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Winter 2019

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#### Published In

Zhang, Wenxian, Raja Rahim and Julian Chambliss, "Race and Sport in the Florida Sun: The Rollins/Ohio Wesleyan Football Game of 1947." *Phylon* (1960-) 56, no. 2 (2019): 59-81.

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## ***Race and Sport in the Florida Sun: The Rollins/Ohio Wesleyan Football Game of 1947***

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### **Abstract**

As the most popular sport in the United States, football occupies a central place in popular discourse. Since the early twentieth century, public engagement with football has been central to sport culture. Across the South, football provided a moment of common experience, and this was especially true of Rollins College. Being the oldest liberal arts institution in Florida, life at Rollins was linked to football for decades. Yet, as this comment suggested, the nature of the relationship could not be unaffected by the changing racial dynamic in the United States. As a small liberal arts college, the faculty and students at Rollins has long supported “progressive” racial politics. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of that history in the 1947 Rollins/Ohio Wesleyan University football game is how that racial progressivism vie with the reality of White Supremacy. Despite notable social progress since World War II, Florida in the late 1940s remained a frontier state in terms of racial relations, since the state law still prohibited the mixed participation in any educational programs. When Ohio Wesleyan led by Branch Rickey insisted on bringing its African American player to the game, President Hamilton Holt failed to take a stand against racial injustice, fearing violence, even though the cancellation was against his personal beliefs. Notwithstanding his own limit and surrender to political pressures in the segregated South of his time, Holt ultimately was able to stand on the right side of history and made his mark on the social integration in the United States.

## Introduction

On Friday, November 28, 1947, Hamilton Holt, president of Rollins College (1925-1949), gave lengthy remarks to the students and faculty in the Annie Russell Theatre:

We all are prone to take our stand on controversial issues in accordance with our general intellectual and ethical beliefs, even before we have heard both sides. I know that some of you have thought that Rollins was wrong in canceling the game, for I have heard already a few such opinions expressed from alumni, faculty, students and townsfolk. Others I know have approved. But it is always better in cases of this kind to hear the objections to what may be said against your conclusions before your utter them than after you utter them. In other words, the spirit of tolerance and fair play requires educated men and women to make up their minds... History, I take it, is nothing but the coming into his own of the individual man, whatever his color, creed, race or religion may be. But during the life-time of every one of you in my hearing this morning, this issue is likely to be with you, even though I hope and believe it will continually get better as the years and decades roll on (Holt 1947a).

Speaking on the issue of race in the United States, it may be assumed that Holt's speech spoke to the experiences of World War II soldiers, the tensions sparked by the onset of the Cold War, or the forthcoming movement for Black civil rights. His remarks, however, con-

cerned the cancellation of a football game, the intersection of race and sports in college athletics, and White southern culture. After much debate, Rollins College cancelled it against Ohio Wesleyan University (OWU) to ensure the racial order of the South. The racial machinations surrounding the Rollins-OWU game tells not only the history of college football and the execution of the Gentlemen's Agreement but also exposes how Whites interpreted the processes of social change in the postwar South.

As the most popular sport in the United States, especially in the South, football has been a major part of American life since its invention in the late nineteenth century. Most people probably do not know that Rollins College once had a very active football program. With mottos such as "Fit for Life," "Fit to Fight," and "Study Hard and Play Hard," Rollins' football program was launched in the early twentieth century, and its first victory was over the University of Florida (5-0) at home in 1906, after suffering two no-win seasons. Over its forty-five-year span (1904-1949), Tars registered a record of 114 wins, 94 losses, and 13 ties, making Rollins one of the best small-college programs in the country (Davis 1994). As a founding member of the Florida Collegiate Athletic Association, Rollins regularly faced teams from much larger institutions and scored a few impressive wins, including beating the University of Havana (80-0) in 1923, and defeating Miami Hurricanes in 1932 (6-0), 1934 (14-0) and 1940 (7-0). Although the program was briefly cancelled (1942-45) due to the war effort and a lack of male enrollment as a result of the draft during World War II, under

the leadership of Coach Jack McDowall (1929-1949) and with ardent support by President Hamilton Holt, for years football occupied a central place in campus life at Rollins, and its annual ritual is the homecoming celebration in each November (ibid; Rollins Alumni Record 1948).

