe had to face.

By late December 1939, the two athletes decided to give up any remaining amateur athletic eligibility and agreed to participate in professional exhibition games headlined by Washington. The local media was mostly supportive of the decision. Although Strobe had been a successful track and field performer for UCLA, the likely cancellation of the 1940 Olympics made his decision to give up the sport easier. A sensitive column by Walsh about Strobe's decision to turn pro highlighted the difficulties faced by black men when it came to employment. Strobe explained: "for six months before the opening of the football season, I and the Strobe family had nothing to eat but beans. For breakfast. And dinner. And supper." Once the season started, he was able to

¹⁶⁹ See Joe Hernandez, "Pros Besiege Trojan Grid Aces," *Los Angeles Examiner*, 11 December 1939, p. II-4.

¹⁷⁰ J. Cullen Fentress, "Down In Front: What Now?" *California Eagle*, 25 January 1940, p. 3-B.

eat with the football team, but his family still “didn’t benefit.” Neither his father nor his brother could “find work,” presumably on account of their race. Strode even provided a small amount of money for his family through his on-campus job. However, he said that the family had a good Christmas because he sold his tickets to the UCLA-USC game “for what they’d bring.” And he added, “I’d like to see anybody with a well-filled belly and a righteous sense of ethics try to make anything out of that.” Strode explained that he was going to play professionally because the money from it would “give my family some decent food and at least some measure of comfort in the home.” Walsh was impressed, writing that Strode was “a man who tells a very straight story, and is neither without intelligence nor a deep sense of ethics.”¹⁷¹ What Walsh did not mention was that the options for black men—regardless of whether they were intelligent and moral—were severely limited. That a college student should feel pressured to support his family was a poignant sign of the lack of employment opportunities for black men in the Los Angeles area.

For Washington and Strode, the lack of professional sports opportunities must have been especially galling. Widely regarded as two of the finest football players on the West Coast, the pair had to settle for being paid on a game-by-game basis in exhibition contests against hastily-assembled squads. Some in the press noted these inequalities. In late December, Fentress re-printed a radio address by Sam Balder, a national sports commentator, who lambasted NFL teams for failing to draft Washington. Balder called the decision “a source of bitter disillusionment” to him and to “the millions of American sports fans who believe in fair play and equal opportunity.” Fentress agreed with that assessment, arguing that Major League Baseball’s on-going ban against black players

¹⁷¹ Davis J. Walsh, “I Speak My Mind,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 29 December 1939, p. I-20.

also violated “American principles” such as “equality for all.”¹⁷² Across the country, writers in the black press highlighted these cases of obvious racial discrimination as proof that African Americans were not given a fair chance in American life. Although many political and social leaders called for a new, pluralistic America in the New Deal era, some black and white observers saw, through sports, a system in which avenues for advancement were either partially or fully closed to racial minorities.

That cautious mindset colored the [New York] *Amsterdam News*’ reaction to Washington’s stunning ovation as he left his final game. In an editorial reprinted in the *Eagle* two weeks after the game, the *News*’ editors celebrated Washington’s career and the fans’ embrace, ecstatic that “103,000 bankers, politicians, movie stars, clerks, laborers, reliefers—the cross section of America—rose as one and applauded him for 10 minutes.” According to the editorial writer, “every red-blooded American must have felt proud” after reading about the tribute given to Washington; the applause was worthy praise for “a great back, a good student and a manly youth who had brought credit to his school, his race and his country.” But the *News* editorial lamented that the vast majority of the fans did not consider “the paradox” of the moment: the on-going presence of discrimination in the nation, an affliction, the editors wrote, that “gnaws at the vitals of our democracy.” After all, “despite Kenny’s ability, courage, honesty” and other positive personality traits, he was “denied many privileges and rights which . . . make U.S. citizens the most blessed in the world.” Because of his race, “thousands of jobs,” including professional football, would be “closed to him.” The writer wistfully considered “how much better off America would be” if the people in the stands considered these on-going

¹⁷² J. Cullen Fentress, “Down In Front: Your Answer, Gentlemen,” *California Eagle*, 21 December 1939, p. 8-A.

inequalities, and then, even better, acted to correct them. If they did so, the writer mused, “it would fill a void in the lives of many, many Kenny Washingtons whose sole desire is to become illustrious and worthwhile Americans. It would make America a still greater nation and our democracy nearer perfect.”¹⁷³ Building on the American ethos of hard-work and self-sufficiency by emphasizing the desire of many black American men to be “illustrious and worthwhile,” the editorial nonetheless called on white Americans to make equality a reality, to see the lack of opportunities in professional sports as a cautionary sign of American democracy’s limitations.

Although the stars of the 1939 team went their separate ways—Strode and Washington to professional football exhibitions, Robinson to athletic stardom in basketball, track, and baseball for UCLA—issues of equality and fairness continued to follow them. The following fall, when Washington played with a group of former college all-stars against the Chicago Bears of the NFL, the *Defender* used the moment to call for an end to: “Jim-crow in baseball and football. . . . It is un-American, it is un-democratic. There is no element of American fair play about it.”¹⁷⁴ When Robinson failed to make the first-team all-Pacific Coast Conference basketball team in February 1941, despite being the leading scorer in the conference, UCLA student writer Hank Shatford dubbed the voting as “a flagrant bit of prejudice,” and he was especially distressed that a coach, Cal’s Nibs Price, failed to include Robinson on his ballots for first, second, and third teams. The voting was “a miscarriage of justice.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ “103,000 Cheered Him,” *California Eagle*, 28 December 1939, p. 4-B.

¹⁷⁴ “Kenny Washington,” Editorial, *Chicago Defender*, 14 September 1940, p. 14.

¹⁷⁵ Hank Shatford, “Shatford’s Sports Slag,” *Daily Bruin*, 5 March 1941, p. 3. For more on this voting controversy, see: J. Cullen Fentress, “In Behalf of Jackie Robinson,” *California Eagle*, 13 March 1941, p.

There were hopeful signs, too, in the months following the epic game against USC. Washington cashed in on his athletic stardom by signing a film contract in January 1940, and would star in one all-black film and appear in others in the years that followed, providing supplemental income for his burgeoning professional football career. UCLA also hired Washington as an assistant football coach for the 1940 season, a move that earned the school a spot on the “Honor Roll in Race Relations” put out by the Schomburg Collection at the New York Public Library. L.D. Reddick, the curator of the collection, wrote President Sproul that “efforts such as yours are doing a great deal toward making real the American Dream of a true democracy.”¹⁷⁶ Published in the *New York Times*, broadcast over radio by the BBC in England, and mentioned by Eleanor Roosevelt in her regular column “My Day,” the honor served notice that black athletic achievement could lead to other opportunities, that it might open doors previously closed to talented African Americans. Strode played professional football locally and also worked for the city’s district attorney’s office, using the connections he made at UCLA to great effect. He would later go on to have a lucrative career as an actor in a variety of action films. Although the 1940 UCLA team struggled, only winning one game, Robinson continued to dazzle writers and fans with his remarkable speed and agility. His performance against Washington State, when he accounted for 339 yards of total offense, ran for two touchdowns, passed for one other score, intercepted three of the opposing team’s passes, and kicked all four of UCLA’s extra points, was a particularly inspiring performance.¹⁷⁷

3-B; and Sam Sale, “Robinson Fails to Make All-league Cage Team: Prejudice ‘Rumored’ to Have Played Major Role in Selections,” *Daily Bruin*, 5 March 1941, p. 3.

¹⁷⁶ See letter from L. D. Reddick to Robert Sproul, Series 369, Chancellor’s Office, Box 124, folder 101, letter dated February 18, 1941.

¹⁷⁷ “Kenny Signs 3-Year Pact,” *California Eagle*, 21 November 1940, p. 6-A.

Throughout the 1939 season, and in the months following it, numerous observers on both sides of the color line hoped that sports would show that American democracy was superior to the hateful fascism of Hitler. In contrast to the exclusionary policies of Nazism, sports offered an arena in which players of multiple races and ethnicities could work together to achieve a common goal, a powerful symbol for a nation struggling to put into place a new, inclusive civic nationalism. How vexing, then, that time and again racial bigotry kept appearing—in prejudice’s impact on award voting; in the stereotypical nicknames used by whites for beloved black stars; in the memorable homecoming display on USC’s campus; and in the lack of professional opportunities for these young men as their college careers ended. Was the story of the 1939 UCLA team one of hope or despair? How could one decide? After all, only four months after tens of thousands stood to cheer Kenny Washington in the Los Angeles Coliseum, the Ku Klux Klan led a parade in downtown Los Angeles. Even as black athletes were garnering praise from local residents for their exploits on the football field and basketball court, nervous whites beholden to traditions of hate visibly and forcefully pushed for the further oppression of African Americans and other minorities.¹⁷⁸ These contradictions revealed the conflicting responses to a multicultural America at a time when the nation was attempting to redefine the contours of American democracy. They reflected the fragmented nature of the American body politic, and the challenges to crafting a civic nationalism that could welcome all the nation’s citizens.

Milt Cohen could not have known he was being prophetic in May 1940, as he penned one of the final columns of his career at the *Daily Bruin*. Inspired by the

¹⁷⁸ See Joffre Roberts and Garland Embrey, “Civil Rights in America,” *Daily Bruin*, 17 May 1940, p. 8 for the *Bruin*’s response to the Klan parade.

performance of UCLA's black athletes that year, he wrote an "Open Letter to President Lincoln" about the problem of on-going "prejudice," particularly as it related to black athletes. Wide-ranging in its description of the obstacles faced by African-American athletes, Cohen's column somberly noted that sports were not free from bigotry: "The same barriers and prejudices that haunt [black athletes] elsewhere also follow them into the sports world." Not all schools were as enlightened as UCLA, Cohen noted; some refused to accept black students at all and others used "a subtle 'discouraging process'" to prevent African Americans from participating in school sports programs. He reserved his strongest words for the lack of professional opportunities for black athletes once done with college. Although "fans would welcome a chance to see men like Jackie Robinson and Kenny Washington play big league baseball," Major League Baseball's "unwritten law" denied them the opportunity. Looking into the future, he wrote: "Some day a man will come along who will sign a Negro to play for his team—and then this so-called tradition will be shattered." Of course, UCLA's own Jackie Robinson would end up being the first black player signed, and his trail-blazing role would gradually open up the rosters of other baseball teams and other sports leagues. The same year Robinson played his first game with the Brooklyn Dodgers, the Los Angeles Rams signed the first two black players in modern NFL history: two Los Angeles-area residents named Kenny Washington and Woody Strode. Cohen hoped that the "new era" he envisioned would "not apply to sports alone," that sports would "lead the way" for change in other aspects of American life: "for it is in the world of sports that our people are the most broadminded."¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ Milt Cohen, "Here's Our Angle," *Daily Bruin*, 15 May 1940, p. 3.

Were sports ahead of society, as Cohen and many others hoped? Could equality on the field, however imperfectly reached, lead to more egalitarian American politics, economics, and society? As policy makers and pundits tried to craft a new, more-inclusive version of American civic culture, and as the Nazis began their campaign of terror halfway across the globe, Kenny Washington, Woody Strode, Jackie Robinson, and their teammates on the 1939 UCLA football team provided numerous opportunities for ordinary Americans to articulate more explicitly their beliefs regarding inclusiveness and fairness in American democracy. There were no easy answers. While some saw this integrated team's success as a positive representation of American civic nationalism, others tried to maintain an order dominated by traditional white elites, and either subtly or overtly dismissed the pretensions of any blacks, such as Robinson, who demanded equal treatment. Events in ensuing years would continue to raise questions about sports' capacity to model fairness and equality in American life. For the moment, though, the 1939 UCLA team showed that a pluralistic team could, at least, achieve great things, no small feat for a tumultuous time.

Chapter Three

A Tall Order: Wilt Chamberlain, Race Relations, and the Politics of Black Masculinity in the Heartland, 1955-1958

Standing more than seven feet tall and moving with an agility and grace uncommon to big men, Wilt Chamberlain nearly always attracted the attention of those around him; he quite literally stood out in a crowd. Even on the basketball court, surrounded by other tall players, he dominated action as fans, coaches, and his fellow competitors all marveled at his on-court exploits. But Chamberlain did more than excel at basketball—as one of the first black basketball stars in the Midwest when he played for the University of Kansas (KU), he also profoundly influenced contemporary discussions of race. Indeed, shortly after his death in 1999, one white Kansas resident recalled: “Growing up in small-town Kansas, Wilt Chamberlain was the first black man in public life whose name I knew. He was a hero to us small-town sports fans.”¹ He seemed larger-than-life to others as well. When the university town of Lawrence, Kansas, faced pressure to integrate all of its restaurants in the winter and spring of 1957, white resident Kathryn Harris wondered how townspeople could celebrate Chamberlain and black teammate Maurice King as “athletic heroes” and then prevent them from “ordering a meal in a downtown restaurant.”² Chamberlain’s race and celebrity—and the abundant

¹ Robert Allen Cherry, *Wilt: Larger than Life* (Chicago: Triumph Books, 2004), 41.

² Kathryn Harris, “Racial Opinions,” Letter to the Editor, *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 7 May 1957, p. 4.

media coverage of integrated basketball he inspired—forced observers and commentators to address publicly issues of race, masculinity, athletics, and equality.

Reactions to Chamberlain's career reveal more than just basketball's centrality to many Kansans or evolution in the game's style and popularity. Instead, the many responses to his brilliant talents and un-fulfilled college career indicate Americans in the heartland struggling to articulate their own definitions of *equality* and *equal opportunity* in the post-war era and as the modern civil rights movement gained momentum.

Numerous people—black and white, old and young, men and women—employed Chamberlain as a form of cultural currency, using his status as a star athlete and black man to consider the implications of a truly equitable and perhaps color-blind society. People often did not agree in their assessment of those goals, or even the definitions of them, and discussions of Chamberlain's career as a college basketball star reveal contentious debates about the nation's sense of its democratic and egalitarian ideals. While most southern (and some midwestern) whites fought to maintain Jim Crow segregation, many whites had begun to view racial segregation with distaste, feeling that it violated the tenets of American egalitarian democracy at the heart of U.S. identity in World War II and the Cold War. However, the discussion of Chamberlain's career reveals the conflicting notions of equality that existed even between black leaders and sympathetic whites. On the one hand, local black leaders expressly hoped that the spindly-legged young man would “improve area race relations” by disproving stereotypes of black male inferiority through his leadership of the basketball team, thus inspiring whites to abandon segregation. On the other hand, area white leaders and commentators supported Chamberlain's mission to solve “the race problem” on the assumption that he

would provide a model of hard work and discipline for area blacks to follow—a vision of racial uplift that asked little of whites. Talking past one another, both groups saw sports as a model for society, but their very different interpretations revealed the tensions underlying changes in the nation’s racial politics.

Chamberlain in Context: The (Not Actually) Free State, and Cold War America

Wilt Chamberlain was quite possibly the most publicized high school basketball player in the history of the game. Born in 1936 into a large family in Philadelphia, one of nine surviving children, Chamberlain grew to seven feet tall. His great height, combined with his remarkable coordination and competitive spirit, made him an excellent basketball player. By the time he was a senior at Overbrook High, he had become a national sensation, as magazines such as *Sport* and *Look* published feature stories about him. Playing in one of the most competitive high school basketball conferences in the nation, Chamberlain led his team to three all-public school championships, and two all-city championships, setting numerous records in the process. In one game as a senior, for example, he scored 90 points to lead his team to victory. Professional success, however, would have to wait: since the National Basketball Association (NBA) prohibited players from joining its professional league until after a player’s class had graduated college, Chamberlain had to continue his career at the collegiate level or with a traveling team such as the Harlem Globetrotters. Given Chamberlain’s on-court prowess, the competition for his services was intense: more than 120 schools offered him a scholarship (and other inducements that were technically against the rules set forth by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)). A media frenzy surrounded Chamberlain’s

college decision, as many believed that the school Chamberlain attended would win multiple national championships. Surprising many, in May 1955, Chamberlain selected KU.

KU offered an alternative option for Chamberlain because it was located away from the prying east coast media and because its head coach, Forrest “Phog” Allen, was generally considered one of the best in the nation. However, the university’s own history of black athletes in sports—and with black students in general—might have given Chamberlain pause had he known of it. Although the school never had an official policy against admitting black students, their enrollment was sporadic and uneven from the time the university opened in 1867 through 1890, with only one or two black students enrolling per year.³ The number of African-American students increased slowly over the ensuing decades. By the time Chamberlain arrived in the fall of 1955, the school averaged 149 black students out of a total enrollment of 9,597.⁴

This small population of black students often faced discrimination in a number of forms at the school and locally. Although the town of Lawrence had always prided itself on its progressive stance towards African Americans (being a strong pro-abolition town in the 1850s and 1860s), most public accommodations, including hotels, restaurants, and

³ There is some disagreement over the timing of the first black student at the school. Amber Reagan-Kendrick suggests that the first black student did not attend the school until 1876 and that the first black student did not graduate until 1885. See Amber Reagan-Kendrick, “Ninety Years of Struggle and Success: African American History at the University of Kansas, 1870-1960,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Kansas, 2004), 8. Kristine M. McCusker, on the other hand, cites 1870 as the first year a black student attended. See Kristine M. McCusker, “The Forgotten Years of America’s Civil Rights Movement: The University of Kansas, 1939-1961,” (M.A. Thesis, University of Kansas, 1994), 5. Reagan-Kendrick’s account seems more thorough and thus more persuasive. In any case, both agree that black attendance was fairly sparse at the school well into the 1920s.

⁴ Reagan-Kendrick, “Ninety Years,” 19, 32, 167.

hospitals, remained segregated, as did local neighborhoods.⁵ Segregation extended to the campus as well, where white fraternities and sororities refused to admit black students. The problem became particularly acute in the 1920s, under the leadership of Chancellors Frank Strong and E.H. Lindley, and Athletic Director Phog Allen.⁶ In fact Allen, Chamberlain's future coach, excluded blacks from the campus swimming pool in 1924 by removing the requirement for black students to pass a swimming test in order to graduate, just so that black and white students would not have to swim together.⁷ Black students of the time also noted a number of other on-campus inequities, such as professors ignoring them in classes and making them sit in the back of classrooms. The campus cafeteria was segregated in 1927.⁸ Conditions were so bad that black student Loren Raymond Miller published a prize-winning essay in *The Crisis* outlining the discrimination that black students faced at KU.⁹ Although some groups protested these actions, they were not enough to overcome the weight of increasing prejudice.

Athletics were often at the heart of debates surrounding segregation. While there had been black athletes in KU's past, including brothers Grant Harvey, Fred Harvey, and Ed Harvey, who had participated and starred in a number of sports around the turn of the century, the school agreed to exclude black students from its athletic teams at an early

⁵ Reagan-Kendrick, "Ninety Years," 6.

⁶ McCusker, "The Forgotten Years," 6.

⁷ The YMCA and the YWCA complained, but Chancellor Lindley ignored them and supported Allen. See McCusker, "The Forgotten Years," 29.

⁸ McCusker, "The Forgotten Years," 30.

⁹ Reagan-Kendrick, "Ninety Years," 34-35. See Loren Miller, "College," *Crisis* 34 (January 1927), 138. Miller then published another article in the *Crisis* that was deeply critical of Chancellor Lindley in August, 1927. See Loren Miller, "The Unrest Among Negro Students at a White College: The University of Kansas," *Crisis* 34 (August 1927), 187.

meeting of the Big Six Conference in 1912.¹⁰ A letter from W. O. Hamilton (the General Manager of Athletics) to Chancellor Frank Strong from October 15, 1913, laid out the developing policy. According to Hamilton, at a meeting in December 1912, “the conference representatives” for each school agreed “that no negor [sic] should be used in ‘games where there was personal contact.’” This policy was passed largely because Washington University of St. Louis and the University of Missouri “absolutely refuse to play against negroes.”¹¹ The change did not go un-noticed. Ed Harvey wrote the Board of Control in January 1914, and expressed his confusion and outrage over the un-stated “common consent” to ban African Americans from participating in school sports. Harvey framed his concerns in terms of civic respect and equal opportunity. He asked: “Is it fair? Has not the Negro student the same right to show his prowess on the athletic field as the white student?” Careful to acknowledge that he was not “asking for social equality,” Harvey expressed his distress that black athletes could no longer participate in athletics, even though they had always been a “credit” to the school. In fact, he argued he and his brothers “helped make ‘athletics at K.U.’”¹² Chancellor Strong appeared unsympathetic, responding vaguely that he “was directed” by the Board of Administration “to say that the Board will do its best to see that the athletics at the

¹⁰ The conference’s official (although rarely-used) name was the Missouri Valley Intercollegiate Athletic Association (MVIAA). The other member schools in 1912 were: Drake University, Iowa State College, the University of Missouri, the University of Nebraska, and Washington University in St. Louis. During Chamberlain’s years at KU, the Big Seven consisted of: Iowa State, KU, Kansas State University, Missouri, Nebraska, the University of Colorado, and the University of Oklahoma.

¹¹ From Clifford S. Griffin, *The University of Kansas, A History*, notes, “Athletics,” in Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas. He cites W.O. Hamilton to Frank Strong, Lawrence, October 15, 1913. The original letters are now unavailable.

¹² From Clifford S. Griffin, *The University of Kansas, A History*, notes, “Athletics.” He cites Ed. S. Harvey to Board of Control (sicsg), Lawrence, January 15, 1914.

University are administered to the best interests of the University and of all concerned.”¹³ Apparently, black athletic participation was not in the “best interest” of the university. The Harvey brothers also wrote Chancellor Lindley in the 1920s to complain about the newly enacted policy of segregating black fans at sporting events. They noted that they were “citizens of Kansas, taxpayers, alumni, ‘K’ men, and contributors to the stadium and Kansas Union” and demanded to know whether the chancellor was aware of “these attempts at drawing the color line.” The Chancellor did not respond.¹⁴

Although the 1920s had seen a decline in the status of black students on campus, World War II motivated some Lawrence residents to campaign more actively for an end to segregation—a trend that was mirrored in locations across the nation. With the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) taking the lead, activist groups began to assault Lawrence’s and KU’s segregated facilities, business, and practices. This group of protesters went beyond Harvey’s call for equal participation and respect by demanding social equality as well, and used non-violent forms of protest, such as a “sit-down” at a movie theater in 1947 and a similar protest at a café in 1948.¹⁵ Business owners and town residents, however, vigorously opposed measures that would integrate popular town establishments and the movement died. In the meantime, university leaders became more sympathetic to the plight of African Americans, although they often felt constrained by the attitudes of white Kansans. Chancellor Deane W. Malott, for example, who succeeded Lindley, wrote the governor of Kansas in 1943 that the school had “gone as far

¹³ From Clifford S. Griffin, *The University of Kansas, A History*, notes, “Athletics.” He cites Frank Strong to Ed. S. Harvey, Lawrence, January 22, 1914.

¹⁴ Reagan-Kendrick, “Ninety Years,” 38.

¹⁵ McCusker, “The Forgotten Years,” 8-9.

in non-discrimination as the people of this state are willing to accept.”¹⁶ Evidence also suggests that the school was hesitant to accept the University of Oklahoma into the Big Six athletic conference in the 1940s because of that school’s all-white student body.¹⁷ Malott’s successor, Franklin D. Murphy, who took over in 1951, was an even firmer supporter of racial equality, and often used his influence to end segregation on campus and push for integration in the town of Lawrence.

There was change brewing in KU’s athletic department as well. Although Phog Allen had been a leading proponent of segregation as athletic director in the 1920s, he recruited the school’s first black scholarship athlete, LeVannes Squires from Wichita, Kansas, in 1950, and Squires made his varsity debut in 1952.¹⁸ A member of Kansas’ 1952 team that won the national championship, Squires was not a particularly talented player and spent most of his career as a little-used reserve. However, Allen’s second black recruit, Maurice King from nearby Kansas City, turned out to be a very gifted player who was a valuable member of the varsity team once he made his debut for the

¹⁶ Clifford S. Griffin, *The University of Kansas A History* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1974), 627.

¹⁷ See: Franklin G. Hunt, et. al. to Chancellor Mallot, March 29, 1947, Chancellor Deane W. Malott Papers, Correspondence, Dept., Athletic Office, 1945/1946, Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas; and J W Williams, et. al., to Deane W Malotte, April 8, 1947, Malott Papers, Correspondence, Dept., Athletic Office, 1945/1946.

¹⁸ Allen’s change of heart may have been motivated more by competition than by any sense of racial justice. Max Falkenstein, who started as a radio broadcaster for the KU men’s basketball team in the early 1950s, and who knew Allen personally, explained the decision to recruit Squires in this way: “Kansas State was starting to get better and better in basketball,” he recalled. In 1950, Kansas State recruited an excellent black player named Gene “The Jet” Wilson. Falkenstein said that Allen responded with the mindset of “We gotta get us a black player,” because he did not want his opponents to have an edge. Author interview with Max Falkenstein, August 10, 2006, Lawrence, Kansas.

1955 season. King was a senior starter when Chamberlain made his varsity debut for the 1957 season.¹⁹

Even with the progress being made in Lawrence and on-campus, conditions were less than ideal when Chamberlain arrived at the school in the fall of 1955. Black students in the 1950s later remembered being told by professors on the first day of class that they could expect no better than a “C” final grade because of their race. The Negro Student Association (NSA) formed in 1950, largely for the purpose of arranging social events for black students on campus since they were denied access to many events their white peers could attend.²⁰ Restaurants and hotels remained segregated in Lawrence. Even nearby Kansas City, a city with a sizable black population, continued to have segregated eating places, although efforts by black leaders had integrated hotels, theaters, and municipal parks.²¹ When the star athlete arrived, he would be stunned to discover the extent to which the color line still dominated the region. And he would undertake a grudging, one-man campaign to undo its predominance.

Nationally, the historical moment of Chamberlain’s career at KU was a particularly rich one for testing and debating issues of equality and the terms of black male citizenship. The landmark U.S. Supreme Court rulings in the two *Brown v. Board of Education* rulings of 1954 and 1955 had ordered the integration of public schools, and people across the nation eagerly, or angrily, anticipated the far-reaching implications of those decisions. The case resonated locally: its title case was *Oliver Brown et al v. The*

¹⁹ I use the term “varsity debut” because in that era freshman were ineligible to play varsity basketball. Thus, players could only play three years at the varsity level, starting with their sophomore season.

²⁰ Reagan-Kendrick, “Ninety Years,” 167.

²¹ Dowdal Davis to Roy Wilkins, 23 December 1955, Dorothy Hodge Johnson Papers, Correspondence-General, 1953-1956, Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.

Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, a NAACP case targeting the segregation policies in Topeka, less than thirty miles west of Lawrence. In addition to legal challenges to Jim Crow, another racial incident gripped the nation just as Chamberlain arrived in Lawrence: the murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, a black teen in Mississippi, who was killed for allegedly whistling at a white woman. When the teen's murderers were found not guilty by an all-white jury, many Americans questioned the nation's judicial system. Meanwhile, as the United States fought the Cold War with the U.S.S.R., issues of civil rights and equality became increasingly important at the national and international levels. How could the U.S. call itself "the land of the free" when children such as Till were murdered without consequence by white bigots, and when black high school students in Little Rock, Arkansas were barred at the school door by the governor from attending a white school in 1957? As historian Mary Duziak has argued, "the international attention given to racial segregation was troublesome and embarrassing," particularly as the nation worked to establish ties with African and Asian nations.²² These issues hit close to home for many in Lawrence: when foreign students at KU suffered discrimination in area restaurants, local residents lamented the negative image this treatment gave not only their community, but also the country at large.

Waiting is the Hardest Part: Recruiting Chamberlain and his Arrival in Lawrence

Getting Chamberlain to Lawrence required a well-coordinated recruiting campaign to land the prized athletic star, an effort that often focused on Chamberlain's potential impact as a racial leader. Although Head Coach Phog Allen clearly wanted

²² Mary L. Duziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 12.

Chamberlain at the school for his athletic excellence, others, such as black leader Dowdal Davis, hoped Chamberlain could inspire integration in Lawrence and surrounding areas. As various university officials and alumni moved behind the scenes to encourage Chamberlain to attend the Midwest school, local newspapers, black and white, covered the story with interest, excited at the possibility that the best high school player in the country would play in their region.

Kansas Coach Phog Allen's interest in recruiting Chamberlain was unexceptional (after all, nearly every major program hoped to land the big man), but his efforts to have black alumni participate in the process—and their willingness to help—illustrate the importance of race to Chamberlain's decision, and the symbolic value some black leaders attached to him. In his autobiography, Chamberlain emphasized Allen's importance to his decision, as he was deeply impressed by the coach's basketball savvy and personality. Showing his skill as a recruiter, Allen was also, in Chamberlain's words, "smart enough to play the black angle for all it was worth."²³ To that end, he enlisted black KU alum Dowdal Davis, managing editor of the *Kansas City Call* and a prominent speaker and community leader. Davis played a vital role in the process, coordinating the efforts of a number of black leaders and KU alumni.²⁴ In February 1955, Davis also accompanied Allen to visit the Chamberlain home in Philadelphia, and helped arrange the big man's two visits to Lawrence in February and April.²⁵ During the process, Davis also enlisted

²³ Wilt Chamberlain and David Shaw, *Wilt: Just Like Any Other 7-Foot Black Millionaire Who Lives Next Door* (New York: McMillan, 1973), 46.

²⁴ The first step Davis took was to have Philadelphia resident Bishop Richard R. Wright, of the AME church, visit Chamberlain at home and extol the virtues of the school and Kansas in general—even though he had never met Chamberlain or his family. See Ernest Mehl, "Sporting Comment," *Kansas City Star*, 6 December 1956, p. 22, and Fay Young, "Fay Says," *Chicago Defender*, 28 May 1955, p. 11.

²⁵ Ernest Mehl, "Sporting Comment," *Kansas City Star*, 6 December 1956, p. 22.

two other influential black alums—Etta Moten, a well-known concert singer, and Lloyd Kerfords, a Lawrence-area businessman—to write Chamberlain, extolling the virtues of the university and also his potential importance to improving race relations.²⁶

Although no record exists of the communication between Davis, Moten, Kerfords and Chamberlain, a number of recollections shed light on the appeals these black alumni made. When Chamberlain decided to leave KU in 1958, he described his recruitment in some depth, and explained that Davis, Moten, and Kerfords all “told me I could help my race by attending K.U., and their arguments were convincing.”²⁷ Similarly, in his autobiography, Chamberlain mentioned how Davis, Moten, and Kerfords all indicated that he “could help the black man by attending Kansas—and they said they were living proof that Kansas could help” him.²⁸ Other sources help illuminate how these black leaders hoped Chamberlain might “help” African Americans. Roy Edwards, a prominent white KU booster, recalled that Davis “pointed out that much could be done to break the color line in this area, and he personally felt that Chamberlain could make a most outstanding contribution to his race.” According to Edwards, Lloyd Kerford “made several trips to Philadelphia to talk to the parents” of Chamberlain, “spending four hours at one time visiting with them and trying to explain how important it was that Wilt should come to the midwest [sic].” These black leaders were not alone, as Edwards noted that “at least five to six hundred letters were received from interested people, from the colored

²⁶ Kerfords also visited Chamberlain in Philadelphia between Chamberlain’s February and April trips to Lawrence.

²⁷ Wilt Chamberlain with Tim Cohane and I.R. McVay, “Why I am quitting college,” *Look*, 22 (June 10, 1958), 91-101 (quotation on p. 100).

²⁸ Chamberlain, *Wilt: Just Like Any Other*, 47.

race, as well as from this area, also from others who were graduates, with the underlying request that Chamberlain come to Lawrence.”²⁹ Davis also told Ernest Mehl, the sports editor for the *Kansas City Star*, that he “talked to Chamberlain of the prestige and effectiveness of the University of Kansas, the boy’s own potential importance and how he might fit into a role which could not be duplicated by any other person.”³⁰ One should note, too, that the *Call* (along with the *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*) covered Chamberlain’s recruitment in much greater detail than any other publication in the area, even the school newspaper, printing numerous photographs and columns in the wake of Chamberlain’s two visits to the area. Clearly, black leaders such as Davis had high hopes that Chamberlain could play a vital role in ending local segregation.³¹

An Associated Negro Press article about Jackie Robinson’s speaking engagement at a St. Louis high school in September 1955, just after Chamberlain arrived, sheds light on the symbolic role that black leaders hoped Chamberlain would fulfill. Even the article’s headline suggests the *Call*’s position on sports: “Jackie Robinson says Baseball Set Integration Pace.” According to the story, Robinson argued that integrated baseball “proved to lawmakers . . . that people can get along together regardless of race, creed, or religion.” Davis most likely hoped that Chamberlain’s star presence on the KU team

²⁹ Roy A. Edwards to Franklin D. Murphy, March 16, 1959, Chancellor Franklin Murphy Papers, Dept., Athletic Office—NCAA Chamberlain, 1958/59, Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.

³⁰ Ernest Mehl, “Sporting Comment,” *Kansas City Star*, 11 December 1956, p. 12-C.

³¹ Certainly, not all African Americans agreed that Chamberlain had picked the right place for his college career. Fay Young, writing in the national black newspaper the *Chicago Defender*, criticized some “Negro fans” for being “off base when they claim that the Jayhawks were against using Negro athletes on their teams.” Although acknowledging “that there has been much prejudice in Lawrence,” he noted the presence of King on the varsity squad, Squires’ career, and the fact that there would be three African-American players on the football team the following year as evidence that the school had integrated. He also brought up the success of the Harvey brothers in the 1880s and 1890s. The tone of his column suggests that some African-American readers thought that KU’s less-than-impressive past regarding black athletes should have led him to choose another school. Fay Young, “Fay Says,” *Chicago Defender*, 11 June 1955, p. 11.

would inspire area businesses in Lawrence and elsewhere to recognize the virtues of integration. The other positive impact of sports, in Robinson's opinion, was one of uplift: he saw baseball as providing "a new incentive" to African Americans "by making them feel that if they have ability they can strive for professions and opportunities which were previously denied them because of race."³² For area black leaders, Chamberlain could perform similar cultural labor by proving the efficacy of integrated society (thus undermining segregation) and providing a positive role model for blacks and whites.

Those were lofty goals for sports figures, and certainly for an 18-year-old basketball player far from home. However, when Chamberlain announced his decision to attend KU on May 14, 1955, nearly anything seemed possible to the local media, who celebrated gleefully. And although area newspapers primarily emphasized Chamberlain's impacts on the basketball court, they also discussed the importance of race in his decision. The *Call*, the *Star*, the *Daily Journal-World*, the *Topeka Daily Capital*, and the university newspaper the *Daily Kansan* all announced Chamberlain's decision in bold headlines as the lead story on the sports pages or even the front page. The *Call* received the news first, as Chamberlain called Davis to let him know. Thrilled that Chamberlain would be moving west, the newspaper celebrated the arrival of the "Phenom Cager."³³ Meanwhile, Dick Snider, the sports editor for the *Daily Capital*, predicted that Chamberlain's decision would "win a bunch of conference championships and plant" the team "solidly in the future national title picture."³⁴ The *Journal-World* even printed the

³² "Jackie Robinson says Baseball Set Integration Pace," *Kansas City Call*, 30 September 1955, p. 10.

³³ "Phenom Cager, Wilt Chamberlain, To Attend K.U.," *Kansas City Call*, 20 May 1955, p. 10.

³⁴ Dick Snider, "Capitalizing On Sports," *Topeka Daily Capital*, 14 May 1955, p. 14.

news of Chamberlain's decision on the front page, with a two-column wide file photograph of him. The newspaper reveled in the fact that Kansas had won out over the "more than 100 schools" which had recruited "the Negro giant."³⁵ *Kansan* Sports Editor Dick Walt predicted Chamberlain would "establish the Jayhawks' prominence in the national basketball scene in the future."³⁶ As the most sought-after high-school basketball player in the country, and probably of all time, Chamberlain would significantly improve KU's basketball fortunes.

Nearly all of these newspapers, however, also emphasized the importance that black alumni and residents in the area played in Chamberlain's decision. The *Call*, no doubt inspired by Davis' active role, celebrated local African Americans' involvement in bringing the star out west. Chamberlain acknowledged in his phone call to the newspaper that "the Negro people interested in Kansas had an awful lot to do with" his decision, and specifically mentioned Davis, Moten, and Kerfords as being particularly important.³⁷ The widely-circulated Associated Press story regarding Chamberlain's decision featured Allen's praise of the "outstanding alumni of the Negro Race" for helping bring Chamberlain to KU.³⁸ Allen said Davis, Moten, and Kerfords had done "an especially fine job in advancing Kansas' strong points which carried great weight with Chamberlain."³⁹ The importance of race to Chamberlain's decision was unavoidable in

³⁵ "Wilt the Stilt Picks Kansas To End Frantic Talent Chase," *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 14 May 1955, p. 1-2, evening edition.

³⁶ Dick Walt, "Along the Jayhawker trail," *Lawrence University Daily Kansan*, 16 May 1957, p. 4.

³⁷ "Phenom Cager, Wilt Chamberlain, To Attend K.U.," *Kansas City Call*, 20 May 1955, p. 10.

³⁸ See, for example, Associated Press, "Star Cager Chooses K.U.," *Kansas City Star*, 15 May 1955, p. 3-S.

³⁹ "Wilt the Stilt Picks Kansas To End Frantic Talent Chase," *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 14 May 1955, p. 1-2, evening edition. Allen also thanked Davis personally in a May 24, 1955 letter, for "the fine

newspaper coverage, an apparent recognition of the on-going struggles with Jim Crow segregation in the region.

A closer look at the discourse surrounding Chamberlain's announcement, however, suggests that black and white observers were often talking past one another as they discussed the importance of race in these stories. Black leaders hoped that Chamberlain, as a nationally-known athletic superstar, would inspire area whites to integrate their communities (including, of course, the still-segregated town of Lawrence). Davis was deeply interested in that subject; he once noted in a speech to a racially mixed audience in Lawrence that if his car broke down before he got home to Kansas City he would likely have no place where he would be allowed to stay despite the welcome he had received from those in attendance.⁴⁰ Davis and others were eager to see Chamberlain use his status as an icon to push through integration in the town and surrounding area. By dominating interracial, on-court competition, Chamberlain could show whites the fallacy of a color system that rested on assumptions of black inferiority.

However, while black leaders wanted Chamberlain to serve as a role model to whites, convincing them that segregation was morally and ethically wrong through his feats of athletic excellence on an integrated team, many white Kansans hoped Chamberlain would be a "good" role model for African Americans and would show the university's and region's liberal racial attitudes. Bill Mayer in the *Journal-World*, for example, emphasized Chamberlain as a sign of progress and a role model for the black

and continuous job that you did in interesting Wilton Chamberlain in the University of Kansas." See Forrest C. Allen to Dowdal H. Davis, 24 May 1955, Dorothy Hodge Johnson Papers, Correspondence-DD and KU Athletic Department, May-Nov. 1955.

⁴⁰ "Brotherhood – USA – 1956," draft, Dorothy Hodge Johnson Papers, DD-Speeches, article drafts, ca 1950s.

community at large. Assessing the logistics of “Operation Stilt”—what he termed the recruiting of Chamberlain—Mayer discussed the significance that race played in the process: “In past interviews, Chamberlain has said one of his primary goals in going to college is the furtherance of the Negro race. He has deep convictions here and states emphatically he hopes his future actions will reflect great credit on his people.” Mayer believed that “the Negroes couldn’t have a finer emissary in this area” because Chamberlain was “a first-class gentleman in every respect, possessed with great social poise, a sharp sense of humor and high intelligence in addition to his athletic ability.” From Mayer’s viewpoint, Chamberlain would be a model of humbleness and virtue, and would prove that blacks could be responsible citizens. Indeed, he praised the Kerfords for their role in the process, and said they were “outstanding citizens of their community for many years.” He guessed that Chamberlain “saw how much this family had done for its race and was inspired by the fact he might be able to do likewise out West.”⁴¹ From Mayer’s perspective, Chamberlain could improve race relations not by revealing the injustices of the color line, but rather by living responsibly, working hard, and setting a good example for other African Americans to follow. Mayer either missed, or purposefully re-interpreted, African-American leaders’ hopes for Chamberlain. From the perspective of black leaders, after all, *whites* needed changing and inspiration, not African Americans. Like Coach Allen, who thought that Chamberlain was persuaded to attend the school because of its “fine points” for African Americans, Mayer focused on what the university and town could provide Chamberlain, and Chamberlain’s potential as

⁴¹ Bill Mayer, “Bill Mayer’s Sport Talk,” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 16 May 1955, p. 9.

a role model for blacks, and not what Chamberlain could do to influence area whites.⁴²

These differing expectations reflected altering perspectives on who was responsible for bringing about racial integration in the region—whites or African Americans—and on whose terms.

By the time Chamberlain arrived in Lawrence for the start of his freshman year in September 1955, narratives of race had largely disappeared. Instead, the local press celebrated Chamberlain's celebrity and marveled at his size. All of the local newspapers printed stories announcing his arrival in town, despite the fact that class had not yet started and that the basketball team would not even begin practicing for months. Chamberlain's presence appeared to offset anxieties that he would choose another school at the last moment. The *Journal-World* even announced his arrival in a front-page story.⁴³ *Capital* writer Dick Snider described Allen's euphoria at Chamberlain's presence, writing that the coach "was smiling like a basketball coach who has Wilt, or three national titles, in the bag."⁴⁴ One photograph circulated widely in the newspapers: that of Chamberlain standing next to 5'5" KU football player Don Pfitzenreuter. The *Kansan*, the *Star*, the *Capital*, and the *Journal-World* all published a version of this

⁴² The pervasiveness of white writer's pride in KU's supposedly progressive nature could also be seen the following fall when *Daily Capital* writer Dick Snider related the following anecdote: during Chamberlain's recruitment, "an Oklahoma representative" attempted "to talk Wilt into being the first to crack the color barrier at OU." According to Snider, Chamberlain responded: "Tell 'em I'll let the next guy do that for 'em." Snider seemed to delight in the fact that KU was ahead of Oklahoma when it came to racial integration—despite the fact that the team had only integrated recently and had few black athletes on any of its teams. See Dick Snider, "Capitalizing On Sports," *Topeka Daily Capital*, 6 Sept. 1955, p. 14.

⁴³ Bill Mayer, "Wilt May Sell 10,000 Ducats For Frosh Fray This Winter," *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 5 September 1955, p. 1-2.

⁴⁴ Dick Snider, "Capitalizing On Sports," *Topeka Daily Capital*, 6 Sept. 1955, p. 14.

photograph, usually with a headline similar to the *Journal-World*'s: "Long and Short of K.U. Sport."⁴⁵



Figure 3.1. Photograph of Wilt Chamberlain and Don Pfutzenreuter.

⁴⁵ See: Rich Clarkson, "Long and Short of K.U. Sport," Photograph, *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 5 September 1955, p. 1; Gene Smoyer, "That's The Long And The Short Of It," Photograph, *University Daily Kansan*, 12 September 1955, p. B-3; "Milt [sic] (The Stilt) Chamberlain," Photograph, *Kansas City Star*, 5 September 1955, p. 9, morning edition; "Wilt Chamberlain, seven-foot..." Photograph, *Topeka Daily Capital*, 6 Sept. 1955, p. 15.

The photograph documented Chamberlain's first full day in Lawrence, September 5, 1955, when he stopped by the football team's media day. These newspapers delighted in the comedic, almost clownish, possibilities of Chamberlain's height even as they tried to convey to readers his extreme size. Perhaps sensing the comic, and in some ways demeaning, implications of Chamberlain towering over the diminutive football player, the *Call*, alone among the area newspapers, did not print the photograph. There was certainly no apparent ill will in the mainstream paper's coverage of Chamberlain's arrival; indeed, several writers such as Snider praised Chamberlain for being good-humored despite the fact that "it was only about the 9,768th time in his life he has been asked to pose for a picture with some little guy."⁴⁶ But the subtle difference in the *Call*'s coverage—the first photograph their editors printed of Chamberlain after he arrived was of him with white high school teammate Doug Leamon, who had also come to Kansas—suggested that Chamberlain's arrival meant more than fun and games to them.⁴⁷

Leamon actually figured in the most remarkable aspect of Chamberlain's long-awaited entrance to the university town—a story that would only be heard years after Chamberlain left the school and went on to a stellar NBA career. Although all of the local newspapers—including the *Call*—noted that Chamberlain had arrived late on Saturday, September 5, and had spent the night with Allen and his wife, none revealed the reason why he had shown up at Allen's home past midnight. Chamberlain explained in his autobiography that he and Leamon made their last stop in the long drive from

⁴⁶ Dick Snider, "Capitalizing On Sports," *Topeka Daily Capital*, 6 Sept. 1955, p. 14.

⁴⁷ "The 'Stilt' Becomes A Jayhawk," *Kansas City Call*, 23 Sept. 1955, p. 11. In his autobiography, Chamberlain bitterly complained that Kansas recruited Leamon to come with him to school despite the fact that he considered two of his teammates, Vince Miller and Marty Hughes, to be superior. Leamon was white, though, and the others were black. It proved to him that "a black man has to be twice as good as a white man just to get an even break." See Chamberlain, *Wilt: Just Like Any Other*, 49.

Philadelphia at a diner in Kansas City, where they were refused service. When after several minutes the two young men realized why they were not being served, they left, with Chamberlain in a fury. Driving straight to Allen's house, Chamberlain, in his own words, "went storming up to [Allen's] front door, and started banging on it so hard" that he "almost knocked the damn thing down." A surprised Allen told Chamberlain to "forget about those people" and offered to put him up for the night. He also had some KU students bring over take-out food for them—it turned out later that he had done this so that Chamberlain did not realize that Lawrence was segregated as well. None of the newspapers printed this story, nor did Chamberlain publicly express his disgust and surprise. However, behind the scenes, Chamberlain angrily told Allen and others that he "had no intention of playing basketball for K.U." if he was forced to stay and/or eat apart from the team. After that warning, the team cancelled a scheduled exhibition for the freshman team against Rice, SMU, and Louisiana State. A game against TCU for the following season was taken off of the schedule as well. After talking with his "advisors" in the area (presumably Davis), Chamberlain conducted his own one-man campaign to integrate area restaurants by demanding to be served in previously-segregated establishments. According to his autobiography, he was never refused.⁴⁸ Local newspapers entirely neglected to cover these strenuous efforts.

And so it was a privately disgruntled Chamberlain who adapted to a town that was, in his own words, "infested with segregation."⁴⁹ As the news media missed the story of his discontent and his tumultuous arrival, they continued to bombard readers with

⁴⁸ Chamberlain, *Wilt: Just Like Any Other*, 50, 51, 58.

⁴⁹ Chamberlain, *Wilt: Just Like Any Other*, 51.

various stories and images of the larger-than-life Chamberlain, reveling in his celebrity and massive physique. The *Journal-World*, in particular, kept up a constant stream of updates on Chamberlain, detailing the minutiae of his life: one day showing a photograph of a smiling Chamberlain sitting on his dorm bed.⁵⁰ The *Call* also devoted considerable attention to Chamberlain, although that paper often depicted Chamberlain as part of a continuum of black success. In October 1955, for example, the *Call* printed a photograph of Chamberlain standing with three other black athletes at the school, Maurice King, Jerry Johnson, “a freshman who comes to K.U. with a splendid high school basketball record,” and Charles Tidwell, “a freshman track star.”⁵¹ The newspaper took special delight in the increasing presence of black athletes on KU’s varsity teams and used coverage of Chamberlain to illuminate this trend.⁵²

When it came time for Chamberlain’s debut before a public audience, in the annual varsity-freshman scrimmage, area newspapers covered the event in great detail, all reveling in Chamberlain’s astonishing display of skill and athleticism. For the first time in the event’s thirty-year history, the freshman squad defeated the varsity, with Chamberlain scoring 42 points in the 81-71 victory in front of a record crowd of 14,000 fans. The area’s white newspapers deluged readers with a flood of stories and

⁵⁰ NEA Telephoto, “Rest for a Weary ‘Stilt,’” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 7 September 1955, p. 13.

⁵¹ “Highly Promising K.U. Athletes,” *Kansas City Call*, 7 October 1955, p. 12.

⁵² Writers from the *Journal-World*, the *Daily Capital*, and the *Call* all commented at various points about the amount of media attention and pressure Chamberlain faced on a daily basis, despite the fact that he had not yet played in a varsity game and would not do so for another year. Although sympathetic to the bombardment of autograph seekers and local and national media representatives, the newspaper kept printing their own stories and photographs, presumably to keep up with reader demand. See, for example: Bill Mayer, “Bill Mayer’s Sport Talk,” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 7 September 1955, p. 15; “Dipper Has a Cause For Being Confused,” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 7 December 1955, p. 1-2; “K.U. Basketball Talent,” *Kansas City Call*, 23 December 1955, p. 11; and Dick Snider, “Capitalizing On Sports,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, 8 December 1955, p. 18.

photographs from the scrimmage, clearly dazzled by Chamberlain's dominance. The day after the game, the *Journal-World* featured two stories, one large action photograph with Chamberlain dunking the ball, and a separate photo montage of three action shots.⁵³ Two days later, the newspaper printed another montage, this one featuring a sequence of Chamberlain drawing a foul as he attacked the basket.⁵⁴ Mayer gushed that "Big Seven titles loom on the horizon almost as 'second nature' and dreams of national titles aren't at all out of line."⁵⁵ Similarly, the *Star* printed two stories about the game, one on the front page and another in the sports section, and included a photograph showing Chamberlain dunking the basketball while several teammates looked up at him.⁵⁶ The dunk had particular resonance for people at the time, as it was a comparatively rare phenomenon in basketball of that era. Chamberlain's ability to dunk with ease and in the flow of the game amazed spectators, and many photographs were devoted to capturing this aspect of Chamberlain's skill set.

A six-photograph spread of Chamberlain in the *Kansan* suggests that KU students were excited, and star-struck, by his presence on campus. Chamberlain was the central feature of the newspaper's annual Thanksgiving photo supplement, with photographs of him in a variety of activities, including dunking a basketball, studying, and talking with a

⁵³ "K.U. Cage Foes Beware: Big Dipper at Large!" *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 20 November 1955, p. 8; "Wilt Makes Non-Spectators Wish They'd Seen the Show," *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 20 November 1955, p. 9.

⁵⁴ Rich Clarkson, "It's a Long Fall From Way Up There to the Floor," *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 22 November 1955, p. 11.

⁵⁵ Bill Mayer, "Future Bleak for Jay Cage Foes," *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 20 November 1955, p. 12.

⁵⁶ See Bill Moore, "It's a Tall Story for K.U. As the Stilt Makes His Debut," *Kansas City Star*, 19 November 1955, p. 1, 7, Ed Garich, "Stilt Hits 42 As Frosh Win," *Kansas City Star*, 19 November 1955, p. 22, and "It's Easier From Up Here," Photograph, *Kansas City Star*, 19 November 1955, p. 22.

young white fan. The largest photograph was of Chamberlain sitting on the court in his practice attire, with his legs stretching across the two pages of the spread, a reminder of his remarkable height. The accompanying text joyfully predicted that KU would “become a major basketball power once again,” thanks to Chamberlain.⁵⁷

Although Chamberlain’s athletic exploits clearly registered with the editorial board of the *Call* as well—who featured multiple stories and photographs just as the predominantly white papers did—the black editors of the *Call* saw more than KU’s basketball prowess at stake in Chamberlain’s accomplishments.⁵⁸ Sports Editor John I. Johnson took the moment of Chamberlain’s scrimmage debut to ponder the state of affairs for black students at KU:

It has been only recently that Negro athletes have chosen to attend the University of Kansas. There has existed a feeling in the past that a colored athlete had little chance to enter fully the athletic program.

But it all seems to have changed in recent years. The change began a few years ago when LeVance [sic] Squires advanced from the freshman to the varsity basketball team. It moved forward this year under Coach Chuck Mather when three Negro boys became members this season of the varsity football team. This spring will see another step forward when Charles Tidwell, and probably others, get an opportunity to compete in track under the Jayhawk colors.

This year for the first time a Negro girl became a candidate for the homecoming queen. Progress in human and athletic relations is being made at the University of Kansas. A new day has come to Mt. Oread.

⁵⁷ Gordon Hudelson and Jack Fisher, “Wilt the Stilt,” Photo montage, *University Daily Kansan*, 21 May 1955, p. 2-3 (special “Picture Supplement”).

⁵⁸ For the *Call*’s game story, see “Wilt, The Stilt, Charms K.U. Basketball Fans,” *Kansas City Call*, 25 November 1955, p. 11. The use of the word “charms” suggests how much the editors hoped Chamberlain would make a favorable impression on the mixed-race audience. For photographs of Chamberlain in action from the game, see “Wilt (The Stilt) In Action,” *Kansas City Call*, 2 December 1955, p. 12. The *Call* actually previewed Chamberlain’s debut in greater depth than any of the other papers, with multiple stories, photographs, and even a cartoon anticipating his first performance. *Call* writers seemed particularly excited that “the eyes of thousands of cage fans” would be watching his debut and sportswriters from across the country would be on hand as well. See “Wilt Chamberlain to Make Cage Debut At K.U. Friday in Frosh-Varsity Tilt,” *Kansas City Call*, 18 November 1955, p. 22. *Kansas City Call*, 18 November 1955, p. 24. See also Blackwell, “The Negro and Sports: Wilt ‘The Stilt’ Chamberlain,” Cartoon, *Kansas City Call*, 18 November 1955, p. 22 and “To Debut At KU,” Photograph, *Kansas City Call*, 18 November 1955, p. 26.

Wilt (The Stilt) will advance these good relations and other Negro students will follow. It is too much to hope that there will be other Stilts, but there will be others who will feel that opportunity for all is available at the Kansas school. Just the chance to make good is all a worthy athlete desires.⁵⁹

Johnson saw Chamberlain as part of a continuum of black athletes who were opening doors for others, who were making “progress in human and athletic relations.” Given that there was no “official” policy that prevented blacks from competing at KU, it was important to have concrete examples of black success—such as Chamberlain’s smashing debut—to open the door. Chamberlain’s success could give other African Americans “the chance to make good.”⁶⁰

These alternate readings of Chamberlain’s importance—as a basketball savior on the one hand and a sign of racial progress on the other—were not necessarily mutually exclusive. Clearly, black sports writers recognized Chamberlain’s importance to KU’s basketball team as much as white writers did, and they would over time discuss his centrality to the team’s fortunes. And there would be times when the white press pondered racism and ideas of equal opportunity through Chamberlain’s career as well. However, the different emphases in press coverage at this particular moment, Chamberlain’s first public performance in a KU uniform, show some of the many symbolic weights that observers heaped on Chamberlain’s shoulders.

⁵⁹ John I. Johnson, “Sport Light: K.U. Fans Meet Wilt, ‘The Stilt,’” *Kansas City Call*, 25 November 1955, p. 10.

⁶⁰ Two weeks later, the newspaper used the controversy surrounding the University of Pittsburgh—Georgia Tech University Sugar Bowl football game to comment on broader issues of racial equality. Georgia Tech students rioted and marched on Marvin Griffith’s house in protest of his attempts to prevent the Georgia Tech team from playing against Pitt and its star black fullback Bob Grier. An editorial in the *Call* praised the students at Georgia Tech and the University of Georgia for being “more in tune with the principles of democracy,” than their elders, and for believing that “team play and sportsmanship ... are important, not the color of a man’s skin.” See “Griffin Arouses A Rebellion,” *Kansas City Call*, 9 December 1955, p. 20.

At the Center of the Athletic World: Wilt and KU's 1957 Season

Chamberlain's debut with the varsity squad for the 1956-1957 season, his sophomore year, contained a number of triumphant moments and gut-wrenching disappointments for KU fans and members of the team alike. As Chamberlain led the KU team to the Big Seven conference championship and a runner-up finish in the NCAA national championship tournament, he generated an enormous amount of media attention from both the black and white press. As black and white writers and readers celebrated the KU season, they inevitably focused their attention on Chamberlain, without question the team's best player and the person most responsible for its success. The varied readings of his performances illuminated contradictory assessments of black male leadership and character, as well as the contours of area race relations.

Chamberlain's varsity debut on December 3, 1956 put to rest any doubts skeptics had about his ability. In an 87-69 victory over Northwestern University, Chamberlain poured in a record-setting fifty-two points and dazzled fans and opponents alike with his agility and strength.⁶¹ The press had eagerly anticipated the game, printing preview stories that paid particular attention to Chamberlain's height and his dunks. In the *Star*, a photograph of Chamberlain about to dunk the basketball, with a caption headlined "This Is It," announced his varsity debut that night.⁶² Meanwhile, alongside a story with the headline, "Wilt, KU Make Debut Tonight," the *Daily Capital* featured a composite

⁶¹ Before the game, the Northwestern players, including center Joe Rucklick, a talented player who would go on to a productive NBA career, expressed doubts that Chamberlain was as good as advertised. Afterwards, they were convinced. A stunned Rucklick called Chamberlain "the greatest" player he had ever seen. See "Wilt Convinces Cats He Isn't Overrated," *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 4 December 1956, p. 13.

⁶² "This Is It," Photograph, *Kansas City Star*, 3 December 1956, p. 4-C.

photograph showing Chamberlain starting to jump for a dunk and then about to flush it through, stretching the limits of technology to “show” him in action.⁶³ The local newspapers went a step further, printing *front-page* stories previewing Chamberlain’s debut. KU students printed a banner headline above the *Daily Kansan* marquee that read: “Wilt & Co. Seek First Victory Tonight.” Down one entire side of the front page was a photograph of Chamberlain standing in street clothes and reaching up with one arm.⁶⁴ Similarly, the *Daily Journal-World* featured a full-length, two column wide photograph of Chamberlain dunking the ball on the newspaper’s front page the day of his debut, and its caption predicted “a crowd of well over 10,000” to attend “the Varsity debut of the fabulous 7-0 Wilt (The Stilt) Chamberlain.”⁶⁵ These newspapers celebrated the impending varsity debut because it gave fans an opportunity to see the big man in action—and it portended great things on the court for the KU team. As the *Kansan* noted, Chamberlain was “the main reason why conference coaches view Kansas with despair and expect the Jayhawkers to dominate the league in basketball during the next three years.”⁶⁶

In game coverage the next day, the local newspapers delighted in celebrating Chamberlain’s accomplishments. The *Call*’s banner headline in the sports section announced “Bill Russell Is Gone, But The Stilt Has Arrived,” and their story proclaimed Chamberlain the new “king” of college basketball, celebrating his ascendance to the throne in the wake of the black Bill Russell’s graduation from the University of San

⁶³ Dick Snider, “Wilt, KU Make Debut Tonight,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, 3 December 1956, p. 13.

⁶⁴ Daryl Hall, “Wilt & Co. Seek First Victory Tonight,” *University Daily Kansan*, 3 December 1956, p. 1.

⁶⁵ Bill Snead, “Big Man on Campus, AND Court,” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 3 December 1956, p. 1.

⁶⁶ Daryl Hall, “Wilt & Co. Seek First Victory Tonight,” *University Daily Kansan*, 3 December 1956, p. 1.

Francisco.⁶⁷ If the other newspapers did not call Chamberlain a “king,” they nonetheless marveled at his feats: the editors of the *Star* believed Chamberlain had lived up to the hype: “Wilt 52, It’s All True,” a headline declared.⁶⁸ The fans apparently agreed with that assessment: according to the game story, “the crowd of 15,000 was more preoccupied by what Chamberlain was doing than with the progress of the game.” An accompanying photograph, headlined “The High And Mighty,” showed Chamberlain shooting the basketball over three white Northwestern defenders.⁶⁹ As they analyzed Chamberlain’s first performance, writers celebrated more than Chamberlain’s physical skills. Bill Mayer, for example, writing in the *Journal-World*, thought Chamberlain’s ability “to adapt and adjust quickly to a given situation,” such as when he changed his strategy in defending Northwestern center Joe Rucklick, revealed his “sharp mind and tremendous native talent.” Mayer was also impressed by Chamberlain’s strength and “tremendous stamina.”⁷⁰ For a fan base eager for another national championship, after two consecutive years of mediocrity,⁷¹ and newsmen excited to have a sensation who would sell more newspapers, Chamberlain appeared to deliver the athletic goods in his stunning debut.

⁶⁷ Herschel Nssienson, “Bill Russell Is Gone, But The Stilt Has Arrived,” *Kansas City Call*, 14 December 1956, p. 10.

⁶⁸ “Wilt 52, It’s All True,” *Kansas City Star*, 4 December 1956, p. 22, morning edition.

⁶⁹ “The High And Mighty,” Photograph, *Kansas City Star*, 4 December 1956, p. 22, morning edition. The afternoon edition of the newspaper featured a different photograph of Chamberlain about to dunk the ball over two white Northwestern defenders. See “That Helpless Feeling,” Photograph, *Kansas City Star*, 4 December 1956, p. 23.

⁷⁰ Bill Mayer, “Bill Mayer’s Sports Talk,” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 5 December 1956, p. 17.

⁷¹ Falkenstein notes that “Kansas basketball had been spinning its wheels” before Chamberlain’s arrival, as two “mediocre” seasons had followed the championship in 1952 and the runner-up finish in 1953. Fans viewed Chamberlain as “their ticket to another national title.” See Max Falkenstein with Doug Vance, *Max and the Jayhawks: 50 Years On and Off the Air with KU Sports* (Wichita, KS: Wichita Eagle and Beacon Publishing Company, 1996), 61.

Undoubtedly, Chamberlain's dazzling display of strength and athleticism proved disquieting to some observers even as it excited others. The numerous dunk photographs in the local papers, for example, often depicted Chamberlain physically dominating white opponents in ways that could have been visually inspiring, or disturbing, to varied observers. One photo in the *Journal-World*, for example, displayed Chamberlain dunking the ball forcefully through the hoop, his mouth open as though letting out a primal scream, while three players watched, one Marquette athlete unmistakably cowering at his power and size.⁷²

⁷² Bill Snead, "Look Out Below!" Photograph, *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 10 December 1956, p. 11.

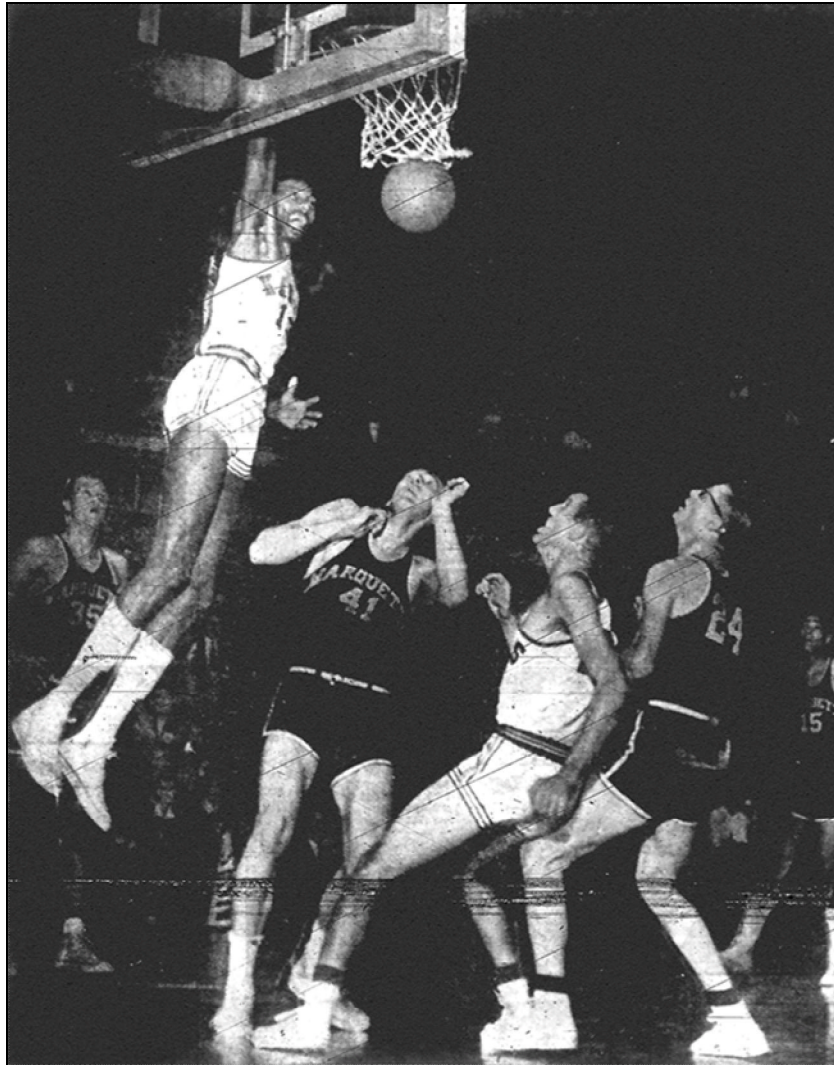


Figure 3.2. Photograph of Wilt Chamberlain dunking against Marquette University.

This photograph had the potential to be quite de-stabilizing. Although theories of white male supremacy were not nearly as widespread in 1950s America as they had been at the turn of the century, Jim Crow segregation rested on fundamental assumptions of black inferiority that were often tied to stereotypes of black male shiftlessness and inadequacy. Images of Chamberlain dominating white competition clearly undermined these stereotypes.

Or did they? Another stereotype of black men revolved around the image of the “brutal black buck,” which the film historian Donald Bogle describes as “big, baadddd niggers, over-sexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh.”⁷³ For these viewers, Chamberlain’s on-court dominance might well have “proven” bestial physical prowess and little more. There were certainly Kansas sports followers who were eager to discount Chamberlain’s greatness. Mayer later felt the need to defend the big man against some “capricious fans” who believed Chamberlain to be “washed up and probably never . . . really great at all” after he only scored twelve points in a narrow, one-point win over Iowa State in the Big Seven tournament. After praising Chamberlain’s defense, rebounding, and teamwork in KU’s win, Mayer also had a few choice words for those who criticized Chamberlain “for missing several key free throws—five in the second half.” He wondered whether those fans noticed that Gary Thompson, the “celebrated” star guard (and a white player) for Iowa State also missed four free throws “in a crucial game,” despite the fact that he was “noted for his coolness under fire.”⁷⁴ Chamberlain’s excellence only went so far in convincing skeptical observers of the inaccuracy of certain stereotypes, even when he clearly dominated the competition night in and night out. Chamberlain might be the star player on the court, but “scrappy” white players might be more “clutch” or “cool” under pressure.

These subtle differences aside, most fans and media members marveled at Chamberlain’s athletic accomplishments, but, in doing so, forgot or neglected Chamberlain’s pioneering role as a race leader. Max Falkenstein, the long-time radio broadcaster for the KU men’s basketball team, recalled that Chamberlain’s “size and

⁷³ See Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 9-14.

⁷⁴ Bill Mayer, “Bill Mayer’s Sport Talk,” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 28 December 1956, p. 8.

agility made him an entertaining oddity ... for many of the wide-eyed Kansas faithful, fans who were still getting accustomed to the concept of a black man on the floor.” Although some fans had misgivings about his race, according to Falkenstein, Chamberlain’s talent—and the fact that he was playing for KU—made “Jayhawks fans more than willing to expand their capacity for acceptance.”⁷⁵ A *Journal-World* front-page story about fans’ reactions to Chamberlain’s debut supports Falkenstein’s perceptions. Men and women, such as the local sheriff and a female foreign exchange student, all marveled at Chamberlain’s grace on the court, calling him “the best ever!” While some fans worried Chamberlain would get injured or become ill, no one expressed any concerns about his race.⁷⁶

In the context of these celebratory reactions, from the media and fans alike, it is especially curious that only one local publication printed Maurice King’s assessment of Chamberlain’s debut. As the other black player on the KU team, King was clearly excited by Chamberlain’s potential impact on the team’s fortunes, but he also considered some larger issues. According to student writer Bob Lyle of the *Daily Kansan*, King hoped Chamberlain would “do a lot to improve racial relationships through his athletic career.”⁷⁷ In theory one of the main reasons for Chamberlain’s decision to play for KU, that aspect of his story largely vanished as writers employed hyperbole and editors scrambled for photos of thunderous dunks. Had those other publications merely been

⁷⁵ Falkenstein, *Max and the Jayhawks*, 59-60.

⁷⁶ “Everyone Is Babbling About the Dipper,” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 4 December 1956, p. 1, 6. The fascination with Chamberlain was not limited to those in attendance. According to the story, “telephone calls poured into Lawrence from all over the nation to find out how Chamberlain did” (quotation from p. 1).

⁷⁷ Bob Lyle, “Wilt Hits 52 For New Record,” *University Daily Kansan*, 4 December 1956, p. 1, 8 (quotation from p. 1).

playing lip-service to those lofty goals? Did they hope that angle of Chamberlain's story would be forgotten? Or did they hope that not mentioning Chamberlain's race would actually improve racial relations by treating his star presence as an unexceptional development? Certainly readers and writers would have been familiar with the burgeoning civil rights movement taking place across the South. The Montgomery bus boycott, which received significant attention from the national media, concluded in December 1956, just as Chamberlain played his first varsity game. Perhaps white Kansas and Missouri civic leaders avoided commenting on racial issues to depict their region of the country more positively, as un-fettered by the unrest that marred the turbulent South. The hesitance to discuss the racial aspect of Chamberlain's debut at the least suggests an anxiety among whites in squarely addressing the racial meanings of Chamberlain's presence and performance, one that would resurface throughout his career.

As the season progressed, Chamberlain continued to garner a great deal of media attention, nearly all of it complimentary of him on and off the court. As the universally-acknowledged best player on the successful KU team, Chamberlain earned acclaim for "leading" the team to victory after victory, although some subtle differences in the coverage of the local newspapers reflect some alternate approaches to Chamberlain's status as a team leader. While the *Call* praised Chamberlain unequivocally as KU's team leader, and considered his accomplishments in the context of the successes of other black athletes and black coaches, other newspapers focused on Chamberlain's leadership in various statistical categories: scoring, rebounds, and blocked shots. Even as these papers acknowledged the centrality of Chamberlain to KU's success, they shied away from praising him as the inspirational leader of his integrated team.

The writers and editors of the *Call* placed Chamberlain at the center of their coverage of KU, writing from the perspective that whatever successes the team enjoyed were due primarily to Chamberlain's presence. In Sports Editor John I. Johnson's wrap-up for 1956, for example, the final athlete mentioned was Chamberlain, "who has done a big part in pacing the team to a string of early victories and who may, barring misfortune, lead the squad to high national honors."⁷⁸ From Johnson's perspective, Chamberlain set the pace for his teammates, leading them almost single-handedly to their successes. Similarly, the *Call's* game story about the Jayhawks' second meeting with Colorado indicated that Chamberlain "turned in another leadership job" in his team's 68-57 victory. Chamberlain scored 31 points, "blocked numerous shots and otherwise provided the difference" in the win, which guaranteed the team at least a tie for the conference title.⁷⁹ The emphasis on Chamberlain as a black leader fit into a broader pattern of coverage in this newspaper. When Tennessee State became the first black school to win the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics basketball tournament (a tournament featuring the best teams from some of the nation's smaller schools) on March 16, 1957, Johnson enthusiastically praised Tennessee State's black head coach Johnny B. McLendon for being "a great coach, period." He was heartened by the success of a black male head coach because it continued to prove that "given an equal opportunity," African Americans could succeed in "almost any field of activity."⁸⁰ To Johnson, Chamberlain and McLendon both embodied successful black male leaders who had proved their worth

⁷⁸ John I. Johnson, "Sport Light: 1956 Has Been Memorable For Many," *Kansas City Call*, 28 December 1956, p. 7.

⁷⁹ "The Stilt Paces Ku Jayhawks Win Over Colorado," *Kansas City Call*, 8 March 1957, p. 11.

⁸⁰ "Tennessee State Tigers Win NAIA Championship," *The Call*, 22 March 1957, 10.

competing against whites, a powerful message for the newspaper's editors and writers. This commentary framed Chamberlain not only a figure of remarkable physical prowess and ability but of broader talents and character.

Other publications tended not to emphasize that message. Although the major publications in the Lawrence area all lauded Chamberlain's accomplishments on the court—and saw him as a leader of sorts off the court—his role as a leader of an integrated team was rarely mentioned. Newspapers certainly praised Chamberlain for leading the team in scoring, and being the key factor on defense or in rebounding. The two times during the regular season that the team lost, the newspapers also went out of their way to absolve Chamberlain of any blame, noting that in both cases tight defense had prevented him from taking over the contests. However, these articles also shied away from depicting Chamberlain inspiring his teammates. Instead, Chamberlain earned praised for setting “a good example for all young adults and teen-agers” by getting his second polio vaccine shot—which both the *Journal-World* and the *Daily Capital* depicted in photographs.⁸¹ The *Daily Kansan* referred to Chamberlain as the “hero” of certain games, and Mayer mentioned Chamberlain's “loose” nature in the locker room before big games, but even these newspapers did not suggest that Chamberlain was the leader of the team.⁸² Nor did they assign this label to Maurice King, the other black player on the team and a senior starting guard. In fact, the team's co-captains were white senior starters John Parker and Gene Elstun. There may have been reasons beyond race as to

⁸¹ See Board of Health, “Long Reach, But a Good Example,” Photograph, *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 12 December 1956, p. 13, and “Wilt Chamberlain, who gave...” Photograph, *Topeka Daily Capital*, 13 December 1956, p. 28. In the photograph, a small white woman injects Chamberlain's arm while he looks at the camera. A white basketball player named John Cleland waits in line.

⁸² See, for example, “KU Ready For League Play After Tourney Sweep,” *University Daily Kansan*, 3 January 1957, p. 4, and Bill Mayer, “Bang on Door Fuels K.U. in Vital Game,” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 7 March 1957, p. 15.

why these two players were selected instead of King, but the decision fit into a broader pattern—going back to Robeson at Rutgers—where team leadership positions were occupied by whites. One final example visually depicted many observers’ notions of a proper leader: before the Big Seven pre-season tournament, which KU would eventually win behind Chamberlain’s record-setting 93 points over its three wins, the *Daily Capital* printed a cartoon of white Iowa State player Gary Thompson. The caption read: “A Real Leader.”⁸³ No similar cartoon appeared for Chamberlain throughout his two-year career.

Although Chamberlain’s role as a racial leader had been largely forgotten in the coverage of Chamberlain’s debut, Bill Mayer did return to that aspect of his career three weeks after the season’s start. Praising the big man effusively, Mayer continued to see Chamberlain as a leader for black people and not for whites:

Wilt, by the way, deserves some orchids for something he’s been doing in addition to playing great basketball. When the towering Negro came west from Philadelphia, he did so with the idea that by being a great performer on the court and a good citizen—a gentleman—off the maples, he might be able to contribute toward the advancement of his people. So far everything he has done has reflected tremendous credit to his race, and Negroes everywhere have every right to be proud of him.

Despite the constant pestering by newsmen and photographers, he’s remained calm and polite and usually smiling and jovial, always ready with a quip. Though battered and booed on the court, he’s never lost his poise and composure. Never has he given any displays of temper. Those who have been skeptical have ended up admiring him for his ability AND his gentlemanly ways...

K. U. can be proud of the Big Dipper as a great basketball player, but it can be even prouder of him as a young gentleman who represents the school as favorably as anyone can.⁸⁴

Mayer certainly seemed genuine in lauding Chamberlain’s character, encouraging readers to be proud of him, and he undoubtedly saw Chamberlain as an important figure in area

⁸³ Cliff Long, Jr., “Iowa State’s Gary Thompson,” Cartoon, *Topeka Daily Capital*, 26 December 1956, p. 12.

⁸⁴ Bill Mayer, “Bill Mayer’s Sport Talk,” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 21 December 1956, p. 10.

race relations. However, Mayer declined to identify who needed to be led by Chamberlain, whose behavior needed to be changed, as he remained vague about how Chamberlain could “contribute toward the advancement of his people.” Implying that the onus for racial change lay with blacks, that they needed to follow Chamberlain’s model of persevering, remaining composed, and avoiding public pronouncements on controversial issues, Mayer outlined a narrow view of Negro uplift that asked little of whites.

If these newspapers were hesitant to label Chamberlain as a team leader, or a figure who would inspire whites to be changed, they certainly acknowledged his widespread popularity. Nearly every newspaper commented on the increased attendance that Chamberlain generated. The *Daily Kansan*, for example, explained the marked increase in attendance at home and on the road as the result of “an improved team and the fabulous Chamberlain.”⁸⁵ Before the Jayhawks left for a West Coast trip in mid-December, an Associated Press article in the *Star* story noted that Ivan Travis, the business manager for the University of Washington, “had received requests for tickets for the ‘Washington-Chamberlain game,’” suggesting fans’ desire to see him in action.⁸⁶ When the team traveled to Colorado, their game became the first Colorado home game to be televised.⁸⁷ People, particularly children, were fascinated by Chamberlain and longed to see him in person. A *Journal-World* front-page photograph of Chamberlain walking hand-in-hand with a young white fan after one of the Big Seven tournament games was headlined “The Luckiest Kid in the World?” And the image’s caption noted that

⁸⁵ “Jayhawks Fill Field Houses,” *University Daily Kansan*, 4 March 1957, p. 1.

⁸⁶ “K.U. Cagers On Coast.” *Kansas City Star*, 14 December 1956, p. 4-D.

⁸⁷ K.U.-Colorado Sellout to Be Televised.” *Kansas City Star*, 25 January 1957, p. 23.

Chamberlain “was mobbed most of the time during the Kansas City tournament by autograph seekers.”⁸⁸ The *Star* re-printed the same photo, with its caption indicating that the photograph revealed “the esteem in which Wilt Chamberlain ... is held by young cage fans.”⁸⁹ These newspapers readily acknowledged (and celebrated) Chamberlain’s popularity, and these inter-racial photographs seem to evidence a heart-felt interest in promoting racial goodwill.

That hope for interracial harmony, however, often belied the actual experiences of KU’s two black players, Chamberlain and King, on the court, even as the local newspapers (black and white) rarely covered any incidents of racial bigotry. In later years, Chamberlain’s white teammate John Parker recalled the racism black players had to deal with:

Wilt and his brash talent came along, and racial tensions, particularly in the traditionally Southern states like Missouri and Oklahoma, escalated. It seemed everywhere we went we heard ‘nigger,’ ‘nigger lover,’ and worse. Officials would often ignore blatant fouls committed against black player, and opposing schools waved Confederate flags and played ‘Dixie.’⁹⁰

There was almost no coverage of this behavior in any of the local newspapers. Occasionally, stories would refer to “partisan” crowds in Missouri or other locations, but there was never hint of racial bigotry underlying fan behavior. The one exception to the rule was Mayer’s commentary following Kansas’ game against the University of Wisconsin in December, when a number of the Wisconsin players (and even the trainer, apparently) “started yelling nasty remarks” about King and Chamberlain. According to Mayer, “there were definite racial overtones.” Coach Bud Foster defended his players by

⁸⁸ Bill Snead, “The Luckiest Kid in the World?” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 31 December 1956, p. 1.

⁸⁹ “Young Fan And Friend,” Photograph, *Kansas City Star*, 6 January 1957, p. 2-B.

⁹⁰ Falkenstein, *Max and the Jayhawks*, 64-65.

saying they were “just cheering,” which Mayer thought was “as valid as a Confederate dollar.”⁹¹ Chamberlain and King both dismissed the incident as unimportant, but it is notable that none of the other white or black presses picked up the story. The persistent faith in sports as a model for interracial equality dictated that these publications not dwell on racial incidents at any length.

Bigotry in the Spotlight: The 1957 NCAA Tournament

Kansas concluded the 1957 regular season in impressive fashion, with a 21-2 record and an 11-1 mark in the Big Seven. Chamberlain finished the year averaging 29.52 points per game, easily the best in team history, and set a variety of other team records. He was also named to first-team All-America squads by every major news and sporting publication, including the prestigious Associated Press team. KU’s team was ranked number two in the nation, behind only the un-defeated squad from the University of North Carolina, and many picked Kansas to win the national championship tournament.⁹² In order to play for the title, however, the team would have to survive two western regional games in Dallas, Texas, including an opening-round game against hometown Southern Methodist University. In the pressure-packed games that followed, the behavior of opposing fans, players, and coaches finally brought the virulent racism against Chamberlain and King out into the open. The various strategies employed by the local media in their coverage, including attempts to minimize the situation at first, efforts at “balanced” coverage, and distress over sports’ egalitarian failures, reflected broader

⁹¹ Bill Mayer, “Bill Mayer’s Sport Talk,” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 24 December 1956, p. 8.

⁹² See, for example, Associated Press, “K.U. Is Choice To Win N.C.A.A.,” *Kansas City Star*, 11 March 1957, p. 19, morning edition.

anxieties about racial integrations' implications. As sportswriters struggled to find the appropriate tone to cover the events, they found themselves (at times grudgingly) assessing the possibilities for, and roadblocks to, an integrated society.

Although in 1957 the NCAA men's basketball tournament had not yet become a multi-million dollar sporting event, it had nonetheless begun to garner major media attention both locally and nationally, particularly because of Chamberlain's presence. In the town of Lawrence, students and residents alike eagerly celebrated the team's entry into the post-season tournament. Advertisements in the *Daily Kansan*—one paid for by local businesses and one sponsored by KU fraternities and sororities—praised the team's regular-season success and offered good luck for the NCAA tournament.⁹³ Meanwhile, an enterprising group of students and local businessmen had formed a group called the Jay Watchers earlier in the season to arrange television broadcasts of the team's games, and they succeeded in getting coverage of the regional games in Dallas.⁹⁴ Students crowded around television sets in the student union and in fraternity houses to watch.⁹⁵ At least in Lawrence, Chamberlain and his teammates were the center of attention as they headed for the NCAA tournament.

⁹³ For the ad sponsored by local businesses, see "Congratulations To The Big 7 Champs," Advertisement, *University Daily Kansan*, 12 March 1957, p. 8-9. The two-page ad featured one photo of the team with Chamberlain centrally-located and another showing the team receiving the Big Seven tournament championship trophy in December. Sponsors for the ad included several Lawrence businesses such as: Independent Laundry and Dry Cleaners; Underwood's ("Everything For The Party" including ice and "Six Pacs"); Hixon Studio and Camera Shop; Douglas County State Bank; and Allison Thomas Flower Shop. For the ad published by fraternities and sororities, see "KU Is Proud Of It's Basketball Champs!" Advertisement, *University Daily Kansan*, 13 March 1957, p. 4. This ad featured a photograph of Chamberlain jumping center and wished the team good luck in the up-coming tournament.

⁹⁴ For the origins of the Jay Watchers, see "TV Coverage Sought For KU Road Games," *University Daily Kansan*, 12 February 1957, p. 1 and "Jay Watchers Begin Drive For TV Funds," *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 13 March 1957, p. 1.

⁹⁵ See "TV Beckons All To Watch As Games Snuff Out Studies," *University Daily Kansan*, 18 March 1957, p. 1.

The players and the fans were unaware of the challenges the team would face once it arrived in Texas. The team's living accommodations were the first sign of trouble. Instead of staying in downtown Dallas with the other three teams, the Jayhawks booked rooms in Grand Prairie, a suburb nearly thirty miles away. Although Mayer was pleased to report that the team would be able to stay together, unlike the previous season when, on a trip to Dallas, Maurice King had been forced to stay in a dorm apart from his teammates, he neglected to inform readers (or did not know), that the team could not stay together in Dallas.⁹⁶ Likewise, the *Daily Capital* reported the team's location but did not explain why the team was staying there.⁹⁷ Even the players were apparently unaware: Chamberlain wrote in his autobiography that he and his teammates at first believed Coach Harp's explanation that he wanted to keep the team "together in a quiet spot, away from the big city." They were, however, disabused of that notion when "someone burned a cross in the vacant lot across from our motel."⁹⁸ Teammate John Parker described the team's accommodations as "a dingy motel miles away in Grand Prairie" and lamented that "no restaurant would serve" the team, so the players "took all [their] meals together in a private room."⁹⁹ Although the integrated Kansas squad would be permitted to play in the upcoming tournament games, these and other signs indicated how unwelcome the team was, how symbolically threatening some found them to be.

⁹⁶ Bill Mayer, "Bill Mayer's Sport Talk," *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 11 March 1957, p. 11.

⁹⁷ "Kansas Leaves for Dallas, Set for Regional Playoffs," *Topeka Daily Capital*, 14 March 1957, p. 18.

⁹⁸ Chamberlain, *Wilt: Just Like Any Other*, 65. None of the newspapers, nor later accounts of the situation, mention this event. It is possible that it is apocryphal, because Chamberlain was known to exaggerate, and some other facts do not add up. Chamberlain claimed that he was not allowed to go to a drive-in movie in his own car while in town, but he had flown down with the rest of the team and so his car was in Lawrence. Still, it is quite clear that the integrated team was an unwelcome guest in the area at large whether this specific incident is true or not.

⁹⁹ Falkenstein, *Max and the Jayhawks*, 66.

Their reception was even worse on the court. In the team's first game in Dallas, they struggled to a hard-earned overtime win over SMU, as a hostile crowd verbally abused the Kansas players. According to Parker, the KU players "were spat upon, pelted with debris, and subjected to the vilest racial epithets imaginable."¹⁰⁰ Chamberlain agreed, writing that the "hostile" fans "booed and jeered" and used a variety of derogatory terms, including: "'nigger' and 'jigaboo' and 'spook' and a lot of other things that weren't nearly that nice."¹⁰¹ Pleased to escape with the win, which they earned in part because King had blocked a last-second shot in regulation, the players assumed the worst was over since the hometown SMU team had been eliminated.

They were wrong. In fact, the team's second game against Oklahoma City University (OCU) involved even worse crowd behavior. Dallas fans, outraged that an integrated team had defeated their school, switched allegiance to OCU, and continued to taunt and harass the KU squad. To make matters worse, Oklahoma City Coach Abe Lemmons and several of his players participated in the unruly behavior. Before the game, Lemmons warned referee Al Lightner that there would be problems "if that big nigger [Chamberlain] piles onto any of my kids."¹⁰² As the game proceeded, the scene verged on bedlam, as Oklahoma City players deliberately attempted to injure Chamberlain and King by tripping them.¹⁰³ Chamberlain recalled: "one of the Oklahoma players kept calling me 'nigger' and a 'black son-of-a-bitch,' and he jabbed me and tried

¹⁰⁰ Falkenstein, *Max and the Jayhawks*, 66.

¹⁰¹ Chamberlain, *Wilt: Just Like Any Other*, 65.

¹⁰² Associated Press, "A Racial Taint In O.C.U. Game," *Kansas City Star*, 18 March 1957, p. 17.

¹⁰³ Falkenstein, *Max and the Jayhawks*, 66.

to trip me every time he went by.”¹⁰⁴ At one point, according to the *Call*’s description of events, Lemmons “charged one of the officials and said: ‘If you don’t call some fouls on that big n----r [dashes theirs] we will get him.’” The normally mild-mannered Harp charged at Lemmons and nearly engaged in a fistfight on the court.¹⁰⁵ As Kansas pulled away to a convincing victory in the second half, the chaos became even more intense. Not even pleading from the SMU athletic director and other public officials could calm the outraged fans, who threw a variety of objects, including coins, paper airplanes, seat cushions, and food, onto the court. According to Falkenstein, the atmosphere was so “dangerous” that “armed police officers escorted the team off the court and all the way back to the airport.”¹⁰⁶

Considering the magnitude of the unruly fans’, players’, and coaches’ behavior, the belated and minimal coverage of the incidents in the local newspapers was striking. In the immediate aftermath of the story, the major newspapers in the area (the *Capital* and the *Star*) made no mention of the racial abuse suffered by the KU team. In the *Star*, Bob Busby referred, off-hand, to a “partisan crowd” during the SMU game; in covering the OCU game, he said the “raucous crowd of 7,600 was slightly out of hand.”¹⁰⁷ In neither case did he acknowledge any racial overtones. In the *Capital*, writer Stu Dunbar also commented on “the partisan” nature of the crowd in the OCU game, writing that it was “nearly 100 percent against Kansas,” although he did not indicate that Chamberlain’s

¹⁰⁴ Chamberlain, *Wilt: Just Like Any Other*, 66. Chamberlain praised one OCU player, center Hubert Reed, who “came over and apologized to me for him and the fans several times, and that more than offset all the abuse.”

¹⁰⁵ “Roudiness [sic] Mars KU-Okla. City Game In Dallas,” *Kansas City Call*, 22 March 1957, p. 11.

¹⁰⁶ Falkenstein, *Max and the Jayhawks*, 66.

¹⁰⁷ See Bob Busby, “K.U. Needs Overtime,” *Kansas City Star*, 16 March 1957, p. 22, morning edition. Bob Busby, and “K.U. Uses Team Effort,” *Kansas City Star*, 17 March 1957, p. 1-B, 2-B.

and King's race were almost certainly the main reasons why the Dallas fans adopted OCU. Instead, as Snider had done, he attributed the crowd's behavior to complaints about the officiating.¹⁰⁸ Only the *Journal-World*, the town newspaper, even hinted at any racial implications in its coverage of the weekend's games. In describing the SMU game, for example, writer Earl Morey seemed disturbed that the crowd "vented a lot of its displeasure at the two K.U. Negro stars."¹⁰⁹

There were likely a number of reasons why the mainstream newspapers were hesitant to condemn, or even describe, the Dallas crowd's antipathy for Chamberlain and King. On the one hand, it was clear that some readers of these newspapers were sympathetic to those in support of segregation, and so taking a firm stand against it would have seemed a potentially risky business move.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, even sympathetic newsmen might have feared that calling extra attention to the racial abuse suffered by the black players would only lead to more taunting in future games and would potentially cause wider conflicts between blacks and whites in the region.¹¹¹ Finally, given the supposedly egalitarian values embodied in sports—the idea that the “level playing field”

¹⁰⁸ Stu Dunbar, “Kansas Batters Oklahoma City, 81-61,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, 17 March 1957, p. C-1.

¹⁰⁹ Earl Morey, “Oread Battlers Avert Third Lightning Bolt,” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 16 March 1957, p. 1-2 (quotation from p. 2). It is likely that the *Journal-World* would have covered the racial subplot of the OCU game in greater detail than the other newspapers, but since the paper did not publish an issue on Sunday, it is difficult to know for certain. Similarly, the *Call* would eventually address the bigotry, but since it was a weekly publication the story did not come out for a few more days after the games.

¹¹⁰ For example, one *Capital* reader wrote in to commend the newspaper for printing “the many fine articles ... about the southern states and their social problems.” Mrs. Margaret Snow, of Manhattan, Kansas, believed that the southern states should be “proud of standing so valiantly for their states’ rights and the integrity of both races.” She argued that “both races realize what the bringing together of children in school, and socially, means,” although she did not say it. Clearly, she did not think it was a good prospect. She believed that the southern states were supporting “constitutional government as laid down by our founding fathers.” See Margaret Smith, “For State’s Rights,” Letter to the Editor, *Topeka Daily Capital*, 13 January 1957, p. A-16.

¹¹¹ Falkenstein acknowledged that he had not brought up the behavior of the fans in his role as radio broadcaster because he did not want “add to the tension of the moment by bringing that stuff up.” Author interview with Max Falkenstein, August 10, 2006, Lawrence, Kansas.

enabled the best to succeed, regardless of race, creed, or color—sportswriters were uncomfortable acknowledging the harsh realities that belied those ideals. Even the *Call* had seemed hesitant to acknowledge the racism Chamberlain and King faced throughout the regular season, never dwelling on the on-going slurs from unruly fans. For black leaders such as Davis, integrated sports offered so much potential for broader change because they showed that integrated society could work. Emphasizing bigotry's tenacious hold among fans could have lent credence to those who believed that segregated society was the best option because it avoided the racial conflict created by putting blacks and whites into close contact with one another.¹¹²

In the end, even the mainstream newspapers had no choice but to cover the racial angle of the story; the day after the game, Lightner expressed his disgust with the crowd and the OCU players and coaches in an Associated Press story that received nationwide coverage. In addition to describing Lemmons' pre-game threat regarding Chamberlain, Lightner also said that OCU players consistently referred to Chamberlain and King as "those niggers." Coach Lemmons responded in the story, vigorously denying that he had ever used the word "nigger" and that his players were deliberately fouling Chamberlain.¹¹³ The back-and-forth continued. OCU Athletic Director Ed Nall demanded an apology from Lightner regarding his comments, claiming that Lightner "was trying to stir up racial prejudice 'that does not exist.'" Lightner, a sports editor from Oregon, refused to back down: "The real trouble seemed to be that Chamberlain and

¹¹² The mainstream newspapers might have also failed to report the racial taunting encountered by Chamberlain and King in locations such as Missouri and Oklahoma because of the negative image that behavior would have given their region as a whole. When Chamberlain had committed to Kansas, some writers had seen his coming as proof of the progressive racial quality of the region. Acknowledging racist Missouri fans would have undermined that ideal.

¹¹³ Associated Press, "A Racial Taint In O.C.U. Game," *Kansas City Star*, 18 March 1957, p. 17.