During the homecoming game on November 22, 1946, Rollins beat Ohio Wesleyan 21 to 13. The game took place in the Orlando Municipal Stadium, at the current site of Citrus Bowl. On February 19, 1947, Jack McDowall, Rollins' Athletic Director, reached an agreement with G. E. Gauthier, his counterpart at OWU, on Rollins' next homecoming game to be played on November 28, 1947, with a signed Southern Inter-Collegiate Athletic Association football contract specifying the time, place, and financial obligations for both parties (Rollins/OWU Football Contract 1947).

During the era of segregation, White southern colleges and universities played their roles in maintaining the racial status quo, including their athletic programs. Since the development of college athletics at the turn of the twentieth century, Northern and Southern colleges and universities operated based on the Gentlemen's Agreement—a mutual understanding that excluded the Black athlete from competition when the teams met. Under such an agreement, White southern colleges avoided integrated competition by not scheduling games with integrated teams of the North or by insisting those teams leave their Black players behind. Throughout the first half of the century, White college leaders contractually agreed that the color line would maintain on football fields in the

North and South (Demas 2010; Martin 1996). Written in ambiguous language, the contracts masked the racist politics of White college athletics. For instance, the Rollins/OWU contract read, "the home management reserves the right to cancel said contest on account of inclement weather or any other unforeseen or unavoidable cause, two hours before the team leaves from its residence or the place of the previous game" (Rollins/OWU Football Contract 1947). The language was typical of most gentlemen agreement contracts that left the meaning of "unforeseen or unavoidable cause" open to debate. By the late 1940s, however, many northern colleges like OWU began to express their oppositions to the Gentlemen's Agreement.

### **A Controversy and A Compromise**

Five weeks before the game was to take place, Rollins learned that the 1947-48 football team of Ohio Wesleyan included an African American freshman named Kenneth Woodward. The inclusion of Woodward breached the inexplicit rule that barred African Americans for intersectional football games, especially those held in the South. After knowing the fact, Rollins officials began to act immediately. In his letter of October 21, 1947 to Dean C. E. Ficken at OWU, Rollins' Dean of Men A. D. Enyart clearly outlined the dilemma the school faced:

*The Administration of the College, the Faculty, the Athletic Department, the student teams and the student body generally, have no objection to playing against a Negro, but there are other serious*

*obstacles in our way over which we have no control. Our College lawyer informs me that there is a State law forbidding mixed participation in any educational function. Whether this law would stand up in our case is a question which I doubt and it need not here be considered, but a more serious situation confronts us in public sentiment. It is difficult for those of you who have always been accustomed to living in the North to understand fully the situation in the Deep South. In the first place the young man in question would have to undergo the humiliation of riding in a separate coach (unless you had a private one) after the team cross the Mason and Dixon Line. Again, he could not be housed and fed in the hotel with his teammates. It would be necessary to provide for him either in a private home or at a hotel in the Negro quarter. This would be humiliating to us as well as to him and the Ohio Wesleyan team (Enyart 1947).*

Enyart's reasoning highlighted the cultural climate of the postwar South. The dilemma that Rollins faced was not uncommon as it was one of many southern colleges that sought to uphold White southern culture and supremacy, even in sports.

When Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers' minor league affiliate, the Montreal Royals in 1945, during World War II ending, baseball's great experiment began. Robinson's entrance into America's favorite pastime sport tested the water of racial

progress in the United States, especially of that in the state of Florida. White Floridians—like most White southerners—resisted the integration of baseball and exposed the myth of a level playing field. When Jackie Robinson arrived in Central Florida for his first spring training with the Montreal Royals in 1946, he was forced to sit in the back of the bus and humiliated, and the Sanford police chief stopped a minor league game because of his presence (Ortiz 2012). With football deeply embedded in southern culture and community, perhaps more so than baseball, Rollins administrators feared the massive resistance would come if an integrated game was held.