King were dark-skinned ... I didn't ask to go down there. They asked me to come. I didn't intend going 2,000 miles to fight the Civil war all over again." He also confirmed the use of racial slurs by Lemmons and his players.¹¹⁴

As the story developed, the local newspapers faced the decision of how best to cover the explosive situation. Often the newspapers showed a tortured sense of trying to be fair and un-biased towards the OCU players and coaches and the Dallas fans, even as their writers clearly recognized the virulent racism on display. For example, Bob Busby, writing in the *Star*, acknowledged that "the behavior of the crowd at the Dallas basketball regional hit an all-time low," but he seemed uncomfortable discussing the scene's evident racial bigotry.¹¹⁵ In fact, he even printed lengthy excerpts from a story by Bill Rives, the sports editor for the *Dallas News*, who argued that Lightner was wrong to indicate the role prejudice played: according to Rives, "any player as tall and skilled as Chamberlain would have been the target of tough treatment." He thought that "the racial aspect, which Lightner so unwittingly and so unfortunately brought up, had nothing whatsoever to do with the conduct of the Kansas-O.C.U. game."¹¹⁶ Although Busby clearly thought the fans were out of line, he perhaps felt obligated to allow the "maligned South" to defend itself. In doing so, he minimized the very real racial threats and intimidations faced by these black players, and, by extension, the racial abuse suffered by black people across the country. An editorial in the *Journal-World* also seemed to miss the point: instead of criticizing the racism of the fans in Dallas, the editorial board instead used the admittedly "disgusting spectacle" of the fan behavior to chastise Lawrence fans. The editorial noted

¹¹⁴ Associated Press, "O.C.U. Asks An Apology," *Kansas City Star*, 18 March 1957, p. 17.

¹¹⁵ Bob Busby, "On The Level," *Kansas City Star*, 19 March 1957, p. 19, morning edition.

¹¹⁶ Bob Busby, "On The Level," *Kansas City Star*, 21 March 1957, p. 30, morning edition.

that “there were several incidents” that season at the KU’s home arena, the Allen Fieldhouse, that featured coins and debris being tossed out on the floor. They hoped KU fans would use the incident as an incentive to improve their own behavior, skirting the OCU game’s racial implications almost entirely. The editorial obliquely mentioned that the OCU players “caused their share of unpleasantness with untimely remarks,” and referred to “unethical” practices by the OCU team, but in not naming those remarks and practices, the story did not call attention to the bigotry on display.¹¹⁷

Similarly, in the *Capital*, Dick Snider wrestled with expressing his disgust towards the game’s racial ugliness even as he attempted to moderate his critiques. He harshly criticized Lemmons for his on-court agitation, and he lambasted the fans as being “juvenile” because they “booed and threw things and conducted themselves in a manner which would make Elvis Presley fans look and sound intelligent.” However, when it came to race, Snider toed a narrow line. Instead of acknowledging the circumstances, he wrote: “Oklahoma City players, they say, had plenty to say to Wilt and Maurice King, KU’s Negro players.”¹¹⁸ He did not make clear who “they” were, nor the credibility of the claims. Similarly, he wrote that Lightner “said Lemmons made some distasteful comments to him before the game about Wilt.” Struggling to maintain a sense of objectivity, he refused to condemn Lemmons, even when he could have easily verified Lightner’s claims by talking, off the record, to any number of sources. He thought that only a fraction of the crowd fit into “the pitifully ignorant group” of bigots who took “added delight in” berating officials and players “if color is involved.” Snider wrapped up his column by comparing Chamberlain to baseball great Jackie Robinson, arguing that

¹¹⁷ “Dallas and Lawrence,” Editorial, *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 19 March 1957, p. 4.

¹¹⁸ Dick Snider, “Capitalizing On Sports,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, 19 March 1957, p. 11.

Wilt was “getting a trial by fire” as the first black superstar in college basketball.¹¹⁹ If that was the case, why not overtly condemn Lemmons, the OCU players, and the fans? Why hesitate to denounce them publicly as racists? Snider belied his own critique of the situation only a few days later, when he discussed a conversation he had with Lemmons, who “shrugged off the racial charges that came out of the game as ‘ridiculous.’” Snider appeared to take him at his word instead of pressing the issue—another example of his discomfort with public discussion of racial inequality and bigotry.¹²⁰

One final sign of the *Star*’s ambivalence towards this event could be seen in a curious newspaper advertisement that appeared six days after the OCU game, on the day of KU’s semifinal game against the University of San Francisco. A simple black-and-white cartoon featured Chamberlain in his Kansas uniform dunking the basketball. Two columns wide and the entire height of the page, the image was explained by a “poem” beneath it: “There was a young man named The Stilt/ Who for basketball playing was bilt [sic]/ When he dunked one to score/ There went up a roar/ Of ‘Bravo!’ or ‘He ought to be kilt [sic].” Beneath the poem was another line of text: “It takes a *man* to do a *man*’s job [italics theirs]. In basketball, Wilt (The Stilt) Chamberlain—In selling goods, the Kansas City Star.”¹²¹ There are a number of extraordinary features of this cartoon: the advertisement expresses admiration for Chamberlain on some level and explicitly identifies Chamberlain as a manly man who gets the job done, a remarkable development given Chamberlain’s race and the weight of long-held stereotypes about black men. But it also suggests the intense negative reaction to his achievements, in the “joking” line that

¹¹⁹ Dick Snider, “Capitalizing On Sports,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, 19 March 1957, p. 11.

¹²⁰ Dick Snider, “Capitalizing On Sports,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, 24 March 1957, p. C-1.

¹²¹ “There was a young man...” Advertisement, *Kansas City Star*, 22 March 1957, p. 35.

some believed Chamberlain “ought to be kilt.” Given the strong reactions to Chamberlain, it is no wonder that these writers engaged in an elaborate verbal dance around issues of race and inequality. Taking a firm stand regarding the crowd’s behavior in Dallas would have required staking out a position on the place of black men in society and on racial integration in general. Demanding fair treatment for Chamberlain from fans and officials would have not only acknowledged the inequalities still present in sports, it would have also given ammunition to the U.S.’s enemies in the Cold War, who could have used the incidents to criticize the nation’s claims of equality. Finally, enumerating the extent of racial prejudice and bigotry faced by Chamberlain and King would have undermined the white faith in black uplift to solve the “race problem.” Simply providing opportunities would not be enough—systemic changes would have to occur in order to root out the racial prejudice that prevented black Americans from getting fair treatment from many whites.

Anxiety over elaborating those beliefs might explain why a number of journalists, players, and fans alike appeared to believe that not talking about the game’s unpleasantness was the best strategy for dealing with the situation’s tension. Of course, the *Journal-World* editorial, dancing around mentioning race, was a prime example of this tactic. So, too, was Snider’s contention that it was “of relatively little importance what Lemmons is alleged to have called Wilt” during the OCU game. What was important was “that the coach felt it necessary to talk before and after the game, and that the official felt it necessary to reply publicly.”¹²² Bigotry was not the central issue: instead, it was the publicity of it that concerned Snider. KU student Del Haley went a step further. In a *Daily Kansan* column, he complained that “the area newspapers have

¹²²Dick Snider, “Capitalizing On Sports,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, 19 March 1957, p. 11.

done more harm than good in relation to” the issue of desegregation. He thought it was irresponsible to “pin the racial prejudice label” on the behaviors of the fans and the players, because it was logical that the fans would boo the team that beat the hometown favorite and because Chamberlain had been roughed up by other teams throughout the season. Brushing aside the suggestion that players on Oklahoma City had “been making derogatory remarks about our two Negro team members,” Haley blamed the newspapers for targeting the players and fans simply because they “were in the South.” In contrast, he praised the players and coaches of KU for staying “silent on the whole affair.” From his perspective, the media’s decision to devote so much attention to the story “only hurt the team’s reputation.”¹²³ Even Mayer, who would level some of the harshest criticism of the Dallas fans and the OCU players and coaches, also praised the Kansas players and coaches for “remaining sensibly mum” about the controversy, believing that strategy was good “public relations.”¹²⁴

Although these men did not explicitly indicate how the team’s “reputation” would be improved by ignoring the racial barbs, they seemed to believe that discussing conflict would create an image of the team (and perhaps the university and region) as agitators, as radicals looking to stir up trouble. Remaining silent would prevent that reputation and a possible backlash against the team and school. That attitude fit in well with the stance towards civil rights of Kansas native, and U.S. President, Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Although Eisenhower believed that all deserved equal protection under law, he was uncomfortable with direct government intervention in issues of segregation, stating, after the decision in *Brown v. Board*, that it was not possible to “change the hearts of men with

¹²³ Del Haley, “Aiding Segregation In Reverse,” *University Daily Kansan*, 21 March 1957, p. 2.

¹²⁴ Bill Mayer, “Bill Mayer’s Sport Talk,” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 20 March 1957, p. 18.

laws or decisions.”¹²⁵ Even his decision to use U.S. National Guard troops to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in September 1957, was undertaken with great reluctance, as Eisenhower hoped to avoid confrontation over the issue. Eisenhower and other like-minded white civic leaders believed that African Americans needed only to be patient, to wait for changes in white Americans’ racial attitudes. Activism, or public protestations regarding inequalities in American life, even in the wake of extreme events such as the Texans’ boorish behavior, served only to hurt African Americans’ cause according to this line of thinking.

There were those, however, who rejected a cautious approach to the situation and who unabashedly critiqued the broader implications of the OCU game. For these writers, the boorish behavior of fans, players, and coaches indicated serious flaws in sports’ capacity to model an equal opportunity society. The *Call*, for example, did not hesitate to reveal the crowd’s racial bias, as the un-named writer noted that fans “abused Chamberlain because of his race and tried in many ways to hamper his play.” Their story also described, and did not allege, Lemmons use of the term “nigger” in connection to Chamberlain. The story refused to elide the obvious racism and unequal treatment that Chamberlain and King faced.¹²⁶ *Star* reader Ray Cain also minced no words in criticizing the Texans. In a letter to the editor headlined “Texas Insult Offends Him,” Cain praised Chamberlain for being “a credit to his race and to basketball” in contrast to the fans and Lemmons, who he said were anything but “good sports.”¹²⁷ Their poor

¹²⁵ Michael S. Mayer, “With Much Deliberation and Some Speed: Eisenhower and the Brown Decision,” *Journal of Southern History* 52 (February 1986), 43-76. Quotation from 61.

¹²⁶ “Roudiness [sic] Mars KU-Okla. City Game In Dallas,” *Kansas City Call*, 22 March 1957, p. 11.

¹²⁷ Ray Cain, “Texas Insult Offends Him,” Letter to the Editor, *Kansas City Star*, 22 March 1957, p. 46.

behavior, in other words, violated the tenets of sportsmanship: the players were not treated equally and with respect on that night, a potential sign of sports' limitations as a model for a civil society and a racial egalitarianism.

Bill Mayer, in the *Journal-World*, re-emphasized those points. First, he contradicted Lemmons' claim that he and his players had not used racial slurs. According to Mayer, "courtside observers Saturday said they heard at least one unfavorable racial reference each to Chamberlain and King by the O.C.U. boys, on the court and on the bench."¹²⁸ Mayer also criticized the crowd in strong tones: "The NCAA would be wise in never letting that city have a meet again, if that's any sample of what'll happen—coins and other debris on the court along with insults, many of them with racial overtones." He also complained that Kansas and the University of St. Louis had to stay in hotels in Grand Prairie "20 miles outside Dallas" because "the large Texas hotels wouldn't allow the Negro boys to use their facilities." These factors taken together spoke poorly of sports in general and, according to Mayer, revealed the fallacy of sports as an arena of fair and open competition: "Supposedly, there's equality, based on ability, in sports, or at least the salesmen try to peddle that bill of goods."¹²⁹ In the abusive behavior of fans and coaches, and in the segregated housing establishments, Mayer pointed out that inequalities still persisted in a number of facets of sports, a claim that the other local papers were hesitant to acknowledge. There was too much at stake: admitting rampant inequality in sports meant acknowledging the persistent barriers to equal opportunity in various other aspects of life, including those directly connected to sports,

¹²⁸ Bill Mayer, "Oread Gang Coolest As Cage Tiff Roars," *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 18 March 1957, p. 1-2.

¹²⁹ Bill Mayer, "Bill Mayer's Sport Talk," *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 18 March 1957, p. 9.

such as public accommodations and educational opportunities. If sports could not serve as an ideal realization of that goal, what hope was there?

After the turmoil of the regional games in Dallas, KU players, coaches, and fans all eagerly looked forward to the national semifinal game and national championship game to be played in Kansas City's Municipal Auditorium. But their hopes were dashed. Although KU easily defeated the defending champions, the University of San Francisco, in its semifinal game on Friday, March 22, the team lost 54-53 in three overtimes to the undefeated team from the University of North Carolina. After the turmoil of the previous weekend, the final two games of the season were largely uneventful. Still, the coverage of the championship game between the all-white UNC squad and KU's integrated team offered some important lessons in evaluating black and white performance. Although all of the newspapers were highly complimentary of Chamberlain's play in a losing performance, an undercurrent of racial tension seeped into coverage as writers consistently praised the Tar Heels' "poise," and largely ignored one ugly racial incident.

Given the criticism Chamberlain would face later in his career that he was a "loser," incapable of "winning the big one," the sympathy and praise for Chamberlain by area writers following the three-overtime loss to UNC was somewhat surprising. As with their coverage of KU's earlier defeats, sports writers largely exonerated Chamberlain from blame, despite the fact that he missed a key free throw in the second overtime that could have won the game. Writing in the *Journal-World*, Earl Morey, for example, believed Chamberlain "probably should be awarded some sort of a sportsmanship honor this season for his splendid actions on the court," and emphasized that he "tallied 23

points for game honors” and “also grabbed 14 rebounds for honors in that department.”¹³⁰ The *Star*, meanwhile, published a sympathetic photograph of Chamberlain walking out of the auditorium following the loss. In the image, taken from behind, Chamberlain looks down, carrying his warm-up pants and jacket. His reflection is visible next to him on a partially-mirrored wall. The image suggests a forlorn, exhausted player lamenting his team’s loss. The caption, headlined, “Alone With His Reflections,” indicated that the “downcrest” Chamberlain, “was so engrossed” in his reflections on the game “that he almost left the building before putting on his warmup pants and topcoat.”¹³¹



Figure 3.3. Photograph of Chamberlain leaving the arena following KU’s loss to UNC.

¹³⁰ Earl Morey, “N.C. Proves Ranking By Edging Jay Quint,” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 25 March 1957, p. 10.

¹³¹ “Alone With His Reflections,” *Kansas City Star*, 25 March 1957, p. 18.

Acknowledging the heavy burden Chamberlain felt for the loss, the photograph fit well with a general narrative that Chamberlain had done all he could to will his team to win.¹³²

Two subtleties, however, complicated this trend. The first involved a racial incident after the game. Only the *Journal-World* and the *Daily Capital* reported what occurred. At the game's conclusion, King approached the UNC bench to offer his congratulations to the players and coaches. As he did so, an unknown spectator yelled out a racial slur. King had to be restrained from going after the fan, who quickly darted out of sight into the crowd.¹³³ For that one fan, at least, the victory of the all-white UNC team had racially significant implications. Although the writers were quick to assert that the fan was not associated with the UNC team, and that the UNC players had been complimentary of KU and Chamberlain in particular, it seems likely that the white fan was a southerner, perhaps from North Carolina, who saw validation of Jim Crow segregation in UNC's triumph.¹³⁴ The lack of coverage and commentary on the incident suggests that people were not interested in exploring that symbolic aspect of the game.

¹³² Singling out Chamberlain for blame for his one missed free throw would have been outrageously unfair, although still entirely possible given the nature of sports coverage. Chamberlain had scored 23 out of KU's 53 points. He had also shot a respectable 6-13 from the field; his teammates, by comparison, shot only a dreadful 9-34. Meanwhile, other teammates, including senior co-captain Gene Elstun, also missed pivotal free throws that could have won the game for KU.

¹³³ See: Bob Hurt, "Harp Says Rebounds Gave North Carolina Big Victory," *Topeka Daily Capital*, 24 March 1957, p. C-1 and Bill Mayer, "Bill Mayer's Sport Talk," *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 25 March 1957, p. 12.

¹³⁴ Although one might be tempted to take the assertion that the UNC players were not overtly racist with a grain of salt, given the location of their school, the team's make-up lends credence to that assertion. Head Coach Frank McGuire had come to UNC from St. John's University in New York City, and he had brought with him some of the most talented basketball players from that region of the country. Thus, the five starters on the UNC squad were all from either New York or New Jersey, including star forward Lennie Rosenbluth. Many observers, in fact, noted the irony that the UNC starting five consisted of "Four Catholics and a Jew" from the New York metro region. See Art Chansky, *Blue Blood: Duke-Carolina Inside the Most Storied Rivalry in College Hoops*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2006), 53.

The *Call*, in fact, viewed the championship weekend through an entirely different lens. UNC's victory over KU and Chamberlain did not dampen the *Call*'s enthusiasm. Sports Editor John Johnson instead celebrated the widespread attention the tournament had received, as fans filled the stands, and radio, television, and newspaper coverage reached unprecedented levels for the final game. According to Johnson, the significant number of black players involved in the final weekend of the tournament had helped to lead to this burgeoning interest: African-American athletes were "always to be found among the top performers," which drew in black fans. And he took pride in the fact that black athletes could not "be kept off the squads when they get an even break." To Johnson, the success and growing acceptance of black athletes in big-time college basketball was a "fine democratic process that is making athletics, both collegiate and professional, of growing interest throughout the nation." He concluded: "It was because of the presence of Wilt Chamberlain and Maurice King of Kansas, [and fellow black athletes] John Green of Michigan, Art Day and Gene Brown of the [University of San Francisco] Dons that the games here last week had an added appeal to many persons who formerly had little interest in NCAA tournaments."¹³⁵ The presence of black athletes on three out of four of the final teams showed that once restrictions to access were removed from sports, African Americans would excel, a lesson many black leaders hoped would be extended to other realms of "democratic" life. One reason the newspaper's editors might not have been too disappointed by the outcome of the KU-UNC game was the success Tennessee State had enjoyed the previous week in winning the NAIA title. Indeed, the newspaper printed photographs of Tennessee State's celebration on the next page after coverage of the KU game, including one image of a white NAIA official

¹³⁵ John I. Johnson, "Sport Light: NCAA Meet Has Wide Appeal," *Kansas City Call*, 29 March 1957, p. 10.

handing the championship trophy to McLendon, while the runner-up Oklahoma State squad looked on. The caption called the trophy “the biggest prize ever won by an all-Negro college basketball team.”¹³⁶

While the black press celebrated the significant presence, and high-level performance, of black players during the NCAA championship weekend, the area’s white newspapers consistently praised the “poise” of UNC’s all-white team. Mayer noted the trend and responded with exasperation: “You hear so cotton-pickin’ much about the ‘tremendous poise’ demonstrated by” UNC in the national championship game. Mayer pointed out that Kansas had only lost by one point in three overtimes, a sure sign that their team had to play with “poise” as well. Although acknowledging that “Kansas made errors, blew free throws and was guilty of bad passes in the clutch,” he pointed out that the UNC players made the same mistakes: “There certainly was no fantastic ‘poise differential’ as far as we could see,” Mayer wrote. The Lawrence writer was particularly upset that “folks” were “criticizing various K.U. boys for slips” in the game, without acknowledging that UNC point guard Tommy Kearns, supposedly the most poised member of UNC’s team, missed three free throws in the final fifteen minutes and committed other major errors.¹³⁷ Although Mayer did not make the case that these alternate interpretations were based on race, it certainly seems plausible that racial stereotypes of coolly rational Caucasians and overly emotional Negroes might well have influenced the discourse surrounding the game.

Integration in the Community: the Lawrence Restaurant Episode

¹³⁶ “Receiving The Coveted Trophy,” *Kansas City Call*, 29 March 1957, p. 12.

¹³⁷ Bill Mayer, “Bill Mayer’s Sport Talk,” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 27 March 1957, p. 19.

As the disappointed KU players and fans recovered from the national championship loss and eased their way back into the spring semester, a campaign to end segregation in the town of Lawrence generated a considerable amount of public dialogue and offered some compelling insights into area residents' perspectives on race and equality. The issue of segregation came to the forefront of Lawrence residents' lives because of the efforts of the Group for the Improvement of Human Relations, a campus-based organization dedicated to desegregating the town's restaurants. The group, which had formed in the winter of 1956-1957, assigned black and white students to visit various eating places in racially-mixed groups and attempt to get served, targeting restaurants close to campus that were dependent on student business. By late February 1957, they had succeeded in integrating "several" restaurants, although businesses in downtown Lawrence had proven more hesitant to change their policies.¹³⁸ By March 19, just three days before KU played San Francisco in the national semifinal game, twenty-one different campus organizations pledged their support to the group and its goal, including: the All Student Council, the Student Religious Council, the International Club, Allied Greek-Independents, the Associated Women Students, eight University halls, three sororities, two fraternities, and two co-ops. Two outside organizations also offered support: the Lawrence League for the Promotion of Democracy and the Lawrence Ministerial Alliance.¹³⁹

Over the course of the spring semester and into May, the group's activities generated discussion both on-campus and off. On-campus, most students supported the group's efforts, with a poll conducted by the All Student Council revealing that only 251

¹³⁸ "'Use Persuasion,' Woodruff Tells Integration Unit," *University Daily Kansan*, 27 February 1957, p. 1.

¹³⁹ "Campus Groups To Support Desegregation," *University Daily Kansan*, 20 March 1957, p. 1.

out of the 1964 respondents indicated “that they would not continue to patronize” restaurants that chose to desegregate.¹⁴⁰ Student Dale Morsch wrote a column praising the recent integration efforts led by the students: he thought it was “the first time since the rowdy John Brown” that “a sane, and at the same time firm, step is being taken toward the abolishment of racial discrimination in the Lawrence community.”¹⁴¹ Del Haley, who had earlier lamented the fact that local newspapers had emphasized the racism of the Dallas fans, now joined full-force in favor of the desegregation efforts, believing that restaurant owners should “set an example by practicing desegregation.” In fact, according to Haley, opponents of desegregation were not “good Americans” because their attitude “could ... weaken our ties with several nations whose friendship is important.” He thought the area restaurant owners should take the lead in desegregation “for the good of Lawrence, the United States and the human race.”¹⁴² On some level, Haley’s seemingly widely divergent opinions were consistent: in both cases, Haley emphasized the importance of public image to the area. He worried that the complaints about racism in Dallas would hurt the team’s reputation; with Lawrence restaurants, he worried that segregation would set a bad public example for the nation, particularly in the context of Cold War foreign relations.

There were some students with misgivings. Student Evelyn Hall, in a letter to the editor in the *Kansan*, wrote that although she was “heartily for non-segregation” when it came to matters such as schooling, restaurants, and transportation, she was uneasy about

¹⁴⁰ “Majority In Racial Survey Approves Desegregation,” *University Daily Kansan*, 7 May 1957, p. 3.

¹⁴¹ Dale Morsch, “Integration Ball Is Rolling,” *University Daily Kansan*, 20 March 1957, p. 2.

¹⁴² Del Haley, “Desegregational Holdup,” *University Daily Kansan*, 13 May 1957, p. 2.

the idea that fraternities and sororities ought to be compelled to admit African-American members. She thought “a great deal would be lost” if they were forced to do so. According to Hall, because the Greek system was “built on the foundation of the right of selection,” forcing fraternities and sororities to admit black students would be “undemocratic and dictatorial.” Fraternities and sororities would lose the “freedom of choice” and she feared it would be “the beginning of an end to other freedoms.” Although she wanted people to be “nonsegregationists,” she urged readers not to “destroy freedom in the process.”¹⁴³ As students wrestled with desegregation on campus and in the community, they attempted to mark out their respective visions of American democratic culture.

Town residents engaged in a similar discussion through the *Journal-World*. Although the newspaper had largely ignored the efforts of the campus group to integrate the city’s restaurants (much to the dismay of Morsch, who criticized the newspaper in his editorial), local restaurant owner Chester Curtice drew attention to the efforts and created a memorable exchange of letters to the editor. As the owner of the Green Lantern Café, Curtice asked readers to support him in his effort to keep his restaurant segregated, blaming “a few salaried persons” (Chancellor Murphy, Dolph Simons Jr. of the *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, and Mr. Zook, the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce) as the cause of integrationist agitation. Curtice complained that “recent test cases conducted by a small minority of K.U. students white and colored, to see if we would serve them or throw them out has been most humiliating to my customers and the participants of these tests.” He said he would not serve “mixed groups” again, although he did when these

¹⁴³ Evelyn Hall, “Eh?” Letter to the Editor, *University Daily Kansan*, 1 March 1957, p. 2.

“test cases” occurred. He thought that the “general public of Lawrence” preferred segregation and wanted to hear support from the newspaper’s readers.¹⁴⁴

Curtice must have been dismayed at the response he received. Those who wrote in overwhelmingly disapproved of segregation. The first, Kathryn Harris, used the cases of Wilt Chamberlain and Maurice King to support her argument for integration, indicating the centrality of athletics to debates about race and equality. She wrote: “I spent two years in the South during the war and how they must be laughing at a town that will make colored boys athletic heroes, and then, not be able to order a meal in a downtown restaurant.” By referring to fan adulation for King and Chamberlain, Harris highlighted the inconsistency of some Lawrence fans; she challenged them, in effect, to extend their sense of democratic opportunity outside the realm of athletics to everyday life. To that end, she thought that those in favor of segregation ought to try living as a black person for a day, to see what it would be like. By experiencing the unequal treatment black people routinely received, such as the “rude and insulting remarks and deeds” that King and Chamberlain encountered in the NCAA tournament, white segregationists might better understand the effects of institutionalized racism. Since KU’s two black players kept their calm in the face of such bigotry, she believed “they both showed themselves to be better sportsmen and gentlemen than their opponents.” If these athletes could not only be equal to whites on the basketball court, but also morally

¹⁴⁴ Chester Curtice, “Restaurant Problems,” Letter to the Editor, *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 4 May 1957, p. 4.

superior to some bigoted white fans, players, and coaches, then it made no sense to exclude African Americans from other aspects of everyday life.¹⁴⁵

Numerous other residents replied as well, all arguing in favor of integration. A self-identified “Negro resident ... property owner and ... taxpaying citizen” named Monroe D. Murray made it clear that he was not a member of any “group” on a mission, but simply wanted to explain what black citizens aspired to: “an equal opportunity, to the rights and privileges to the pursuit of happiness.” Asserting that “the success or failure of an individual lies first with the opportunity given, and then with the individual himself,” Monroe emphasized that whites needed to remove the barriers that prevented blacks from participating in society on an equal footing to that of whites. Although “proud of Lawrence, its civic, social, capitalistic and industrial development,” as well as the university, he and other blacks were “ever conscious of the fact that there are still many privileges denied them on the basis of color alone, and often wonder if Lawrence is proud of them?” Acknowledging that blacks’ lives were better in Lawrence than elsewhere, Monroe nonetheless insisted that an improved caliber of life was not enough: he wanted “unity and understanding among races” in Lawrence and the world. He also appreciated Curtice’s “frankness” and tried to insist that his letter was not an attack on him, but rather “the hope that such problems will be corrected, before they cause further embarrassment to our city and the citizens thereof.”¹⁴⁶ As in Harris’ letter, Monroe emphasized the value of a democratic culture that recognized achievement equally and that enabled people of all races to coexist civilly and associate freely.

¹⁴⁵ Kathryn Harris, “Racial Opinions,” Letter to the Editor, *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 7 May 1957, p. 4.

¹⁴⁶ Monroe D. Murray, “The Negro Sentiment,” Letter to the Editor, *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 16 May 1957, p. 4.

Yet despite the numerous calls for desegregation, Curtice's letter revealed that there were clearly residents in the town who were opposed to the idea. The newspaper apparently did not receive any letters from this segment of the population, as it published a letter from reader Anne Cerf, who challenged "those who want discrimination to stand up and be counted."¹⁴⁷ The silence to her plea suggested that those in favor of segregation were not so willing to articulate their views. Maybe they realized that the numbers had shifted firmly against them, as the student poll had reflected. And how could they have argued against the discourse that had developed? What type of democratic culture did exclude one segment of its population based on skin color? How would the U.S. continue to prove its superiority to foreign nations, particularly the newly-created African nations, when it maintained legalized segregation?

To Stay or Go? Chamberlain's Difficult Decision, "Amateur" Athletics, and Race Relations

As the public dialogue regarding the Lawrence restaurants developed, Wilt Chamberlain was pondering his future in the town. Although he still had two more years of school remaining, rumors began to swirl that he would end his education early and join the Harlem Globetrotters, a popular traveling troupe of black basketball players who dazzled crowds with basketball-based comedic routines. Chamberlain did, in fact, consider the possibility. Privately, he complained to some of the KU alumni about the pressures he faced as the star athlete at the school: "It's a job ... and as long as it's a job, I might as well be paid. I've got about 10 years of basketball in me. It will cost me about \$15,000 a year if I don't take it. Here at Kansas the pressure is on me—we have to

¹⁴⁷ Anne Cerf, "Stand Up, Be Counted," Letter to the Editor, *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 23 May 1957, p. 4.

win.”¹⁴⁸ As he weighed his options, the press followed the story closely. While some writers encouraged him to stay, others saw the practical factors that might drive Chamberlain to leave school. At the heart of the debate was Chamberlain’s impact on race relations, and the implications his decision had for the status of athletics in the university.

Publications such as the *Call* clearly had a vested interest in having Chamberlain stay in school and finish his degree. Chamberlain could only serve as a “race man,” as a leader in bringing about integration, if he played by the rules. Leaving school early would not only remove him from the area spotlight, it would mark him as a drop-out, a quitter. Jerry Dawson, writing in the *Kansan* about Chamberlain’s impending decision, indicated that some worried “that if Wilt leaves, integration in Lawrence will suffer a 25-year setback.”¹⁴⁹ The editors of the *Call*, almost certainly led by Davis, were so anxious to see Chamberlain stay that they devoted an editorial to the matter, despite the fact that the newspaper almost never discussed sports on its editorial page. Headlined “Don’t Do It, Wilt!,” the editorial expressed “hope that Wilt the Stilt will not let the lure of big money take him away from college basketball.” The editorial board wanted Chamberlain to “turn down all offers to enter the professional ranks until after he graduates.” They cautioned Chamberlain that “money isn’t everything” and that in later years he would “feel the need of his education.” The *Call* argued that Wilt would be “a bigger man for turning down efforts to steer [him] away from [his] chosen course.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Bill Mayer, “Wilt, Loneski State They’ll Stay at K.U.,” *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 4 May 1957, p. 1-2 (quotation from p. 2).

¹⁴⁹ Jerry Dawson, “So What?” *University Daily Kansan*, 7 May 1957, p. 2.

¹⁵⁰ “Don’t Do It, Wilt!” Editorial, *Kansas City Call*, 10 May 1957, p. 18.

Others ignored the racial implications of Chamberlain's pending decision and emphasized its business implications. Bill Brower, writing for the American Negro Press, defended Chamberlain's right to play professionally if he chose to do so, unworried over any damage to the race at large. Comparing Chamberlain's situation with "the bonus babies in major league baseball" who often left college when offered contracts by major league teams, Brower argued that there was "no great hue and cry over their cashing in on their athletic potential" and wondered why it should be different in Chamberlain's case. Brower believed it would make sense for Chamberlain to "make hay while the sun shines" and to take the \$15,000 a year offer from the Globetrotters.¹⁵¹ Mayer, meanwhile, painted Chamberlain's ruminations in a positive light: "Many persons admire the youngster for even considering the situation, for they contend that the average person would leap at the chance to make" the considerable amount of money Chamberlain could earn with the Globetrotters. He thought Chamberlain had a tough decision in front of him, because while he had come "to Kansas with the idea of bettering himself educationally, becoming a good example for the youth of the nation to follow and to help his race with exemplary behavior and outstanding athletic feats," he had a very good opportunity to "accept a huge and attractive salary as a professional."¹⁵² Dawson, in his editorial for the *Kansan*, averred that leaving might be the right choice for Chamberlain: "Wilt isn't dumb. If he thinks \$20,000 a year for 8 or 10 years is more important than a business degree, then he just might be right."¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Bill Brower, "Beating The Gum," *Kansas City Call*, 24 May 1957, p. 10.

¹⁵² Mayer, "Wilt, Loneski, State They'll Stay," p. 2.

¹⁵³ Jerry Dawson, "So What?" *University Daily Kansan*, 7 May 1957, p. 2.

What bothered many about Chamberlain's potential decision to leave school, however, was its reflection on the state of (supposedly) amateur college athletics. In the *Capital*, Snider thought it was "a sad commentary" on college sports that Chamberlain was thinking of leaving, and cynically pondered whether Chamberlain had actually asked KU alumni for "advice, or a raise."¹⁵⁴ In the *Kansan*, George Anthan also thought that Chamberlain's consideration of a professional offer was distasteful. He worried that college basketball was "becoming tainted, ever so slightly, by this aura of professionalism," and he dramatically compared it to the decline of the Olympics in ancient Greece. He saw it as a bad sign of the times, in which "a school's fame is based on the success of its athletic teams" and "the athletic department is not distinguished from the university proper in the mind of the average critic."¹⁵⁵

Meanwhile, even as Chamberlain took his time in making up his mind, he was barraged by newsmen wanting to get the scoop on the story. Frustrated by the constant telephone calls from reporters, he hung up on the *Star*'s Lawrence correspondent and then on Sports Editor Busby himself. Busby did not take kindly to the slight:

Chamberlain has become quite sensitive in talking about the matter, but as long as he leaves his answers on a hazy leaving-the-door open basis, he will continue to be queried by sportswriters and broadcasters and getting huffy about it and hanging up the telephone won't do him any good with public relations. . . . He is a public figure and what he does is of public interest and his advisers should certainly remind him of that fact.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Dick Snider, "Capitalizing on Sports," *Topeka Daily Capital*, 5 May 1957, p. C-1.

¹⁵⁵ George Anthan, "Along the Jayhawker trail," *University Daily Kansan*, 7 May 1957, p. 6.

¹⁵⁶ Bob Busby, "On The Level," *Kansas City Star*, 23 May 1957, p. 25, morning edition.

Although the newspapers had generally praised Chamberlain's character throughout the season, this one act of defiance was enough to generate a chiding comment from Busby. From Busby's perspective, Chamberlain had stepped out of line, and needed to be reminded of his "proper" place. The warning to Chamberlain to behave appropriately as a "public figure" constituted another pressure, another voice telling Chamberlain what he should or should not do. Seemingly everyone had advice for Chamberlain, including basketball legend George Mikan, who was in town for a speaking engagement and urged the KU star to remain in school.¹⁵⁷

With all of these competing forces attempting to push him in one direction or the other, Chamberlain finally made up his mind to return to school and announced it in a press release. Nearly everyone breathed a sigh of relief. While some newspapers such as the *Capital* focused on the implications of Chamberlain's decision to KU's basketball team,¹⁵⁸ the *Journal-World* heaped praises on Chamberlain in an editorial. The writers thought that Chamberlain "once again has stamped himself as an All-American individual as well as an All-American athlete" by deciding to remain in school. Turning down a considerable amount of money to remain in school, Chamberlain proved his good character. The editorial board was particularly impressed that Chamberlain "made his decision on his own," which revealed "that he has an extremely level head on those lofty shoulders." Although people would be excited about having Chamberlain back for basketball and track, the editors argued for a broader significance to his decision:

¹⁵⁷ Bill Mayer, "Mikan Asks Wilt To Refuse Pros; Athletes Lauded," *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 21 May 1957, p. 13.

¹⁵⁸ "R-o-c-k C-h-a-l-k—Wilt to Stay!" Editorial, *Topeka Daily Capital*, 27 May 1957, p. 4.

But Wilt's move had far more significance than the fact K.U. will have possibly the greatest basketball player in history around whom to build two more teams. It may eventually be labeled one of the greatest steps on record on behalf of education and its many benefits. Here is a case where a nationally prominent young man—an idol for millions of youngsters—has bypassed a more glamorous and lucrative career for a college degree and, as a sideline, amateur athletics.¹⁵⁹

Chamberlain's decision, in short, reflected "high credit on the young man, his family background, his race, his sense of values and his sense of loyalty and allegiance to those who have faith in him."¹⁶⁰ He symbolically affirmed the value of an education to these writers, and in doing so made a powerful statement on behalf of his race.

Although the *Call* did not comment on Chamberlain's decision (perhaps pretending the entire distasteful affair never happened), Davis was almost certainly overjoyed. Behind the scenes, he had lobbied for Chamberlain to stay in school, and Coach Harp wrote him personally to thank him for his efforts, believing Davis' "counsel had a great deal to do with" Chamberlain's decision to remain in Lawrence.¹⁶¹ For Harp, of course, Chamberlain's return would only aid his team's fortunes on the court. He could now plan for the coming season, secure that Chamberlain would be at the center of the team's campaign. Chamberlain would also, of course, continue to remain at the center of a host of conflicting interests and watchful eyes. The pressures that had caused him to ponder leaving school early would remain unabated.

¹⁵⁹ "Wilt's Big Decision," Editorial, *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 25 May 1957, p. 4.

¹⁶⁰ "Wilt's Big Decision," Editorial, *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 25 May 1957, p. 4.

¹⁶¹ Dick Harp to Dowdal Davis, 25 May 1957, Dorothy Hodge Johnson Papers, Correspondence-DD and KU Athletic Department, July-Sept. 1956, May 1957. Davis was not the only one working behind the scenes to convince Chamberlain to stay. KU Chancellor Franklin Murphy, a strong supporter of integration in Lawrence, wrote a letter to Chamberlain's parents, trying to convince them of the value of an education for his overall maturity. See Franklin D. Murphy to Mr. and Mrs. William Chamberlain, 30 April 1957, Dorothy Hodge Johnson Papers, Correspondence-DD and KU Athletic Department, July-Sept. 1956, May 1957.

The Disappointment of 1958 and the Decision to Leave

Although many fans and journalists predicted a return to the NCAA championship for the KU squad in the 1957-1958 season, it was not to be. The team started off well, winning the pre-season Big Seven tournament for the second consecutive year (the first school to accomplish that feat), but Chamberlain was injured in an early-season contest and missed two games—both of which KU lost. Although the press still covered the team closely throughout the season, the newspapers' flood of articles and photographs subsided as fans acclimated to the big man's presence. Even as Harp praised Chamberlain for his improved leadership skills and work ethic, the head coach himself would come under fire as the team failed to match the previous year's success. When starting guard Bob Billings missed three late-season games with a back injury, the team's hopes for a return to the NCAA tournament were quashed, as the team fell out of contention with two straight losses. Worn out from the physical abuse he received on the court, tired of the non-stop media attention, and bored by the slow-down tactics employed by opponents, Chamberlain made the decision to leave school after finishing his junior-year exams. As he departed for one year of exhibition basketball before joining the NBA, commentators paused to consider his legacy, but the story of his role as a race leader was largely forgotten in the bitterness of his "failure" to bring a championship to the university team.

The fervor over Chamberlain, even in the *Call*, had subsided by fall 1957. There were fewer stories and photographs of him in the area's newspapers, and only 7,000 fans showed up for the varsity-freshman scrimmage that year. Although the editors of the

Call expected great things, predicting that Chamberlain and his teammates could “wear the crowns as kings of the NCAA” that year, the sudden death of Dowdal Davis at the age of 43 over the summer perhaps explained a shift in the newspaper’s sports coverage.¹⁶² New sports editor James C. Brown approached sports simply as entertainment to be reported on; the statements about democracy, and the higher value of sports, were largely absent.¹⁶³ The other area newspapers all continued to follow Chamberlain, but, as with the *Call*, the number of photographs and front-page stories declined considerably. However, when Kansas defeated highly-regarded Kansas State to win the pre-season tournament, the newspapers lauded Chamberlain and ratcheted up expectations for the team once again. Snider, in the *Capital*, praised Chamberlain for improving his game, and included un-signed comments from other coaches such as: “He’s working harder, getting better shots ... He’s shooting better ... He’s hustling, defending and rebounding harder than ever before.” Snider thought that Chamberlain’s improved performance on the court, and his high character (“Success hasn’t ruined him”), made Kansas “the team to beat” once again.¹⁶⁴ That positive assessment of Chamberlain’s character would be revised in the coming months.

¹⁶² James C. Brown, “Sport Light,” *Kansas City Call*, 13 December 1957, p. 10. For the story of Davis’ death, see “Dowdal H. Davis Dies Suddenly,” *Kansas City Call*, 28 June 1957, p. 1, 4.

¹⁶³ One exception was an ANP column by Bill Brower, who responded to the poor treatment black sophomore star Oscar Robertson received while playing with his University of Cincinnati team in Pittsburgh against Duquesne University. Noting that poor sportsmanship and racial bigotry were not limited by “geographical bounds,” Brower still had high hopes for blacks’ participation in big-time sports. He argued, “as long as Negro athletes are able to compete with their white counterparts, we have a good chance of making some progress.” Because “athletic competition is no respecter of race, creed or color,” Brower believed that sports could have a profound influence on society. Since fans and fellow athletes judged players solely on “ability,” it made “a difference—sociologically and psychologically—when a Negro can not compete on even terms with whites.” Enabling black athletes to compete with whites enabled them to prove their equality because their performance would speak for itself. Bill Brower, “Beatin’ The Gun,” *Kansas City Call*, 28 February 1958, p. 8.

¹⁶⁴ Dick Snider, “Capitalizing on Sports,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, 1 January 1958, p. 13.

Still, as the season progressed, the praise of Chamberlain remained consistent, and Harp specifically acknowledged Chamberlain's team leadership on a number of occasions. Early in the season, after KU's victory over Iowa State in the pre-season tournament, Harp went out of his way to praise Chamberlain for his "leadership on the floor and the inspiration he gave our entire squad by his determination."¹⁶⁵ Similarly, after the team lost to Kansas State in late January, the head coach praised Chamberlain for helping keep the team focused. In the first practice after that game (which made it very unlikely that the team could win the conference title), "The leader in that practice was Wilt. He always has shown a lot of leadership in practice, but it was particularly good that day."¹⁶⁶ Harp's praise of Chamberlain's leadership skills were not necessarily echoed by the area's sportswriters, however, who still seemed uncomfortable with acknowledging Chamberlain in this capacity. Snider, for example, in delivering his post-mortem of the KU season, argued that although "it was taken for granted that Wilt would make up for a lack of experience, court leadership and outside shooting," that season, it was clear he was not up to the task in all of those areas.¹⁶⁷ Although Snider's main point was not to blame Chamberlain (indeed, he thought quite correctly that Wilt's teammates had not been up to the task) he nonetheless suggested that Chamberlain was an inadequate leader for the squad.

¹⁶⁵ "Harp Lauds Wilt; Winter Says Cats 'Ready' for KU," *Topeka Daily Capital*, 29 December 1957, p. C-1.

¹⁶⁶ Dick Snider, "Capitalizing on Sports," *Topeka Daily Capital*, 17 February 1958, p. 10-11. Quotation from 10.

¹⁶⁷ Dick Snider, "Capitalizing on Sports," *Topeka Daily Capital*, 26 February 1958, p. 13.

Chamberlain's injury provided another example of the contradictory readings fans could assign to nearly every aspect of the big man's life. Accidentally kneed in the groin during the pre-season tournament, Chamberlain's testicles became infected and he was bed-ridden in the hospital for nearly a week. Given standards of propriety at the time, the school referred to Chamberlain's illness as a "glandular infection," a phrase that most of the newspapers used. By and large, the public coverage of Chamberlain's illness was positive, and the newspapers expressed hope that he would recover quickly from the illness. The *Star*, for example, printed an Associated Press story in which Chamberlain lamented that the team would "be short without" him. The story indicated that he "restlessly stretched his long legs in the hospital," unhappy to be apart from his team, that he felt "nothing but disappointment" that he could not help his team win.¹⁶⁸ However, another un-published story lingered under the surface of this pleasant dialogue. Although the university never specifically identified Chamberlain's condition, after a short time, according to Chamberlain's recollection, rumors began to spread: "it seemed like everyone on campus knew the precise anatomical location of my problem ... and the rumor that I had the clap swept the campus. Kids started snickering and referring to me as 'The Big Dripper.'"¹⁶⁹ Although the gossip was most likely harmless in intent, it nonetheless fit into the stereotype of the sex-crazed black male and its circulation suggests the permeation of that image.

Stereotypes infected other representations of Chamberlain as well. In anticipation of KU's first regular season game against the Kansas State Wildcats, the *Kansan*

¹⁶⁸ "One-Man Team? Jayhawks Say No," *Kansas City Star*, 7 January 1958, p. 14.

¹⁶⁹ Chamberlain, *Wilt: Just Like Any Other*, 74.

published a front-page cartoon of Chamberlain shaking two wildcats, one in each hand, with a caption: “Wilton The Wildcat Killer.”¹⁷⁰ Chamberlain’s long legs were emphasized in the cartoon—but so, too, were his exaggeratedly large lips and grotesque white teeth. The minstrel qualities to the front-page drawing show how pervasive stereotypes could creep into representations of Chamberlain and other black men, even in cases when the intent was to express admiration.

Chamberlain infiltrated the broader culture in a number of other ways, as various local residents used him as a form of cultural currency to which they attached a number of meanings. Chamberlain’s on-campus radio show, “Flip ‘er With Dipper,” debuted in February 1958, and featured his own selections of music and his commentary on a variety of subjects. In representations of Chamberlain as a DJ, newspapers inevitably linked him to the “hip” culture of rhythm and blues music.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ Bob Sweet, “Wilton The Wildcat Killer,” Cartoon, *University Daily Kansan*, 3 February 1958, p. 1.

¹⁷¹ See Bob Busby, “On The Level,” *Kansas City Star*, 18 February 1958, p. 17, morning edition, “‘Dipper’ Turns ‘Flipper,’” *Lawrence University Daily Kansan*, 14 February 1958, p. 8, and “Sorting The Platters,” *Kansas City Star*, 21 February 1958, p. 30.



Figure 3.4. Photograph of Chamberlain as a DJ. Chamberlain's stint on the radio added to his notoriety in the area. This photograph was published in the *Kansas City Star*, 21 February 1958, p. 30.

As a celebrity, people were naturally interested in what the big man liked on and off the court, and his music and fashion choices made their way into the local culture. A letter to the editor in the *Capital* gives some idea just how much Chamberlain had influenced the lingua franca of Kansans. W. W. Graber, Administrator of the Kansas Wheat Commission, wrote in to complain about a recent editorial in which the board called for a new state slogan (to replace "The Wheat State") because the state was not the number

one producer of wheat in 1957. He argued that basing a change on one year would be foolish: “Do you think that Wilt Chamberlain will be left off of anyone’s All-American basketball team if he fails to be high point man in one game this season?”¹⁷²

Chamberlain’s image also pervaded selected advertisements as well. Independent Laundry & Dry Cleaners employed a photograph of Chamberlain jumping high in the air about to shoot in an ad for their company. The ad copy read: “Far Above All the Rest! ... And so is your wardrobe When You Give It Independent Care.”¹⁷³ Even as Chamberlain could be used to uphold damaging stereotypes, he could also represent excellence and achievement, a sign of his cultural malleability for Kansans.

As the 1958 season wound down, the finally healthy Jayhawks ended the season on a positive note by decisively defeating first-place Kansas State 61-44. The contest turned out to be the last game of Chamberlain’s college career, as he had made the decision to turn pro months before, contacting *Look* magazine to set up an exclusive deal to announce his decision. Chamberlain received \$10,000 for the rights to his story, but when the news leaked just before he left town for good, he faced an awkward situation. Bound by the terms of his contract, which prevented him from speaking to other media outlets about any of the story’s details, Chamberlain bashfully dodged questions from members of the local media, a group he had become well acquainted with over the course of his three years in Lawrence. Finally getting into his red convertible, Chamberlain stopped by to chat with Chancellor Murphy and Coach Harp before heading back to his hometown Philadelphia.

¹⁷² W. W. Graber, “Says Kansas Still Leading Producer,” Letter to the Editor, *Topeka Daily Capital*, 5 January 1958, p. A-14.

¹⁷³ “Far Above All the Rest!” Advertisement, *University Daily Kansan*, 14 January 1958, p. 7.

Reactions to Chamberlain's decision were mixed, with some supporting him and others expressing bitterness at his early departure. In either case, the story of Chamberlain's role as a race man, as a leader sent to improve race relations in the area, was largely forgotten. In the *Call*, James C. Brown supported Chamberlain's decision, thinking it made good financial sense to "learn some more about" basketball as a professional "while he can cash in on it."¹⁷⁴ Bill Brower of the ANP also defended Chamberlain, saying he "made a smart move" by turning pro. Because Chamberlain was "hounded in a peculiar way" from the moment he stepped foot on campus, Brower argued "he could have hardly enjoyed a peace of mind." He could not understand how anyone could "criticize Chamberlain's desire to help his family."¹⁷⁵ Ernest Mehl, in the *Star*, generally supported Wilt's decision as well, since Chamberlain "was not being taught ... the points which would enhance his value as a professional basketball player."¹⁷⁶ Although Mehl had misgivings about college basketball serving as a stepping-stone to professional sports, he did not fault Chamberlain's logic. Similarly, a lengthy editorial devoted to the news in the *Journal-World* was also sympathetic to Chamberlain, wondering "how many persons in their early 20s would bypass that kind of money for one year of college and a degree—especially if they feel they can pick up the degree later?"¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ James C. Brown, "Sport-O-Rama," *Kansas City Call*, 30 May 1958, p. 10.

¹⁷⁵ Bill Brower, "Beat in' The Gun," *Kansas City Call*, 13 June 1958, p. 10.

¹⁷⁶ Ernest Mehl, "Sporting Comment," *Kansas City Star*, 25 May 1958, p. B2.

¹⁷⁷ "Best of Luck Wilt," Editorial, *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 24 May 1958, p. 4. Lawrence residents generally appeared to be supportive as well. The following Monday, a front-page story dealt with local reaction to Chamberlain's decision, saying that "Downtown Lawrence conversation ... centered around the departure of ... Wilt Chamberlain" on Friday and Saturday. According to the un-bylined story, "most showed no resentment over his decision" and many "added they probably would have done the same

Still, others expressed bitterness with Chamberlain's decision and the way he left the university. Busby broke the news by observing that Chamberlain "has washed his hands of collegiate basketball and herded his \$5,500 fire-red convertible back home to Philadelphia." Busby was particularly irked, and felt betrayed, that Chamberlain had "issued [a] strong denial" when the story about his decision had been leaked in April.¹⁷⁸ By not being properly deferential to the local news media, apparently, Chamberlain earned their scorn. In the *Capital*, Snider suggested that Chamberlain "let down some people ... who think he should have stayed and completed his education. Some will think he owed it to KU to remain for his final year of eligibility, and some will say he represents an investment on which the school deserves three years of service." He also took shots at Chamberlain's character, writing that he "may be most disappointing now to those who had the most faith in him." Although Chamberlain had always "been praised by those close to him as a model boy," Snider indicated that he had not always lived up to that reputation, mentioning "stories being circulated" that showed "Wilt was beginning to consider himself bigger than the institution he represented." According to these stories, Chamberlain sometimes made "his own travel arrangements, arriving for a game a full day behind the rest of the team."¹⁷⁹ No longer a sure-fire attraction to draw reader interest, Chamberlain became instead the target of accumulated resentment from Snider and others.

thing." Of course, most also "expressed regret" that he would not be on the team the following year. See "Fans Switch From Wilt After Football Preview," *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 26 May 1958, p. 1.

¹⁷⁸ Bob Busby, "On The Level," *Kansas City Star*, 27 May 1958, p. 23, morning edition.

¹⁷⁹ Dick Snider, "Capitalizing on Sports," *Topeka Daily Capital*, 24 May 1958, p. 16.

In most of the discussions of his departure, Chamberlain's importance as a basketball player took precedence over his impact as a racial leader. In his own account in *Look* magazine, Chamberlain made clear that he had come to Kansas to "promote interracial good will," and thought that by keeping control of his emotions on court he had done so to some degree, but offered little other assessment. He also downplayed the racism he encountered, lamenting select incidents, but generally describing a positive experience (and making no mention, for example, of Lawrence's on-going segregation).¹⁸⁰ Similarly, a *Star* editorial titled "The Great Wilt Leaves K.U." was more reflective and informative than argumentative. Recalling some of Chamberlain's on-court achievements, and the excitement he created among fans, the editorial offered encouraging words for KU fans, saying that it would be "a big loss for one year," but that "the university can look to the future with confidence" because of its tradition of excellence.¹⁸¹ The *Journal-World's* editorial seemed most interested in assuaging reader anxieties about "the doom of KU basketball."¹⁸² In the *Capital*, Snider assessed Chamberlain's career, but only on the basketball court, arguing that the big man "never quite lived up to expectations." Snider noted that "it was taken for granted he'd do everything for Kansas that the public expected" because he was such a spectacular player, but, of course, "Kansas not only didn't win a national title, but also failed to win the conference championship in Wilt's second try."¹⁸³ Even in a follow-up column one week later, Snider eschewed Chamberlain's impact on area race relations, focusing instead on

¹⁸⁰ Chamberlain, "Why I am quitting college," 94.

¹⁸¹ "The Great Wilt Leaves K.U.," Editorial, *Kansas City Star*, 26 May 1958, p. 28.

¹⁸² "Best of Luck, Wilt," Editorial, *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, 24 May 1958, p. 4.

¹⁸³ Dick Snider, "Capitalizing on Sports," *Topeka Daily Capital*, 24 May 1958, p. 16.

the inevitable dip in attendance and gate receipts in the wake of his departure.¹⁸⁴ As Chamberlain headed for Philadelphia in his convertible, he left behind fans and foes, some who lamented his loss and others who criticized his decision. Had he “promoted interracial good will” as he had hoped to? It appeared that no one was willing even to ask that question at this moment, perhaps a reflection of the on-going racial tensions that divided the nation and the region.

Conclusion: A Weight Too Heavy

Wilt Chamberlain cast a lengthy shadow in Kansas when he left Lawrence in 1958. Although he had failed to lead his team to an NCAA championship title, he had mesmerized countless observers with his unique combination of height, strength, skill, and agility. During his three years in the town, black and white people clamored to see him, in person or on television. They besieged him with autograph requests. They attempted to copy his fashions (his usual hat, an Ivy League cap, became remarkably popular on KU’s campus and in Lawrence), and wanted to know as much as they could about his habits and dress. Readers frequently wrote in to ask sportswriters about the pads he wore on his shins and the rubber bands around his wrists. In short, he was an icon, a celebrity to star-struck basketball fans.

He was also a black man dominating a game that, until recently, had seen few black faces on its courts. As Chamberlain over-powered his (mostly white) opponents, and as he worked with his integrated team to achieve individual, team, and school honors, he engendered numerous reactions from those who watched him. He shouldered the expectations of diverse groups as best he could: the hardcore KU basketball fans who

¹⁸⁴ Dick Snider, “Capitalizing on Sports,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, 31 May 1958, p. 14.

expected him to lead the team to the conference title, and the NCAA championship, each year; the black leaders such as Dowdal Davis who hoped he would erase the color line in the still-segregated region; the white leaders who thought he would set a good example for other African Americans and who wanted his success to paint a positive picture of the school and region; ordinary black residents who fervently wished his success would enable them to eat in any restaurant they chose; all these and many more. It is little surprise that he could not meet all these expectations, their aims too broad, their goals too far-reaching for just one young man. His long, spindly legs could not hold up under so many heavy weights.

Still, in people's discussion of his actions on the court, and his life off of it, we can hear how diverse groups attempted to use this giant man to express their hopes, their anxieties, their visions of equality, and their notions of manliness. When people celebrated his leadership, snickered about his sexual behavior, or praised his example as "race leader," they offered concrete and compelling definitions of phrases such as "separate but equal," "deliberate speed," and "equal opportunity." As more and more—although by no means all—white Americans refuted racial segregation in the wake of World War II and in the climate of the Cold War, these conflicting responses to Chamberlain revealed central tensions among those in favor of a more egalitarian society. Many white observers hoped for a society in which black Americans had access to public accommodations, but hesitated to support legislation or civil rights activism that forced recalcitrant whites to follow through on this vision of American society, trusting that a gradual change in attitudes inspired by black achievement would be enough. These figures were less likely to consider black men such as Chamberlain as leaders of white

men, hoping instead to integrate African Americans into a white-dominated society. On the other hand, although black leaders and some socially-conscious whites certainly hoped that Chamberlain's performance could have symbolic value, they nonetheless pushed for more extensive changes. Extraordinary individuals such as Chamberlain could play a leading role in society, steering white and black Americans alike to a promised land of racial equality that took black accomplishments seriously. Still hopeful that integrated team sports could model this equal opportunity society, these leaders minimized racial conflict to show that whites and blacks could get along, even when the starring role was played by an African-American man. In these ways, Wilt Chamberlain, at the center of attention in the nation's heartland, forced countless people to consider the nature of the civic, democratic, and multi-racial culture of which they were all a part.

Chapter Four

Un-Civil Discourse: Charlie Scott, the Integration of College Basketball, and the “Progressive Mystique”

When Charlie Scott, an African-American high school basketball star, decided in May 1966 to become the first black scholarship athlete at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), the *Carolina Times*, an African-American newspaper in nearby Durham, N.C., took notice. Although pleased that the state’s flagship public university was now welcoming black athletes, the newspaper’s editors worried that area black colleges and black businesses would face stiffer competition to retain talented African Americans. An editorial mused: “The Charlie Scott case is but the forerunner of the raids that are certain to be made on Negro society.”¹ This cautious tone reflected the changing times. In the same year that Stokeley Carmichael popularized the phrase “Black Power,” and as many black activists became increasingly disenchanted with the benefits of integration into white society, Charlie Scott’s decision to play for UNC no longer engendered the seemingly untroubled optimism that many had expressed when Jackie Robinson integrated Major League Baseball. Indeed, when Robinson signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1945, columnist W.L. Greene for the Raleigh *Carolinian*, another local black newspaper, had argued the opposite of the *Carolina Times* editorial. According to Greene, black readers should not “grudge the Jackies the chance” to earn

¹ See “The Diminishing Returns of Integration,” *Carolina Times*, 7 May 1966, p. A2.

higher pay by playing in the white league, and Greene chastised readers who disagreed.²

By the spring of 1966, that integrationist optimism had been replaced by concern over the fate of black-run institutions. The editorial's headline, "The Diminishing Returns of Integration," indicated the growing reticence of black leaders to believe that equal opportunity on the athletic field led to broader social and cultural gains, and reflected the increasing radicalism of African Americans across the country.

As one of the few black athletic stars at any of the major predominantly-white southern universities, Scott engendered a number of different responses from observers when he entered UNC.³ On one level, his arrival augured a bright future on the basketball court for the Tar Heels and spelled trouble for the team's rivals, such as Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) counterparts Duke University, North Carolina State University, and the University of South Carolina.⁴ But his decision clearly had wider impacts: as a black man playing basketball for a nearly all-white school, against almost exclusively white opponents, Scott incited a range of responses that revealed tensions over racial integration, issues of fairness and equality, and sports' place in the broader

² W. L. Greene, "Lest We Forget," *Carolinian*, 3 November 1945, p. 4. Area white journalists feared the friction engendered by Robinson's signing. For example, Jack Horner, writing in the *Durham Morning Herald*, argued that "there would be complications in the South" if baseball integrated; the Robinson signing would "not help the Negro's cause." See Jack Horner, "Robinson Case Starts Hot Stove Gossip," *Durham Morning Herald*, 25 October 1945, p. II-2.

³ There had been other black scholarship athletes in the South, although they were still few and far between by 1966. Some Texas schools, such as the University of North Texas, integrated their athletic squads as early as the late 1950s. See Ronald E. Marcello, "The Integration of Intercollegiate Athletics in Texas: North Texas State College as a Test Case, 1956," *Journal of Sport History* 14.3 (Winter 1987): 286-316. Western Texas College—now the University of Texas at El Paso—featured an all-black starting five that won the NCAA basketball championship in 1966. However, most men's basketball and football teams at major southern universities and colleges remained segregated, and Scott was the first black star player in the ACC.

⁴ At the time of Scott's arrival on campus, the schools in the ACC were: the University of Maryland, the University of Virginia, North Carolina State University, Duke University, UNC, Wake Forest University, Clemson University, and the University of South Carolina.

culture. A cross-section of responses to Scott, from the perspectives of local mainstream newspapers, local university and African-American newspapers, university administrators, and national media publications reveals how people used Scott's career to channel their hopes, frustrations, and anxieties towards the state's, and nation's, changing racial politics. Three key moments in Scott's career—his decision to attend UNC, his involvement with the nascent campus Black Student Movement (BSM), and his anger at being denied the ACC Player of the Year award in the spring of 1969—illustrate the contentious meanings of race that crept into his story. In the varying degrees of praise and condemnation, outright jubilation and cautious silence, we can see some of the conflicted lessons people at the time drew from Scott's achievements on the court and his social activism off it. Although the mainstream media, in line with North Carolina's progressive reputation, attempted to minimize Scott's race in an effort to ease unrest (and in tacit support of the status quo), numerous alternate publications, including the local black press, used Scott's career to probe the limits of sports' transformative capabilities amid the day-to-day realities of integration.⁵ These reactions to Scott's athletic career provide a window into the challenges ordinary people faced as they came to grips with new public representations of race and masculinity in the turbulent late 1960s.

Race, Popular Culture, and Athletics in “Progressive” North Carolina

North Carolina's reputation as a racially progressive state significantly affected how white observers assessed Scott. One of the most notable features of the dialogue surrounding Scott's career at UNC was a certain pattern of silence and avoidance by both

⁵ The principal mainstream publications explored in this article are the *Durham Morning Herald*, and the *Raleigh News and Observer*. Alternate publications include the campus newspaper the *Daily Tar Heel*, the *Chapel Hill Weekly*, the *Carolinian*, and the *Carolina Times*.

mainstream newspapers and the university administration. In both of these sources we see a hesitance to emphasize Scott's race and his significance in breaking down integration because of their belief in what William Chafe refers to as the "mystique" of North Carolina "progressivism."⁶ North Carolina had long enjoyed a reputation as a moderate state in the South, and V. O. Key's influential study of southern politics, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, first published in 1949, helped perpetuate the idea that North Carolina was a haven of tolerance in the region, with a "progressive outlook and action in many phases of life, especially industrial development, education, and race relations." In fact, Key argued that "nowhere has cooperation between white and Negro leadership been more effective" than in the state of North Carolina.⁷ That ideal, however, did not always match up with reality. Chafe argues that civic leaders in North Carolina throughout the twentieth century often tried to present the state as having a "progressive outlook" on race, even as the state's policies towards blacks tended to be "reactionary," keeping African Americans in inferior positions socially and economically.⁸ Hiding behind the veil of progressivism, various white civic leaders in North Carolina tried to minimize any signs of dissent, believing "that conflict over any issue ... [would] permanently rend the fragile fabric of internal harmony."⁹ Instead of fostering public

⁶ William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 7.

⁷ V. O. Key with Alexander Heard, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 206.

⁸ Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 4-5. Paul Luebke has echoed this point in recent years, noting that to black North Carolinians, "the state's racial moderation was always problematic." Indeed, according to Luebke, "the moderate path that the white elite chose nevertheless institutionalized and legitimated a segregated society in which blacks could not expect either political or economic equality." See: Paul Luebke, *Tar Heel Politics: Myths and Realities* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 102.

⁹ Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 7.

debate about issues, white North Carolinian leaders instead emphasized the importance of “civility,” which was “a way of dealing with people and problems that made good manners more important than substantial action.”¹⁰

Two episodes reveal the limits of North Carolina’s “progressive” outlook towards race and the emphasis on civility over meaningful change, in particularly evocative ways: the failed re-election campaign for Senator Frank Porter Graham in 1950 and Chapel Hill’s tumultuous sit-ins in 1963 and 1964. Graham, long known as a progressive force in North Carolina in his position as the President of the University of North Carolina, and a popular figure state-wide, was appointed to the U.S. Senate by Governor Kerr Scott after the death of Senator J. Melville Broughton in March 1949. When Graham had to run for re-election in 1950, he squared off against a corporate lawyer named Willis Smith, who wisely positioned himself as a moderate candidate in comparison to the liberal Graham. Although Graham was regarded as, according to biographer Warren Ashby, “the best-known and best-loved man in North Carolina,” he lost the election because Smith successfully characterized him as a pro-Communist, pro-black public figure. In the campaign: Smith’s supporters harped on the fact that Graham had selected an African-American youth as an alternate candidate for the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, New York; handouts indicated that Graham favored integration of public facilities and schools; and Graham’s membership in the ACLU supposedly revealed his Communist leanings. Despite the fact that Graham had been a very popular figure in the state because of his efforts to help workers earn better wages and his tireless efforts to promote improved public education, Graham lost the Democratic primary to Smith.

¹⁰ Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 8.

Reactionary politics, largely centered on the racial issue, doomed his chances to win, indicating racial politics' power in North Carolina.¹¹

The town of Chapel Hill's own struggles with integrated public accommodations also reveal the seething racial tensions that lingered well into the 1960s. Although long considered a haven of liberal thought and progressive outlook in the South, Chapel Hill had numerous businesses that retained segregated facilities in 1963 and 1964, including eateries on Franklin Street, the town's main thoroughfare. Starting in January 1963, a number of like-minded groups, including the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Peace Union, helped form the Chapel Hill Freedom Committee and began to picket segregated businesses and eventually stage sit-ins.¹² The response in the supposedly liberal town surprised many: in one case, the owner of a grocery store locked his doors to trap protesters sitting-in and then dumped bleach and ammonia on them, leading to hospitalization and serious injury; in another case, a female employee of a segregated restaurant urinated on a sit-in protester.¹³ Although the activists received behind-the-scenes support from some "white Chapel Hill establishmentarians,"¹⁴ by and large, local publications largely ignored the protests or condemned them, with the

¹¹ See Warren Ashby, *Frank Porter Graham: A Southern Liberal* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 1980), Chapter 18, "Campaign Ordeal," 257-71.

¹² For a thorough account of the sit-in movement in Chapel Hill and its aftermath, see John Ehle, *The Free Men* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965). For recent reflections on the sit-in movement, see "A Challenge to the Old Order," 30, Charles L. Thompson, "Standing Up by Sitting Down," 32-43, Carolyn Edy, "Segregation's Last Stand," 44-47, and Carolyn Edy, "Town and Gown," 46, all in *Carolina Alumni Review*, 95, No. 2 (March/April, 2006).

¹³ For accounts of the former incident, see: Ehle, *The Free Men*, 141-43, and Thompson, "Standing Up," 32-34. For accounts of latter incident, see: Ehle, *The Free Men*, 144, and Thompson, "Standing Up," 41-2.

¹⁴ Thompson, "Standing Up," 39.

exception of the student newspaper *The Daily Tar Heel*.¹⁵ Protester Charles Thompson commented on this community silence in later years: “almost no one from the town or the University signaled any support. Some local liberals said that we had done both the town and the University a disservice by moving too fast. People were not yet ready for desegregation.”¹⁶ Echoing President Eisenhower’s cautious approach to civil rights in the wake of the *Brown* decisions, these white Chapel Hill residents trusted that gradual, non-confrontational change was possible, an attitude viewed with increasing distrust by African Americans across the country.

Chapel Hill residents’ violent response to integration demands, the refusal of the town government to pass a public accommodations bill, and the widespread community apathy towards achieving integration revealed the limits of “progressivism” in the supposedly enlightened town. As the novelist John Ehle described Chapel Hill in his account of the sit-ins, *The Free Men*, Chapel Hill proved itself as “a Southern town proud of its reputation as a liberal community,” which, when worried about “tarnishing that reputation,” drew “back from being a genuinely liberal community.” Instead of viewing the sit-in movement as a wake-up call “for corrective action,” Chapel Hill townspeople “just wanted all the trouble to go away.”¹⁷ Hemmed in by the standards of progressivism, Chapel Hill community members avoided acknowledging racial conflict and inequality, preferring to emphasize the moderate and civil nature of their town.

This emphasis on civility helps explain why both the mainstream newspapers and the university hoped to limit the dialogue surrounding issues of race in connection with

¹⁵ See Ehle, *The Free Men*, 152, and Thompson, “Standing Up,” 39.

¹⁶ Thompson, “Standing Up,” 43.

¹⁷ Ehle, *The Free Men*, 325-26.

college athletics. These white community leaders tried to avoid conflict by ignoring the social barriers being broken by people such as Scott, in the process limiting his impacts to the basketball court, a strategy that reveals a deep anxiety over integration's implications. Counter examples such as the area's black newspapers (*The Carolinian* and the *Carolina Times*), the student newspaper *The Daily Tar Heel*, the local town paper the *Chapel Hill Weekly*, and even some national publications, all covered Scott's experiences as a black athlete with a greater degree of frankness, finding hope in the broadening of opportunity for African Americans, but also probing some of the limits that African Americans still faced even as Jim Crow laws died out. These divergent reactions to Scott's career indicate both the utility and the limitations of sports figures to help everyday people adjust to the significant racial changes in the previously-segregated South.

Other events nationwide affected Scott's reception by blacks and whites. As the once-impermeable walls of Jim Crow segregation began to crack, following events such as Robinson's signing with the Dodgers in 1945, President Truman's decision to integrate the military in 1948, the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, widespread public support for the Montgomery Bus Boycotts of 1957, and finally the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, anxious southerners, black and white, tried to give shape to an integrated culture that fulfilled their needs and desires. With the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 providing a federal mandate to end segregation, the often-illusionary walls dividing the worlds of black and whites crumbled. But new tensions and conflicts arose out of the rubble. By the time Scott came to Chapel Hill, the broader civil rights movement had reached a moment of transition, as new and old leaders clashed over the direction the movement would take. Integration and laws regarding equal opportunity did not easily

address the most pressing issues facing the black community, such as extreme poverty, inadequate housing, and barriers to job promotion and advancement. By 1966, younger leaders such as Stokely Carmichael, of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and Floyd McKissock, of CORE, aggressively pushed for black solidarity and federal economic aid, and expressed a willingness to abandon strategies of non-violence.¹⁸

In this climate, the integration of popular sports could provide an outlet for nervous observers, a test case for the possibilities of a desegregated South. Certainly, North Carolinians had looked to sports in the past as one way to tease out ideas regarding racial equality. The animated response from local journalists to Robinson's signing in 1945, even though there were no Major League Baseball teams in the South at the time, offers a baseline to compare to Scott's reception twenty years later, in addition to reaffirming sports' importance to notions of race, masculinity, and equality. The area's black newspapers (and black newspapers across the country) saw Robinson's signing as a pivotal event that indicated that black Americans would gain broader access to a number of areas of life previously restricted to them. Although the story broke too late to make it into the weekly black newspaper *The Carolinian* until November 3, nearly two weeks after the signing, the paper's editors still featured it as the top news item on the front page, with a banner headline declaring: "NAT'L LEAGUE SIGNS 1ST NEGRO."¹⁹ The

¹⁸ Many historians have analyzed the changing civil rights movement in the second half of the 1960s. For two perceptive summaries, see Alan Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 345-75, and Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality 1954-1992*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 184-209. Clayborne Carson provides a compelling account of SNCC's changing ideology. See *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 215-306.

¹⁹ ANP, "Nat'l League Signs 1st Negro; Club Owners Jubilant But Want Robinson Paid For," *Carolinian*, 3 November 1945, p. 1, 8. See 1.

paper also featured two columns on its editorial page about the event, both expressing hope that Robinson's signing would lead to greater advances for African Americans in general.²⁰

If mainstream newspaper editors did not express the same enthusiasm about the signing—leaving it for the sports section as opposed to putting it on the front page—they nonetheless seemed to understand its ramifications, either attempting to downplay the potential for strife in the aftermath, or lamenting the event's significance for the fate of Jim Crow institutions in general. Although area newspapers gave Robinson's story top billing in the sports section, they also generally included sidebar stories in the coming days speculating on Robinson's ability to make the major league Dodgers (at the time, he had only signed with the top minor league affiliate, the Montreal Royals), perhaps hoping that he would fail in his attempts and the effects of his signing would be minimal. These mainstream papers also often included brief stories about the potential for legal action from disgruntled Negro League owners upset at losing Robinson to the Dodgers without compensation; the prominent inclusion of these stories had the effect of subtly defending the status quo, chiding Robinson for abandoning his "proper" place in the all-black leagues.²¹

²⁰ See C. D. Halliburton, "Second Thoughts," *Carolinian*, 3 November 1945, p. 4; and W. L. Greene, "Lest We Forget," *Carolinian*, 3 November 1945, p. 4.

²¹ See AP, "Negro Is Signed By Farm Team," *Raleigh News and Observer*, 24 October 1945, p. 9; Jack Hand, "Rickey Believes Robinson Will Make Major Leagues," *Raleigh News and Observer*, 25 October 1945, p. 11; AP, "Brooklyn Signs Jackie Robinson, Negro Infielder," *Charlotte Observer*, 24 October 1945, p. 10-I; AP, "Negro League Protests Signing of Robinson," *Charlotte Observer*, 24 October 1945, p. 10-I; Sid Feder, AP, "Dodgers Sign First Negro To Enter Organized Ball; Jack Robinson Will Play For Montreal Club; Former U.C.L.A. Star Will Get Chance In Minor Leagues," *Durham Morning Herald*, 24 October 1945, p. 8; Gayle Talbot, AP, "Robinson Represents \$25,000 Search Conducted By Rickey; Shortstop Is One OF Some 25 Negroes Who Have Been Recommended By Dodgers Scouts," *Durham Morning Herald*, 24 October 1945, p. 8; Jack Hand, AP, "Rickey Thinks Robinson Will Make Majors; Negro Baseballer To Try Out With Montreal Team," *Durham Morning Herald*, 25 October 1945, p. II-2; Bus Ham, AP, "Griffith Accuse Rickey Of Outlaw Act In Taking Negro; 75-Year-Old Owner Says Rickey

Two sports editorials from mainstream papers, one from the *Charlotte Observer* and another from the *Durham Morning Herald*, offered more in-depth commentary on the Robinson signing and both provide an interesting glimpse at the tactics white journalists in the area would use in dealing with the significance of racial pioneers in sports.²² Jack Wade, writing in the *Observer*, gave voice to a position that his paper and others would often use in later years by attempting to minimize the event's significance and potential for conflict. He argued that although the signing of Robinson was "revolutionary," "it was inevitable" as well. According to Wade, "It was merely a question of when and where." In downplaying the event's significance, Wade also attempted to paint a picture of a racially-harmonious South, one un-blemished by the ugly stains of racial conflict. Indeed, Wade took issue with Dodgers minor league director Branch Rickey, Jr. (the son of the Dodgers President who had decided to pursue black players) for saying at the press conference announcing the signing "that he expected widespread 'repercussions'" from the signing, particularly in the South. Wade disagreed, arguing that prejudice was nearly eliminated in the South and that he expected Robinson's entrance into the big leagues to be smooth. He argued that southern white athletes' exposure to black athletes in other sports would ease the transition:

Times have changed. In recent years southerners have played along side of and against great Negro football players. They have competed in many a track meet in which great Negro trackmen have competed. They have boxed against great Negro fighters. In most cases, these things have been done as a matter of course.

Should Pay For Robinson," *Durham Morning Herald*, 25 October 1945, p. II-2; and AP, "Monarchs' Owners Not To Bother About Robinson," *Durham Morning Herald*, 26 October 1945, p. II-2.

²² See Jack Horner, "Robinson Case Starts Hot Stove Gossip," *Durham Morning Herald*, 25 October 1945, p. II-2; Jack Wade, "Jack Wade's Sports Parade; Revolutionary, But It Was Inevitable," *Charlotte Observer*, 25 October 1945, p. II-2.

Indeed, from Wade's perspective, the attempt to single out the South for a bitter reaction will not pan out as Rickey, Jr. believed it would:

Let us reiterate our opinion that if the Dodgers organization looks for any great smell to be raised, with "repercussions" to establish it as a martyr, it is apt to be disappointed. There may be a few Bilbos to raise their voice in the maligned South, but the reaction, we believe, especially in the press, will be dignified and restrained, even if there may exist some misgivings and a slight confusion in our hearts.²³

We can read Wade's analysis as either an extraordinarily naïve case of wishful thinking on his part, or, more likely, as a deliberate attempt to paint a positive picture of the "maligned South." Chafe's description of North Carolina's "progressive" image certainly helps explain Wade's dismissive tone. By crafting an image of the South as moderate and willing to go with the times, Wade fell back on the trope of North Carolina as a state unfettered by racial tensions. This strategy, characteristic of North Carolina, was also often employed by other southerners, who dismissed any suggestion that their region had a problem with race relations.

Jack Horner, in the *Morning Herald*, on the other hand, more overtly lamented the signing of Robinson, musing over its implications for segregation at large. Willingly admitting that "there would be complications in the South" if there were an integrated team, Horner chided Rickey, Jr. for his anti-southern remarks and criticized the Dodgers for raiding the Negro Leagues without compensating them for their players. Using the "separate but equal" logic of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, Horner wondered whether "Negro baseball players want to enter the white leagues." Indeed, he highlighted the "interesting comments" of former All-Star white baseball player Rogers Hornsby as being particularly appropriate:

²³ Wade, "Revolutionary, But It Was Inevitable," p. II-2.

The Negro leagues are doing all right and Negro players should be developed and then remain as stars in their own leagues. A mixed baseball team differs from other sports because ball players on the road live much closer together. The way things are it will be tough for a Negro player to become a part of a close-knit group such as an organized ball club. I think Branch Rickey was wrong in signing Jackie Robinson and that it won't work out.

Building on Hornsby's comments, Horner argued that the Robinson signing would cause "friction" and that it would "not help the Negro's cause."²⁴ Emphasizing the presence of the Negro leagues as a perfectly legitimate place for African Americans to play, Horner lamented the change that Robinson's signing portended, arguing that it would create strife where there was none, and would upset what had been a perfectly appropriate situation. If Wade pretended that Robinson's signing would cause no major ripples, Horner approached the matter from a different perspective, believing that the signing would upset the balance afforded by segregation (and present distasteful experiences such as black and white men living on the road together as part of a team).²⁵ In other words, Horner feared the consequences of Robinson's signing for the status quo and attempted to suggest that both blacks and whites in general supported the conventions of Jim Crow society. Men such as Horner and Hornsby saw a society in balance, with black and white carefully circumscribed; they were either unable or unwilling to acknowledge the

²⁴ Horner, "Robinson Case Starts Hot Stove Gossip," p. II-2.

²⁵ Although the *Tar Heel* did not cover the event, the paper was on a weekly schedule at that point and did not have a large sports section, which perhaps explains the omission. However, coverage of racial strife occurring in town at the time of Robinson's announcement suggests that even a liberal paper such as the *Tar Heel* could attempt to minimize conflict under the veil of progressive mystique. Controversy ensued when two African Americans and two whites, part of the Brotherhood for Reconciliation, attempted to sit together "in the front section of a Greensboro-bound Carolina Coach company bus and refused to move when so ordered by the driver..." See Bill Sexton, "Race Incidents Arise After Bus Seating Arrests; Four Booked on Disorderly Conduct Counts After Negroes' Refusal to Move to Rear," *Daily Tar Heel*, 15 April 1947, p. 1. The next day, a white man was assaulted by a group of taxi drivers for talking to a black woman in the bus station. The situation prompted the paper to publish a front-page editorial lamenting the violence as being against "the light and liberty for which this University town stands." See "Impossible, You Say?," Editorial, *Daily Tar Heel*, 16 April 1947, p. 1. Although the paper sides with the victims, it also makes it sound as though such violence and hatred were absent from the area, as though race relations were perfect despite the obvious inequalities that pervaded the town and the area at large.

pervasive inequalities that relegated blacks to inferior positions legally, politically, and economically. In later years, as actions of the federal executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government increasingly struck down Jim Crow laws, columns such as Horner's would disappear, to be replaced by a silence more characteristic of Wade's approach. And yet it seems clear that beneath the veneer of acquiescence, opinions such as Horner's would remain very much in the consciousness of many white southerners.

Although the Robinson signing thrust the issue of integrated athletics into prominence in North Carolina, at the local level minor cracks had already started to develop even before 1945, and would continue to do so before Scott's arrival, as the South grudgingly accepted the necessity of playing integrated sports teams from the North and West. Indeed, North Carolinians and other Southerners had known about black athletic achievements for decades before Scott enrolled at UNC. The exploits of boxers Jack Johnson and Joe Louis, track star Jesse Owens, baseball legend Robinson, and other black athletes such as basketball player Bill Russell, football star Jim Brown, and basketball sensation Wilt Chamberlain, had all gained national attention.²⁶ More directly, ACC schools had already faced black athletes in a variety of contests. Following UNC's lead in 1936, when the Tar Heels went to New York and played against New York University and their star black halfback Ed Williams, a policy gradually evolved whereby it was acceptable for southern schools to play against blacks as long as the games were not in their home stadiums. Over time, even this policy became more liberal: the first black to compete in a game in the South was football player Chester Pierce, who played for Harvard against the University of Virginia (UVA) in

²⁶ For more on North Carolinians' knowledge of integrated athletic competition, see Grundy, *Learning to Win*, 262.

1947, and Duke then hosted the integrated University of Pittsburgh football team in 1950. Although many schools in the Deep South states of South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi resisted competing against black athletes well into the 1960s, the Upper South schools of the ACC proved more amenable to integrated competition.²⁷ When black athletes did come to the South in the 1950s, however, they often faced humiliating conditions where they were forced to stay in segregated hotels and eat meals at segregated restaurants, unable to dine and stay with their teammates.²⁸ Although these conditions gradually improved, Scott's experiences indicate that many in the South still resisted change.

Scott's debut also took on heightened significance because of the changing position of black athletes in predominantly white sports organizations. Although many early pioneers in professional and amateur sports had shied away from pushing for political, social, and economic change, black athletes in the 1960s increasingly became more politically engaged. Black athlete activism would peak in the so-called "black athlete revolt" of 1967 and 1968, a series of protests and boycotts led by San Jose State Sociology Professor (and former Division I track athlete) Harry Edwards. The "revolt," best remembered for the "black power salute" of sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos on the medal stand during the 1968 Summer Olympic Games, heightened racial tensions and divided athletes, black and white, over the place of politics in sports.

²⁷ Mark D. Briggs, "A Tale of Two Pioneers: The Integration of College Athletics in the South During the 1960s in the Age of the Civil Rights Movement" (M.A. Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000), 15-7.

²⁸ Grundy, *Learning to Win*, 264. The experiences of these black athletes was comparable to black musicians who played fraternity parties and other events at southern schools in the late 1950s and into the 1960s. As music historian Brian Ward has noted, white southern students could revel in black music even as they continued to relegate black musicians to second-class status. See Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 232.

Responses to Scott's participation in political and social campaigns reveal the threat athlete activism posed to many white North Carolinians, and also the wider concern it caused across the country.²⁹

Scott's Hushed Debut: UNC's Cautious Attitude toward Integration

Scott was a blacktop phenomenon in New York City before deciding to move south to attend Laurinburg Institute, a black prep school in south-central North Carolina. A bright student, Scott earned an academic scholarship to Laurinburg and then quickly demonstrated his considerable skills on the basketball court. After initially accepting an academic scholarship to play for Lefty Driesell, then-coach at small Davidson University, Scott changed his mind and decided to sign an athletic grant-in-aid with Head Coach Dean Smith at UNC.³⁰ Scott chose UNC in part because he liked the team's coaching staff and the other players, but also because he felt more comfortable in Chapel Hill as a black man than he did in tiny Davidson. According to a number of sources, Scott encountered discrimination in one of Davidson's area stores; when he went to Chapel

²⁹ Edwards chronicled his efforts and motivations in the Olympic boycott in his excellent work *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York: Free Press, 1969). See also: Amy Bass, *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Michael Lomax, "Revisiting *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*: Harry Edwards and the Making of the New African-American Sports Studies," *Journal of Sport History*, 29, no. 3 (Fall 2002), 469-79; Jack Scott, *The Athletic Revolution* (New York: Free Press, 1971); and David K. Wiggins, "'The Year of Awakening,'" *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in a White America* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 104-22.

³⁰ Scott's change of heart did not come without controversy. Driesell was so upset that he actually ambushed Scott, "jumping out of the bushes the next day [after Scott's commitment] to confront [him] as he walked to a movie." See Art Chansky, *Dean's Domain: The Inside Story of Dean Smith and His College Basketball Empire* (Marietta, GA: Longstreet, 1999). In fact, the President of the Davidson College Alumni Association, William White, even sent University President William Friday and Smith a letter complaining about UNC's recruitment of Scott. Chancellor Sitterson sent him a cordial reply, firmly stating that UNC's actions had been appropriate and that it was Scott's right to change his mind. See William White to William Friday and Dean Smith, 5 May 5 1966, and J. Carlyle Sitterson to William White 9 May 1966, both in Box 15, "Athletics—Basketball" folder, in the Chancellor's Records: J. Carlyle Sitterson Papers, #40022, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Hill, he made sure to “walk the town and the campus by himself” in order to “see how a single black man would be treated in Chapel Hill.”³¹ Not encountering any problems, Scott soon signed a binding letter of intent to attend UNC and play basketball.



Figure 4.1. Photograph of Charlie Scott shooting the ball during a game. Scott’s speed, quickness, and athleticism made him one of the most exciting players in the ACC. See http://museum.unc.edu/get_page.html?chapter=12&slide=11.

³¹ Briggs, “Tale of Two Pioneers,” 69.

Scott's decision to attend UNC would not have been possible without the trail-blazing of other black students in the previous decade. Although UNC liked to present itself as a progressive institution ahead of its time in terms of race relations, the university dragged its feet when it came to integrating the school, sluggishly admitting some graduate and professional students before 1954, and only slowly opening its doors to African-American undergraduates in the post *Brown* era. Indeed, UNC got into some trouble when it tried to force its first black students—law students in 1951—to sit in the segregated Jim Crow section at football games instead of in the regular student section. The school eventually relented when various groups protested this action.³² As late as 1959, one NYU administrator specifically lamented the “segregation of” black students “at football games and other activities” at UNC as particularly disheartening.³³ Going against long-held traditions of Jim Crow segregation meant that even watching sports proved a challenge for the integration process. Playing sports would be another matter altogether. As black undergraduates first trickled into UNC in 1955, coaches, for the first time in the South, had to deal with the possibility that black athletes could potentially compete on their teams.³⁴

The integration of black students, and undergraduates in particular, was a problematic process for many university administrators who nervously tried to integrate the campus while minimizing racial conflict. Chancellor William B. Aycock attempted to monitor the integration of the student body closely—he kept detailed records on the

³² Martin, “Rise and Fall of Jim Crow,” 263-5.

³³ From Sydney G. Roth to William B. Aycock, 9 November 1959, in Box 2, “Integration—Negroes 1957-1959” folder, in the Chancellor’s Records: William B. Aycock Papers, #40020, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

³⁴ Martin, “Rise and Fall of Jim Crow,” 265.

number of African-American students and tracked their progress throughout their time at UNC.³⁵ Sports played a role in negotiating this transition. As early as 1957, Chancellor Aycock wrote a letter to Sam Magill, a university official in the athletic department, asking for “the latest news regarding segregation and football.”³⁶ In spring 1964, meanwhile, the Student Legislature’s Special Committee on Discriminatory Practices chose “the policy of the University toward the recruiting of Negro athletes” as one of the five topics its members wanted to discuss in a meeting with Chancellor Aycock, suggesting how important athletics were to students’ conceptions of institutional discrimination.³⁷ And yet, it was not until spring 1966 that Scott signed with the school, and not until 1968 that UNC finally integrated its football team.³⁸

The university’s torpid pace in enrolling black athletes reveals school leaders’ concerns over the implications of integrating the “big-time” sports of men’s basketball and football. UNC followed the University of Maryland’s lead in recruiting black athletes, although, to the university’s credit, it pushed ahead of most other ACC schools. Still, why was there a delay between admitting black undergraduates and recruiting black athletes for major sports programs? As historian Charles H. Martin notes, “it was one

³⁵ Although there are many examples of papers such as this, the first example in Chancellor Aycock’s papers comes from 1957. See Roy Armstrong to William B. Aycock, 31 July 1957, Box 2, “Integration—Negroes 1957-1959” folder, in the William B. Aycock Papers.

³⁶ See William B. Aycock to Sam McGill, 6 July 1957, Box 2, “Integration—Negroes 1957-1959” folder, in the William B. Aycock Papers.

³⁷ See Student Legislature’s Special Committee on Discriminatory Practices to William B. Aycock, 2 March 1964, in Box 2, “Integration—Negroes 1964” folder, Aycock Papers.

³⁸ Maryland integrated its football team in 1963. Other African Americans had participated on sports teams on UNC’s campus before Scott—the first black to compete at UNC was Edwin Okorama, who played for the soccer team in 1963. See Briggs, “Tale of Two Pioneers,” 15-6. However, football and men’s basketball were the dominant sports on campus, the only team competitions to draw major crowds and generate considerable media attention. Integrating these teams carried much more symbolic weight than lesser-known sports such as soccer.

thing to admit a small number of African Americans into the classroom but something far more sensitive to accept them into what was arguably the single most important campus activity: big-time sports.” Indeed, the integration of football and/or basketball, both popular among students and the community at large, was sure to be controversial—after all, even scheduling games against integrated teams from outside the region had caused consternation well into the 1960s for many schools in the South.³⁹ Thus, the delay in admitting black athletes can be understood as evidence of the university’s desire to avoid public conflict and any controversy that would potentially alienate students, fans, and/or alumni. In this context, it makes sense that the university would allow black students to attend football games, but would then try to make them sit in the blacks-only section instead of with their fellow students. The university could suggest that black students enjoyed equal access to university events even as they were cordoned off from their white peers in order to accede to the customs of Jim Crow society.⁴⁰

One behind-the-scenes letter, although unrelated to sports, perhaps most clearly highlights the university’s integrationist policies. In this revealing document, J. A.

³⁹ For example, in 1963, Mississippi State University Basketball Coach James H. “Babe” McCarthy sneaked his team across the state line to participate in an NCAA tournament game against the integrated squad from Loyola University of Chicago. Segregationist state legislators had filed a court injunction prohibiting the team from participating in the contest, but the coach and his players ignored the ruling, eventually losing to Loyola (the eventual NCAA champion) 61-51. For more on this incident, see 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*, 63, no. 4 (November 1997), 827-854. Although this game involved a school from the Deep South, the responses reflected the potential controversies that could emerge from integrated athletic competition.

⁴⁰ According to Martin, Wake Forest first signed an African-American basketball player the same year as UNC, in the spring of 1966. The other schools in the conference followed, starting with Duke and North Carolina State the following year. Recruitment of African-American football players occurred more slowly. Again, North Carolina (along with North Carolina State) was second behind Maryland and Wake Forest, when they signed Lanier in 1968. It took the University of Virginia and Clemson University until 1971 to follow suit. See Martin, “Rise and Fall of Jim Crow,” 265. Jacobs chronicles the experiences of all of the black basketball pioneers in the ACC and in the Southeastern Conference (the SEC) in *Across the Line: Profiles in Courage: Tales of the First Black Players in the ACC and SEC* (Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2008).

Williams, the personnel officer for the university in 1957, outlined the policy of the Carolina Inn (a whites-only on-campus hotel and restaurant) for serving African Americans attempting to eat there. Williams recommended that the staff's first goal should be to try to guide blacks to alternative locations. However, failing that, the staff should not deny blacks service because, "A law suit would probably focus the attention of the negroes on the situation in Chapel Hill."⁴¹ Williams wanted to preserve the appearance of civil cooperation, or, in Chafe's terms, "civility," in order to both avoid negative press coverage of the town and to foster an image of progressive policies towards blacks on campus.⁴²

This attitude carried over to matters related to sports. A potential opportunity for the university to take the lead in integrating the town of Chapel Hill occurred in the midst of the Chapel Hill sit-ins in December 1963, when Daniel H. Pollitt, a professor in UNC's law school, sent a letter to Secretary of the Faculty A.C. Howell, requesting a resolution at the next faculty council meeting that "the Administration cease utilizing" segregated businesses "for official university functions." In particular, Pollitt targeted a restaurant called The Pines, a segregated establishment where "the coaches [he does not specify if he means football or basketball] have their press conferences."⁴³ The resolution apparently came to Aycock himself, because he drafted a letter back to Howell—and his response is instructive in considering the university's stance on integration as a whole. In his letter, Aycock noted that segregated facilities were already

⁴¹ J. A. Williams to William B. Aycock, 19 July 1957, in Box 2, "Integration—Negroes 1957-1959" folder, Aycock Papers.

⁴² Chafe, *Civility and Civil Rights*, 8.

⁴³ See Daniel H. Pollitt to A.C. Howell, 17 December 1963, Box 2, "Integration—Negroes 1961-1963" folder, in the William B. Aycock Papers.

avoided for student functions since they would not allow all students to attend. He gave the example of a bowling alley that did not allow blacks to attend but was used by the Physical Education department—the bowling alley changed its policy to keep its contract with the school. However, since The Pines required neither student nor black staff presence for the press conferences held there, the University would not prevent its use for those functions.⁴⁴ Given the opportunity to make a relatively minor stand against segregation in Chapel Hill, the Chancellor balked, apparently unwilling to create any kind of stir by rebuking this popular restaurant. Using a loophole to get out of the situation, the Chancellor simply sidestepped the issue, keeping issues of race and segregation out of the spotlight.⁴⁵

Elements of this mindset can be seen in Charlie Scott's case as well. After Scott committed to UNC in the spring of 1966, Chancellor Sitterson wrote Scott a letter, commending him on his choice—the first and only time the Chancellor welcomed any individual incoming student in this manner. Although clearly acknowledging the importance of Scott's decision by personally writing to him, Sitterson did not make any mention at all of the significance of Scott's race in his letter, instead simply observing that he was sure that Scott “carefully considered all of the important factors in making

⁴⁴ See William B. Aycock to A. C. Howell, 16 January 1964, Box 2, “Integration—Negroes 1964” folder, in the William B. Aycock Papers.