The first half of the twentieth century was a turbulent time for race relations in the United States. Despite notable social progress made since the Civil War, racial discrimination and anti-Black violence was still rampant in the South. One of the least populated states of the time, Florida nonetheless shared in the racial violence that defined the region, and incidents such as the 1920 Ocoee Massacre highlight this dark reality. On November 2, 1920, after two Black men attempted to vote and encouraged other African Americans to vote, the entire Black population of Ocoee was violently assaulted. On the night of the attack, White World War I veterans, many members of the local Ku Klux Klan, came from across Orange County to participate. At least 24 Black homes were burned, and dozens lost their lives, the Ocoee Massacre is still regarded as the "bloodiest day in modern American political history" (Ibid).

In their deliberations, another important factor that Rollins administra-

tors considered was that the Orlando Municipal Stadium was not controlled by the College, but managed by the local chapter of the American Legion, a conservative veterans organization established after World War I. Although formally non-partisan, the American Legion during its early years was very active in issue-oriented U.S. politics, and worked to the spread of the ideology of Americanism. One of its top leaders had even declared that "Fascisti are to Italy what the American Legion is to the United States" (Campbell 2003). In addition, around the same time, the Florida NAACP adopted multiple resolutions at its state conference in Lake Wales, which plainly stated: "The existence of Ku Kluxism is a potential threat to the personal safety and the Constitutional rights of all minorities. We therefore ask our state, county, and city authorities to take vigorous action in cases of intimidation or violence against citizens by the Ku Klux Klan and other Fascist groups" (Moore 1947).

With this background in mind, Dean Enyart (1947) emphasized:

*There might be serious danger arising out of the situation if some die-hard "cracker" from the outlying districts during the game should shout, "Kill the nigger!" We could not guarantee what might happen. I have seen race riots start here under less provocation. I assure you that we are partly civilized in this section of the world, but the College cannot undertake to control the emotional impulses of the rabble. If a riot were started somebody would be sure to*

*be hurt, or perhaps even killed. We all regret exceedingly this situation, but we can see no way of changing it under the present condition.*

Given the unforeseen or unavoidable circumstance, Enyart suggested: "In view of the fact that the contract was made without either of the parties being aware of the present conditions, we feel that a cancellation of the contract would be embarrassing to both sides and would result in a very definite financial loss to us, and worse than that, would create an almost inexplicable situation with our athletic obligations and our homecoming alumni" (*Ibid*). Therefore, on behalf of Rollins, he proposed that OWU to play the game without the player in question: "We sincerely hope that the young man would not be offended by being left at home on this trip and that the established friendly rivalry between the two teams may continue for many years to come" (*Ibid*). Clearly, Rollins administrators were more concerned about the southern way of life than the welfare and humanity of Woodward. Like most southern colleges fighting to preserve the Gentlemen's Agreement, despite political and social pressures toward racial progress, in the late 1940s, Rollins explicitly stated their desire to exclude a player based on race.

While acknowledging the awkward situation, Allen C. Conger, OWU's Registrar and Head of Athletic Committee, noted in his reply that Woodward "was salutatorian of his high school class (South High, Columbus, Ohio). That high school has a student body composed of one-fourth negro and three-fourths White students. In spite of his

belonging to the racial minority, he was elected President of the Student Body and Chief Justice of the Student Court. He is the only student ever to hold both of these offices. He received the Shriner Award as the outstanding student in citizenship of the city and the Agonis Award as the outstanding student athlete of the city" (Conger 1947). In other words, Woodward was no ordinary negro or Black athlete. Woodward's academic and athletic records demonstrated a level of respectability that Conger believed White Americans, even those in the South, could accept. Noting his enrollment was to demonstrate "freedom from prejudice," Conger further acknowledged:

*When we scheduled the game two years ago we had no colored boys on our squad and we did not know there would be any problem of this sort. I am sure that you are well qualified to interpret the situation in Florida. It seems clear to me that we have not only the general problem but we also have the question of the young man and the treatment he would receive by segregation in travel and in housing. You have also stated quite clearly the possibility that trouble could arise from a certain section of the "sporting public" (Ibid).*

When the situation was made public, it created an uproar in Winter Park. Some members of the Rollins academic community, those with progressive viewpoints in racial relations including faculty, students and alumni, urged the college leaders to take a brave stand against the discrimination in the Deep

South. After some discussions, however, Rollins administrators were able to convince the student body that the proposed compromise was in the best interests of the College as well as the Central Florida community.

Similar persuasion also took place at Ohio Wesleyan. After receiving the letter from Dean Enyart and speaking with President Hamilton Holt over telephone on November 2, John Adams, President of Student Council at OWU explained the sensitive issue in details to his student assembly in the college chapel. As a result of deliberations, two resolutions were passed: by a vote of 19 to 1, the Student Council at OWU opposed breaking the contract with Rollins; and then through an unanimous vote, it was recommended that "Ohio Wesleyan sign no contracts in the future with any institution where circumstances will prevent any member of the athletic teams from playing" (Ohio Wesleyan News 1947). Adams was praised by *Ohio Wesleyan Transcript* (1947a) for doing "his job efficiently while dealing with people representing both sides of the issue whose good intentions and common sense were carried away by emotion and information which was not totally correct. A vote of confidence goes to John Adams for his success in handling in an important major issue."

On November 8, 1947, John Adams sent a brief thank-you letter to President Holt: "I wish to express my appreciation for the time you took last Sunday afternoon to help the Student Council of Ohio Wesleyan settle one of the most controversial issues with which it has ever been faced. I fully realized your position at the time, and I expressed that

point of view to the student body" (Adams 1947). In his reply, President Holt noted:

*I hope no one at Ohio Wesleyan thinks for a moment that Rollins College or our football team would hesitate at any time or place to play an opponent with the team selected by them even if it included a Negro. But we live in a part of the country in which there is a small but vociferous element which resents such intermingling of the races and it would have put us in a very embarrassing position if we had to police the game so as to assure that no untoward incident might have results that would be anything but satisfactory either to Rollins or Ohio Wesleyan. The fact is whatever way the issue is decided, Rollins is put in an awkward position and I am glad that the students of Ohio Wesleyan, though not approving of our decision, are able to see our side of it (Holt 1947b).*

Holt and his administration argued that the Rollins team did not fear playing against a Black student but dreaded the outrage from the surrounding White community. The notion of playing against an integrated team was an idea that White southerners, who came of age in a segregated world, could not handle easily. Political demagogues and public expectations in the community demanded that Rollins maintain athletic segregation. Because of the potential of segregationist resistance, college officials concluded the best way to help race relations was to maintain status quo. Moreover, for some the idea of play-

ing to a Black player was an even more disturbing thought. A loss would have exposed the weaknesses of White Supremacy and the vulnerability of White manhood in the South.

Then Holt reflected from his personal experience, which clearly reveals his thinking on this controversy issue: "Before I came to Rollins College I was for twenty-five years an editor of one of the three most important papers in the United States which championed the Negro's cause and it is personally humiliating to me that we even had to suggest the course we did in the present case. It goes against my grain, but sometime prudence is the better part of valor" (*Ibid*).

In addition to the votes by the Student Council, the football team, the Athletic Committee, and coaches at OWU also voted unanimously to play Rollins without the player in question. A crisis seemed avoided, OWU would leave Woodward behind, and Rollins began preparation work for the homecoming celebration and game, which would include football rally and coronation of the Student Homecoming Queen at halftime (Ohio Wesleyan News 1947; *Sandspur* 1947a).