⁴⁵ It is worth noting that Head Basketball Coach Dean Smith is often credited with integrating the town of Chapel Hill by going out to lunch at the Pines (where the basketball team usually had its pre-game meals) with his minister and a black friend in the late 1950s. Smith downplayed the incident in his autobiography, noting that he was only an assistant coach at the time and thus not tremendously influential, but the memory of the event has had staying power. See Dean Smith, with John Kligo and Sally Jenkins, *A Coach's Life* (New York: Random House, 1999), 95-96. In recent years, Georgia Tech University head basketball coach Paul Hewitt, an African-American man, re-emphasized Smith's courage in taking part in the small step for social change, noting that the move could have negatively affected Smith's potential to be promoted to head coach. See Jacobs, *Across the Line*, 112.

[his] college decision.”⁴⁶ By ignoring Scott’s race, Sitterson perhaps attempted to make Scott feel like just any other student, but he also seemed uncomfortable using Scott’s example as a way to promote discussions of integration and racial equality on campus, perhaps fearful that these dialogues would suggest conflict or strife. Scott’s race disappears in discourse such as this, even though it obviously had profound influences on his life throughout his time at UNC.

The official athletic department pamphlets previewing each upcoming men’s basketball season similarly minimized the significance of the team’s gradual integration. The 1964-1965 preview, for example, made no mention of African-American walk-on Willie Cooper’s race when he played for the freshman team.⁴⁷ Although listed on the roster for the freshman team that year, he was one of five team members not pictured in the team photo.⁴⁸ Similarly, the athletic department materials covering Scott’s four years at UNC made no mention of his race or his pioneering role. The preview issue for his freshman season simply indicated that he was “a highly-rated player from New York City” (although a photograph was included, providing visual evidence of his race).⁴⁹ Subsequent editions praised Scott’s skills and spotlighted him as the team’s star, but none

⁴⁶ See J. Carlyle Sitterson to Charlie Scott, 9 May 1966, in Box 15, “Athletics—Basketball” folder, in the Sitterson Papers.

⁴⁷ According to various sources, Smith and the rest of the coaching staff had hoped that Cooper would actually be the first black player on the varsity team as a walk on. However, Cooper failed an accounting exam early in his sophomore year and decided to concentrate on his studies instead. See Briggs, “Tale of Two Pioneers,” 71; Chanksy, *Dean’s Domain*, 63; Smith, *A Coach’s Life*, 99.

⁴⁸ Bob Quincy, ed., *The 1964/1965 UNC Basketball Blue Book* (publishing information not listed), 8-9. Alternate title: *University of North Carolina Basketball, 1964-65 Basketball: Our Men in Outer Space*.

⁴⁹ Jack Williams, ed., *The 1966/1967 UNC Basketball Blue Book* (Chapel Hill, NC: Colonial Press, 1966), 41.

discussed his integrationist legacy.⁵⁰ There may be many reasons why the university hesitated to take this step, perhaps fearing that people would believe the school was pulling a publicity stunt or trying to generate extra “business” for its supposedly amateur sports teams; or perhaps the university feared the vitriolic response of pro-segregationist alumni. Nevertheless, this silence over Scott’s race fits a broader pattern among school leaders.

Even head coach Dean Smith’s way of handling Scott’s status as the lone black player on the team could be seen in this light. Indeed, according to Scott, “Coach Smith always tried to keep the race thing out of it.” Although Scott understood that Smith wanted to avoid making race an issue within the team by creating an atmosphere in which Scott’s race did not matter—in which he was the same as everyone else on the team—the approach left Scott feeling slightly disgruntled in later years. “He was right in saying, if I don’t make it an issue, then it won’t become an issue within my team,” Scott admitted, but “the thing is I had to live outside that team.”⁵¹ Although Smith attempted to make Scott feel the same as any other player, the reality was that he was *different* from all the other players, playing with extra scrutiny from the fans and media, and unable to enjoy a social life with his teammates outside the basketball court. Teammate Dick Grubar lamented the abuse Scott suffered on the courts, particularly when the team played at the University of South Carolina: “The man put up with more than I think anybody could ever put up with. Just in terms of the racial taunts, the spit, the water, the N-word. It was

⁵⁰ See: Jack Williams, ed., *The 1967/1968 UNC Basketball Blue Book* (Chapel Hill, NC: Colonial Press, 1967), 17; Jack Williams, ed., *The 1968/1969 UNC Basketball Blue Book* (Chapel Hill, NC: Colonial Press, 1968); and Jack Williams, Sybil Smith, Rick Brewer, Chris Cobbs, eds., *The 1969/1970 UNC Basketball Blue Book* (Chapel Hill, NC: Colonial Press, 1969). Season previews also made no special note of Billy Jones, the ACC’s first black basketball player, who played for the University of Maryland from 1964-1968.

⁵¹ Briggs, “Tale of Two Pioneers,” 77.

horrible. It was *horrible*.” Scott said in later years that although he appreciated his teammates’ concern, he realized that they were probably upset because their teammate and friend was being verbally assaulted—not because of the broader circumstances of racial prejudice.⁵² Even in moments of joy—such as the celebration following Scott’s brilliant performance in the 1969 ACC Tournament championship game—Scott’s race isolated him from his teammates: “We had great fun in the locker room. After that we walked out of the locker room; everybody went one way, and I went another way. I had to celebrate it by myself.”⁵³



Figure 4.2. Photograph of Scott celebrating with his teammates following the 1968 ACC Tournament Championship. Photo courtesy of the *Yackety Yack*, 1968 edition, p. 248.

⁵² Jacobs, *Across the Line*, 102.

⁵³ Jacobs, *Across the Line*, 101.

Smith's attempt to minimize racial issues within the confines of his team—his model of a “collective silence” about it—let Scott just be another basketball player on the court, but it ignored the social isolation Scott faced outside the confines of the basketball program, and may have limited the outlets for Scott to express his anxieties and frustrations.⁵⁴ Smith was certainly sincere in his beliefs in racial egalitarianism and appalled at the treatment Scott received. During one game in South Carolina, for example, the normally mild-mannered coach charged at a white fan who called Scott a “black baboon.”⁵⁵ However, Smith faced a difficult situation, fearful of alienating players unaccustomed to being teammates with a black man, let alone one who garnered a significant portion of the team's accolades.⁵⁶ He also may have been concerned that discussing Scott's race too often with his team would suggest that the player was receiving special privileges.⁵⁷ Downplaying Scott's race was tactically savvy for Smith and the success of his team, but the heavily-burdened Scott could not avoid the additional pressure he felt as a racial pioneer in the spotlight.

These examples of the university's relative silence regarding Scott's social significance—and, indeed, to the integration of the student body and the university town in general—point to one strategy employed in response to integration by white

⁵⁴ Briggs, “Tale of Two Pioneers,” 78.

⁵⁵ See Chansky, *Dean's Domain*, 64 and Jacobs, *Across the Line*, 102.

⁵⁶ Smith himself acknowledged that he and his players “felt our way along, and we grew closer over time,” as they tried to adjust to an integrated environment that both Scott and the white players were unaccustomed to. See Smith, *A Coach's Life*, 102. The experiences of UNC player and North Carolina native Ricky Webb, a teammate of Scott, illustrate the discomfort many had with the idea of a racially-integrated society. Webb said that “the first thing people would ask him when he would go home was how can you shower with a nigger?” See Briggs, “Tale of Two Pioneers,” 78-9.

⁵⁷ In fact, Scott said in later years that Smith's decision to limit the discussion of racial issues with the team made sense: “If I would have kept it on my mind all the time, it would have been very hard.” See Jacobs, *Across the Line*, 115.

administrators in positions of power. What mattered to these leaders was not necessarily the broader cultural effects of integration—that is, what these small steps meant for the changing character of the institution—but rather how public reaction to these changes might lead to conflict and thus a negative image for the school. The school’s, and the state’s, progressive image was at stake. Scott arrived on campus after the nationally-witnessed turmoil of Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, Selma, Alabama, in 1964, and the 1965 Watts Riot in Los Angeles. The outpouring of negative response from northern whites as a result of these events made it imperative that the university avoid any ugly scenes as it tried to bring black students peaceably into the academic fold.

Telling Silences: Mainstream Newspaper Coverage of Scott’s Career

Local mainstream newspapers’ coverage of Scott’s decision to attend UNC similarly showcase how race-minimizing discourse predominated in white public forums. The *Morning Herald*, for example, mentioned that Scott was “the first of his race to receive an athletic grant-in-aid,” but offered no opportunity for Scott to discuss his feelings about his role as a trailblazer.⁵⁸ The *News and Observer* was even less open to this type of dialogue: printing a story by the Associated Press, not one of its own writers, the *News and Observer*’s coverage mentioned that Scott was a “bespectacled New York City Negro,” but did not point out that Scott was UNC’s first black scholarship athlete and the first one in the area.⁵⁹ Neither paper offered any editorial or letters to the editor in subsequent days speculating on what Scott’s actions portended for racial change in the

⁵⁸ See Don Shea, “Laurinburg’s Scott Signs with Carolina; Negro Youth Accepts Scholarship,” *Durham Morning Herald*, 4 May 1966, p. B3.

⁵⁹ See “UNC Gets Laurinburg Star Scott,” 4 May 1966, p. 17.

South. The reluctance of the local papers to discuss Scott's story seemed to indicate the misgivings of many whites: in an article in the *Charlotte Observer*, Mel Derrick wrote that Scott: "wanted to go to college down South, not as a crusading Jackie Robinson burning to crack a color line, but as a young man honestly seeking an education. He wants to be a doctor."⁶⁰ Attempting to assuage his readers' fears, Derrick openly discussed Scott's decision, but attempted to circumscribe its far-reaching effects, emphasizing Scott's limited goals as a student-athlete and his unwillingness to agitate for broader changes in racial equality.

A similar pattern appeared in these same papers throughout Scott's playing career, and the incentive to minimize racial conflict may have been heightened by the so-called "black athlete revolution" that occurred during Scott's time at the school. Although few black athletes heeded Edwards' call to boycott the 1968 Summer Olympic Games, numerous public events connected to Edwards' efforts galvanized the American public. Scott himself participated in the Olympics, explaining that he wanted to show his faith in integration. However, he later acknowledged that 1968 "was the time of the militant black" and said he supported athletes who publicized African-Americans' continuing efforts towards equality.⁶¹ As controversy swirled around black athletes' participation in the Olympics, Jack Olson's series on the "Black Athlete" in *Sports Illustrated*, published over five issues in July 1968, further shattered the illusion that sports were free from racial prejudice and were a model of equality. One of the most widely-read series in

⁶⁰ Mel Derrick, "Charlie Scott: Basketball Star ... Student ... And Tar Heel Prize," *Charlotte Observer*, 4 May 1966, p. D6.

⁶¹ Briggs, "Tale of Two Pioneers," 96-8. Quotation from 98. Scott was not alone in rejecting the boycott. For an interesting discussion of athletes' responses to Edwards' plan, see: "Should Negroes Boycott the Olympics? Ebony poll of athletes indicates majority prefer to participate in this year's Mexico City sports spectacular," *Ebony*, 23.5 (March 1968): 110-116.

Sports Illustrated's history, Olson's articles spotlighted the inadequate academic assistance given to black athletes, social taboos against interracial dating, the practice of "stacking" black athletes at certain positions to keep their numbers limited on the playing field, and other examples of bigotry and discord in the sports world. Olson's series was jarring in part because most black and white sportswriters had, as Edwards argued, tended to avoid racial issues in their coverage. The local mainstream North Carolina media took that trend to an extreme in this time of heightened black athletic activism and political awareness.⁶²

One of the most prominent examples of this silence on racial issues came in the spring of 1969. That year, as a junior, Scott was clearly the best player on the Tar Heels and led them to an impressive 27-5 record, an ACC Championship, and a berth in the NCAA's Final Four. Two remarkable performances astounded local and national basketball observers. In the ACC Tournament championship game against Duke, Scott scored 40 points, including 28 in the second half alone, to lead UNC to a come-from-behind 85-74 victory. One week later, he scored 32 points, including a last second, game-winning shot, to lead the Tar Heels to an 87-85 victory over Davidson, a victory that vaulted his team into the national semifinals. However, Scott was denied the ACC Player of the Year award, losing out to John Roche, a white sophomore guard for South Carolina. Roche had certainly played well that season, and had scored thirty points in leading South Carolina to an early-season victory over UNC. Traditionally, however, the Player of the Year Award had been rewarded to the best player on the best team—in this case Scott. The Tar Heels had also rebounded to win the re-match with South Carolina

⁶² For Edwards' analysis of media coverage of black athletes in integrated sports, see *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 31-7. Olson's articles formed the basis of his book, *The Black Athlete A Shameful Story: The Myth of Integration in American Sport* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1968).

later in the season, a game in which Roche committed a crucial late-game gaffe that helped UNC clinch a 68-62 victory.⁶³ Given Scott's more advanced status in school—another factor voters usually considered—Scott appeared to be a shoo-in for the award. When the votes were tallied, however, Roche earned 56 votes to Scott's 39.

The unexpected second-place finish may have been the result of Scott's activism in February 1969 with UNC's newly-formed BSM. When Chancellor Sitterson appeared to dismiss many of the group's demands for changes on campus—which included the establishment of a Department of African and Afro-American Studies, the abandonment of SAT scores for admission decisions, intensified recruitment of black students, and better financial aid packages for minorities—Scott and black freshman basketball player Bill Chamberlain joined a group of four BSM members to discuss their cause with the university's head administrator on February 18, 1969.⁶⁴ Coming in the wake of violent confrontation at nearby Duke, where black students occupied a campus building and fought with local police, Scott's involvement in BSM activities generated considerable media coverage. The *Morning Herald's* front-page story about the meeting published thumbnail photographs of Scott and Chamberlain with its story, and noted Chamberlain's statement at a rally afterward: ““If I'm going to represent this university on the basketball court, I think the university should go to bat for me and take some positive action soon.”” Scott said nothing at the actual event, but released a more diplomatic statement later in the day from Maryland, where he had travelled for a game. Saying that he and

⁶³ Art Chansky, *The Dean's List: A Celebration of Tar Heel Basketball and Dean Smith* (New York: Warner Books, 1996), 48.

⁶⁴ The BSM may have been partially motivated to act by a campus visit from Stokeley Carmichael on November 21, 1968. Carmichael implicitly attacked the progressive mystique in his speech, saying that the “main goal” of white liberals was “to prevent confrontation and conflict,” which led to the continuation of “the status quo.” See J. D. Wilkinson, “Carmichael Attacks Liberals, Explains Need For Violence,” *Daily Tar Heel*, 22 November 1968, p. 1.

Chamberlain participated “to serve . . . in helping to close the communication gap” between the BSM and university administrators, Scott emphasized that he was happy at the school, and that his “concern grew out of the situation in which black students have found themselves at universities throughout the country.”⁶⁵ Even in staking out that rather moderate position, Scott received no support from the editors of the *Morning Herald* or the *News and Observer*, either in the news or sports sections. Instead, both newspapers printed editorials that ridiculed the demands of the BSM and praised Sitterson and UNC System President William Friday for taking a firm line against on-campus activism.⁶⁶ Neither supporting nor condemning Scott’s actions, the mainstream newspapers refused to take a stand regarding the place of political activism in athletics.

Only one month later, Roche won the Player of the Year award, and Scott publicly fumed at the decision, and indeed almost boycotted his team’s NCAA tournament games, feeling that the vote was racially motivated. In later years, he described the vote as “an insult.”⁶⁷ Given the fact that five of the sportswriters selecting the All-ACC teams for that year left Scott off of their ballots entirely—an absurdity, given Scott’s stellar season-long performance—his accusations seemed well-founded. As Scott later recalled, he received little public support for his stance: “I don’t remember anyone vocally supporting me on that one.”⁶⁸ Although Smith told Scott in private that

⁶⁵ Dale Gibson and Ross Scott, “New Demands, Ultimatum Presented By UNC Blacks,” *Durham Morning Herald*, 19 February 1969, p. 1A, 2A, morning edition.

⁶⁶ See “Threat In Black Student Demands,” Editorial, *Durham Morning Herald*, 21 February 1969, p. 4A and “Not ‘Revolution,’” Editorial, *Raleigh News and Observer*, 20 February 1969, p. 4.

⁶⁷ Briggs, “Tale of Two Pioneers,” 83.

⁶⁸ Briggs, “Tale of Two Pioneers,” 82.

he felt that Scott should have won the award, few public voices joined to condemn the apparently racist vote.⁶⁹

Indeed, despite Scott's protests about the injustice of the Player of the Year voting, the local mainstream newspapers did little to report the snub, or, if they did, covered it in measured ways that enabled them to avoid taking a stand. The *Morning Herald*, for example, actually covered Scott's complaints—devoting a fairly large story to it a few days after the snub. In the story, Scott expressed his disappointment that the sports writers voted for Roche “because he's white.”⁷⁰ This engagement with racial issues seems impressive at first glance; the *Morning Herald* printed a story featuring a black player's perspective of race and racism. However, the story still reveals an unwillingness to directly engage issues of race and the challenges to insuring equal opportunity. For example, no editorials or letters to the editor appeared in issues in the following days. Even more damning, the story itself was not written by a local writer: its byline was the Washington Post-Los Angeles Times News Service. Ironically, this *local* story was covered by a *national* news service—apparently because it hit too close to home. The *Morning Herald* may have printed its story to at least partially appease its black readership (Durham had, and has, a higher percentage of black residents than Raleigh), but was clearly unwilling to support Scott or to criticize those who had snubbed him. Although one *Morning Herald* writer asked Scott whether he thought his BSM activism had anything to do with the voting, no editorial columnists—on the sports page

⁶⁹ Briggs, “Tale of Two Pioneers,” 81.

⁷⁰ See “Scott Sore at ACC Coach, Player Picks,” *Morning Herald*, 16 March 1969, p. 2C.

or elsewhere—argued the position in the newspaper.⁷¹ At least the *Morning Herald* allowed Scott to vent his frustrations; the *News and Observer* failed to mention Scott's complaints at all. In their story announcing the ACC Player of the Year, the un-credited article mentioned that Roche beat out Scott, but indicated nothing about any controversy. The newspaper failed to mention Scott's disgust in subsequent days as well. Perhaps these newspapers hoped to minimize racial conflict as a way of protecting black athletes from extra scrutiny, but the strategy of avoiding any discussion of racial issues encouraged a dualistic response from white fans who could celebrate black athletic achievement without considering the still-unequal nature of post-Jim Crow society.⁷² After all, sports hardly provided a model for equal opportunity in American life when rewards were based on race instead of performance.

The technique of using national media sources to cover local issues of race in athletics was not unique to that one story about Scott's frustration in the *Morning Herald*. Indeed, the *News and Observer* and the *Morning Herald* both printed an Associated Press story around this time that discussed Scott's experiences in context with two other area basketball stars who had come from the North: Davidson's Mike Malloy, and Wake Forest's Charles Davis.⁷³ This story explicitly addressed the issues involved with "Negro athletes at predominantly white Southern colleges," discussing the difficulties in

⁷¹ "Scott Sore," p. 2C.

⁷² See "Roche Player of the Year," *News and Observer*, 13 March 1969, p.39. The one exception to this trend was the coverage of the story in the *Charlotte News*, where writer Bill Ballenger noted that the issue involved in Scott's voting was "essentially a racial one." He also printed an exchange with Scott in which the black star pointedly commented, "White writers did this." See Bill Ballenger, "Scott Hints He May Quit; Miffed By All-ACC Voting," *Charlotte News*, 14 March 1969, p. 16A.

⁷³ See: "For Scott, Malloy and Davis, Schooling in North Carolina Story of Extremes," *Durham Morning Herald*, March 15, 1969, p. 3B; "Negro Stars Live in Two Worlds," *Raleigh News and Observer*, 15 March 1969, p. 14.

having a fulfilling social life with few other African Americans at their schools, talking about the dilemma of trying to stay “loyal” to both their team and their race, and discussing the importance of “a deep sense of racial pride” for all three athletes.⁷⁴ As with the story about Scott’s complaints in the *Morning Herald*, however, this story shows the unwillingness of mainstream area papers to engage such hot topics directly in their own papers. Farming out these stories to the national news media allowed these newspapers to distance themselves from any controversy. Doing so minimized conflict, but also stifled dialogue. As Chafe notes, civility and its associated silence had power in this way “to crush efforts to raise issues of racial injustice.”⁷⁵ Although the presence of these AP stories in the *Morning Herald* and the *News and Observer* reveals a victory of sorts for dissenting voices and anti-consensus perspectives, that victory was far from complete.

One final anecdote about local mainstream press coverage of Scott’s career provides a valuable glimpse into the seething tensions and bitter prejudices that lingered just below the surface of the local white papers’ muted coverage. A few days after Scott’s varsity debut in the fall of 1967, a game in which Scott played a vital role in securing a Tar Heels’ victory, *Morning Herald* Sports Editor Hugo Germino passed along a quote from former South Carolina basketball coach Chuck Noe: “Referring to Charlie’s speed and quickness, Noe says: ‘He’d make a fortune as a pickpocket in New York.’”⁷⁶ Stereotypes of lawless black men retained cultural currency, even as sportswriters

⁷⁴ “For Scott, Malloy and Davis,” p. 3B.

⁷⁵ Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 8.

⁷⁶ Hugo Germino, “Gathering Up The Dope,” *Durham Morning Herald*, 5 December 1967, p. B2, afternoon edition.

seemingly accepted Scott as a student-athlete. The paper did not print any letters to the editor or qualifications in the following days.

Alternate Voices: Discussing Scott's Racial Significance

Although mainstream newspapers such as the *News and Observer* and the *Morning Herald* tried to minimize any issues about Scott's race, alternate media voices engaged Scott's story more frankly, allowing for at least the potential of real dialogue to emerge out of Scott's experiences, and giving us some insight into how students and African Americans felt about Scott as a pioneer. The *Chapel Hill Weekly*, *The Daily Tar Heel*, and black newspapers *The Carolinian* and *The Carolina Times*, all dealt with Scott's race more openly, discussing controversy and speculating on Scott's story in relation to changing racial politics in the region. Even the national news media—as the earlier Washington Post-Los Angeles Times story revealed—covered Scott's role as racial pioneer with a sharper focus on on-going inequalities. These various alternate media voices help illustrate the critical possibilities largely smothered by the veil of silence so characteristic of North Carolinian “progressivism.”

Revisiting Scott's decision to attend UNC from the perspective of these alternate media sources, a number of subtle differences in their coverage indicate alternate reactions to Scott's decision in contrast to the nervous fear of conflict that loomed over the mainstream press. For example, the two in-town newspapers, the *Tar Heel* and the *Weekly*, both provided a sharper focus on race in their coverage of Scott's decision to attend UNC. The *Weekly*'s headline announced Scott's pioneering role more boldly than

any mainstream publication: “Carolina Makes Big Catch: 1st Negro Signs UNC Grant.”⁷⁷ More significantly, a story one week later about Sitterson’s appointment as permanent chancellor for UNC noted that Sitterson “had received a letter from an out-of-state alumnus who refused any more financial aid to the University” because of Scott’s recruitment.⁷⁸ The letter was a stark reminder that racial conflict still existed and that Scott’s transition to UNC would not necessarily be smooth. It was not mentioned in any of the other local newspapers.

Although the *Tar Heel* did not report that specific incident, the campus newspaper did address Scott’s race more thoroughly than the mainstream papers, suggesting that the student body was more willing to welcome black students, and black student-athletes, into their midst. More explicit coverage of Scott’s career fit a broader pattern of liberal writing in the student paper.⁷⁹ Alone among area publications, the *Tar Heel* covered walk-on Cooper’s first game with the freshman team in the fall of 1964, noting: “An historic event produced the most noise from the stands with 2:07 left in the game. Willie Cooper, of Elm City, scored on his first shot, a high arching jump shot from the side. He is the first Negro to score two points for the Blue and White.”⁸⁰ Although the editors and

⁷⁷ See “Carolina Makes Big Catch: 1st Negro Signs UNC Grant,” *Chapel Hill Weekly*, 4 May 1966, p. 6.

⁷⁸ See Lawrence Maddy, “I Have Tremendous Optimism: Sitterson,” *Chapel Hill Weekly*, 11 May 1966, p. 2. The *Weekly* may have been more likely to broach issues of racial injustice because Chapel Hill was known as a relatively liberal town (the bitter response to the sit-in movement, notwithstanding). Such responses were, in any case, not uncommon. Head Football Coach Bill Dooley received a letter from a fan calling him “a traitor to his southern heritage” after signing Lanier. See Keith Patrick Howard, “Desegregation of College Football in the Southeastern United States” (Master’s Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2001), 29.

⁷⁹ See Kimberly Edens, “Pioneers: The Daily Tar Heel and the Integration of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,” (Undergraduate honors thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1990).

⁸⁰ “Freshmen Cagers Drop Baby Tigers By 87-56 Count,” *Daily Tar Heel*, 2 December 1964, p. 1.

writers made no further comment on the event, the newspaper's implicit approval of this development marked the *Tar Heel's* support of athletic integration.

Although the *Tar Heel's* initial story announcing Scott's decision essentially used the news wire report, the *Tar Heel* issued a follow-up story the following day that addressed off-court issues more thoroughly. Smith was quoted as saying that "the atmosphere for a Negro student" at UNC was the key factor in Scott's decision to attend the school. In particular, Scott and Smith wanted to emphasize Scott's academic goals as well as his athletic ones, and one telling comment from the article engaged the possibility of Scott's exploitation as an entertainer: "[Coach Dean] Smith said that Scott saw that he could be a part of the student body here and 'not just a gladiator.'"⁸¹ Speculating on the significance of UNC's racial climate and mentioning Scott's concern with the status of black athletes at large, the story thoughtfully considered issues ignored by the mainstream press.⁸² The article also addressed the basketball team's policy towards recruiting black athletes in general—again, something none of the mainstream papers bothered to report—with Smith saying that he would "recruit Negroes if they can fulfill the academic requirements at UNC and also do the job athletically."⁸³ Although this engagement with racial issues may have been motivated by students' hopes regarding the positive effects that black athletes would have on their teams' success, even in pursuing that rather prosaic goal the paper still opened up space for dialogue about race relations.

⁸¹ See Barry Jacobs, "Campus Atmosphere Helps Bring Charlie Scott Here," *Daily Tar Heel*, 5 May 1966, p. 5.

⁸² The specific term "gladiator" was often used by Edwards, and perhaps showed Smith's awareness of his efforts.

⁸³ See Jacobs, "Campus Atmosphere," p. 5.

The area's black newspapers approached the story of race and its intersection with Scott's career in two ways that differed from both the white mainstream and the white alternative presses. First, these black publications tended to emphasize black athletic milestones in greater detail; and second, they explicitly challenged the ideal of sports as a model for broader social equality. In spotlighting Scott's signing with UNC, for example, these newspapers emphasized the positive implications of this decision but also cautiously considered some of the negative implications for the African-American community. Although *The Carolinian* did not make special mention of Scott as the first black scholarship athlete in the area, it paired the story with a large photograph of Scott and J.C. Melton, the dean of students at Laurinburg, thus emphasizing the role a black institution played in preparing Scott academically for college.⁸⁴ The *Carolina Times* was more thorough in its coverage, devoting a front-page story to Scott's announcement, even though sports matters rarely achieved such prominent placement. Although the story itself merely mentioned that Scott was "the first of his race to receive an athletic grant-in-aid at UNC," it also mentioned Cooper's brief stint with the freshman team in 1964-1965.⁸⁵ The prominence given to this story in both papers indicates that many took pride—and a measure of hope—from Scott's ability to attend and play for the state's flagship public institution. Of course, the *Carolina Times* editorial, "The Diminishing Returns of Integration," also made clear the limits of Scott's symbolic role. Recognizing that integration would not in and of itself provide equality for African Americans, the paper's editors also implicitly questioned sports' virtue as a model of fairness and egalitarianism, anticipating the widespread athlete revolt of 1968.

⁸⁴ See "Cage Star Going to Carolina," *Carolinian*, 21 May 1966, p. 15.

⁸⁵ See "Scott to Attend UNC With Full Scholarship Agreement," *Carolina Times*, 7 May 1966, p. 1A, 6A.

Alternate responses to the controversy surrounding Scott's snub as Player of the Year also reveal that some whites, students, and African Americans were more willing to use athletic contests as opportunities to contest on-going racial issues. Both the *Weekly* and the *Tar Heel* discussed the injustice of the voting and allowed for some discourse of racial inequality. Although, curiously, none of the sports-page articles in the *Weekly* offered any commentary on the unfair voting, both an editorial and a letter to the editor offered caustic critiques of the situation. An editorial titled "Great Scott's Late Returns" called the decision of five journalists to leave Scott off of the ballots an "incredible miscarriage of justice." Further, the paper's editors sarcastically denounced the "sportswriters here and there who have been putting themselves on record as having voted for Charlie Scott," since it would appear from these public testimonials that Scott, by this new accounting, would have "about thirty times as many votes as all those cast for the ACC Player of the Year for the past decade, combined."⁸⁶ Not only disparaging the unfairness of the vote, the editorial accused the writers of being disingenuous by lying to avoid any racial controversy—although the paper did not, it should be noted, ever mention race explicitly.

F. Wilton Avery's letter to the editor on the same page, however, did tackle racism directly. After rhapsodizing about Scott's skills and unselfishness on the basketball court, Avery—a white medical school student⁸⁷—rhetorically asked whether Scott's "ability and value to his team and conference could not have been overlooked

⁸⁶ "Great Scott's Late Returns," *Chapel Hill Weekly*, 23 March 1969, p. B2.

⁸⁷ *Yackety Yack: The Yearbook of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill* (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Company, 1967), 461.

simply because of his color, could it?”⁸⁸ Avery’s letter suggested that the failure of the Player of the Year voting was offensive because it did not hold up to the standard of equal opportunity. The rhetoric of athletic integration had been that sports would provide a model where equal access would determine success regardless of race. However, as Avery noted in his critique, that ideal did not hold true in Scott’s case. The lingering legacy of prejudice prevented Scott from achieving the respect and admiration he deserved. Taken together, the editorial and the letter to the editor both show a willingness on the part of this marginal, local paper to tackle issues of racism and injustice head on.

The *Tar Heel* similarly questioned the long-held ideal of athletic equal opportunity in an opinion piece titled “An Extreme Injustice” by sports columnist Art Chansky. In the column, Coach Smith expressed his displeasure with the writers who left Scott off of their ballots, accusing them of being either “anti-North Carolina or anti-black.” Chansky himself sternly criticized “anyone that can let personal feelings like these effect [sic] judgment of a player’s performance on the court.” Although not printing any direct quotes from Scott indicating the racial bias implicit in the voting, Chansky did note that Scott lamented that he, like other players, wanted “to be appreciated.”⁸⁹ The writers who left Scott off of their ballot, in other words, did not follow through on the idealistic vision of sports being free from prejudice and solely based on merit.

⁸⁸ F. Wilton Avery, “The Greatest Scott of All,” Letter to the Editor, *Chapel Hill Weekly*, 23 March 1969, p. B2.

⁸⁹ Art Chansky, “An Extreme Injustice,” *Daily Tar Heel*, 19 May 1969, p. 4.

As Scott's career progressed, the area's black newspapers continued to hesitantly applaud black athletic achievement in predominantly white schools such as UNC, even as they grew increasingly skeptical about athletics' far-reaching implications. Although the *Carolina Times* offered no coverage of the ACC voting—not surprising, given that the paper was bi-weekly, had a fairly brief sports section in general, and seemed more interested in covering the historically-black schools in the CIAA—the paper did at least engage Scott's race more openly in its stories about him and the UNC team during this later period of his career. For example, in previewing UNC's appearance in the NCAA tournament regional finals, the paper highlighted “three very fine black athletes” who would be at the center of competition: Scott, Davidson's Mike Maloy, and St. John's University's Johnny Warren.⁹⁰ Even that recognition of the presence of black star athletes was missing in coverage from papers such as the *Morning Herald* and the *News and Observer*. *The Carolinian* similarly highlighted race more directly, pointing out that Scott's claiming of the ACC Tournament Most Outstanding Player award was “the first time this honor has been bestowed upon a Negro.”⁹¹ None of the other papers mentioned this fact. In this way, these black newspapers saw Scott's milestones and achievements as one more stepping stone on the pathway of progress.

In contrast, however, these African-American newspapers also acknowledged the very real limits of sports to effect broader changes. It is probably not a coincidence that a few weeks after Scott's snub, *The Carolinian* published a Negro Press International article by Joseph L. Turner about the impact of the black athlete on integration. The issue

⁹⁰ See Sam Davis, “UNC Beats Duke For Title On Scott's 40 Points,” *Carolina Times*, 15 March 1969, p. A7.

⁹¹ See “‘Great’ Scott Leads All in ACC Scoring,” 15 March 1969, p. 21.

would have had particular relevance to those who had watched Scott's story unfold. Offering insightful commentary about the limits of change possible through the success of black athletes, Turner argued that the apparent widespread "distinction" given to black athletes was only "token acceptance" of an elite few. Granting the popular embrace of black sports stars such as NBA great Bill Russell and tennis player Arthur Ashe, Turner pointed out that "acceptance" as an athlete did "not imply that the same respect [would] be given" to African Americans in more mundane professions. Turner also highlighted racism's continuing manifestations in the sporting world, where there were no black baseball managers, only one black quarterback in professional football, and other rampant "signs of racial discrimination." Thoughtful and probing, Turner's article was another sign that by the late 1960s many African Americans had become disenchanted with the potential of sports integration to initiate broader changes, another reflection of the changing climate of the civil rights movement. Observers saw Scott's snub as one more example of the failure of sports' egalitarian model.⁹²

The national news media, in covering Scott's story, also showed a growing disenchantment with the possibilities of sports integration. Because of UNC's prominence as a college basketball powerhouse—and the team's success in the nationally-covered NCAA tournament—Scott had the opportunity to provoke dialogue about race and integration in a wider realm than just North Carolina or even the southern states of the ACC. Some national news media outlets—apart from the Associated Press articles mentioned earlier—picked up on his story's significance. *Sports Illustrated's* Curry Kirkpatrick, writing a year after Scott's snub, described the heightened level of vitriol levied by opposing North Carolina State fans on Scott and fellow African-

⁹² See Joseph L. Turner, in "Spotlight on Sports" section, *Carolinian*, 29 March 1969, p. 23.

American teammate Bill Chamberlain, as State fans “spat” on the players. He also observes that, “in several key games [in the ACC that season] the ugly old racial epithet [apparently, “nigger”] has been heard from the stands.”⁹³ Unwilling to varnish the racist ugliness that still marred the gradually integrated ACC, Kirkpatrick refused to succumb to the “progressive” policy of smoothing over any signs of racial conflict.

That sense of disenchantment also pervaded *New York Times* writer James T. Wooten’s March 1969 article about Scott’s reception by white North Carolina fans. A cautionary assessment of sports’ transformative capabilities, Wooten’s article balanced the coverage of white fan esteem for Scott with a darker side of white fans’ responses.⁹⁴ Thus, Wooten pointed out that a white student who shouted “Charlie for God!” after Scott’s dramatic last-second shot to beat Davidson in the NCAA tournament, also made the observation that “‘niggers’ choke in the clutch” after Scott’s sub-par performance against Purdue in the national semifinal game a week later.⁹⁵ This story reveals the duality of some white sports spectators—both their idolization and appreciation of Scott as a basketball star, and their loathing of him as a member of a supposedly suspicious and inferior race. That one incident was not an isolated event. Lawyer Dan Pollitt recalled that a few years into Scott’s career at UNC, after Wake Forest had brought in black players Charlie Davis and Norwood Todmann, a Tar Heel fan yelled: “‘Hey, ref! Hey,

⁹³ See Curry Kirkpatrick, “One More War to Go,” *Sports Illustrated*, 2 March 1970, 12-15. For his discussion of these racial incidents, see 15.

⁹⁴ See James T. Wooten, “Negro Basketball Star a Hero To Many North Carolina Whites,” *The New York Times*, 22 March 1969, p. 20.

⁹⁵ Wooten, “Negro Basketball Star,” p. 20. That one fan was not the only one to blame Scott for the team’s loss to Purdue. In a column following the game, Chansky chastised UNC fans for “badmouthing” the team after the loss. He felt compelled to remind students: “that Charlie Scott nearly won the Atlantic Coast Conference Tournament single handedly. And that Davidson would have been Purdue’s opponent had it not been for Scott.” It seems clear that many assigned responsibility for the loss to Scott, an additional burden for a player already weighted down with many pressures. See Art Chansky, “Not Typical of Carolina,” *Daily Tar Heel*, 22 March 1969, p. 4.

ref! Them Wake Forest niggers are after our colored boys!” Pollitt ruefully observed: “Charlie Scott was now our colored boy.”⁹⁶ Despite Scott’s achievements on the court, some white fans persisted in falling back on damaging stereotypes, and using derogatory names, regarding African Americans. In his article, Wooten speculated optimistically that Scott would, in general, help encourage the integration of universities in the South and a lessening of racial stereotypes, but his inclusion of the still-present racism among fans cautioned that such gains were never made without serious conflict.

One particular aspect of Scott’s career, his on-campus political activism, illustrates best the diverse hopes and anxieties attached to his stardom. When Scott was approached by members of the BSM to become involved in various political activities, he found himself in an awkward position, as he struggled to balance his desire to help fellow black students and still be a moderate enough figure, in his words, “that other blacks could come [to UNC] after” him.⁹⁷ At one point, members of the BSM even asked him to boycott a game in support of their efforts. An anguished Scott approached Smith about the matter. Although the head coach had publicly supported Scott’s role in the meeting with Sitterson, he hesitated to give his blessing to a one-game boycott, fearful that he would be fired if he condoned such an action. Scott, too, worried how his teammates and others would respond to such a dramatic step.⁹⁸ In many ways, the youthful Scott was in an extremely delicate position. In essentially the same role Robinson had played in MLB in the late 1940s—acting as a racial trailblazer in a previously all-white institution—Scott

⁹⁶ Jacobs, *Across the Line*, 113.

⁹⁷ Briggs, “Tale of Two Pioneers,” 100-03.

⁹⁸ Jacobs, *Across the Line*, 119. Scott did not begrudge Smith his hesitance, arguing that the idea of a boycott was more of “a power move by the black students” than a genuine good cause.

faced pressures the baseball pioneer had not. Most black leaders and activists had been content for Robinson to let his on-field actions suffice as a political statement, especially in his first three years in MLB, on the assumption that outspoken activism would close opportunities to other black athletes. However, the political climate had shifted by the time of Scott's career. By 1968, black activists wanted athletes to use their prestige to advocate on behalf of issues relevant to the African-American community. But Scott had many of the same worries that Robinson had in the late 1940s—namely, that politically-charged incidents involving the first black athletes in the ACC would prevent other black athletes from following in his footsteps.

Scott had reason to be concerned about people's responses to his involvement with the BSM. After the flare-up over the Player of the Year voting, Avery, in his letter to the editor, pondered whether his activism had cost him votes.⁹⁹ *Charlotte News* writer Bill Ballenger also wondered if Scott's work with the BSM had influenced voting, noting that Scott was "under pressure from black militant groups to quit basketball as a gesture against inequality in the system."¹⁰⁰ Similarly, a *Morning Herald* reporter asked Scott if the skewed voting had anything to do with his involvement in the BSM. He angrily replied, "That has nothing to do with that ... That's for all black students. This only concerns basketball."¹⁰¹ Some white fans (who disdained black political activism as a sign of the failure of "progressivism") and black students (who often felt Scott was not

⁹⁹ Avery, "Greatest Scott of All," p. B2.

¹⁰⁰ Bill Ballenger, "Scott Hints He May Quit; Miffed By All-ACC Voting," *Charlotte News*, 14 March 1969, p. 16A.

¹⁰¹ "Scott Sore," p. 2C.

doing as much as he could for social issues) would have disagreed.¹⁰² Indeed, Wooten noted that bar patrons in Hickory, North Carolina watching the national semifinal game against Purdue, cheered for Scott early in the game, but then later entertained the theory that Scott purposefully played poorly because he was “mad at the school” because of the on-going protests led by the BSM.¹⁰³

The one local press outlet to support Scott’s activism was the *Daily Tar Heel*. After Scott and Chamberlain met with Sitterson in February 1969, the newspaper published an editorial that praised the players for their decision to “use their positions as basketball stars as a club to force the Administration to act,” even though their actions would likely “gall a lot of people.” To the editors, it was “only proper” that black athletes use their “power” to help black causes, and they thought the two basketball players showed “maturity of intellect” and “courage of action.”¹⁰⁴ Sports Editor Owen Davis similarly praised the two, writing that he supported black athletes who decided to

¹⁰² Briggs, “Tale of Two Pioneers,” 102-3. Scott’s dilemma in this regard was certainly not unique; as David K. Wiggins has argued, black athletes across the nation in the late 1960s had “to come to grips with their conflicting roles and demands as athletes and black Americans,” and determine their level of participation in the civil rights movement. However, although Wiggins argues that “black athletes exerted a newfound sense of independence and exhibited a willingness to challenge racially discriminatory practices” in this time period, he may have underestimated the difficult position that Scott, and other pioneer athletes in the South, faced. See Wiggins, “The Year of Awakening,” 105, 110.

¹⁰³ Wooten, “Negro Basketball Star,” p. 20.

¹⁰⁴ “Scott, Chamberlain Right In Supporting Demands,” Editorial, *Daily Tar Heel*, 19 February 1969, p. 2. The *Daily Tar Heel* was also the lone area newspaper to support the demands brought forth by the BSM. When Sitterson initially balked at the BSM’s grievances, the *DTH* editorial board called his response “an unfortunate failure.” On that same page the newspaper printed editorials from the *Greensboro Daily News*, the *Durham Herald*, and the *Charlotte Observer*—all praised Sitterson for his response to the demands. See “University Has No Case For Racial Complacency,” Editorial, *Daily Tar Heel*, 5 February 1969, p. 2. Even the *Chapel Hill News* expressed bemusement at on-campus black activism. An editorial commented ironically that in contrast to the aims of the civil rights movements of the 1950s and early 1960s, the current conflicts were marked by “black students demanding all-black dormitories, black curricula, black deans for black students, black student government for blacks in brief, a black microcosm within predominantly white institutions.” These new aims seemed to the editors to be “flatly opposed to those in the forefront of the civil rights movement” of the recent past. See “A Most Confusing Situation,” Editorial, *Chapel Hill News*, 19 February 1969, p. II-2.

“take their stand.” Although he guessed that the two would “be branded as troublemakers,” Davis encouraged them to persevere, writing that “few achieve greatness by avoiding controversy.” Specifically targeting UNC’s progressive image, he noted that the school was not the “spiritual nirvana” that many believed it to be. By calling attention to inequalities on campus, the two athletes were following their convictions and “should be respected by all for doing what they feel is right.” Davis then described a scene from the team’s recent trip to play against the University of Maryland. According to Davis, as the team’s bus “passed by long streets of tenement row houses” that were populated “almost exclusively” with black residents, “Scott . . . peered out the bus window.” A somber Davis wrote: “He can’t pretend that what he saw is not real. The day of the dumb jock is fast fading.” The *DTH* sports editor encouraged Scott to “follow his conscience.”¹⁰⁵ As a star athlete, a celebrity, Scott was assigned often competing roles by observers. Some hoped that he could help push ever-greater political and economic gains for minorities, while others hoped to limit his achievements to the basketball court and took offense to any activism he did off of it. These divergent responses illustrate the ways in which sports provided an opportunity to figuratively wrestle with the changing meanings of race, and the changing climate of the late civil rights movement.

Conclusion: the 1970 Season, Sports, and the Changing Meanings of Race

The year following the Tar Heels’ Final Four loss and the controversies surrounding the BSM protests and the ACC voting turned out to be a season of ups and downs for Scott. Before the season, the team’s players voted Scott and fellow seniors

¹⁰⁵ Owen Davis, “Heel Prints,” *Daily Tar Heel*, 21 February 1969, p. 5.

Eddie Fogler and Jim Delaney tri-captains—a significant symbolic victory for the team’s first-ever black player. The *Daily Tar Heel* also published a lengthy feature story about the star in its season preview. Art Chansky wrote that Scott had “come a long way” as a person during his time in Chapel Hill. Noting that Scott had been scrutinized “athletically, socially, politically and racially” during his time on campus, he praised the player for handling all of the pressure as well as he did. Scott credited his “more serious” demeanor to “the Olympics ... and, oh yes, the ACC writers,” a jibe at the disappointment he had encountered the previous spring. He also acknowledged his growing political consciousness: “I cast away the privileged characteristics that I inherited when I came here. ... I have taken my place as an average American black man in society. In doing so, I’ve become much more aware, but I’ve gained far more responsibility.”¹⁰⁶ A reflective Scott certainly did not shy away from the activism that may have cost him votes the year before.

On the court, the team surged to an impressive record early in the season, only to stumble late. Failing to make the NCAA tournament, the team lost in the first round of the National Invitational Tournament. For Scott personally, however, it was another year of on-court excellence. Leading the league in scoring, Scott dazzled fans across the country with skillful all-around play, and was named to either first team or second team of nearly every major All-America squad. Once again, however, he lost out to Roche for player of the year honors. This time, voters decided to reward the best player on the best team, even though Roche’s individual scoring, passing, and rebound numbers were not nearly as impressive as Scott’s. Campus voices, again, cried foul; Chansky argued that

¹⁰⁶ Art Chansky, “All-American Charles Scott Has Travelled [sic] A Long Way,” *Daily Tar Heel*, 25 November 1969, p. 1, “Basketball Preview.”

no “other criteria” besides race could explain why Roche won the award that year. At least one other *DTH* staff member agreed. Beneath Chansky’s column, the newspaper printed an un-titled cartoon that showed Ku Klux Klan members, in full regalia, putting pieces of paper marked “Roche” into a box that said “ACC Player of the Year.”¹⁰⁷



Figure 4.3. Editorial cartoon from the *Daily Tar Heel*, March 1970.

Mainstream media reporters again kept their silence. Scott was eventually selected as the ACC “Athlete of the Year” in 1970, leading him to speculate in later years that “something must have touched a nerve.”¹⁰⁸ His peers rewarded him as best they could:

¹⁰⁷ Art Chansky, “Writers ‘Ran’ True To Form,” *Daily Tar Heel*, 11 March 1970, p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ Chansky, *Dean’s List*, 53.

the campus yearbook editors selected him as one of four seniors to earn the Frank Porter Graham Award for academic excellence, a commitment to the university, and public service.¹⁰⁹ As Scott left the school for a lengthy (and successful) career in professional basketball, he offered his final thoughts on his trail-blazing role at the school in an interview with Chansky: “I’ve never regretted going to North Carolina. . . . I’d do it again. It was fun and that’s part of what going to college is supposed to be. If I have a son, I hope he goes to North Carolina.”¹¹⁰

When Charlie Scott decided to attend UNC to play basketball, he surely knew that he was embarking on a challenging four years. As a racial pioneer, at a school where basketball was tremendously popular, he would be subject to intense scrutiny. The eyes of an entire state—even an entire region—would be focused on him as he visibly altered one of the last public bastions of segregation in the South. As Scott acknowledged in looking back on his experiences, he felt burdened by the pressure that went along with his career: “I couldn’t just be an ordinary basketball player. . . . I had to be better. I also had to be better academically—I couldn’t just be an ordinary student.”¹¹¹ He also had to navigate the turbulent racial politics of the era, testing the limits of acceptable activism. Still, for all the courage his decision required as a political and social action, it’s worth remembering the human dimension to his experiences. His struggle was often a lonely one. “I gave away my whole social life for college,” Scott lamented in later years. “. . . at

¹⁰⁹ See *Yackety Yack* (Winston-Salem, NC: Hunter Publishing, 1970), 94.

¹¹⁰ Art Chansky, “A Lone Victory,” *Daily Tar Heel*, 18 March 1970, p. 4. Scott was certainly well-prepared to pursue a career in professional basketball following his four years at UNC. He earned numerous accolades during his ten-year professional career in the American Basketball Association and the National Basketball Association, including the ABA’s Rookie of the Year Award in 1971, and an NBA championship with the Boston Celtics in 1976. He became a successful businessman when his playing career ended.

¹¹¹ Jacobs, *Across the Line*, 114.

that time [white] people did not associate with blacks. ... And blacks did not socialize with whites. So, therefore, my social life was very limited to what North Carolina had to offer.”¹¹² Isolated, barraged with racial taunts, particularly on the road, and always subjected to a higher standard of scrutiny than white players—as the ACC Player of the Year awards from 1969 and 1970 reveal—Scott deserves immense credit for his courage in choosing to be such an important trailblazer in the Jim Crow South.

His importance as a role model cannot be underestimated. One of the first black football players at UNC, Charles Waddell, a first-team All-American, said he decided to go to UNC in part because of Scott. According to Waddell, Scott’s status as the first black scholarship athlete at UNC made him “the guy that ... we [black athletes at UNC] looked up to.”¹¹³ Collis Temple, a black basketball player who lived in the Louisiana bayous, “watched the Tar Heels on television” and aspired to mimic Scott’s success, eventually becoming the first black player at Louisiana State University.¹¹⁴ Scott himself believed that his success at the school had changed young people’s perceptions of race, as white fans aspired to measure up to black athletic heroes: “I think that having little white kids wanting to be like blacks had a more direct effect on race relations than anything else. Then you’re changing people’s ideologies.”¹¹⁵ Nearly forty years after he had played his last game for UNC, “people ... especially black people, but also whites” approached him to “talk about the significance” that his UNC career “had on their

¹¹² Briggs, “Tale of Two Pioneers,” 91.

¹¹³ Howard, “Desegregation of College Football,” 28.

¹¹⁴ Jacobs, *Across the Line*, 98.

¹¹⁵ Briggs, “Tale of Two Pioneers,” 86.

lives.”¹¹⁶ Scott clearly had a profound influence on the sports landscape at UNC, in the ACC, and in the South in general.

And yet measuring Scott’s influence may prove less profitable than considering the terms by which white and black observers used his career to different ends in a tumultuous time period. Cautious white leaders—from newspaper editors to university administrators—may have welcomed Scott’s contributions on the court but were deeply anxious about his broader significance off of it. In minimizing opportunities for open dialogue about race and the inequalities of the Jim Crow South, these leaders clearly feared a negative reaction from white patrons, whether these were newspaper readers, university students, parents, or wealthy alumni. Hiding behind the veil of progressivism and distancing themselves from open discussion of Scott’s racial significance enabled them to avoid conflict, even as it tended to limit Scott’s contributions to the basketball court. In a sense, these white leaders probably fulfilled the desires of many whites who wished to circumscribe integration. By not exploring the racist implications of Scott’s voting, for example, newspaper editors managed to avoid controversy even as they prevented an opportunity to question just how far-reaching athletic integration could be for social change. The myth that simply providing blacks with equal access to previously cordoned-off areas of life would erase centuries of racism would have been easily disproved by acknowledging the distressing continuities in white fans’ reactions to athletes such as Scott.

At the same time, numerous alternate voices, from the black press, from the university press, and even from the local town newspaper, all pushed for a more frank engagement with changing racial politics. By the time Scott arrived at UNC, many

¹¹⁶ Jacobs, *Across the Line*, 99.

blacks and whites had begun to lose faith in the transformative power of athletics to alter society. In their calls for recognition of the validity of Scott's political work with the BSM, in their support of his cries of racism when he was left off of the all-ACC ballot, and even in their continued willingness to discuss his racial significance, these alternate sources suggest that others took Scott's model as a cautious test case of the promise of integration and equality suggested by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. More often than not, black writers noted the continuity of racism instead of the change, and they worried about the negative effects of integration on thriving all-black institutions. Scott's success alongside white teammates was inspiring to some degree for these black and white audiences, but it was not an end point for the struggle for equality. Rather, they hoped to use his stardom to push for more awareness of continuing racism and the on-going political and economic inequalities that still limited African Americans' possibilities.

There was no one way to read Scott's story, nor were there necessarily two ways equally divided between black and white fans. Instead, Scott's story brings to mind some of the various forces merging, colliding, and glancing off of one another in the late 1960s. Students, alumni, and other fans wanted a team that would win and embraced integration as a way to level the playing field against teams that had already done so. Some black activists hoped to use the celebrity of athletes to push for larger social, economic, and political gains for African Americans. Nervous whites beholden to Jim Crow feared what the recognition of black athletes meant for long-held standards about the "appropriate" behaviors of black men. White community leaders worried athletic integration would lead to ugly racial conflict, giving their region a negative public image. Some black

community leaders, alternatively, feared that Scott's example would lead to a drain of talented African Americans from black colleges and other institutions. Far from an exhaustive list, this summary nonetheless suggests the many symbolic weights Scott's career could bear, and perhaps indicates why so many paid so close attention to his brilliant achievements. As one player out of five Tar Heels on the court, Scott stood out because of his race. As fans followed the trajectory of his career, they framed his exploits against a changing time when what it meant to be black in the South no longer seemed to apply. As the path to the goal of racial equality seemed, to some distressingly and to others gloriously, at least partly open, various sets of eyes followed Scott, hoping and fearing just what his successes would mean.

Chapter Five

“To End the Racist and Discriminatory Practices”: Alabama Football and the Struggle to Integrate, 1969-1973

In August 1970, A. M. “Tonto” Coleman, the commissioner of the Southeastern Conference (SEC), an athletic association of prominent (and predominantly white) southern universities, wrote an impassioned column in which he described the moral worth and intrinsic values of college football. Published in the *Birmingham News*’ annual college football preview, Coleman’s column would have had special resonance with the newspaper’s local readers, who ranked among the most passionate fans in the nation. Many rooted enthusiastically for the University of Alabama (UA), located only sixty miles from Birmingham in Tuscaloosa. The school’s football team had won three national championships in the 1960s under celebrated head coach Paul “Bear” Bryant, and had brought considerable pride to state residents. In his column, Coleman earnestly described college football as: “a universal language wherein the doctor, the lawyer, the minister, the baker, the candlestick-maker, and even the town drunk can get together and talk”; “an opportunity for an education” for football players and the other athletic programs funded by football’s revenues; “the common denominator of the faculty, the student body, the alumni, and ‘Joe Fan’”; “the generator of ... college spirit”; and a vital force in “the building of a competitive spirit and character.” He believed that athletic competition would, in a tumultuous time period, “result in building the leadership ...

which will keep America strong.” He saw it counteracting the “selfishness ... complacency ... [and] apathy” he believed was infecting the nation.¹

Although people had often ascribed a range of virtues to athletic competition, Coleman’s lengthy missive took on an especially urgent tone because of the increasingly radical activism that characterized the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. In the realm of sports, moreover, desegregation had finally reached the schools of the Deep South, another destabilizing shift for both whites and blacks. Bowing to public and competitive pressures, most schools in the SEC had begun to integrate their athletic teams by 1970, placing black athletes in positions previously reserved for white athletic heroes.² Although UA had not yet fielded a black player on its varsity squad, change was coming in that regard, and readers of the *Birmingham News* likely knew it. Meanwhile, across the nation, anti-war protests, civil rights demonstrations, affirmative action policies, and black athletic boycotts combined, in the eyes of many whites, to undermine the values of American society. With distress, the local mainstream media reported on the activities of groups such as the Black Panthers, regularly devoting front-page stories to gatherings of black radical groups even when their meetings took place far from Alabama. Upset by the perceived upheaval in society, and the revolutionary boasts of these and other groups, many whites looked to athletics as a salve, a restoration of order in a chaotic time. For local African Americans, college football offered another possibility—a recognition of black achievement in the South and a welcome opportunity for upward mobility. College

¹ Tonto Coleman, “Football? What is it?...” *Birmingham News*, 23 August 1970, p. F-14.

² The first SEC school to integrate its football team was the University of Kentucky, in 1966. The University of Tennessee followed in 1968, and the University of Arkansas, Vanderbilt University, Mississippi State University, the University of Florida, and Auburn University all fielded black players in 1970. UA integrated its varsity squad in 1971. The final three schools to integrate in 1972 were Louisiana State University, the University of Mississippi, and the University of Georgia. See Briggs, “Tale of Two Pioneers,” 173.

football's popularity in the state inspired black leaders and civil rights activists to campaign for African-American athletes' inclusion in UA's prominent football program. But black leaders had their own concerns. Anxieties regarding the preservation of black-run institutions, such as universities, heightened as the 1960s ended and the 1970s began. As a result, many in the black press promoted college athletic teams from historically-black schools with an increasing sense of urgency.

As the UA football team sluggishly integrated its football team, these hopes and anxieties would color public discussion of the team's changing character. A number of key moments surrounding the team illuminated these debates in particularly evocative ways: a 1969 lawsuit filed by the school's student-run Afro-American Association that called for the school to recruit black athletes with the same diligence as whites; a humiliating season-opening defeat to the integrated University of Southern California (USC) team in the fall of 1970; and public discussion of the recruitment, and debuts, of the team's first black players, Wilbur Jackson and John Mitchell. The presence of Bear Bryant—a respected and beloved coach for many white Alabamians—loomed over all of these events, as his actions had the potential to set an example for integration across the state.³ As the civil rights movement fractured and lost steam with the dawning of the 1970s, the University of Alabama's highly-esteemed and publicly visible football team offered a compelling opportunity to test how racial integration might work in the Deep South. Would white southerners accept black players on a team that had been a source of regional (white) pride? Would southern blacks welcome the chance to play, or even cheer, for the prestigious program, or would they maintain their loyalty to the black

³ Bryant was so beloved by Alabama residents that, according to biographer Allen Barra, the day after he died in 1983, "the entire area code for the state of Alabama ... had been shut down from overload." See Allen Barra, *The Last Coach: A Life of Paul "Bear" Bryant* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), xiv.

institutions that had been central to their community in previous years? Could black and white southerners work together to achieve success, and, if so, under what terms? In the waning years of the civil rights movement, the discourse surrounding the UA football team provided some answers to these questions, revealing the depth of white resistance to affirmative action and the continuing challenges in building broad support for civil rights activism. Paradoxically, in its successes and failures, the team also shed new light on the heartening possibilities—and discouraging limitations—of college sports to model an equal opportunity society.

Bear Bryant, Black Athletes, and the Changing Climate of Civil Rights

The Alabama football team, because of a confluence of factors, offered a particularly rich site to test racial integration in the Deep South. As a state, Alabama had been the site for some of the most famous, and infamous, moments in the civil rights movement. Together with its neighbor Mississippi, Alabama had one of the worst reputations with regards to the abuse of black rights and systematic brutality directed at its African-American residents. The Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 and 1956, begun when activist Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of a segregated bus, had marked an important early victory for civil rights activists (and led to the ascension of a young newcomer to the city, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.). The Southern Christian Leadership Council's (SCLC) Birmingham campaign in April and May 1963 had been another important event, galvanizing northern white support for the black struggle for equality. Millions across the nation watched in horror as police officers, led by notorious white commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor, sprayed non-violent protesters and marchers

with fire hoses and unleashed police dogs on demonstrating high school students. These events, along with a host of others, placed the state at the center of the national civil rights struggle.

On June 11, 1963, the University of Alabama itself entered national discussions of race relations. When black students Vivien Malone and James Hood attempted to enroll at the school that day, Alabama Governor George Wallace vowed to defy a court order insisting on their right to attend the state's flagship public university. Wallace was an avowed supporter of segregation, announcing in his inaugural address only five months previously that he would keep segregation alive in Alabama "forever." To demonstrate his disapproval of the court decision, the governor stood in the doorway to the university's main building. With a large crowd of journalists and pro-segregation Alabamians on hand, and Americans across the nation watching, scores of National Guard soldiers insured the two students' safety when Wallace finally stood aside.⁴ The intense struggle for the two African-American students to enroll inspired President John F. Kennedy to address the nation that night, calling for a new civil rights bill that would outlaw discrimination in public accommodations and public education.⁵

Many praised UA President Frank Rose, and the school's students and administrators, for their peaceful welcoming of Hood and Malone once Wallace stepped aside (Malone, in fact, graduated from the school in 1965—the first African American to do so). However, a significant number of state residents expressed disgust with the

⁴ Suzanne Rau Wolfe, *The University of Alabama: A Pictorial History* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1983), 212-13.

⁵ For more on the effects of the stand in the schoolhouse door, see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1988), 822-24.

university administration's perceived hesitance to disobey the federal government.⁶ Rose received a number of letters from angry whites regarding the showdown. One unnamed writer accused Rose of being "ready to sell the white race down the river to be a Bunch of mongrels."⁷ An un-named University of Alabama student pleaded with Rose "to stand in the door with Governor Wallace," believing that gesture would be "a stand with the people of this state."⁸ As these examples (and the countless other letters Rose received) attest, many white Alabamians were quite distressed to see the university integrated, fearful of what this change meant for long-standing social customs regarding the "proper" places of blacks and whites.

As the school admitted a trickle of black students in the years following the stand in the schoolhouse door, football coach Bear Bryant continued to succeed with all-white teams. According to historian Andrew Doyle, white Alabamians took special pride in Bryant's squads, as they provided "undeniable proof of achievement and legitimacy for a state that historically led the nation only in adult illiteracy and infant mortality." Given the racial make-up of his teams, Bryant also served as a symbol for a defiant South in the

⁶ According to the historian Suzanne Rau Wolfe, "the University's subsequent peaceful integration and Rose's firm leadership," after Wallace's stand-off with federal troops, earned Rose acclaim from "publications around the country." See Wolfe, *University of Alabama: A Pictorial History*, 206.

⁷ Crank Letters folder, President Frank Rose Papers, William Stanley Hoole Special Collections Library, the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa.

⁸ Letter to Frank Rose, May 27, 1963, Integration, Crank Letters 1963 folder, President Frank Rose Papers. The school's faculty appeared to be more liberal in its racial views: the student hesitated to sign the letter "because of the attitude of the faculty." Those who believed Rose to be a proponent of racial equality might have been surprised to discover that he warmly thanked Hill Ferguson for sending a report he had written, entitled "One of the University of Alabama's Tragic Eras." The document analyzed the serious problems that came with integration—in particular, the issue of "Mongrelization." See Hill Ferguson, "One of the University of Alabama's Tragic Eras," Integration, Crank Letters 1963 folder, President Frank Rose Papers.

face of increasing pressure to integrate.⁹ That role was laden with irony, as the taciturn head coach was actually something of a racial moderate, having had black friends while growing up poor in Arkansas. In his 1974 autobiography, Bryant even insisted that he had actually tried to integrate the University of Kentucky football team in the late 1940s, when he served as the team's head coach, but had been denied by the university president. Be that as it may, by the mid-1960s, the coach hesitated to recruit black players for his Alabama squad, knowing that the state's governor was a staunch segregationist and fearing that white fans might not be willing to accept black players.¹⁰ According to former recruiting coordinator Clem Gryska, Bryant was also "looking for the right players who would make the transition without causing any added attention to the program." The coach felt that the school "did not need another schoolhouse door episode," and he felt that Wallace's race-baiting made it difficult for him to act on his desire to have black players on the team.¹¹

⁹ Andrew Doyle, "An Atheist in Alabama Is Someone Who Doesn't Believe in Bear Bryant: A Symbol for an Embattled South," in Patrick B. Miller, ed., *Sporting World of the Modern South* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 247-75. Quotation from 250.

¹⁰ See Paul W. Bryant and John Underwood, *Bear: The Hard Life and Good Times of Alabama's Coach Bryant* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1974), 299-306. Even after Bryant decided to integrate the team, he still worried about public response. Condredge Holloway, an African-American quarterback who aspired to attend UA, said that when he met with Bryant in 1970 during his recruitment, the coach told him: "I'd love to have you at Alabama, but Alabama's not ready for a black quarterback." Holloway said he appreciated Bryant's "honest" appraisal of the situation, and he ended up attending the University of Tennessee instead, where he did play quarterback. See Keith Dunnivant, *Coach: The Life of Paul 'Bear' Bryant* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 259. As to Bryant's racial views, although the coach wrote that he did not "agree with everything Martin Luther King said," he insisted that he "saw the wisdom in most of it." See Bryant, *Bear*, 299.

¹¹ John David Briley, *Career in Crisis: Paul "Bear" Bryant and the 1971 Season of Change* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006), 36.



Figure 5.1. Photograph of Paul “Bear” Bryant. UA’s coach, pictured here wearing his trademark hounds-tooth hat, remains a beloved figure in Alabama. The UA team currently plays at Bryant-Denny Stadium, and the on-campus Paul W. Bryant Museum celebrates his considerable success as the team’s football coach from 1958 to 1982. Photo available online at the Paul Bryant Museum: <http://bryantmuseum.ua.edu/includes/gallery/images/2.jpg>

Regardless of the coach’s personal feelings, Bryant hardly took a leadership role in those tumultuous years following the schoolhouse door incident.¹² In fact, it was a desire to keep his team competitive more than any change in the racial atmosphere that inspired Bryant to integrate. As national opinion turned against segregation, Bryant’s all-white team paid the price in bowl games and in polls determining the national champion. For example, although officials from the Rose Bowl expressed interest in having Alabama play in the 1962 game, political pressure, led by writers such as Jim Murray of

¹² Bryant believed that integrating his team as a political act, in direct conflict with the governor’s desires, was not the appropriate response: “you don’t change people’s thinking overnight,” he wrote. “When folks are ignorant, you don’t condemn them, you teach ‘em.” See Bryant, *Bear*, 300.

the *Los Angeles Times*, caused the committee to back away.¹³ Murray, a heavy-handed and opinionated columnist, caused great consternation among Alabama fans. Using his syndicated column, Murray protested bitterly when Alabama won the national championship again in 1964, suggesting that the team merely won the “Front-of-the-Bus championship” because of its refusal to schedule integrated teams for regular-season contests.¹⁴ Although Alabama residents wrote letters to Bryant declaring their support for him and ridiculing Murray, the writer’s protestations appeared to work. In 1966, Alabama did not win the national championship, despite being undefeated, while Notre Dame, with one tie on its record, claimed the title.¹⁵

White Alabamians expressed their outrage in a variety of forms, but appeared uninterested in calling for more games against integrated teams—or for the integration of the team itself. The Alabama Broadcasters Association named Bryant the “Citizen of the Year” for 1966, in an effort to make up for the “lost” championship, and the State House felt compelled to “heartily congratulate” Bryant for the award in an official resolution for “his tremendous contribution for the whole State of Alabama.”¹⁶ Students on campus seethed as well. Campus newspaper *Crimson-White* sports editor Tommy Roberts

¹³ Doyle, “Symbol for an Embattled South,” 254-58.

¹⁴ Doyle, “Symbol for an Embattled South,” 263. Original citation is *Los Angeles Times*, December 4, 1964, III-1. Although it was true that UA did not schedule regular-season games against integrated teams, Bryant had actually advocated for the squad to be permitted to play integrated teams in post-season bowl games. As a result, the team faced an integrated team from Pennsylvania State University in the Liberty Bowl in December 1959. See Bryant, *Bear*, 301.

¹⁵ This “outrage” inspired Bull Connor to write Bryant a letter commiserating that Bryant and his team had been dealt with unfairly. See Doyle, “Symbol for an Embattled South,” 265. Keith Dunnivant devoted an entire book to the saga of the 1966 team. See Dunnivant, *The Missing Ring: How Bear Bryant and the 1966 Alabama Crimson Tide Were Denied College Football’s Most Elusive Prize* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007).

¹⁶ “House Joint Resolution No. 49,” Athletics, 1967 folder, President David Mathews Papers, William Stanley Hoole Special Collections Library, the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa.

bitterly complained that “stupid polls” had denied the team its just rewards. He also spotlighted Murray, writing that the columnist “showed up with that old segregation flag as his standard and proceeded to tear not only Alabama football but also the whole South apart.”¹⁷ Roberts did not, however, call for the team to recruit black players, one obvious solution to the “biased” treatment the team received from the national media.

It was surely no coincidence that Bryant first addressed the subject of black football players with university administrators only three months after that disappointment, explaining that he and his staff had no plans “to recruit colored athletes from out-of-the-state at this time, but certainly would be interested in any who qualify within the State.”¹⁸ The “lost championship” of 1966 seemed to light a fire under the long-time head coach.¹⁹ Bryant also made it clear that he would treat black players the same as their teammates. In his letter to school administrators, the coach indicated that one black student had approached him in the previous year about the possibility of joining the team, but had decided against trying out because of academic concerns. Bryant indicated that he told the young man “that he would be treated like any other candidate” and that the coaching staff “discussed this candidate” with the rest of the

¹⁷ Tommy Roberts, “Scooter On Sports,” *Crimson-White*, 12 January 1967, p. 5.

¹⁸ Paul Bryant to Frank A. Rose and Jeff Bennett, March 20, 1967, Athletics, Department of folder, President Frank Rose Papers. Bryant’s decision to start recruiting only in-state African American athletes stemmed from his belief that out-of-state players were unlikely to attend the school because of its negative image in the national media. See Ed Darling, “On Bowls, Recruiting, Coaching, Future,” *Tuscaloosa News*, 18 November 1970, p. 7.

¹⁹ Bryant admits as much in his autobiography, writing that he was mostly interested in getting “good players” when he attempted to integrate the team. He “wanted to win” and lamented that he could not keep the best black athletes in the state. See Bryant, *Bear*, 300.

team, “making sure they understood that he was a candidate like themselves, and would receive the same treatment from the staff and other members of the squad.”²⁰

The coaching staff actually had the opportunity to act on their egalitarian ideals only one month later. When spring practice opened on April 2, 1967, five black players showed up to try out for the team, an event the local media covered with some interest.²¹ However, because none of the players ever made the varsity squad, the incident did not generate much lasting discussion. The experiences of Andrew Pernell, a black student from Bessemer, Alabama, however, revealed how the team’s lackluster efforts at recruiting black athletes impeded blacks’ opportunities to make the team, even as walk-ons. Although Pernell was gifted enough to make the squad, and actually participated in spring practice with the squad in 1967 and 1968, he had to leave the team because NCAA regulations prohibited walk-on football players from receiving outside scholarships. In order to stay on the team, Pernell would have had to give up his private scholarship, an option he could not afford. The other possibility would have been for the football team to give Pernell a football scholarship, but Bryant and the coaching staff insisted that the team was at the limit allowed by the NCAA—even though the school was permitted to provide up to 125 players with scholarships at that time.²²

By 1968, Pernell and the other black players had found allies in their quest to integrate the UA squad: the Afro-American Association (AAA), a student group formed

²⁰ Bryant to Rose and Bennett, March 20, 1967. There is no record of the administration’s response to Bryant’s recruiting plan.

²¹ See, for example, “Bryant Checks Negro Hopefuls,” *Tuscaloosa News*, 6 April 1967, and Tommy Roberts, “Tide Spring Drills Open With 151 Reporting,” *Crimson-White*, 3 April 1967, p. 6.

²² For more on Pernell’s experiences, see John Croft, “Bear’s ‘Handicap’ Of Segregation To Be No More,” *Crimson-White*, 26 November 1968, p. 2.

that year. Although the number of black students remained very low—even by the spring of 1971, there were approximately 340 black students out of a total population of about 13,000 students—those who had managed to gain admittance to the university found support and solidarity through the AAA.²³ Pernell’s experiences, and the football team’s policies towards black athletes, provided some of the first opportunities for the group to organize. When Pernell was prohibited from playing in the team’s annual “A-Day” game in 1968, an inter-squad scrimmage at the conclusion of spring practice, because of his scholarship situation, the group distributed leaflets accusing the school of racism.²⁴ As the start of fall semester approached, the group also published an open letter to the university community that called for a number of initiatives, including one that emphasized that the university should “actively” recruit black athletes and offer them scholarships.²⁵ Two weeks after that letter, on August 15, 1968, AAA leaders Edward Nall and Moses Jones met with Bryant to discuss black athlete recruitment. According to Willard F. Gray, the Chairman of the Faculty Committee on Intercollegiate Athletics who was in attendance at the meeting, the conversation “was a most cordial one and the students left with a pledge to assist with recruitment of outstanding, well-qualified, black athletes.”²⁶ Still, the AAA’s participation indicated that black students were getting impatient with the football team’s half-hearted efforts to integrate.

²³ For more on the founding of the AAA, see Don Yaeger, with Sam Cunningham and John Papadakis, *Turning of the Tide: How One Game Changed the South* (New York: Center Street, 2006), 57.

²⁴ Yaeger, *Turning of the Tide*, 63-64.

²⁵ Edward L. Nall, Booker T. Forte, Rosa Moore, and Moses C. Jones, Jr. to University Community, August 1, 1968, Student Organizations, Afro American Association 1968-1969 folder, President David Mathews Papers.

²⁶ Willard F. Gray to David Mathews, August 19, 1970, Athletics, 1968 folder, President David Mathews Papers.

Another source of pressure for Bryant came from the local black press, who called on UA and other schools in the SEC to seek out talented African-American athletes in the state's formerly-all-black high schools. When UA's chief rival, Auburn University, signed its first black players for the 1968-1969 school year, *Birmingham World* sports editor Marcel Hopson praised the school, while criticizing UA's athletic department for continuing "to drag its feet on fielding outstanding Negro athletes on its freshman and varsity football and basketball teams."²⁷ Hopson kept up the campaign throughout the spring of 1969. In March, he criticized UA and other SEC schools for "ignoring the 'very good prospects' from the all-Negro or formerly all-Negro oriented high schools in Jefferson County and other sections of Alabama." He believed that SEC schools used test results "as an excuse" for not recruiting black athletes, because it was clear to him that white athletes were also "not necessarily geniuses," but were still given scholarships.²⁸ One victory for athletic integration occurred at the high school level. Spring 1969 marked the first time that previously all-black high school teams were able to compete against previously all-white high school teams in state basketball championship competition—a development the *World* celebrated. Columnist Marion Jackson expressed his delight that the contests would take place at UA, since they would mark "the first major confrontation between Negroes and whites" since Wallace's stand at the door.²⁹ Although the late 1960s showed a tendency towards black solidarity in some ways, these comments, and the efforts of black players to join the UA football

²⁷ Marcel Hopson, "Hits And Bits," *Birmingham World*, 25 January 1969, p. 6.

²⁸ Marcel Hopson, "Hits And Bits," *Birmingham World*, 29 March 1969, p. 7.

²⁹ Marion Jackson, "Views Sports Of The World," *Birmingham World*, 22 February 1969, p. 6. UA's campus appeared to hold symbolic importance to many in the black community. In that same article, Jackson wrote that there was "hardly a [black] parent whom one meets in Birmingham, that does not brag that his off-spring is living in dormitories on the University of Alabama campus."

team, show that African Americans clearly wanted to participate with whites in a variety of public activities.

That goal went unrecognized by many whites as the 1960s ended and the 1970s began. As various people considered the potential integration of UA's football team, the changing climate of the civil rights movement significantly affected their response to these events. Stokeley Carmichael's impromptu call for "Black Power" in the summer of 1966 had inspired, or at least coincided with, a massive shift in white public perception of the civil rights movement. By 1967, according to historian Peniel Joseph, "Black Power" and not "civil rights" came to "[frame] public perception" of black activism.³⁰ As Harvard Sitkoff argues, the media's emphasis on "the activities of only the most vengeful blacks," including armed take-overs of campus buildings by black students at Columbia University, Duke University, and other schools, and kidnapping plots by groups such as the Revolutionary Action Movement, "diminished the already nearly exhausted sympathy for the [civil rights] movement."³¹ Groups such as the Black Panthers, who proudly carried weapons and spoke of revolutionary overthrow, caused great anxiety in the mainstream white media, and prompted calls for an end to black separatism and so-called reverse racism.³² President Nixon's 1968 election campaign for "law and order" built on these fears, coding resistance to black activism with a call for a crackdown on lawless

³⁰ Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 174.

³¹ Sitkoff, *Struggle for Black Equality*, 213.

³² See Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 205-75. As Sitkoff notes, the group also engaged in benevolent activities, such as free breakfast programs for children and free health clinics, but "most whites, dependent on what the media reported, only heard their revolutionary bravado and only saw their bloody shootouts with the Oakland police." See Sitkoff, *Struggle for Black Equality*, 204.

radicals.³³ Bryant would have to navigate this terrain as he welcomed black athletes in a time of upheaval and strife.

Affirmative action plans also affected people's perceptions of race and the goals of the civil rights movement—and colored discourse surrounding the football team's integration. President Lyndon Johnson had actually employed a sports metaphor to justify affirmative action in 1965: "You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, 'You are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair." Despite the president's warning, most white Americans appeared to believe that this effort was indeed sufficient.³⁴ As the economy began a downturn in 1970, resistance to affirmative action grew, as whites believed that black economic advancement came at the expense of whites. In this climate, prominent labor organizations and many Jewish Americans—two core groups of supporters for the civil rights movement in the 1950s and early 1960s—turned their backs on their coalition partners, uncomfortable with plans that seemed to rely on racial "quotas" or "hiring guidelines" for minorities.³⁵ As black activists pushed for representation on Alabama's football team in proportion to their presence in the state, white football leaders and press members carefully delineated a policy that eschewed any "taint" of affirmative action.

Thus, as black activists attempted to retain black cultural institutions while simultaneously breaking down the remaining barriers of Jim Crow segregation, and as

³³ Sitkoff, *Struggle for Black Equality*, 211.

³⁴ Sitkoff, *Struggle for Black Equality*, 217.

³⁵ See Robert J. Weiss, "*We Want Jobs*": *A History of Affirmative Action* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 126, 130-33.

white leaders attempted to integrate blacks into white society without giving up the privileged position they inhabited, UA's football team proved to be a particularly important symbolic battle ground.

The AAA Lawsuit

The battle over the integration of UA's football team came to a head in July 1969. At the start of the month, the AAA, in conjunction with local civil rights activists, filed suit against the school for failing to recruit black football players in earnest. The lawsuit's development, including the build-up to it, the case made by the plaintiffs, and the responses of the university, the local media, and Bear Bryant, reveal how athletics served to tease out contested issues regarding the limits of racial integration. Would token acceptance be enough? Or would the university, and the white community more broadly, have to make significant changes in the ways they sought out and evaluated black achievement?

Two lawyers, Harvey Burg, a white graduate of Columbia Law School who moved to Alabama in 1967 to get involved in the civil rights movement, and Jim Baker, an African-American lawyer from the area, played pivotal roles in initiating the case. Burg said he decided to get involved because he "decided that God needed some help—God of course being Bear Bryant" with the decision to integrate the football team. Although Burg and his associates could not find "a conscious effort to bar blacks" from the team, they also discovered that the school tended to recruit white players "through a whole old-boy network of whites who had played at Alabama" or had coached at the school. This network generally did not include traditionally-black high schools and the

numerous talented players on those teams. Burg argued that this system meant that African-American athletes almost never had the “opportunity” to prove they were talented enough to play for the team, because they did not have the chance to display their skills to recruiters and coaches.³⁶

Burg faced a dilemma in pursuing any action against the school, however, as he struggled to find black athletes willing to file suit: “In those days, somebody black who asserted their rights could often be considered a troublemaker.”³⁷ The AAA proved to be the perfect solution. Although members of the group had been buoyed by their August 1968 meeting with Bryant, believing that he would conscientiously seek out talented black athletes, the coaching staff had signed no black players to scholarships in the ensuing months. As a result, the group issued a press release in January 1969 headlined “Is This Institutionalized Racism?” that specifically targeted the lack of black athletes at the school. The release pondered whether “the recruitment program of the University of Alabama’s Athletic Department [was] the last stronghold of white supremacy.” Because the university had not signed any football players in December, when it announced the latest batch of recruits, the group wondered whether “a black man” had to “be a ‘Superman’ or an O.J. Simpson” to get a scholarship at Alabama. They then called on Bryant to offer the remaining four scholarships to black players.³⁸ When their efforts proved fruitless, the group turned to Burg and his associates to pursue the matter legally.

³⁶ Yaeger, *Turning of the Tide*, 60-1.

³⁷ Yaeger, *Turning of the Tide*, 62.

³⁸ “Is This Institutionalized Racism?” Student Organizations, Afro American Association 1968-1969 folder, President David Mathews Papers. See also James C. Wilder to David Mathews, attached. O.J. Simpson was a prominent black running back from the University of Southern California who had just won the most prestigious college football honor, the Heisman Trophy, in December 1968.

U. W. Clemon, an African-American classmate of Burg's from Columbia, took up the case, and filed the lawsuit in federal court on July 2, 1969.³⁹

The terms of the lawsuit laid out the AAA's claims for institutional discrimination, fitting athletics into a broader struggle for equal rights under the terms of the U.S. Constitution. Bryant, in his capacity as athletic director and football coach, was the first defendant listed, followed by the University of Alabama, its board of trustees, UA President David F. Matthews, and Robert Finch, the U.S. Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW). These men, according to the suit, had failed to uphold the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution because the plaintiffs and "all similarly situated black citizens and black students" had been "denied because of race or color equal opportunities and rights as enjoyed by white citizens, to education and participation in interscholastic athletics."⁴⁰

At a time of heightened white concerns regarding black separatism and affirmative action, the plaintiffs walked a fine line between emphasizing the need to remove barriers to equal opportunities for blacks and calling for a recruiting strategy based on attracting black athletes. To address the former issue, the lawsuit accused Bryant and the school of violating African Americans' constitutional rights by "failing to seek out with equal diligence and activity black athletic talent from all-black high schools, and integrated high schools, and failing to award athletic grants-in-aid to black high school athletes." Addressing the latter issue—the need to aggressively pursue black

³⁹ Yaeger, *Turning of the Tide*, 65-7. According to Yaeger, who interviewed AAA President-elect Jones and Clemon, the plaintiffs had little hope that they would win the case but believed its "symbolic" importance was worth the effort.

⁴⁰ Copies of the lawsuit are available in the Mathews Papers, Afro American Association 1968-1969 folder.

players for the squad, the lawsuit called attention to the school's failure "to award black high school athletes from the state of Alabama athletic scholarships in proportion to the number of black and white high school athletes in the state." Taken together, these failings denied "black high school students the right to equal opportunity, and benefits to higher public education." Emphasizing the language of equal opportunity but asking for a more representative team, the plaintiffs risked opening their case to potential criticisms that they were seeking the installation of racial "quotas."⁴¹

In explaining why they were seeking redress, the plaintiffs linked sports accomplishments to broader issues of respect and economic opportunity. According to the language of the suit, the school's discrimination against black athletes prevented them from getting "a college education" along with the "recognition and status" that came with participation "on prominent athletic teams." The plaintiffs then tied their case to dreams of upward economic mobility: black athletes were not able to access "the most significant opportunity of all – that of 'making it', i.e., that of obtaining an education, and, also, a chance to carve out a career in professional sports, the rewards of which are dreamed about by men without regard to their color." Token efforts towards black athletic recruitment would not suffice. Although acknowledging that one black student, James Owens, had been offered a football grant-in-aid, the lawsuit dismissed that one incident, indicating that the talented player was recruited only "belatedly, after he had been recruited by rival Auburn University" and in response to pressure from the AAA. That one effort was not enough: the football program would have to intensify its recruitment, to match the fervor with which they sought out the state's and nation's premier white

⁴¹ Even the section geared at Andrew Pernell's case—in which his community scholarship prevented him from joining the team—avoided the taint of affirmative action by arguing that cases like Pernell's discriminated against "the poor" and not against "black athletes."

football players. The time had come, in other words, for the most prestigious football team in the state to fully recognize black athletic achievement, and provide for African Americans the same chance to earn prestige and financial success open to white athletes.

News of the lawsuit earned significant attention in the local mainstream media and also helped clarify the AAA's position. Locally, the *Tuscaloosa News* and the *Crimson-White* printed articles about the legal matter as the lead story on their respective front pages, while the *Birmingham News* put the story on page two, what it referred to as the "Second Front Page." Clearly, the area press believed the story to be significant.⁴² The articles focused on comments made by Edward Nall, former president of the AAA and a recent graduate of UA. After reiterating the suit's major goals, specifically the active recruitment of black athletes from previously all-black schools, Nall clarified that the recent recruitment of Wendell Hudson, the first black scholarship player for the basketball team, would not affect the lawsuit because the court action was "aimed primarily at the football program" since "football is the main sport at the University." He also explained the inclusion of HEW director Finch as a defendant by explaining: "two years ago HEW officials secured a promise from the University that it would integrate ... But they let the matter drop and never checked to see if the promise was kept. We want to bring the matter once again to their attention."⁴³ Nall's call for federal intervention must have been troubling to white Alabama's many states' rights' supporters, who

⁴² The prominence of the story in these local newspapers contradicts Briley, who writes that the lawsuit received little press coverage. See Briley, *Career in Crisis*, 27.

⁴³ The local accounts of the lawsuit's filing contain similar accounts and quotations. See: "Racial Suit Aimed At UA Athletics," *Tuscaloosa News*, 1 July 1969, p. 1-2, 2nd edition; "Black students sue Bama on athletes," *Birmingham News*, 2 July 1969, p. 2, Metro ed.; and "Afro Suit Charges Discrimination In Athletic Recruits," *Crimson-White*, 7 July 1969, p. 1.

resented events such as the schoolhouse door incident because of the involvement of federal troops.

The local mainstream newspapers in Tuscaloosa and Birmingham offered no commentary on the lawsuit's merits, either in the sports pages or editorial sections, nor did they print any letters to the editor on the subject—a familiar tactic among white southern newspapers regarding issues of racial injustice in sports. Even the black newspaper the *Birmingham World* refrained from commenting on the subject, a surprising omission for a paper that had only months before, on multiple occasions, called for black athletes at the school.⁴⁴ Only the *Crimson-White*, the very liberal on-campus newspaper, expressed its support for the lawsuit. In an impassioned editorial, the newspaper's editors said that they joined “the Afro-Americans on this campus in demanding that something be done to correct a situation long overdue for change.” Defending the AAA's decision to file a suit, the newspaper's editors argued that the AAA had “quietly sought to alleviate the situation through conversations with University officials” but had “received nothing but platitudes.” However, the editors were also careful to articulate the limits of their support, avoiding the language of racial quotas: “Like many black students on this campus, the *Crimson-White* does not feel a Negro should be signed for sports here merely because he happens to be black. At the same time, we do not feel a superior black athlete should be bypassed by UA merely because of his color, and an inferior white should be signed.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ The *World's* decision to refrain from commenting on the lawsuit may have had to do with its editors' animosity towards young black radicals. On multiple occasions, the newspaper printed editorials and columns damning the tactics and ideals of groups such as the Black Panthers, clearly falling in line more with old-guard organizations such as the NAACP. The participation of the AAA, and the decision to file suit, may have struck the *World's* editors as distasteful tactics.

⁴⁵ “Support For Afros,” Editorial, *Crimson-White*, 7 July 1969, p. 2.

If those students qualified their support for the lawsuit to some degree, their conclusion left no doubts about their position regarding black equality:

The University of Alabama has come a long way in its race relations since that stupid day when Gov. George Wallace stood in the door at Foster Auditorium to block the entrance of two qualified blacks who sought to enroll here.

However, the black student on this campus has still to achieve much before we have an institution which is truly one for all citizens.

The Afro-American Association, whatever the outcome of the case, has rightly filed suit against the athletic department. That association is to be complimented for its dignity in all its efforts so far.

The suit filed at Birmingham should indicate that blacks on this campus want full equality in all phases of University life. And this newspaper fully supports their efforts.⁴⁶

Unlike the mainstream newspapers, dependent on the support of local whites for advertising revenues and circulation totals, the *Crimson-White* offered its full support for racial integration of the football team, and, indeed, the entire school.⁴⁷

That support assuredly did not represent the only opinion on the matter. Jack Gurley, a graduate of the university in 1950, wrote an agitated letter to the editor in response to the *Crimson-White* editorial, to express his displeasure with the newspaper's "rotten views." Gurley believed that the editors did not represent "the majority" of students and criticized them for expressing their "personal views and associate personal feelings," which caused "harm" on campus. He believed that the editorial was "unwanted trash" and he thought that it was "a disgrace" that the editors were

⁴⁶ "Support For Afros," Editorial, *Crimson-White*, 7 July 1969, p. 2.

⁴⁷ That support did not go un-noticed. The AP picked up the story of the *Crimson-White*'s editorial and select newspapers, including the *Birmingham News*, printed the AP's account of the student newspaper's support for the lawsuit. See AP, "U of A paper backs suit of Negroes," *Birmingham News*, 9 July 1969, p. 58.

“[representatives] of the University of Alabama in any matter whatsoever.”⁴⁸ Clearly, the integration of the football team, or at least the tactics employed by the AAA, did not sit well with Gurley. He was not alone. Activist Frye Gaillard’s 1970 report on the desegregation of SEC athletics included some of the frustrations white Alabama fans had with the suit. According to the author, one “irate alumnus” said: “It just burns me up for those nigras to try to tell the Bear who to recruit.”⁴⁹ What appeared to gall many whites was that African Americans would attempt to usurp power from the team’s beloved (white) head coach.

Although Bryant had been out of town when the lawsuit had been filed, and thus unavailable for comment, he did address the situation at his annual mid-summer press conference only three weeks later, and his comments shed light on not only his attitudes towards an integrated team, but also the way he would pitch that change to his team’s fans. Bryant told the assembled reporters that he and his coaches would “continue like we’ve been – trying to build winning football teams,” and he insisted that they were only interested in recruiting “winning players,” regardless of whether they were “white or black or any other color.” Bryant clearly felt that the lawsuit was out of line, however, saying: “We ask our alumni and friends to help us recruit, but not to help us select” players. The coach also defended the team’s record in regards to black athletes, saying that he and his staff “saw play or practice more than fifty all-black teams last year, in our

⁴⁸ Jack Gurley, “Editorial Ires Alum: C-W’s Views Called Rotten,” Letter to the Editor, *Crimson-White*, 21 July 1969, p. 2.

⁴⁹ Frye Gaillard, “Crumbling Segregation in the Southeastern Conference,” *The Black Athlete—1970* (Nashville, TN: Race Relations Information Center, 1970), 27.

state and in bordering states.” And he lamented that the team had missed out on “two black ones” who had “told us they were coming.”⁵⁰

These statements served various purposes. First, Bryant refuted the central claims of the lawsuit, that he and his staff had been negligent in recruiting black players. Second, he outlined, presumably for pro-segregationist whites, a plausible reason why he would recruit black athletes: “to build winning football teams.” Third, Bryant also reaffirmed his power as head coach to determine the recruiting strategies of his team, implicitly chiding the AAA for attempting to encroach on his territory. That attitude clearly resonated with the editors of the *Birmingham News*; one of three quotations from Bryant’s press conference that they re-printed at the top of the sports page was Bryant’s statement: “We’re going to attempt to recruit players who are winning players, not because they’re white or not because they’re black.”⁵¹ In making these announcements, Bryant was most likely being genuine; behind the scenes, the head coach relayed the same message to his assistants. The day the law suit had been filed, Bryant had sent a memo to his coaching staff telling them that the team’s “recruiting policy shall continue just as it has been in the past—with the lone purpose of recruiting WINNING STUDENT-ATHLETES, regardless of color.” He also told his assistants that although they would “welcome individuals and groups to call . . . attention to prospective student-athletes,” he and his staff would “reserve the right” to decide whom they would recruit.⁵² Far from Wallace’s cry of “segregation forever,” Bryant’s own declarations

⁵⁰ Charles Land, “Recruiting Plan Still The Same, Bryant Declares,” *Tuscaloosa News*, 23 July 1969, p. 15.

⁵¹ “We’re going to . . .,” *Birmingham News*, 23 July 1969, p. 31.

⁵² Briley, *Career in Crisis*, 26.

acknowledged that integration was approaching but refused to give black activist groups any credit in spurring his decisions.

Bryant had another opportunity to express his opinions on the process of integrating his team the following summer when he gave a deposition in the lawsuit to Clemon on July 8, 1970. The interview transcript offers an intriguing look into the coach's mindset, as he attempted to defend his staff's policies in the past and outline a satisfactory plan for the future. His answers also suggest some of the competing pressures he had faced as leader of one of the state's most popular institutions—and the terms by which he would integrate his team.

Bryant admitted that his staff had targeted black athletes for only “three or four years,” and he was also candid that competitive factors motivated the change in policy.⁵³ He explained that he and his staff did not want the best in-state black players “to get away” to other schools, hence the decision to start with local black athletes. Here, the coach may have been a tad disingenuous, not acknowledging the lost 1966 national championship, but he surely was honest in emphasizing the competitive edge these athletes would bring.⁵⁴ Bryant also argued that he and his staff had picked up their efforts in “the last two years,” that they had “really worked at it very hard.” In that time, they also began to recruit black athletes from bordering states, and in the past year they

⁵³ Bryant did note that his staff was ahead of the curve in some regards: their recruiting “was prior to the time when they started [black and white high school athletes] playing one another.” See Transcript of Paul Bryant deposition, “Gaillard, Frye, Race Relations Information Center, Re: Interview” folder in “Civil Rights Lawsuit 1969” box, Paul W. Bryant Museum, University of Alabama, p. 12.