### **Branch Rickey and Hamilton Holt: Two Progressive Americans with Different Ideas for Social Change**

When OWU trustee Branch Rickey became aware of the compromise reached between the two schools, he immediately interrupted and turned the situation upside down. Rickey (1881-1965) was a successful professional sport executive



and the Baseball Hall of Fame inductee, who was best known for breaking color barrier in Major League Baseball in 1947. Growing up in Southern Ohio, Rickey attended Ohio Wesleyan and was a catcher on the baseball team. He also participated in professional football and played with an African-American teammate named Charles W. Follis, and that personal experience of an interracial friendship had a lasting impact on his life (Nash 2009). After graduation, Rickey maintained close contacts with his alma mater. By the time the controversy with Rollins emerged, he already had a successful business career as the president and general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers for several years while serving on the Executive Committee of OWU's Board of Trustees. By signing Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play in Major League Baseball since the nineteenth century, and one year before President Truman integrated the military in 1948, Rickey helped change baseball forever. In June 1947, Ohio Wesleyan awarded Rickey an honorary Doctor of Laws for his "high principles of integrity, intelligence and tolerance" (Ohio Wesleyan Magazine 1947, 124). Owing to his brave and visionary act, Rickey has since been recognized as a civil rights leader, who "catalyzed the transformation of all sports in this country and set the stage for the Civil Rights Movement" (Kurtz 2006).

During the Executive Committee meeting of the OWU Board of Trustees on Saturday, November 15, 1947, Rickey insisted that OWU would only play the football game scheduled on November 28 with Kenneth Woodward as a part of the team. Overriding the recently

reached oral agreement between Dean Ficken and Dean Enyart, the Committee asserted that OWU would stand by its contract with Rollins, while the university's Athletic Board also issued a statement that "any fulltime student of Ohio Wesleyan University regardless of race color or creed is eligible for all intercollegiate competition provided he meets the regular eligibility requirements" (Ohio Wesleyan Transcript 1947b ). On Monday, November 17, upon learning this latest development through telegraph, Enyart made a long-distance phone call to Ficken, his counterpart at OWU, who also served as acting president at the time. Himself a proud Ohio Wesleyan graduate, Enyart tried very hard to salvage the game scheduled to be played in ten days, even offered to fly to Delaware, meet with OWU administrators and trustees, and solve the matter face-to-face: "If that man is played, it is just too much of a hazard to risk for his sake, and Rollins and Ohio Wesleyan's sake. If the trustees know that sufficiently well, I am quite sure that they would listen to reason" (Telephone Transcript 1947).

In his response, Ficken stated: "It is understood perfectly that risks are involved. However, your Alma Mater cannot face the world in the next twenty-five years if we participate in an act of discrimination at this time. I would not solve it this way and I did not have this solution for it, but influences much more potent than my own made the decision for me to communicate on behalf of the Executive Committee. As you know, the Board of Trustees is the only ultimate authority in dealing with colleges like yours and mine" (Ibid). He further indicated that OWU Board was willing to

charter a plane to fly the player in question and make arrangement for his hotel stay in Orlando. Ficken went on: "But Ohio Wesleyan just simply cannot take the first action which is that of discriminating against one of its players. He may not be eligible when he gets down there. That is still possible... We are going to have to solve it on the basis of the Constitution of the United States whatever else happens" (*Ibid* ).

From the phone conversation, it was very clear that OWU's Executive Committee would not reverse its decision under the leadership of Branch Rickey. The ball was back in the court of Rollins, and the final decision rested on Hamilton Holt. Evidently, OWU's decision not to leave Woodward behind represented the inevitable end of the Gentlemen's Agreement between colleges in the North and South, while Holt's personal conflict exposed the complexity and limitations of White sympathizers and some progressives to the cause of Black civil rights in the postwar South.

In 1925, Hamilton Holt (1872-1951) became the eighth president of Rollins College. An accomplished journalist and internationalist, Holt had no pedagogical training in higher education. However, based on his own experience at Yale and Columbia, he boldly abandoned the traditional lecture and recitation method, and launched the Conference Plan of teaching that centered the curriculum on individual learning at Rollins. Holt founded the Animated Magazine, an annual public speaking event that brought many great personalities to Rollins, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the American philosopher John Dewey. He also established

the Spanish Mediterranean architectural style of the campus and fostered a great legacy of expansion and growth for the College. It was during the Holt era that Rollins achieved national prominence as one of the outstanding experimental colleges in the country. To many people in Winter Park and Central Florida, Rollins was Holt, and Holt was Rollins (Kuehl 1960, 219). As a popular president, he was highly visible on campus, attending all sorts of fraternity and sorority programs, as well as football, baseball and softball games, and was affectionately called "Prexy" by Rollins students, who would gather in the Winter Park train station each fall to welcome his return from summer break in Woodstock, Connecticut (Lane 1980, 53).

The publication Holt noted in his reply to Adams earlier was *The Independent*, which was founded in 1848 by several Congregational Church laymen, including Holt's grandfather Henry C. Bowen (Chambliss 2009). Originally published as a religious weekly for promoting antebellum abolitionism, the magazine remained a progressive voice after the Civil War and expanded its focus to address political, social, and economic issues. In 1897, after graduating from Yale and pursuing postgraduate study at Columbia, Holt became the managing editor of *The Independent*, and eagerly advocated for diversity and acceptance at the turn of the twentieth century. Using the weekly to champion the cause of African Americans, Holt strongly condemned the racial discrimination and violence against Blacks in the South, noting that not even Germans ferocity in Belgium, English cruelty in Ireland, and Japanese brutality in Korea

could “equal in depravity and barbarity America’s record for lynching” (Kuehl 1960, 48). Believing education was key to solve the racial issue in America, he attended several conferences at Tuskegee organized by Booker T. Washington, and actively promoted Wilberforce University, the first college owned and operated by African Americans. With Mary W. Ovington, Oswald G. Villard, and John Spargo, he also formed the Cosmopolitan Club, a social group aimed for improving interracial relations in New York. More significantly, in 1909, along with other notable progressives such as W.E.B. Dubois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, John Dewey, Charles Darrow, and Oswald Villard, Holt became a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (*Ibid*). Judging from his associations and actions, Holt was aligned with progressive race ideology that advocated for equity.

However, Holt’s take on race reflect the complexity of the time. He once published in *The Independent*, along with a measured response by W.E.B. Dubois, a passionate letter by Corra Harris, who tried to justify lynching and segregation in the American South (Lane 2015). From that encounter Holt developed a long-term friendship with Harris, even inviting her to teach at Rollins in the late twenties. Although he strongly supported the cause of African Americans, Holt’s moderate position in race relations reflected his perception of the limitations linked to community. In 1947, he joined eight other presidents in the South, including the University of Virginia, University of Mississippi, University of Arkansas, University of Texas,

Vanderbilt, and Tulane, to voice their objections to the recommendation of President’s Commission on Higher Education that the dual system of schools in America, then still effective in seventeen states, be eliminated: “It would be unwise and impractical to end the segregation of White and negro children that exists in the schools and colleges of the South, by any kind of government edict. This problem should be solved by the Southern people themselves and cannot be done overnight” (Fine 1947, 17).

A very important factor in Holt’s deliberation is his sturdy opposition to violence in both international and domestic affairs. Throughout his life, Holt was an international peace activist and a strong supporter of the League of Nations and the United Nations. To solve any international conflict, Holt advocated active engagement and dialogues instead direct confrontation, war, and violence. In dealing with domestic challenges such as interracial relations in the Deep South, he adopted the same approach and genuinely believed “that a race riot which threatened to break out in Orlando where the contest was to be played would actually harm race relations rather than promote them” (Kuehl 1960, 49).