⁵⁴ Another indication of Bryant's focus on competition occurred later in the deposition. After discussing a number of players his staff was currently trying to sign, Bryant grumbled “I hope the hell this list doesn't get to our opponents.” See Transcript of Bryant deposition, p. 46.

“tried all over the country.”⁵⁵ Defending his record while also acknowledging that he and his staff could have been more thorough in earlier years, Bryant made no secret of his desire to improve his team by recruiting talented African-American athletes.

If competition explained the recent changes in the team’s recruiting, an anecdote he shared with Clemon suggested one reason for the delay in signing black scholarship players. Bryant recalled:

four or five years ago ... I was in Mobile and a ... very fine [African-American] coach came to me and said he had a real terrific [black] athlete that wanted to come to the University and he would like to play ... I told him if he comes up there we are going to treat him just like anybody else, but from one coach to another, if he was my kid, right now I believe it is a little too soon, I would direct him some place else. I said, we want to win, color doesn’t mean anything to us, but ... we are going to have to play in Starkville, Mississippi, and Oxford, Mississippi, and Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and it might be just a year or two from now, but I said, right now if he was my kid, I would try to direct him some place else, but if he comes, he would be treated like anybody else, and the coach, we visited quite awhile, and he understood and agreed with me.⁵⁶

Was Bryant being honest here, or had he deflected the un-named athlete away for other reasons? It is impossible to say with certainty, but there were certainly elements of truth to Bryant’s answer—black players would have faced brutal treatment from fans in Alabama and Mississippi.

But the phrase “too soon” was all-too familiar for black Americans, who had been told on countless occasions by white leaders that racial progress could not be rushed, that African Americans need only be patient. This idea motivated Martin Luther King’s famous April 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in which the civil rights leader

⁵⁵ Transcript of Bryant deposition, p. 13.

⁵⁶ Transcript of Bryant deposition, p. 14.

rebuffed white southern ministers who called his tactics “unwise and untimely.”⁵⁷ King and other civil rights leaders had recognized this language of moderation as code for a continuing deferral of black rights and aspirations, and had demanded immediate change. Likely aware of these frustrations in the black community, Bryant nonetheless pursued a cautious strategy similar to that used by President Eisenhower, who had hesitated to enforce the *Brown v. Board* verdict. Instead of taking the lead in recruiting black players, the coach waffled, delaying long enough that his school’s football team integrated after more than half of the other teams in the conference. Given the coach’s stature in the state, in the SEC, and in the nation, many wonder if Bryant could have accelerated the process by leading the way instead of following others.⁵⁸

Bryant’s consistency in the deposition suggests his vision of how integration might work. In discussing the experiences of various black athletes who had expressed interest in trying out for the team, Bryant always affirmed that he would treat players the same, regardless of race. When a black student named Doc Roane asked Bryant about trying out for the team in the spring of 1967, Bryant “told him to get his physical and shave that mustache off and come on out there.” Bryant then talked with his team about having black players try out for the squad, explaining that he “was trying to do it in a way that nobody could get hurt, you know, anything could happen and I talked to the squad about it and the squad handled it and I think our kids, we respected Doc.”⁵⁹ When another black athlete, a junior college transfer named Ralph McGill, visited, Bryant had

⁵⁷ The full text of the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is available online at the University of Pennsylvania’s African Studies Center. See http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Barra, *Last Coach*, xxv and Doyle, “Symbol for an Embattled South,” 269-70.

⁵⁹ Transcript of Bryant deposition, 48-9.

one of the homecoming queens show him around town, hoping to interest the talented athlete in Tuscaloosa and the team. He also cautioned McGill that “we never had a black football player on our squad and there might be problems; we have them with the white ones, probably have them with anybody.” However, he told McGill to come to him with any issues he encountered. Although McGill chose instead to attend the University of Tulsa, Bryant’s efforts suggest that he was feeling out how to best bring black and white players together on his squad.⁶⁰ Well aware of the depth of racial animosity in Alabama, and the likelihood of uncomfortable interactions between his players and unruly fans, Bryant sought to ease his program gradually into the integrated era.

In contrast to Bryant’s gradual, cautious approach, however, the lawsuit called for direct action by the school, clearly frustrated that the coach had not taken a leadership role in desegregating big-time athletics. The AAA and their supporters insisted that the time had already come for the football team to seek out talented black athletes and provide them with equal opportunities to their white counterparts. The AAA followed their lawsuit in November 1969 with a list of seven demands that called for significant changes to the school’s institutional culture, including the establishment of an Afro-American Cultural Center, a separate orientation for black students, and the hiring of more black faculty. The school’s new president, David Mathews, expressed his concerns that the group was seeking to separate itself from the university’s white population. In a letter to one of the group’s advisors in the wake of the demands, Mathews cautioned that in addressing the “many real and serious problems” for black students at a school “where

⁶⁰ Transcript of Bryant deposition, 27. Although it seems implausible that Bryant would ask a white woman to escort the black player on his tour of the university and town, this appears to have been the case. The first black homecoming queen, Terry Points of Birmingham, won the honor in 1973. See Wolfe, *University of Alabama*, 227.

most students are white,” the university should not “return to separatism.” The school, and black and white students, had to face “the hard task of having to live together.”⁶¹ However, the AAA’s seventh and final demand contradicted that assessment. Following in the arguments made in the lawsuit, the AAA stated: “Action should be taken by the administration to end the racist and discriminatory practices of its athletic department.”⁶² Presumably, that meant bringing black and white athletes together on the university’s teams, hardly a separatist endeavor—and yet one the university resisted on some level, as administrators attempted to have the lawsuit dismissed on multiple occasions. As blacks and whites faced “the hard task” of learning how to live with one another in new ways, and how to share beloved cultural institutions, the football team provided a site in which to explore how integration might work.

⁶¹ See David Mathews to Joseph Mallisham, April 26, 1971, Afro-American Association 1970-1973 folder, President David Mathews Papers.

⁶² “Demands On Which Action Is To Be Taken,” Afro-American Association 1970-1973 folder, President David Mathews Papers.

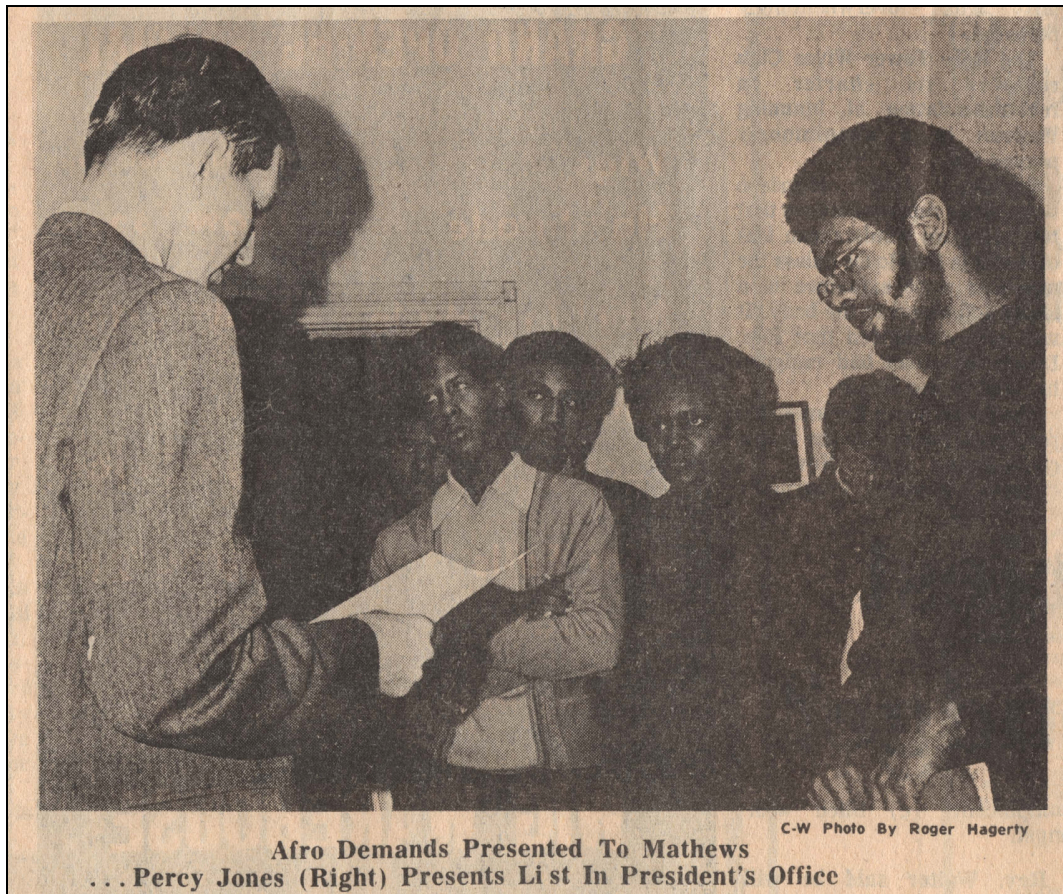


Figure 5.2. Photograph of President David Mathews and AAA members. The youthful UA president faced significant pressure from the AAA to make the campus more welcoming to black students. See Donna Bible, “Afros Present List of Demands,” *Crimson-White*, 10 November 1969, p. 1.

Recruiting UA’s First Black Players

As the lawsuit progressed—with the university officially denying the charges in the fall of 1969, Bryant’s deposition in July 1970, and a postponement of the trial until July 1971—Bryant and his staff made the first major strides in securing black players for UA’s squad. The recruitment of the two black pioneers—Wilbur Jackson and John Mitchell, who would both debut with the varsity squad in the fall of 1971—reveals how important athletic competition could be symbolically, and practically, to many in the black community. At the same time, the recruitment of these two stars also sheds light on

Bryant's efforts to navigate the treacherous racial terrain of the early 1970s. Positioning himself as a color-blind talent evaluator, the head coach integrated his football team even as he carefully distanced himself from affirmative action policies and the radical activism of the era.

Jackson and Mitchell took widely divergent paths to UA, although their backgrounds were, in many ways, quite similar. Jackson was from Ozark, a small town in Alabama's hinterland. Brought up in a working-class family (his father worked on railroad lines), Jackson played only two years of high school football—his junior year at an all-black school, and his senior year in a newly-integrated high school. His recruitment by UA's coaches resulted from a rather accidental set of circumstances. On hand to keep tabs on two players from Jackson's high school team who had already made commitments to the program, assistant coach Pat Dye spotted footage of Jackson playing in the high school's spring football game, and began to recruit the wide receiver as well.⁶³

Mitchell's route to the school was more circuitous. He grew up in Mobile, a city on Alabama's Gulf Coast, where his father served in the United States Coast Guard and his mother was a homemaker. As a child, he eagerly tuned in to Alabama and Auburn football games on the radio and on television, dreaming of attending either of the in-state powerhouses. However, with a rather thin frame, Mitchell did not attract interest from many big-time football programs. Instead, his academic exploits—he and three other black students had won a state science fair competition—had earned him academic scholarship offers from UA and other SEC schools. Hoping to play football, Mitchell instead accepted an athletic scholarship to Eastern Arizona Junior College, where his inspired play during the 1969 and 1970 seasons drew the attention of a number of big-

⁶³ Yaeger, *Turning of the Tide*, 157-63.

time programs, including USC.⁶⁴ When USC coach, and long-time Bryant friend John McKay, mentioned off-handedly that he was about to sign a talented end from Alabama, Bryant tracked him down and began recruiting Mitchell as well.⁶⁵ Although Mitchell's and Jackson's recruitments did not meet the AAA's call for the team to actively seek out black players from traditionally-black high schools (and, indeed, effectively validated the AAA's charge that the team continued to recruit through the "old-boys" network), the staff's efforts to land the two talented black players showed that the team had, in fact, accelerated their recruitment of African Americans.

Both players remembered Bryant's recruiting pitch in similar ways, and the tactics the coach used show how he attempted to welcome the black players while limiting the potential for disruption of his program. According to Jackson, the UA coaches never mentioned his pioneering role, but they made a point of telling him: "Look, you're going to be treated like everybody else."⁶⁶ Similarly, when Bryant visited with Mitchell and his family, he told the skilled defensive end: "You are gonna be treated like anybody else. I don't have black players, white players, I have just players."⁶⁷ He also assured Mitchell's mother that her son would be "treated fairly ... like all the other players."⁶⁸ Undoubtedly, Bryant was being sincere, letting the players know that they would not be discriminated against because of their race—a real concern for black athletes at the time

⁶⁴ Part of the reason that USC and other schools sought Mitchell's services is that he bulked up while playing for Eastern Arizona, making him more credible as a defensive lineman.

⁶⁵ See Yaeger, *Turning of the Tide*, 164-68, and Briley, *Career in Crisis*, 111-13.

⁶⁶ Yaeger, *Turning of the Tide*, 163-64.

⁶⁷ Briley, *Career in Crisis*, 113.

⁶⁸ Yaeger, *Turning of the Tide*, 168.

across the country. But Bryant's emphasis that he would not give the black players any special treatment also fit in well with the white backlash against affirmative action and other policies that gave minority groups "special treatment."

That defensiveness came through clearly in the second point Bryant emphasized with the two black pioneers. He told both players that if they encountered any problems because of their race, they should bring the issues to him, that he would "get it solved." He urged them not to "go to the press first."⁶⁹ The coach probably had a number of reasons for that philosophy, but he almost certainly wanted to avoid dissension within the team and the distractions that a public discussion of racial attitudes would have incurred—a very real possibility, given the widespread black athletic activism across the country. As Bryant explained in his autobiography, he "damn sure wouldn't stand for [his first black athlete] showing up with a bunch of photographers and some big-talking civil rights leader trying to get publicity."⁷⁰ Like many whites, Bryant clearly disapproved of the changes in civil rights activism in the late 1960s, as advocates moved away from sit-ins and marches to more localized dramatization, and publicity, of individual incidents of discrimination. While Bryant disdained what he saw as the media hoopla surrounding civil rights activism, he did not dissuade his players from becoming involved in issues on campus. Jackson was a member of the AAA and said he "usually attended their meetings on campus."⁷¹ What upset Bryant was the possibility of media

⁶⁹ Yaeger, *Turning of the Tide*, 167. According to Jackson, Bryant told him: "If you have a problem, come and see me. Don't see anybody else. Just come and see me, and it'll be taken care of." See Yaeger, *Turning of the Tide*, 164.

⁷⁰ Bryant, *Bear*, 302.

⁷¹ Briley, *Career in Crisis*, 110.

exploitation of issues, of his team and players being used to promote an agenda that he saw as unrelated to football and to his team in particular.

In any case, both players said that Bryant's warnings were unnecessary, that they never had any problems with their teammates. Mitchell believed that this was the result of Bryant's stature: "I think it was so much because of Coach Bryant. . . . I think they were afraid of what he might do to them."⁷² He was probably correct. According to offensive lineman Jimmy Rosser, Bryant stood up after the conclusion of the team's spring practice in 1970 and gave his assessment of the team and what it needed to work on before the start of the next season. He added one unexpected message: "He told us that he was going to get the best athletes available to play for us and that included black players. He then proceeded to tell us that if any of you didn't like that then you could get the hell out of here."⁷³ Bryant was known for his fiery temper and tough demeanor (he had earned the nickname "Bear" for reportedly wrestling a captive bear as a thirteen-old), and his players in later years nearly unanimously agreed that they were frightened of the gruff coach.⁷⁴ Given Bryant's stature and imposing presence, it is little wonder that his players avoided antagonizing their new teammates.⁷⁵

The responses of people outside the team showed a variety of reactions to the squad's integration. In the white mainstream press, the news of Jackson's decision to

⁷² Yaeger, *Turning of the Tide*, 169. Mitchell also noted that his experiences were atypical in some ways: "there were some places I went because I was a football player that a lot of other black students never entered because they were all-white places, where only white students would go." But Mitchell went with his teammates and never experienced any problems.

⁷³ Briley, *Career in Crisis*, 9.

⁷⁴ For the origins of Bryant's nickname, see Bryant, *Bear*, 23-4.

⁷⁵ Of course, many players likely treated their black teammates fairly because they harbored no racial prejudice. Mitchell's roommate was Bobby Stanford, a white player from Albany, Georgia. The two became, and remain, best friends. See Yaeger, *Turning of the Tide*, 168.

sign a scholarship offer with the school in December 1969 generated considerable attention, even if, in general, editors and writers did not address the event's long-term consequences. The one exception was the *Tuscaloosa News*, who covered Jackson's signing in considerable detail, with a front-page story announcing Jackson's decision.⁷⁶ Sports Editor Charles Land wrote in his lead paragraph: "The University of Alabama, unsuccessful in past attempts to sign black football players to Southeastern Conference grants-in-aid, apparently is going to shatter its all-white tradition this fall."⁷⁷ Referring to Jackson as "a fleet wingback from Ozark's Carroll High," Land seemed excited that Jackson would play for the team. When asked about being the school's first black football player, Jackson said, "It doesn't bother me. ... I've been up there to visit twice, and everything seemed okay to me. I feel pretty good about it."⁷⁸ The *News* certainly did not shy away from Jackson's trail-blazing role and Land even speculated that the school would likely attract more black players before the official signing day.

Others in the mainstream media were more hesitant to celebrate the event. The *Birmingham News* did not report Jackson's announcement that he would sign with the school, instead waiting until the official signing date. That decision was an odd one, especially considering that one day after the Tuscaloosa story, the newspaper had an ideal opportunity to comment on Jackson's decision. Sports Editor Alf Van Hoose devoted his column to Alabama's prospects for the future, and its need for better players on the varsity squad. The column would have been a logical forum to discuss the arrival of black players on the UA team, but Van Hoose said nothing about Jackson, perhaps

⁷⁶ Charles Land, "Negro Picks Bama," *Tuscaloosa News*, 23 November 1969, p. 1-2.

⁷⁷ Land, "Negro Picks Bama," p. 1.

⁷⁸ Land, "Negro Picks Bama," p. 2.

hesitant to point to black players as saviors of the program.⁷⁹ When the newspaper reported the signing of letters of intent one week later, the news that Alabama signed its first black player was certainly not the lead of the story. That information was relegated to the second page, where writer Jimmy Bryan noted: “Alabama also signed its first Negro players to grants-in-aid. They are Bo Mathews, 6-3, 235-pound fullback from Butler High in Huntsville, and flanker Wilbur Jackson, 6-2, 185-pound flyer from Carroll High of Ozark.”⁸⁰ As with North Carolina’s “progressive” media, the *Birmingham News* distanced itself from reporting on significant developments in racial politics as they related to athletics.⁸¹

The local black press, on the other hand, cautiously celebrated the event as a hopeful sign of progress. The *Birmingham World* re-printed an editorial from the *Chicago Daily Defender* under the headline “Crumbling Barriers?” It read:

If signing up a black athlete is an index to racial and social progress in the Deep South, then a new day is dawning in the old confederate state of Alabama in whose capital George Wallace, when he was Governor, personally tried to keep a black girl from registering at the University of Alabama, just about five years ago.

Today, matters seem to be taking a different racial twist. Wilbur Jackson, a black football player has been tendered a football scholarship by officials at the University of Alabama. He will become the first Negro football player to sign with Alabama

Alabama has been charged in a federal court suit with failing to recruit black athletes as it does white athletes. Of all probability, the suit will be dropped if Jackson is given a football scholarship as announced by Alabama Sunday newspapers. This may well be a sign that race barriers are beginning to crumble. Or is this unjustified optimism?⁸²

⁷⁹ Alf Van Hoose, “Freshmen promise new Bryant era,” *Birmingham News*, 24 November 1969, p. 13.

⁸⁰ Jimmy Bryan, “Auburn out-signs Tide 37-16 as recruiting war begins,” *Birmingham News*, 14 Dec. 1969, p. C-1, C-6. Mathews did not qualify academically and thus never joined the team.

⁸¹ This comparison seems particularly apt, as the *News*’ masthead read: “Serving a Progressive South.”

⁸² “Crumbling Barriers,” Editorial, *Birmingham World*, 3 January 1970, p. 4.

The cautious tone in the wake of Jackson's signing was understandable. White Alabama's recalcitrance towards black civil rights, and its dismal record of violence against blacks, made many African Americans skeptical of signs of progress. Still, Jackson's signing offered a glimpse of a future in which "race barriers" no longer impeded black progress.

Many white Alabamians were not as pleased by Jackson's signing, and a letter from UA alumnus A. B. Porter to President David Mathews reveals just how upset some were by the decision to recruit black players. Porter opened his letter: "Strongly protest our school giving athletic scholarship to colored football player." Although he grudgingly understood why black students were being admitted, blaming "the unconstitutional Civil Rights Law," he thought that the university went too far in providing "a free ride via a grant-in-aid" to a black student-athlete. He believed that the decision to provide a scholarship to a black football player stemmed from the "desire to win at any cost," and he called that motivation "a terrible thing." Although Bryant had often couched his decision to integrate in terms of its competitive advantages, Porter dismissed that argument, upset that the team had sacrificed its white racial purity. He hoped that the squad would "lose all games in which this darkie and any others ... participate." An Alabama native and a property owner in Gadsden, Porter wrote it was "doubtful" that the school would "ever get another buck" from him in donations. He concluded: "Shame on you, Bryant, and any others involved in this!"⁸³ Although Bryant did not retain any letters he received in response to his decision to recruit black players, it seems clear that Porter was not alone, that the act of aiding African Americans with full

⁸³ See A. B. Porter to David Mathews January 18, 1971, Athletics, Jan. – March 1971 folder, President David Mathews Papers.

scholarships and a place on the prestigious football team was too much for some to bear. When black players actually took the field, the stakes would get even higher.

Of Myth and Memory: the USC Game, or, Sam Cunningham's Magic Bullet

The season-opening game between USC and Alabama on September 12, 1970, has taken on almost mythic proportions among some college football fans, as it is often remembered as being the game that brought integration to Alabama's football program. Before a packed stadium at Birmingham's Legion Field, the integrated USC team throttled Alabama 42-21, with black players scoring every one of the Trojans' five touchdowns on the day. USC sophomore fullback Sam Cunningham made a lasting impression on the fans and press who watched the game: he scored three touchdowns and seemed to overpower any Alabama defender who attempted to stop him. In the conventional telling of the story, the drubbing convinced a recalcitrant Bryant to agree to integrate his football team. There are many problems with this story, which scholars and journalists have identified, but the tale's most important flaw is that it is factually untrue.⁸⁴ Wilbur Jackson was already on the freshman team in the fall of 1970, and the team's coaching staff was eagerly seeking out black players. Further, as discussed earlier, Bryant had actually welcomed the opportunity to add black players to his team,

⁸⁴ A number of authors have debunked the importance of this game. Yeager's *Turning of the Tide* takes the story of the 1970 game as its central event, playing up its importance, but even he acknowledges that the UA team was already on the path to racial integration. On the other hand, although skeptical that the USC game had the effects many believed, Barra argues that it is within reason to believe that Bryant scheduled the game in part so that Alabamians could see firsthand the impact of black football players. For his take on the game's importance, see: Barra, *Last Coach*, 369-70. USC's role as the racially enlightened team in this game is ironic, considering the racism of USC's coaches in the 1930s, when the school's team formed a stark contrast to the integrated UCLA squad. McKay, who took over as head coach in 1960, indicated that the school's reputation for racial prejudice was not easy to shake off, but the coach quickly brought in a number of black players who contributed to the team's success, including Heisman Trophy winners Mike Garrett and O. J. Simpson. For more on McKay's role in integrating the USC squad, see Yeager, *Turning of the Tide*, 103-05.

hoping to restore competitive balance. However, despite these inaccuracies, the 1970 contest between the schools does offer rich material for considering issues of race and equality as they affected Alabama football. In the build-up to the game and in its aftermath, blacks and whites, Alabamians and non-Alabamians, could not help seeing the game's racial implications. Their different interpretations provide one more window into people's changing perceptions of race and an integrated society.

Ironically, the game against USC was a last-minute addition to UA's schedule, as the NCAA had only recently ruled that schools could play eleven regular-season games in a season. Bryant travelled to California to set up a home-and-away series with his good friend McKay. If he had any intentions of using the game to introduce Alabama fans to integrated competition, he certainly kept those opinions to himself. In the weeks leading up to the game, reporters frequently asked the coach why he had scheduled such a difficult opponent for the first game of the year, and Bryant consistently listed the same reasons: that he wanted to give his players the opportunity to travel to other parts of the country, and that he wanted to play against the best programs. He never brought up race, although it was surely behind some of the frequent questioning directed at him.⁸⁵

Regardless of Bryant's intentions, it was obvious to all who followed the sport that the USC team would feature black players—even their quarterback, the position considered the most prestigious on the field, was an African-American player named Jimmy Jones.

⁸⁵ For an example of a story in which Bryant explained his choice of USC, see Alf Van Hoose, "'Bama puts on deeper red for '70," *Birmingham News*, 23 August 1970, p. C-1, C-7. Bud Furillo, a writer for the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, insisted that Bryant intended for the game to ease racial integration at UA. "We all heard that Bryant had come to talk with [USC Coach John] McKay about scheduling a game to help him [Bryant] get some black players on his team. Everyone in the newspaper business knew it at the time. It was just common knowledge." See Yaeger, *Turning of the Tide*, 81.

These black players, their white teammates, and even the school's cheerleaders, all shared apprehensions about traveling to Birmingham for the game, knowing the state's (well-deserved) tarnished image regarding racial bigotry. Bill Holland, a white fullback, recalled in later years: "All most of us knew about Alabama was lynchings and burning crosses. ... And we didn't want to know much more than that."⁸⁶ A USC cheerleader told a local reporter after the game that squad members "were told to expect anything down here in the South."⁸⁷ The black players on USC's team had conflicted feelings about the game. Some were especially anxious and even smuggled weapons—including guns and knives—on the trip. Others saw the game as an opportunity to prove what they could do, seeing it as an opportunity to give "a real demonstration of ... Black Power" to Alabama whites. Black players' apprehensions about white fans' responses to them were well-founded: when the USC players arrived, some white Alabamans gawked as the "USC nigguz" (the term one white woman used to refer to the players as she nervously gathered up her children) checked into their hotel. When the USC players took the field to warm-up before the game, fans shouted "catcalls and racial slurs."⁸⁸

That reception was not the one intended, and carefully orchestrated, by Birmingham's civic leaders. Eager to distance themselves from images of civil rights brutality, the city's elites attempted to make the visiting team welcome. As planes bringing players, families, and fans from Los Angeles arrived, they were met by Birmingham's mayor, George Seibels; the Banks High School band, playing "a medley

⁸⁶ Yaeger, *Turning of the Tide*, 111.

⁸⁷ Delbert Reed, "South's Nice Says Visitor," *Tuscaloosa News*, 14 September 1970, p. 14.

⁸⁸ Yaeger, *Turning of the Tide*, 114-24. Quotations from 113, 119, and 125.

of California and Alabama tunes”]; and “the Birmingham Arlington Belles, a group of 20 of the city’s lovlies [sic] dressed in long and frilly antebellum dresses and near-umbrella-sized bonnets.”⁸⁹ Considering the racial dynamics of the game, the choice of an “Old South” theme represented a curious decision. No doubt many thought it was quaint and charming, but it almost certainly added to the anxieties of USC’s black players.

Meanwhile, the *Birmingham News*’ editors also attempted to make their California visitors feel welcomed, expressing in an editorial the “hope that Southern Cal’s trip to Birmingham is just the first of many such visits by the Trojans and other leading teams from other sections of the country.” One can imagine these “progressive” leaders crossing their fingers that all would go smoothly and that the city would bolster its reputation. The editorial concluded that it was: “truly nice to have the U.S.C. players and their thousands of supporters in Birmingham” and expressed the hope that “everything about their stay is enjoyable except the final score.”⁹⁰

The final score actually turned out to be quite pleasant for USC, as they drubbed UA in a game that most felt was not even as close as the 21-point margin indicated. The dominating performances by USC’s black players must have made the game’s outcome especially jarring—one of USC’s scores had been a touchdown reception by halfback

⁸⁹ Harold Kennedy, “Old South welcome greets Southern Cal,” *Birmingham News*, 12 September 1970, p. A-1, A-5, metro edition. Quotation from A-1.

⁹⁰ “Meaty Football Fare,” Editorial, *Birmingham News*, 12 September 1970, p. 10, metro edition. The one visitor who was almost certainly not made to feel welcome in Birmingham was *Los Angeles Times* columnist Jim Murray, who had provoked so much ire in earlier years. Clyde Bolton dreaded Murray’s impending arrival, criticizing him as someone who delighted in thinking “of a new way to say something nasty.” He noted that Murray often complained about UA’s “all-white color scheme” and “super-rough approach to football,” although he did not respond to either point. Instead, he took issue with Murray’s claims that UA “hasn’t poked its head above the Mason-Dixon line since Appomattox.” Bolton argued that UA’s schedules had been plenty difficult in the past—and would be the toughest in the country this season. He also seemed to be threatening Murray, writing that he was searching for the phone number to “Honest Herman’s Loan Company.” See Clyde Bolton, “From out of hiding spot, a book...” *Birmingham News*, 10 September 1970, p. 29, metro edition.

Clarence Davis, a Birmingham resident who had been unable to attend his home state's premier football program. One final event, after the last whistle had sounded and the teams were heading to their dressing room, would have likely pushed some white Alabama fans over the edge. As the USC players left the field, they celebrated by throwing Confederate money in the air. The money consisted of "\$50 bills issued by the sovereign state of Alabama and signed by Thomas Hill Watts, governor and redeemable ... in confederate treasury note."⁹¹ Even in the moment, these players saw larger ramifications to their victory than just a regular-season game.

Although the *Tuscaloosa News*' Warren Coon lamented the Confederate money incident as "the final insult" of the contest, on the whole the local white press said nothing about the game's racial significance in its immediate aftermath.⁹² However, they certainly did not shy away from crediting USC's black players. Writers from both the *Tuscaloosa* and *Birmingham News* praised Cunningham effusively, and both newspapers featured photographs of the big back in action.⁹³ And although Van Hoose wrote that USC ultimately won because they "had better troops [and] more of them," which could have pointed to the disparity in black athletes, he certainly did not make that point explicit.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Warren Coon, "That Confederate Money Made Things Even Worse," *Tuscaloosa News*, 14 September 1970, p. 13-14. Quotations from 14.

⁹² Coon, "That Confederate Money," p. 14.

⁹³ See, for example: Alf Van Hoose, "Trojan hosses turn it on," *Birmingham News*, 13 September 1970, p. C-1, C-5. Quotations from C-1, metro edition; Tom Self, "Soph Sam Cunningham..." Photograph, *Birmingham News*, 13 September 1970, p. C-1, metro edition; Charles Land, "Tough Trojans Top Tide, 42-21," *Tuscaloosa News*, 13 September 1970, p. 1, 14; and Dan Meissner, "Trojans' Sam Cunningham..." Photograph, *Tuscaloosa News*, 14 September 1970, p. 13.

⁹⁴ Alf Van Hoose, "Big and swift Super Sam to be a great one," *Birmingham News*, 14 September 1970, p. 10, metro edition.

Only when Murray and other writers outside the region used the game to critique Alabama's segregated squad did Charles Land of the *Tuscaloosa News* respond. Land criticized "a West Coast writer who was feeling rather smugly about it all." According to Land, this writer (likely Murray) suggested that "Alabama ... get some black players, too. ... Look out the window and there's no telling how many football players you'll find." Land was not impressed: "It seemed the only racial stone the man could find to throw, for Alabama's football team certainly did not insult any Southern Cal players of any color."⁹⁵ Indeed, Land and others in the local press emphasized the local citizens' civility. Land's co-worker Delbert Reed was delighted to report that USC's nervous cheerleaders found that "none" of the "bad things" they had heard about Alabamians "were true." One USC cheerleader praised the locals as being "really nice."⁹⁶ These writers refused to permit the game to be an indication of the superiority of an integrated team and a denigration of southern society.

The local black newspaper the *Birmingham World*, however, considered the game in precisely those terms. Marcel Hopson noted that although "thousands of words have been uttered concerning the absence of Negro varsity players on the football roster of the celebrated University of Alabama," the USC game had "intensified" those discussions. Hopson then printed lengthy excerpts from Murray's column about the contest: "Alabama has finally joined the Union. They ratified the Constitution, signed the Bill of Rights. ... They now hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal in

⁹⁵ Charles Land, "Looking with Charles Land," *Tuscaloosa News*, 14 September 1970, p. 6.

⁹⁶ Delbert Reed, "South's Nice Says Visitor," *Tuscaloosa News*, 14 September 1970, p. 14.

the eyes of the creator.” Although Hopson did not comment directly on Murray’s piece, it was clear he supported the sentiment.⁹⁷

Others in the black community similarly celebrated the game’s outcome, as a number of anecdotes from Don Yeager’s account of the USC game attest. African-American William Wagstaff, then a young waiter, remembered being “too distracted to focus clearly on his tables” while the game played. A white Alabama student at the time, Eddie Rose, recalled being teased after the game by some black teens—when Rose found out that the youths were from Birmingham, he asked why they hadn’t cheered for UA. They replied: “There are brothers on the [USC] team.” And Jay Davis, a black man who was eight the day of the game, recalled how exciting it was to see a black quarterback on USC’s team. According to one account, a barbershop in Birmingham had an aging clipping of the game story hanging on its wall in the late 1990s—nearly thirty years after the contest.⁹⁸ The performance of black players in an integrated setting, playing against one of the premier all-white teams in the nation, had symbolic importance to these observers. Their performance constituted, as the USC players had hoped, “a real demonstration of . . . Black Power” to Alabama whites.

Local white fans mourned the loss and foresaw a long season ahead for their once-formidable team. Some even recognized the necessity of adding black players to UA’s squad. U.W. Clemon, the lawyer in the AAA lawsuit, remembered his African-American friends telling him after the game that white Alabama fans responded to the drubbing with the “universal” idea that the school needed to “get . . . some of those black football players.” *LA Times* writer Jeff Prugh described four white Alabama fans the

⁹⁷ Marcel Hopson, “Hits And Bits,” *Birmingham World*, 26 September 1970, p. 2.

⁹⁸ Yeager, *Turning of the Tide*, 130-35.

morning after the game saying: “I sure bet the Bear wishes he had two or three them or Nigra boys on his team *now*. They were huge!”⁹⁹ That the comment spoke to a rather prosaic, and demeaning, reason to integrate a football team is certain. But it also reveals the resonance the game had with a wide circle of observers. On the whole, the USC-Alabama game marked a prelude to the team’s integration. Observers on both sides of the color line grappled with what an integrated team might look like, and considered the terms under which that team would perform. The following season, black and white fans alike would have an integrated UA team to cheer for, and its reception offered a chance to evaluate racial change in the Deep South.

Rising Tide: Integrating the UA Football Team

The struggle to integrate UA’s football team was a long one. John Mitchell took the field as the first black varsity football player in the school’s history more than four years after the abortive attempts of blacks to walk on to the team in the spring of 1967, more than two years after the filing of the AAA lawsuit in July 1969, and a long year after the loaded dialogue surrounding the USC game. Responses to that long-awaited debut—and that of his teammate Wilbur Jackson the following week—reveal football’s potential to model how blacks and whites could work together successfully. Athletic competition provided one space that whites and blacks both saw as fulfilling the obligations of an equal opportunity society, and thus many drew hope from, or at least accepted, the team’s changing character. Still, there were signs that sports had its limitations, as on-going anxieties about “special treatment” for African Americans, the declining stature of black

⁹⁹ Yaeger, *Turning of the Tide*, 14.

institutions, and contested visions of leadership in the newly-integrated South all colored people's perceptions of the desegregated, and resurgent, UA football team.

Two events preceding the black players' varsity debuts set the stage for the football team's integration: Jackson's starting role with the freshman football team in the fall of 1970, and both players' participation in spring practice in April and May 1971. Although limited by a lingering ankle injury, Jackson played in all five of the freshmen team's contests that season, and served as one of three game captains for the team's match-up with Tennessee.¹⁰⁰ Even before the season started, an article in the *Birmingham News* noted that Bryant was "high on the chances of Negro Wilbur Jackson of Ozark boosting Tide stock."¹⁰¹ By the time Jackson played his first game with the team, the local newspapers, particularly the *Tuscaloosa News*, openly acknowledged his trail-blazing role. Sports editor Land wrote: "Alabama's freshmen put a couple of highly regarded running backs, some large linemen and the school's first scholarship black football player on display Monday at 1:30 p.m. in a Denny Stadium season opener against Mississippi State."¹⁰² Van Hoose, in the *Birmingham News*, commented that Jackson—"Alabama's first scholarshipped Negro footballer"—was "a top athlete."¹⁰³ Although crowds for these games were rather sparse, the newspapers nonetheless covered them with some interest, eager to spot potential contributors for the future. Jackson's debut created only a ripple; the speedy player appeared in photographs in both of the

¹⁰⁰ "Vols next for Tide frosh," *Birmingham News*, 5 November 1970, p. 26.

¹⁰¹ Ronald Weathers, "Tide visit impresses ..." *Birmingham News*, 4 September 1970, p. 8. In that same article, Bryant lamented "two [local black players] who got away": Frank Downing, who selected Mississippi State and James Owens, who picked Auburn.

¹⁰² Charles Land, "Tide Frosh Open Here Monday," *Tuscaloosa News*, 4 October 1970, p. B-2.

¹⁰³ Alf Van Hoose, "Bama rookies bring speed, size to combat," *Birmingham News*, 6 October 1970, p. 10.

local dailies, so even casual fans could see that change was coming to the varsity team's make-up.¹⁰⁴

If some may have thought that black players' impact on the team would be minimal the following season because of Jackson's injury and reduced role, Mitchell's presence in spring practice in 1971, and Jackson's improved health, made it quite clear that black players would play significant roles. Mitchell's inclusion probably surprised casual UA fans. Unlike, Jackson, whose signing was well-documented in the press, Mitchell's decision to attend UA after transferring from Eastern Arizona Junior College (EAJC) apparently caught many in the local media off guard. Although writers were aware as early as February that Mitchell was one of four junior college players to sign with the team, they did not note that Mitchell was black.¹⁰⁵ Even when writer Clyde Bolton singled out Mitchell as one of four players who looked impressive in the first day of practice, he made no mention of Mitchell's race, and neither black player appeared in the photograph that accompanied the story, which showed several players stretching.¹⁰⁶ The presence of a second black player on the team probably remained unknown to many until after a few days of practice, when the *Birmingham News* published a photograph of Mitchell with Steve Bisceglia and Danny Taylor, two other junior college transfers, and assistant coach Bill Oliver.¹⁰⁷ The Tuscaloosa newspaper followed soon after with its

¹⁰⁴ See "Tide Freshmen Footballers Talking Over That Last Little Detail," Photograph, *Tuscaloosa News*, 20 November 1970, p. 7, and "Vols next for Tide frosh," *Birmingham News*, 5 November 1970, p. 26.

¹⁰⁵ See Ronald Weathers, "Sign-up tally: Auburn 31, Alabama 34," *Birmingham News*, 7 February 1971, p. C-5.

¹⁰⁶ Clyde Bolton, "No wholesale 'wishboning,'" *Birmingham News*, 1 April 1971, p. 41.

¹⁰⁷ See Haywood Paravicini, "Coach Bill (Brother) Oliver..." Photograph, *Birmingham News*, 4 April 1971, p. C-1.

own photographs of the black defensive end—a front page photo of Mitchell with Bryant and two teammates.¹⁰⁸ For those Alabamians outside the immediate Tuscaloosa-Birmingham area, their first viewing of Mitchell and Jackson in action would have come at the annual A-Day game, which was broadcast statewide on television.¹⁰⁹

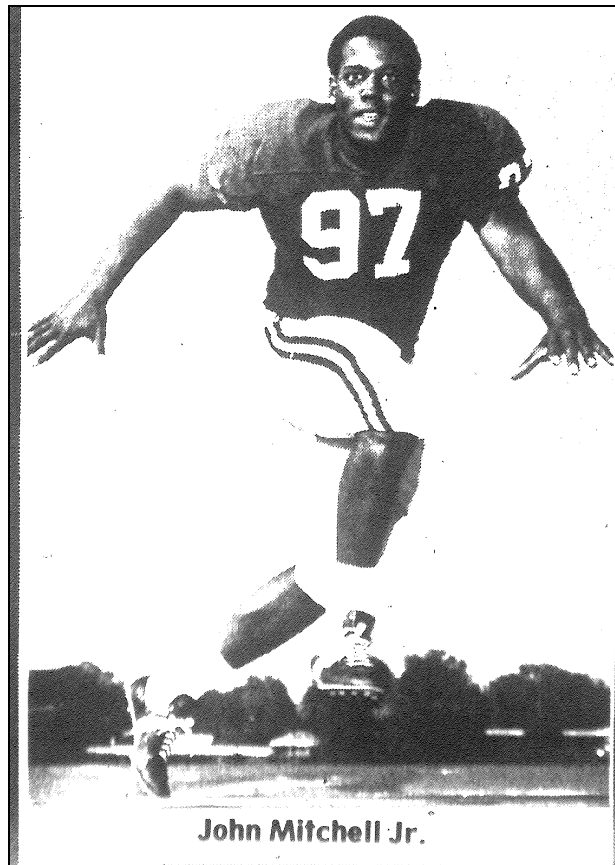


Figure 5.3. UA media department photograph of John Mitchell. Mitchell used speed and effort to overcome his rather slender frame and become a star at the defensive end position. This photograph of Mitchell circulated widely. See, for example, Leonard Shapiro, “Mitchell Found ‘Good Life’ At UA,” *Tuscaloosa News*, 29 December 1971, p. 15.

¹⁰⁸ Calvin Hannah, “Annual Grid Battle Near,” Photograph, *Tuscaloosa News*, 30 April 1971, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ Alf Van Hoose, “Musso-Davis tandem heads up Red squad,” *Birmingham News*, 29 April 1971, p. 53.

Mitchell's presence on the team warrants additional comment because, unlike the recovering and youthful Jackson, Mitchell was an experienced player who was more likely to contribute immediately. Earning a position with the first-team defense during practice, Mitchell quickly became integral to the team's fortunes. Fans would have to support him if they wanted their team to succeed. According to one anecdote, fan acceptance of the talented end came quickly. During that first spring practice with the team, Mitchell accompanied some teammates to a bar in town called "The Tide," a traditional watering hole for the football players. At first, the patrons stopped and stared, stunned that a black person had entered the establishment. However, according to historian Raymond Hughes, once "Mitchell was introduced as a football player, everybody went back to what they were doing." Some patrons even offered to buy him drinks. Only one year later, Mitchell's picture hung on one of the bar's walls.¹¹⁰ In the press meanwhile, Van Hoose raved about Mitchell's ability, writing that "when the strong, swift Mobilian [sic] learns to go all-out, every play, he'll be outstanding."¹¹¹ These early experiences—Jackson's participation with the freshman team and both players' important roles in spring practice and the A-Day Game, likely acclimated many white Alabamians to black players' presence on their beloved team.

¹¹⁰ Raymond Hughes, "Desegregating the Holy Day: Football, Blacks and the Southeastern Conference" (Ph.D Dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1991), 101.

¹¹¹ Alf Van Hoose, "Tide casting long shadows toward fall," *Birmingham News*, 3 May 1971, p. 21. In this story, and in others, Van Hoose never mentioned Mitchell's race, but did note his birthplace of Mobile. Mitchell's Alabama heritage may have made him more palatable to Van Hoose and his readers. In fact, the newspaper published an editorial the same day as Van Hoose's column that praised black professional baseball players Hank Aaron, also from Mobile, and Willie Mays, from Birmingham, as the two neared Babe Ruth's career home run record. It appeared that local pride could potentially momentarily trump long-standing racial prejudices. See "Babe, Willie, Hank," Editorial, *Birmingham News*, 3 May 1971, p. 10.

Pre-season press coverage during fall practice in August and early September 1971 served a similar function. Jackson and Mitchell both appeared in the team's official media guide that fall. As with all the other players, the two had paragraph-length write-ups and a thumbnail photograph—so there was no doubt as to their race even though the guides made no mention of their trail-blazing roles. Mitchell's write-up even indicated that the talented defensive end "quickly established himself as one of the top contenders for a starting job this fall" after transferring from EAJC.¹¹² Photographs of the two from fall practice regularly appeared in both the Tuscaloosa and Birmingham newspapers as well, so readers were not caught unaware of their presence on the squad.

The *Tuscaloosa News* even printed individual feature stories on both black players in the weeks leading up to the start of the 1971 season. Although Delbert Reed's article regarding Mitchell focused on his contribution to the team's depth at defensive end and made no mention of his race,¹¹³ Tom Couchman's article about Jackson, headlined "The Times, They Are A 'Changin,'" more explicitly addressed Jackson's experiences as the first black player in the school's history. Couchman wrote that Jackson did not represent the traditional stereotypes of football players as "a bunch of numbers with faceless faces (white around these parts)." Couchman explained: "For one thing, [Jackson] happens to be black, the first black football player to sign a scholarship with the University of Alabama." The other thing that made Jackson different, according

¹¹² Thornton, Charley and McNair, Kirk, *Alabama Football 1971* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1971). 22, 23, 26, 28. Quotation from 28.

¹¹³ Delbert Reed, "Mitchell Tightens Tide Loose Ends," *Tuscaloosa News*, 2 September 1971, p. 9. Reed, and the coaches he talked with, complemented Mitchell. End coach Richard Williamson said Mitchell was "strong, can move, and picks up his assignments well." He also praised Mitchell for having "a good attitude" and said the end "works hard." Reed wrote that "Mitchell's presence ... makes the Crimson Tide defensive end position look a little more secure." And although the article did not address Mitchell's race, the story was accompanied by a file photo of Mitchell running in uniform with no helmet on.

to the youthful Couchman, was his reason to attend UA. According to Couchman, Jackson did not come to UA solely to “eat, drink, and sleep football.” Jackson agreed: “Now you have guys concerned with getting an education first, and then with social problems and things like that. Football just isn’t the most important thing now.” Reflecting the spirit of black athlete activism that had engulfed the nation in the late 1960s, Jackson’s comments might have proved unsettling to some—would the team face unrest with black athletes? Jackson’s assessment of his experiences to that point would have mitigated those concerns: “No problems . . . I don’t notice anything different, that I get any different treatment. Everything seems to be okay.” Although Couchman wondered whether “a black man in Wilbur Jackson’s position” could offer any other answer, he seemed assured by the ease with which Jackson interacted with his white roommate, Danny Taylor.¹¹⁴ A rather frank analysis of Jackson’s trail-blazing role, Couchman’s article showed both the interest in black players, and the awareness of the potential for disruption and disharmony. It also expressed the familiar hope that sports could provide a venue for blacks and whites to come together peaceably.¹¹⁵

On the whole, mainstream press coverage leading up to the season veered haphazardly between assessing the changes to the team’s racial make-up and ignoring the significance of the new players on the squad. On the one hand, Van Hoose of the *Birmingham News* spoke with pride before the team’s season-opening rematch with USC that “two fine black athletes, end John Mitchell and flanker Wilbur Jackson,” would be

¹¹⁴ Tom Couchman, “‘The Times, They Are A ‘Changin,’” *Tuscaloosa News*, 23 August 1971, p. 6.