Holt also served as the chairman of the board in the late 1940s, besides his position as Rollins president, a factor that further complicated his decision-making process. Although personally he had a progressive stance on race relations in America, Holt had to deal with a conservative board, which largely consisted of successful businessmen in the South. According to his own reflection (Holt 1947a):

*I was in great distress as to what was the right thing to do, but I finally decided it this way. I said to myself, "What did I come here for; to solve the race problem or to help build up Rollins College?" the answer then was inevitable... It was a violation of my whole general attitude on the race question. If I had come down here, on the contrary, to make my chief concern in life the solution of the Negro Problem (and a White man could not consecrate his life to a more worthy cause) then I would have put the race issue above the welfare of Rollins and would have felt justified in doing so.*

Holt's assessment of the danger posed by the game was also very telling:

*If rumors can be believed, we understood that some groups had threatened that he [Woodward] never would be allowed to enter the stadium... Members of the American Legion and Trustees of the Orlando stadium for instance frowned upon a game of mixed races. This hostile feeling might even spread so as to break up the cordial relations that now obtain between town and gown and might even set the welfare of the College back in the community for perhaps a generation (Ibid).*

On Saturday, November 22, 1947, at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Rollins Board of Trustees, which was attended by the chief administrative officers of the College and other trustees in the area, a resolution was unanimously adopted.

The statement read:

Officials of Rollins College, representing many different sections of the United States, have given careful consideration to the advisability of playing the game scheduled with Ohio Wesleyan University on Friday, November 28, in consideration of the fact that one member of the Ohio Wesleyan team is a Negro. Rollins College has no objection whatsoever to playing in a game in which a Negro participates. However, a football game is a community affair, and, after consultation with leading members of our community, both White and colored, officials of Rollins College have decided that in the best interests of racial relations, they are unwilling to take action which might interfere with the good progress now being made in Florida, and especially in the local community. Rollins, therefore, has decided to cancel the game (Rollins Board of Trustees 1947).

On the same day, immediately after the board meeting, Coach McDowall wired a rush telegram to Gauthier of OWU stating that in accordance with Clause Seven of the Rollins-OWU Contract, which stated that "home management reserved the right to cancel" the game due to any "unforeseen or unavoidable cause," Rollins was terminating the game between Ohio Wesleyan University and Rollins on November 28, adding, "needless to say, we do this with utmost reluctance" (McDowall 1947). Undoubtedly, the cancellation was a major disappointment to students at Rollins. However, as the time was running out and without any other practical options, the Student Council followed suit and voted to cancel the game instead of risking further dispute. In a

memo to President Holt, Student Council Secretary Mary Jane Whitley (1947) stated: "This is to inform you that we, the Student Council, at our last meeting of November 24th, voted unanimously in favor of the decision made to cancel the Ohio Wesleyan game of November 28th."

Holt's speech on the cancellation of the Ohio Wesleyan football game deserves extensive quotation because it clearly reveals his rationale on this controversial issue and how some white progressives offered inaction as a step toward racial progress:

*After debating the long run versus the short run, it was perfectly obvious to us all as we discussed this point, that Rollins, living in the Deep South as we do, was forced to risk misunderstanding and criticism in the North in order to take what we believed would be the better course to better relations between the Whites and Blacks in the South. I may tell you that I have never heard a more high-minded, dispassionate or statesmanlike discussion since I have been at Rollins College than the two hour debate our trustees and administrative officers had in coming to their unanimous conclusion. May I say this to you students; you will probably have critical decisions like this to make as you go through life—decisions that whatever you do, you will be misinterpreted, misunderstood, and reviled. I have found in my own case it helps to find out which of your loyalties involved is the greater. It seemed to all of us that our loyalties to Rollins and its*

*ideals were not to precipitate a crisis that might and probably would promote bad race relations, but to work quietly for better race relations, hoping and believing that time would be on our side (Holt 1947a)*