¹¹⁵ If fans were upset that UA would have black players on their team, they didn’t show it at the box office. A brief story from the first day of practice reported that the team had already sold out three games and that tickets were going fast for the other games as well. See “Alabama Game Tickets Fast Becoming Scarce,” *Tuscaloosa News*, 15 August 1971, p. B-1.

“making historic debuts.” He seemed especially delighted to point this out, since “professional cynic” Jim Murray had suggested that the Tide was “out of its class” in taking on USC.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, as practice started that fall, Van Hoose had identified “two obvious look-changes” in that year’s team—and neither had to do with the presence of black players on the varsity for the first time ever. Instead, he commented on the larger size of the players and their longer hair. Bryant discussed the new policy on hair length—players could grow their hair as long as “their ears and eyes and shirt collars aren’t covered”—and explained that this shift would not change the team’s core values: “sacrifice, dedication, work, unselfishness, [and] desire.”¹¹⁷ Presumably, having black players on the squad would also not affect those ideals, but neither Bryant nor Van Hoose discussed that change in any depth, apparently feeling that longer hair was more worthy of comment.

One final pre-season anecdote suggests how the team’s integration fit into broader dialogues regarding racial equality and even affirmative action policies. In the midst of a *Tuscaloosa News* story about the silliness of media day, in which players posed for countless (and often rather strange) photographs, writer Charles Land described this scene:

Between photographs, the conversation drifted along lazily, like lukewarm molasses. The News’ Calvin Hannah and Dan Meissner stacked up nine players, three deep, to distract the railbirds for a moment.

‘That’s an HEW shot,’ one writer quipped, noting the only black player was on the top row.

¹¹⁶ Alf Van Hoose, “‘One skeered, other one is glad of it’ in Los Angeles,” *Birmingham News*, 10 September 1971, p. 9.

¹¹⁷ Alf Van Hoose, “The ’71 Tide: Larger, with longer hair,” *Birmingham News*, 17 August 1971, p. 15.

One looked over the group and observed that only six of the nine players appeared to be enjoying the pose. ‘The guys on the bottom don’t seem to be smiling,’ he said.¹¹⁸

HEW stood for the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, at the time the branch of the federal government known for enforcing laws against segregation and discrimination. One could read the comment in a number of ways. In putting the black player at the top of the formation, the photographers were giving blacks an unfair advantage, just as HEW and government programs, such as affirmative action, supposedly did. Or, in including a black player at all, the photographer emphasized the squad’s newly-integrated character, with the jibe about the HEW suggesting that many saw federal pressure and interference affecting the team’s make-up. At the very least, the anecdote revealed how Alabama’s football team could serve to channel some people’s frustrations with the process of integration, even as it could offer hope to others.

Finally, after weeks of practice, the season started, with Alabama taking on USC in Los Angeles on September 10, 1971. The game marked Mitchell’s debut with the team, and it was an auspicious beginning for the newly-integrated squad.¹¹⁹ Despite being underdogs, Alabama earned a 17-10 win that marked the start of a very successful 11-1 season. Area newspapers gleefully celebrated the victory. In the *Birmingham News*, UA’s triumph over USC shared top billing on the front page with the death of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev.¹²⁰ One day later, Van Hoose indicated that the

¹¹⁸ Charles Land, “Picture Day Is ... Well ... Like That,” *Tuscaloosa News*, 17 August 1971, p. 8.

¹¹⁹ Jackson, like many of the team’s reserves, did not play in the first game against USC. He debuted the following week.

¹²⁰ Alf Van Hoose, “Bryant beams over Tide in trenches,” *Birmingham News*, 11 September 1971, p. 1, 11. The *Tuscaloosa News* also printed the game story on the front page. See Delbert Reed, “Terrific Tide Topples Trojans, 17-10,” *Tuscaloosa News*, 11 September 1971, p. 1, 5.

victory had been tremendously important to community members—estimating that between 5,000 and 10,000 people showed up to greet the team when they arrived at the Birmingham airport late that Saturday night, including “old men . . . with their ladies,” “middleagers [sic],” “kids,” and even “babes in arms.” Van Hoose ascribed a good deal of meaning to the game, believing the victory “proved” to the Alabama players that “they are men again.” He also argued that the “conquest of Southern Cal” had regional implications: “Dixie football, beginning to be suspect in other regions lately, needed it. Alabama’s record under Bryant, sagging in tough games the last three years, needed it.”¹²¹ For all of the gender, regional, and personal implications ascribed to the contest, nowhere, not in this article nor in any in the following days in either the *Birmingham* or *Tuscaloosa News*, did these writers make the point that a black male athlete had played a key role in the momentous win, that the reputation of “Dixie football” had been restored in part by the key participation of a black player.¹²² Alabama was on its way to becoming a national force again in college football, but it remained to be seen if the local press, and UA’s celebrated head coach, would acknowledge the key roles black men played in the team’s resurgence.

¹²¹ Alf Van Hoose, “Cloud 9 fine, but it’s back to work again,” *Birmingham News*, 13 September 1971, p. 23, 27. Quotation from 23.

¹²² As an example, an editorial in the *Tuscaloosa News* three days after the game expressed excitement that “success was attained in starting this new season” of UA football, congratulating the coaches and players and calling on local residents to support the team in its upcoming home opener, but made no mention of the racial barrier broken when Mitchell took the field. See “Victory Adds Interest To Tide’s Home Opener,” Editorial, *Tuscaloosa News*, 14 September 1971, p. 4. Even the *Crimson-White* did not emphasize Mitchell’s race in its coverage of the game, although in the newspaper’s next issue, sports editor Rick Young published a photograph of the top three defensive ends on the team: Mitchell, Robin Parkhouse, and Ed Hines. The caption noted that Mitchell played “creditably against the Trojans,” and noted: “Strong, lithe, and quick, Mitchell is the first Negro to play varsity football at Alabama.” The caption then described the other players’ backgrounds. See “John Mitchell . . .” Photograph, *Crimson-White*, 16 September 1971, p. 12.

As the season progressed, the mainstream media generally treated the black players the same as their teammates. Mitchell and Jackson both appeared in action photographs from the team's games, and the local white writers certainly noted the important roles the two played. The *Birmingham News*, for example, praised Mitchell for his performance against Louisiana State University, when he sacked the quarterback and caused a fumble late in the 14-7 victory.¹²³ Similarly, Jackson earned accolades for his 67-yard touchdown run in Alabama's 31-3 win over the University of Miami.¹²⁴ The *Birmingham News*' Jimmy Bryan even devoted a feature story to Mitchell in late September 1970, discussing his improving play at defensive end. Only mentioning Mitchell's pioneering role in passing near the conclusion of the story, Bryan had high praise for the junior college transfer, writing that he had "as much potential as any man who ever lined up at a Tide flank." Bryan certainly took Mitchell seriously, quoting the black player's opinions regarding the team's upcoming opponent and his own role in the defense.¹²⁵ In many ways, the local mainstream press followed a similar course to North Carolina's progressive newspapers, seamlessly incorporating the achievements of Mitchell and Jackson into their regular coverage and minimizing discourse regarding

¹²³ Clyde Bolton, "Tiders out-tough Bengals 14-7 and scent oranges," *Birmingham News*, 7 November 1971, p. C-1, C-7. Mitchell and teammate Parkhouse were selected as co-winners of United Press International's Defensive Player of the Week Award following that game. See "Five Tide defenders earn honors," *Birmingham News*, 11 November 1971, p. 54 and "Plenty Of Standouts In Tide Defensive Unit," *Tuscaloosa News*, 12 November 1971, p. 13.

¹²⁴ Alf Van Hoose, "Relentless Tide bowls over Miami 31-3, sniffs oranges," *Birmingham News*, 14 November 1971, p. C-1, C-9. Jackson did not regularly start, as he played the same position as senior All-American running back Johnny Musso, nicknamed "the Italian Stallion." Musso missed the Miami game because of an injury, however, and Jackson benefited with increased playing time.

¹²⁵ Jimmy Bryan, "Bama's Mitchell has best day, but looking for better," *Birmingham News*, 29 September 1971, p. 23.

race, but they also acknowledged the two athletes' pioneering roles more openly than their counterparts to the north.

Perhaps these local newspapers were following Bryant's lead. After all, the coach had promised to treat the players the same as any other, and he appeared to follow through on his pledge. The coach regularly credited the black players for their performance in games, and often did so in ways that acknowledged their effort and not just their ability, not falling trap to the white media convention wherein white players worked hard and black players succeed because of "natural" talent. For example, after Jackson's long run against Miami, Bryant praised the running back not for his speed but for his determination when he "broke those tackles on the sideline."¹²⁶ As the end of the season approached, Bryant told a group of athletic boosters that Mitchell had "been a great defensive end" in replacing the injured Ed Hines, and had been vital to the team's success.¹²⁷ Bryant certainly did not shy away from crediting the team's black players, and he also attempted to reach out to his black players in other ways. On one occasion, he scheduled the popular film *Shaft*—an action film starring black actor Richard Roundtree—for one of the team's outings that fall, and black and white players alike loved the movie.¹²⁸

Behind the scenes, the team's first black players felt they were treated fairly as well. According to Mike Washington, who played with the freshman team in 1971, Bryant told the team the first time they gathered: "he didn't care who we were, he didn't

¹²⁶ Jimmy Bryan, "Bowl can wait"; Tide makes it 10 down, big one to go," *Birmingham News*, 14 November 1971, p. C-8.

¹²⁷ Clyde Bolton, "Bryant talks of a great 'Bama team," *Birmingham News*, 16 November 1971, p. 22.

¹²⁸ Briley, *Career in Crisis*, 35.

care who our mama and daddy were, and he didn't care what color we were. He said we were going to get an education and we were going to play football—in that order. And he stuck to his promise.”¹²⁹ Mitchell and Jackson, both at the time and in later years, recalled having “no problems” as the squad’s first black players and praised Bryant for his equitable treatment of them. Jackson said in later years: “It was a tough experience on the field, but it was tough on everyone. ... I felt as though I was treated like everyone else, and I also felt that is how it should have been.”¹³⁰ His teammate Sylvester Croom—like Washington, a freshman in 1971—echoed that perspective: “Coach Bryant didn't have black players or white players... He just had football players. The only thing he cared about was your effort; he didn't care about the color of your skin.”¹³¹ Certainly, the black players faced additional pressure from outside the coaching staff because of their race. According to Washington, some black residents told him he “wouldn't have a chance at Alabama and white people ... said” he and the other black players “should go to a black school.”¹³² But he also insisted that within the confines of the team, Bryant created an environment in which race did not determine recognition or status.¹³³

¹²⁹ Kirk McNair, *What It Means To Be Crimson Tide* (Chicago: Triumph Books, 2005), 156.

¹³⁰ Eli Gold, with MB Roberts, *Bear's Boys* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 87.

¹³¹ Gold, *Bear's Boys*, 47. Mitchell also insisted, on numerous occasions, that Bryant treated him fairly. See, for example, Gold, *Bear's Boys*, 143.

¹³² McNair, *What It Means*, 157.

¹³³ Washington had first-hand experience with Bryant's rough, but fair, treatment. In practice as a freshman, Washington moved out of the way of offensive lineman John Hannah, who had just broken the leg of another cornerback on the previous play. Washington, “gave him one of those ole moves like a bullfighter” and the running back following Hannah scored a touchdown.¹³³ An enraged Bryant climbed down from his observation tower—a rare occurrence in practice, and one reserved for moments when he was going to chastise a particular player. Terrified, Washington watched as Bryant approached him and then proceeded to grab his facemask and yell at him in front of the entire team. According to Washington, Bryant gave him a tongue-lashing: “The bottom line was that I had better get my butt in gear or I wouldn't have to run away. He would send me home. But he also told me I had too much talent to let it go to waste by wasting time in practice.” Although Washington was shaken, he thought that it was an important

Although the mainstream white press picked up on the color-blind attitude Bryant took towards his team, the local black press made a determined effort to keep black players, and black schools, in the spotlight. However, that decision did not entail focusing on the exploits of Jackson and Mitchell. Indeed, the *World* rarely even mentioned the UA team during the 1971 season, instead concentrating their sports reporting on the local historically-black colleges and universities. The history of black athletic achievement in Alabama helps explain that emphasis. The *World* devoted considerable attention to an organization called the Grid Forecasters, who held an annual banquet to honor local black athletes. According to Marcel Hopson, the group formed in 1951 out of concern that national press agencies and newspapers ignored African Americans across the country when it came to selecting All-America teams and other honors. Similarly, the group was distressed by the lack of coverage of black athletes in the “two local dailies,” who also slighted African-American high school athletes in Birmingham “when time came to issuing ... accolades and honors” for athletic achievement. The group hoped that by calling attention to local black athletes, they would inspire college coaches “throughout the nation, especially the Negro-enrolled colleges in the South and mid-west section” to recruit these players and offer them scholarships.¹³⁴ That the group still existed in the early 1970s spoke to the on-going inequalities in the black sporting world. In August 1972, the newspaper’s editors justified the Forecasters’ continuing work, explaining that, without the group, black athletes would be “left unprotected and even more exploited.” In particular, the editors

moment for the team: “If there was ever any question about whether coach Bryant was going to treat everyone the same way, he answered it that day.” See McNair, *What It Means*, 167.

¹³⁴ Marcel Hopson, “Hits And Bits,” *Birmingham World*, 13 January 1973, p. 4.

expressed distress that integration of schools and sporting conferences had not led to “a corresponding utilization of black coaches, black administrators, and black school athletes into the established broader structures of athletics.” Although the editors believed that Birmingham’s residents were, on the whole, “fair-minded,” they acknowledged the need for an organization such as the Grid Forecasters to help protect black athletics.¹³⁵

That emphasis on protecting black athletes and black athletic institutions dominated the *World’s* sports coverage. If North Carolina’s black press coverage of Charlie Scott’s debut had been tinged with anxiety regarding the fate of African-American institutions, the *World’s* analysis lamented the effects of integration on historically-black schools. In January 1971, *World* columnist Marion Jackson noted the troubles that black college football teams were facing as they were “no longer able to recruit the top athletes of their race.”¹³⁶ Jackson also bemoaned the fact that the integration of high schools usually led to the retention of white football coaches, who steered their top athletes to their own schools and not black colleges.¹³⁷ By June 1971, Jackson was calling on small black colleges to hold games in downtown stadiums so that

¹³⁵ “Emphasis On Recognition,” Editorial, *Birmingham World*, 26 August 1972, p. 2.

¹³⁶ Bryant actually anticipated this development in his deposition to Clemon. He told the lawyer that the coaches at traditionally black colleges were “going to be displeased with you all, they used to get all of those athletes.” See Transcript of Bryant deposition, p. 86.

¹³⁷ Marion Jackson, “Views Sports of The World,” *Birmingham World*, 2 January 1971, p. 6. Hopson also expressed his distress at the effects of high school integration on black coaches. In August 1971, he complained that “some folk” in the educational system were “still attempting to use subterfuges to avoid carrying out the desegregation and anti-discrimination court orders in appointments, employment, promotions and transfers.” He was particularly disgruntled that black football coach William N. Horn, a coach for twenty years at Western Olin High School, was not hired for either one of two vacancies at majority white schools. Instead, white coaches with much less experience were hired. See Marcel Hopson, “Hits And Bits,” *Birmingham World*, 21 August 1971, p. 6.

“Negro football competition” could be “rescued.”¹³⁸ The *World* was not alone in this bleak assessment. A December 1970 article by Lacy Banks in *Ebony* magazine expressed similar concerns. Although pleased that African-American athletes were finally being given the opportunity to play at schools such as “Mississippi State and the University of Alabama, sworn bastions of white supremacy,” Banks noted that many in the black community expressed misgivings. Some worried that black athletes would be exploited for their athletic ability. Others noted that stereotypes relegated black athletes to certain positions, excluding them from roles such as the quarterback. Prairie View College Coach Alexander Durley and Grambling University Coach Eddie Robinson also lamented the loss of quality athletes from black schools, noting the impact this trend had on attendance and revenues. Robinson also pleaded that he could mold an African-American youth into “a man, a fighter, a producer ... better than the white man.”¹³⁹

The loss of attendance at black football games proved particularly troubling. Hopson was outraged when the Health Bowl Benefit Football Classic, a game whose proceeds provided financial aid to poor, sick children, had been cancelled in November 1971 because of declining interest. The annual affair, which pitted two local black high school football teams against one another, had been played on Thanksgiving Day for twenty-nine years. The decision to cancel inspired Hopson to call Birmingham “the ‘Grave Yard’ of Negro ‘Firsts.’” Officials blamed “the advent of school (racial) integration” for canceling the game, citing a decline in income from a net of \$21,248.02

¹³⁸ Marion Jackson, “World Sports,” *Birmingham World*, 24 June 1972, p. 5.

¹³⁹ Lacy J. Banks, “Black Football Players in the White South,” *Ebony*, vol. 26, no. 2 (December 1970), 131-39. Quotations from 132, 139.

in 1965 to only \$13,474.76 in 1970.¹⁴⁰ Hopson still seethed one week later, writing this scathing indictment: “No one (especially an ethnic minority groups [sic]) can ‘merge’ with the so called ‘Power Structure’ in any walk of life. The minority group merely gets ‘swallowed up.’ Results: Not even the bones or skin are left to show any trace of . . . existence.”¹⁴¹

The benefit game’s demise was not the only thing on Hopson’s mind; he also expressed anger that some of the premier, previously all-black high school football teams were not ranked by the Alabama High School Athletic Association (AHSAA), despite fine records. And he argued that after the Negro Alabama Interscholastic Athletic Association “merged” with the AHSAA, it was actually “‘buried’ into oblivion.”¹⁴² In the same year that black players made their debuts with the UA squad, at the same time that Jackson and Mitchell were helping lead the Crimson Tide to an undefeated regular season, local black leaders such as Hopson found more despair than hope in sports. Instead of an equal opportunity, sports provided another case of white majority culture subsuming black culture and obliterating cherished African-American institutions.

The first year of an integrated team at UA, then, conveyed a wide range of meanings, providing hope to some and anxiety to others as Alabamians tried to bring blacks and whites together in the post-Jim Crow Deep South. A late October 1971 photograph in the *Tuscaloosa News* captured both the possibilities and the challenges sports provided as a model of that ideal of interracial equality.

¹⁴⁰ Marcel Hopson, “Hits And Bits,” *Birmingham World*, 13 November 1971, p. 7.

¹⁴¹ Marcel Hopson, “Hits And Bits,” *Birmingham World*, 20 November 1971, p. 5.

¹⁴² Marcel Hopson, “Hits And Bits,” *Birmingham World*, 20 November 1971, p. 5.

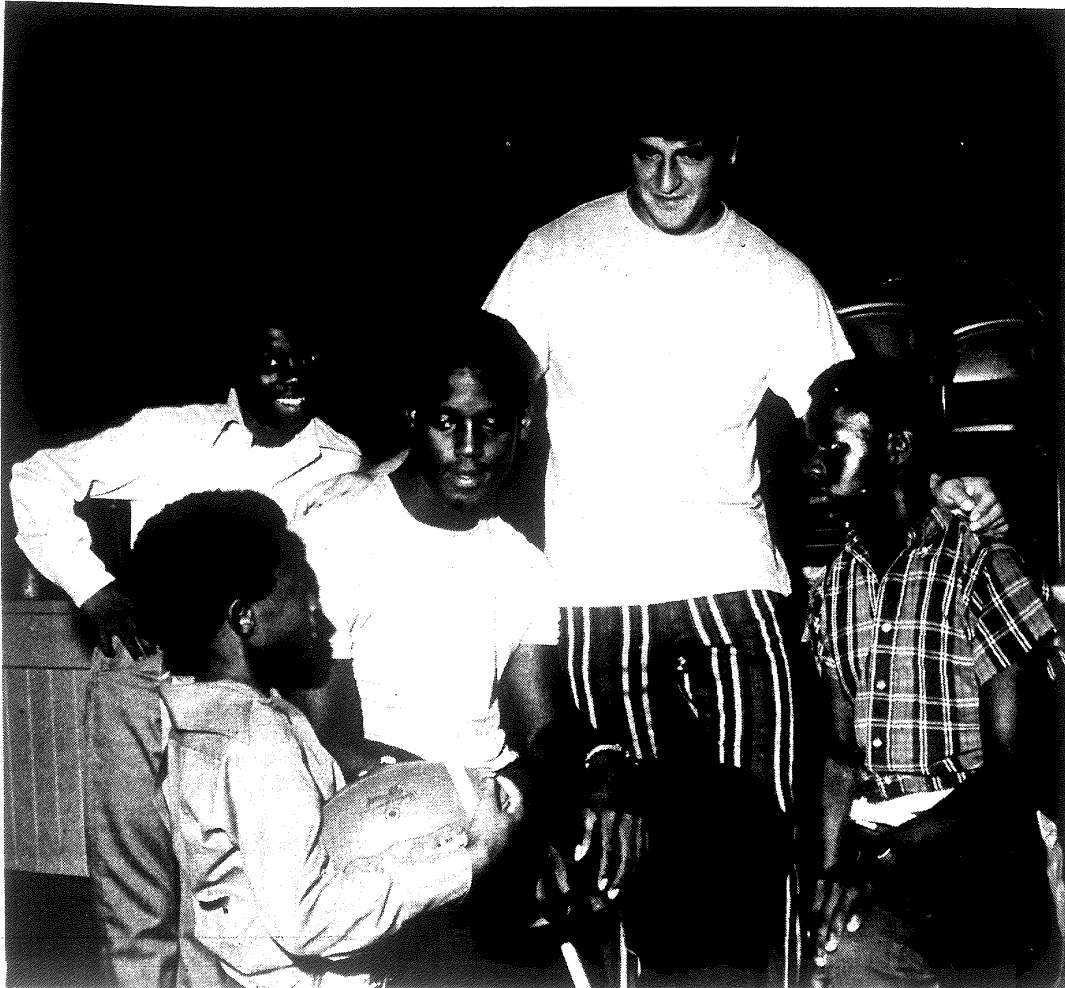


Photo By Dan Meissner

'Keep Working And Stay In School'

"If you keep working and stay in school, you never know what you can do," Alabama stars John Mitchell and Johnny Musso told a gathering of young football players at Westlawn Junior High School Monday afternoon. Musso (standing) and Mitchell (seated) then answered questions from (left to right) Johnny

Steele, Eddie Ray and Harold Wilson. "The only way to be a good winner is to be a good loser," Mitchell and Musso told the boys. "If you never know what it's like to lose, you can't really understand what it feels like to win." The local PARA arranged the talk.

Figure 5.4. *Tuscaloosa News* photograph of John Mitchell and Johnny Musso.

In the picture, Johnny Musso, UA's star running back, and John Mitchell talked with three African-American boys, who smiled and looked in wonder at the football players. According to the caption, the two players told the youths to "keep working and stay in

school,” a positive lesson, certainly, and symbolic of how UA’s prestigious football team could reach out to an even wider audience with black players now on the team. The arrangement of the principles in the photograph may have conveyed another message, however. Mitchell sat in a chair and talked with a black boy holding a football. Musso stood behind Mitchell, and had one hand on his shoulder and one hand on the shoulder of another black student who looked intently at Mitchell. Although clearly meant to be an image of racial harmony, the image nonetheless conveyed a paternalistic message. Musso stood in a position of authority, benevolently guiding the proceedings.¹⁴³ Blacks and whites had come together, yes, but there were still issues to be ironed out—who was in charge of this newly-ordered society, and who would shape the terms of integration, remained very much undecided.

1972 and After: Expanding Opportunity

John Mitchell and Wilbur Jackson broke through the color barrier in Alabama football in 1971 and there would be no going back. Although the squad lost the de facto national championship game to the University of Nebraska on January 1, 1972, the following year proved to be another successful season for the university’s football team and its black athletes. During the 1972 season, Mitchell served as game captain on multiple occasions, was selected by his peers as one of three permanent captains at the season’s conclusion, and earned first-team All-American honors on the Eastman Kodak squad (a team selected by the American Football Coaches Association). That same year, Jackson led the team in rushing yards and earned significant media coverage. And the

¹⁴³ Dan Meissner, “Keep Working And Stay In School,” Photograph, *Tuscaloosa News*, 19 October 1971, p. 7.

two were not alone, with four black sophomores and two black freshmen (just made eligible by the NCAA) joining the varsity squad and playing significant roles. Although the squad would come up short in its quest for another national championship, it added an SEC title to the school's already impressive collection and reaffirmed Alabama's place as one of the top football programs in the nation.

As in the previous season, issues related to race and college football offered both signs of hope and despair in regards to race relations. Bryant's treatment of players, public assessments of Mitchell's career, response to a black athlete revolt at nearby Troy State University, and Mitchell's hiring as an assistant coach all illustrated how sports could channel debates regarding affirmative action and President Richard Nixon's call for "law and order." Positive signs regarding racial integration abounded in the experiences of the Alabama football team. Bryant continued to live up to his color-blind pledge, praising his black players consistently in the press, including young underclassmen such as Ralph Stokes, Mike Washington, and Tyrone King. The head coach even named freshman linebacker Woodrow Lowe one of three game captains for the 1972 team's second game of the year to reward the young player for his effort on special teams.¹⁴⁴ The mainstream press praised the team's black players as well: Mitchell was often asked for his insights regarding the team's performance; the AP named Mitchell to the first-team All-SEC squad; and the local media praised Mitchell for his All-American selection.¹⁴⁵ Support seemed strong in the community as well. At the regular season's conclusion, Mitchell, along with the other seniors on the squad, received a watch from

¹⁴⁴ Ronald Weathers, "Kentucky comes a-calling... it's turnaround for Bear," *Birmingham News*, 17 September 1972, p. C-1, C-12.

¹⁴⁵ See Clyde Bolton, "One man's vote: Hannah," *Birmingham News*, 30 November 1972, p. 25, and "Davis nips Jones as Tide, Tigers lead All-SEC," *Birmingham News*, 29 November 1972, p. 55, 61.

the Jefferson County Chapter of the University of Alabama Alumni Association. A small gesture, to be sure, but a visible sign that traditions were changing. The group had given watches to the senior players every year since 1923, and Mitchell was the first black player to share in the event.¹⁴⁶

The conclusion of Mitchell's career provided an impetus for his hometown community and for the local media to assess racial progress through the pioneer's experiences. In February 1973, one month after his final game with the Tide, the city of Mobile celebrated "John Mitchell and Bobby McKinney Day," honoring the black star and one of his white senior teammates. Both players received "crimson and white" cars at the dinner held in their honor, and Bryant, the event's guest speaker, effusively praised both players, saying that they had "represented" their home town "very, very well" on and off the football field. When discussing Mitchell's career, Bryant rued that the UA football team had not fielded black athletes "long before" it eventually did. The coach also continued to employ a discourse that minimized racial distinctions among his players. When asked how many black players were on his team, Bryant replied: "None. ... we don't have any white ones either. We just have players. I just wish it had been that way all along." Mitchell himself expressed his positive feelings regarding his time at the school, saying that he was "readily accepted by the players, coaches, students and fans" and praising Bryant for having a positive influence on his life. Mitchell said his career at the school was full of "great memories."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Jimmy Bryan, "Crimson Tide seniors relive big moments," *Birmingham News*, 9 December 1972, p. 13. In fact, Mitchell appeared in one of the two photographs that accompanied the story.

¹⁴⁷ Ben Nolan, "Glimpses from the Score Book," *Mobile Register*, 20 February 1973, p. 1C, 2C. The *Crimson-White* also reported this celebration, noting that other former UA players attending the event included Lee Roy Jordan, Scott Hunter, Kenny (Snake) Stabler, Bubba Sawyer, and David Chatwood. The

The press picked up on these positive feelings. In a story in the *Birmingham News* regarding the end of Mitchell's trail-blazing career, Van Hoose was delighted to report that "quietly, with dignity, and very effectively" Mitchell had been "a sociological pioneer" on the team. He was also pleased to write that there would be "no book" written by Mitchell to chronicle his experiences because "the trail he blazed ... completely lacked dramatics." Thus, "no publisher has banged Mitchell's door to commercialize on the popular theme of violence."¹⁴⁸ Clearly, Van Hoose was relieved that the unrest that had occurred at other schools across the country did not take hold at UA. A story in the *Crimson-White* about Jackson's and Mitchell's experiences in 1971 and 1972 supported these positive assessments. Jackson said that "for the most part everybody was friendly" during his time at the school. He believed that coaches' emphasis on winning would make discrimination and tokenism on football teams a thing of the past. Mitchell went one step further, saying that the black and white players on the UA team "have a beautiful relationship."¹⁴⁹ These comments must have been heartening to those who looked to football to model blacks and whites working together in an integrated society.

Some were still skeptical. As the regular season came to a close for the 1972 UA squad, *Crimson-White* features editor Nathan Turner wrote a column about black students' sense of the campus and its racial climate. He situated their responses in light

presence of those past stars suggests that many former players supported the decision to integrate the team. See Rick Gilliam, "Inside Sports," *Crimson-White*, 19 February 1973, p. 12.

¹⁴⁸ Alf Van Hoose, "Tide pioneer just member of the team," *Birmingham News*, 7 January 1973, p. C-1, C-8. Quotations from C-1.

¹⁴⁹ Nathan Turner, "Blacks discuss football careers," *Crimson-White*, 18 January 1973, p. 5. Mitchell's assessment was corroborated by his white teammates as well. Near the conclusion to the 1971 season, the *Tuscaloosa News* had published a story about Mitchell's first year. His roommate that season, Robin Parkhouse, said that the two had "become good friends." He added: "We treat each other as men, and believe me, John Mitchell is a fantastic human being and a real man." See Leonard Shapiro, "Mitchell Found 'Good Life' At UA," *Tuscaloosa News*, 29 December 1971, p. 15.

of the ninth anniversary of Wallace's stand at the schoolhouse door, wondering why it took the university so long to admit black students and how much, or little, racial attitudes had changed in the previous nine years. Although many of the black students he interviewed expressed doubts about the school's racial climate, Turner cited the lawsuit regarding black athletes as proof that progress had been made. At that point, according to an un-named official in the athletic department, there were 18 black athletes, including ten on the football team. According to the official, all ten had "either played or dressed out" that season, including the four black freshmen. But Turner cautioned that some still doubted the university's commitment, believing that black athletes were "being used" or that athletic department officials only recruited black athletes because they realized "that they [could not] win without blacks." Turner saw that skepticism as a sign that black students were still "trying to come to grips with a school which many say has not lived down its past."¹⁵⁰

The media's response to a racially-charged situation in late September 1972 at nearby Troy State University also suggested some of sports' limitations for addressing the more complex issues at the heart of the changing civil rights struggle. Six black football players at the school, located approximately 180 miles from Tuscaloosa and 140 miles from Birmingham, had left the team at halftime of a game against Ouachita College, protesting what they believed to be unfair conditions and biased treatment from coaches and athletic officials. Head coach Tom Jones immediately dismissed the players from the team and gave them no opportunity to return—a stance that delighted *Birmingham News* writers Jimmy Bryan and Alf Van Hoose. Describing the behavior of

¹⁵⁰ Nathan Turner, "Black attitude today reflects liberalization of racial opinions," *Crimson-White*, 30 November 1972, p. 5.

the players as a “mutiny,” Bryan insisted that Jones was not being racist in kicking the black players off the team: “Coach Jones,” he wrote, “does not judge a man by the color of his skin. He judges him by the color of his blood and backbone.” What defined these players was their decision to “quit.” Neither Jones nor Bryan took seriously the players’ list of grievances—which included unfair distribution of work study jobs, false statements in recruiting, and inferior medical treatment for the team’s black players.¹⁵¹

Van Hoose and other (white) observers across the country also enthusiastically supported Jones’ decision. In an era when youth activism, and especially black athlete activism, was at an all-time high, Jones proved heroic to many, who likely saw his actions as another example of the “law and order” that President Nixon had promised in his 1968 election campaign. The enthusiastic reactions to Jones’ firm response also fit in well with Nixon’s “southern strategy” in the 1972 election, in which the President aggressively courted southern white voters who felt betrayed by desegregation and affirmative action policies.¹⁵² Van Hoose believed that the coach’s decision entailed a “landmark stand,” and that Jones had set an example for “many leaders of young men who have fiddle-faddled around with indecision for several years.” To Van Hoose, sports had “shown the way” in a “turbulent era” in American history, and he saw Jones’ actions as one more sign of that leadership. Van Hoose cautioned his readers not to interpret his article as “applause for a coach jumping on black athletes.” He insisted that he praised Jones for punishing athletes of any color for “trying to test solid rules of conduct” that

¹⁵¹ Jimmy Bryan, “Walkout terminated blacks’ football,” *Birmingham News*, 4 October 1972, p. 29, 30.

¹⁵² For more on Nixon’s “southern strategy,” see Sitkoff, *Struggle for Black Equality*, 212-14, 216, 224. Dean J. Kotlowski offers a positive assessment of Nixon’s civil rights record in *Nixon’s Civil Rights: Politics, Principle, and Policy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), although many scholars dispute his arguments, including Sitkoff, whose review appears in the *Journal of American History* 89 (March 2003): 1611.

had been established over the long history of organized sports. Although Van Hoose argued that his enthusiasm for Jones stemmed from the treatment of youth revolt (and on some level, that was surely true), other signs belied that interpretation: in the article, Van Hoose chose coaches Jim Owens at Washington, Ben Schwartzwalder at Syracuse, and Lloyd Eaton, former coach at Wyoming—who all dealt with black athlete uprisings—as people who would have been gratified by Jones’ stand.¹⁵³ Clearly, racial issues were important to Van Hoose. Despite his plea to read his article differently, one could easily interpret it as a call for white leaders in positions of authority to put blacks back in their “proper” place.

Still, there were many ways that sports—and Alabama’s football team in particular—did offer hope for people concerned about racial integration. When Mitchell narrowly missed earning a spot with the San Francisco 49ers of the National Football League, Bryant offered him a position as an assistant coach—the first black assistant coach at any major university in the South. Mitchell held that position for a number of years, and is currently an assistant coach with the NFL’s Pittsburgh Steelers. Meanwhile, as increasing numbers of black players joined the Crimson Tide, the team’s fortunes rebounded. Although the squad had finished 6-5 in 1969, and 6-4-1 in 1970, disappointing by Bryant’s high standards, the first integrated teams of 1971 and 1972 bounced back to 11-1 and 10-2, respectively.¹⁵⁴ One year later, the team would claim a share of the national championship. There was no doubt that black players contributed to

¹⁵³ Alf Van Hoose, “Applause rings from afar for Troy’s Coach Jones,” *Birmingham News*, 6 October 1972, p. 11. In a later story, Jones said that he had received “mail from all over the country” as well as telephone calls supporting his actions. See Jimmy Bryan, “Support from all over for Jones’ stand,” *Birmingham News*, 11 October 1972, p. 36.

¹⁵⁴ Bryant was also named the AP SEC Coach of the Year in 1971, although the impact of integration on his team was not mentioned. Delbert Reed, “Bryant Choice For Coach Of Year,” *Tuscaloosa News*, 1 December 1971, p. 17.

that success, but so, too, did Bryant's emphasis on equal treatment. His players consistently recalled the fairness with which he treated black players. Walter Lewis, who was UA's second black quarterback in the early 1980s, said the coach told the players that they "bled the same blood and sweated the same sweat," which helped create "a bond among the players."¹⁵⁵ Ozzie Newsome, who played at UA, had a Hall of Fame career in the NFL, and is currently the General Manager of the NFL's Baltimore Ravens, said this about Bryant: "[Martin Luther] King preached opportunity ... but without people like Coach Bryant who gave us the opportunity and really treated us as equals, where would we be?"¹⁵⁶ Bryant's thoroughness in integrating his team—naming black captains, putting black players in key positions, and hiring black assistants (Croom was hired as an assistant not long after Mitchell)—spoke to his sense of fairness and his commitment to winning.¹⁵⁷ It also opened up a number of new opportunities for his black players. As Wilbur Jackson commented in later years, "Being a football player at Alabama puts you into a select network that will help you throughout your adult life."¹⁵⁸

Of course, those opportunities did not necessarily translate to other black Alabamians, or to other African Americans in the South in general. When Mitchell looked back on his first season with the varsity, he was pleased to report that he had "no troubles" at the school but admitted that "being an athlete really helps."¹⁵⁹ And that would be the real challenge for the 1970s and beyond—how to re-shape everyday life so

¹⁵⁵ McNair, *What It Means*, 232.

¹⁵⁶ Dunnivant, *Coach*, 265.

¹⁵⁷ Barra writes that Bryant's "greatest achievement as a leader was the thoroughness with which he integrated the team and the coaching staff once the commitment was made." See Barra, *Last Coach*, xxv.

¹⁵⁸ Briley, *Career in Crisis*, 276.

¹⁵⁹ See Shapiro, "Mitchell Found 'Good Life,'" p. 15.

that ordinary black citizens could participate equally with their white peers. The black students who sued the school, the black athletes at Troy State University, even radical groups such as the Black Panthers, all pushed for African Americans to enjoy the same standard of living, the same treatment, the same recognition of their past and their culture that most white Americans enjoyed without ever acknowledging their privileged position. Where white newspapers anxiously saw “radical” behavior and “separatist” politics, many African Americans saw the obliteration of their cultural institutions and the loss of positions of prestige to black professionals—from high school football coaches to university presidents and everything in between. How could people extend the positive treatment and experiences of Mitchell, Jackson, Newsome and the other black Alabama football players to more people in the black community, to a wider circle? These athletes entered into one old-boy network and benefited. But that was only one of many such networks that gave white men a leg up on their competition. Would white men in the worlds of business and politics be so agreeable? The effusive praise for Tom Jones and the white backlash in the 1972 presidential election—which rolled back many affirmative action policies and other programs designed to help minorities—suggested that those transformations remained unlikely.

Still, as *Crimson-White* sports editor Rick Young noted in March 1972, the success of the integrated Alabama football team had its symbolic value for this tumultuous era. He contrasted the on-going tensions over the busing of students to integrate public elementary and high schools with the accepted busing taking place in sports—of integrated squads travelling together to games. Although acknowledging that there was “still racial injustice in sports,” including “the paucity of Negro coaches and

administrators,” the lack of black quarterbacks, and the stacking of black athletes to make room for whites, Young still found hope. Sports, Young argued, was “one of the perilously few segments of society that shows us integration works, and how it works.” Athletes could not rely on “nepotism” to be successful, Young noted, as people often did in business and other professional fields. Instead, they had to earn their way through hard work and ability. In order for coaches to be successful, moreover, they had to “have standards of fairness and equality above reproach” to field the best team. As Young noted, “the owners of many businesses in Tuscaloosa would not be so open-minded.” Integrated sports teams in which players were treated fairly modeled, in other words, how the rest of American society might operate, that old familiar dream that imbued so many black and white writers’ perspective of sports throughout the twentieth century. Still, there was something poignant about Young’s observations, rooted as they were in a specific moment in time. As whites in the North and South fought school busing and affirmative action vigorously, and as black activists struggled to retain cultural institutions and gain access to new economic opportunities, sports held out some hope. They taught Americans, as Young noted, “that different races can ride the bus together.”¹⁶⁰ We would do well to heed that lesson.

¹⁶⁰ Rick Young, “Press Box,” *Crimson-White*, 9 March 1972, p. 11.

Conclusion

College Sports as Model and Metaphor

Sports' centrality to debates over race and equality would continue in the years after 1973, but the early 1970s marked an important era of transition—with the integration of the last SEC schools, racial segregation in big-time college athletics (at least among players) had ended. This era also saw the gradual demise of the modern civil rights movement, as the fractures exposed in debates over affirmative action and black nationalism proved too wide to heal entirely. Racial integration had come to athletics, and to many other aspects of American life, but much work remained to be done. Black players continued to face racial barriers at the collegiate level, including coaches who restricted them from certain positions, fans who continued to cling to negative stereotypes of black men, and university officials who welcomed black athletes' financial contributions to the school via sports but who made no effort to insure their education. While many still turned to sports as proof of the American dream of equal opportunity, the same frustrations reappeared time and again.

Leadership positions in college sports proved to be a particularly thorny issue. Although John Mitchell became an assistant coach with Alabama in 1973, and parlayed that experience into coaching jobs at other schools and in the NFL, most black athletes were not so fortunate. The traditional network of white college administrators and coaches made available few opportunities for black players when their careers ended. As of December 2007, only seven out of 117 Division-IA college football teams had black

head coaches. When organizations such as the Black Coaches and Administrators (BCA) called attention to this dismal record, and asked that universities with openings for head coaches at least interview one minority coach, public response again showed how sports issues could channel debates regarding equality in American life.¹ On one sports-themed Internet message board, the call for interviews of black candidates led to an impassioned discussion. One reader lamented that the BCA was asking for a “double standard,” arguing that if schools were required to interview African Americans for coaching positions, “then there should be requirements on offering scholarships to white players.” Others defended the organization, insisting that granting interviews did not infringe on whites’ rights, and that the process was one small step that schools could take to overcome the “institutionalized belief that White-Americans are somehow better suited to be head coaches than are African-Americans.”² These debates highlighted the on-going vitality of college athletics to channel anxieties and aspirations regarding American democratic society, and suggested the barriers black men face in securing leadership positions in the realm of athletics and beyond.

New bodies and institutions contributed to the dialogue as well. With the passage of Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act in 1972, Congress mandated that schools fund men’s and women’s on-campus activities—including athletics—equally. Although the implementation of Title IX has been controversial, and spending on men’s athletic programs continues to outpace funding of women’s sports, the legislation nonetheless

¹ The Black Coaches and Administrators web site catalogues stories featuring the organization and has a number of articles devoted to the issue of interviewing and hiring African-American college football coaches. See <http://bcasports.cstv.com/genrel/bca-genrel.html>.

² The discussion took place from November 28 through November 20, 2007 in the “Tar Pit” forum of the “Inside Carolina” web site, an Internet publication devoted to UNC sports. Discussions are only archived for a limited time, so no permanent record of the discussion exists online, although the author printed a copy for his research.

spurred the creation of women's college teams across the country, providing numerous opportunities previously out of reach.³ One sign of this change appeared in a brief November 1972 story in the *Crimson-White*. That month, UA approved a budget for women's sports for the first time in the school's history, allocating the laughably small sum of \$13,000 for that purpose.⁴ As schools across the nation slowly began to implement women's sports programs, these teams and athletes channeled new debates regarding gender and sexual equality. The spring 2007 controversy surrounding radio talk show host Don Imus, who called Rutgers' women's basketball players "nappy-headed hos," spoke to the ways women's athletics could be the site for discourse regarding the intersections of race, sex, gender, and even class. Imus' comments lampooned the women players for being unfeminine, called attention to their race, and simultaneously poked fun at what he saw as their lower-class appearance.⁵ The outrage in the mainstream media showed that such observations would not go uncontested.

As these and numerous other contemporary examples suggest, the debates over American equality—and sports' centrality to those discussions—continue on into the present day. Because the model of the level playing field has had such long-lasting resonance in American culture, and because economic, racial, and gender inequalities persist (and, in some cases, have become even more extreme), many people continue to turn to sports as a model for American society, as a realization of the ideal of equal opportunity. The varied case studies of this project suggest that college sports in

³ For more on the effects of Title IX and the response to it, see Linda Jean Carpenter, *Title IX* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2005), and Susan Ware, *Title IX: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedord/St. Martin's, 2007).

⁴ Brad Fisher, "Women's sports budget approved by Athletics," *Crimson-White*, 9 November 1972, p. 1.

⁵ The Imus story was widely reported in the news. The AP story is available online through msnbc.com at: <http://nbcsports.msnbc.com/id/17982146/1/>.

particular can work well to channel discussions regarding equality and opportunity. Deeply resonant in local communities, and free from the relatively abstract language characteristic of the realms of law and public policy, integrated team college sports served a number of functions. First, they provided specific examples for people to articulate their beliefs regarding the contours of American democratic society. Second, they opened up spaces for people's beliefs to be momentarily suspended—and perhaps lastingly altered—as observers cheered athletes from groups they might have otherwise disparaged. Third, the struggles of these pioneers called attention to the barriers African Americans faced in other areas of life. And, finally, the achievements of these college sports teams proved that blacks and whites could work together to attain success.

But the limitations faced by these pioneers over the course of the twentieth century also revealed the inadequacies of college sports to deal with some of the complicated issues related to the ideal of equality—issues that continue to divide Americans. Coaches who recruited black players simply to remain competitive could, and did, exploit black athletes, failing to support these players' academic endeavors and ignoring them for positions as coaches when their playing careers ended. Some white fans continue to praise black athletic achievement, but circumscribe its meanings, falling back on stereotypes of intellectual inferiority and primitive passions. Furthermore, the esteem and opportunities given to athletes did not necessarily translate to other African Americans. Athletic success did little to rectify centuries of poverty in the black community. The income gap between whites and blacks, on the whole, remains wide, a reminder that centuries of discrimination cannot be undone simply by removing legal and political barriers to black opportunity. Further, the hopes that integrated team sports'

success would enable all black men to access the privileges of U.S. male citizenship have been dashed. According to 2006 U.S. Department of Justice statistics, one in every fifteen adult black men, and one in every nine black men between the ages of twenty and thirty-four, was in prison, compared to the national average of one in every ninety-nine adults.⁶ In these ways, the level playing field of sports remained a utopia whose example could not easily be duplicated in other aspects of American life.

President Johnson's warnings to white America about the need for affirmative action, about the many steps necessary before African Americans would be capable to compete on equal terms with whites, retain their currency in contemporary times. Although black athletes and entertainers represent some of the most popular and beloved celebrities in American culture, their exceptional success does not mean that all is equal in American life. In truth, the ideal of equal opportunity will never be realized. There will never be a starting line where everyone in society, regardless of race, family wealth, ethnicity, and religion, is on equal footing. But sports offer a sign of how change can occur, how progress can be made. As black college athletes took to fields and courts previously restricted to them, their bodies spoke to the possibilities of transcending barriers to equal opportunity. By chipping away at other examples of discrimination—such as stacking, exclusion from certain positions, and leadership roles on and off the field—these athletes modeled the exhausting, never-ending effort required to make the playing field of sports less uneven. They represented, and continue to represent, the long struggle to make American society live up to its egalitarian ideals. How we interpret

⁶ See Adam Liptak, "U.S. Imprisons One in 100 Adults, Report Finds," *New York Times*, 29 February 2008, online edition: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/29/us/29prison.html>.

their efforts, the credence we give to their claims for equality, may well determine how close we can come to that elusive ideal.

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