No records of correspondence between Holt and Rickey can be found in the Rollins College Archives to confirm whether Holt knew Rickey in person. However, in 1947, those two progressive individuals with different approaches for social change and racial justice in America appeared to be on the direct course of collision. Rickey was not only a successful businessperson, but also a devoted Christian whose early friendship with African Americans greatly shaped his ideals of equal rights for all. When witnessing the racial discrimination suffered by his Black teammate, he once proclaimed: "I may not be able to do something about racism in every field, but I can sure do something about it in baseball" (Prince 2016). Out of personal convictions and astute business sense, Rickey's vision and action to break the color barrier had profoundly transformed the American sports after World War II and set the stage for the Civil Rights Movement decades later. However, unlike Rickey, Holt preferred a more gradual and incremental approach in racial politics. Although he strongly supported the cause of African Americans, his unwavering opposition to any violence in conflict resolutions put him at odds with Rickey's much more aggressive stand against racial discriminations in America.

### *A Football Game is a Community Affair*

Despite Holt's passionate argument and the unanimous votes by the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees and the Student Council, Rollins student newspaper *Sandspur* still issued an editorial strongly condemning the decision made by college officials:

*This is no time to bury our heads, pleasant as such self-deception may be. It is rather a time for facing squarely some disturbing moral questions. One of the main arguments on which the trustees based their decision is that "a football game is a community affair." And so it is, to the extent that any such game is largely supported by members of the community. But it seems ridiculous that basic college policies, even about football, should be dictated by the community. After all, a college should be a center not only of learning but of leadership. Its members should be defenders of liberal action rather than mere followers of community reactionaries. To allow important policies to be determined by our environment is to sink into ineffectual romanticism and to avoid our intellectual responsibilities. And we must face those responsibilities, or face the fact that we can no longer call ourselves a liberal college (*Sandspur* 1947b, 2).*

When it came to the struggle for Black rights, the willingness of so-called White progressives to remain silent was a strike against racial and social progress. Having this understanding, *Sandspur's* editorial team led by Pat Meyer took a

radical stand and forcefully denounced the compromising position took by Rollins administrators:

*True, much has been accomplished by the quiet workers of the world — but more striking advances have been made by those who dared. Without Joan of Arc and Abraham Lincoln, our civilization could not have come as far as it has. Both these leaders realized the necessity for compromise, and gave in time and time again on small issues. But when it came time for a final test of their principles, they would accept no compromise, and bloodshed and violence was a small price to pay for the good they accomplished. We must not be blinded by the possibility of violence to the larger possibilities for good in a given situation. We must not sink into existences of quiet desperation, and forget when to stop compromising. It is a dangerous thing to forget... If, as has been remarked, this issue actually boils down to a fundamental conflict between idealism and realism, it is all too easy to see where the college stands. Our liberal principles, our high ideals ... it becomes apparent that such visionary concepts must, at the first conflict, be sacrificed to expediency. Have we forgotten that ideals, to be worth anything, must be lived by and fought for; that they are worse than useless if the first clash shows them subservient to pragmatic realism? This is a center of higher education; for such a mistaken attitude we have not even the excuse of ignorance (*Ibid*).*

Some faculty members also voiced their objections on moral ground, while others were upset that football had occupied excessively a centralized place in college life at Rollins, and would like to see its abolishment. In a letter to Sandspur, English Professor Nathan Starr (1947, 2) pointed out:

*It is ironic to consider that during the same football season which saw Rollins cancelling its game with Ohio Wesleyan, others in the South have taken the lead in scheduling inter-racial games. In Durham, NC, a team of Negroes played a team of Whites without incident; in Charlottesville, Va., Harvard's Negro tackle was applauded as he left the field; in Dallas, Texas, Southern Methodist University apparently had no qualms about inviting Penn State to play in a post-season Bowl game, even though the northern team included two Negroes. In heeding the voice of anti-liberal opinion in the community under the fear of violence (which in my opinion would not have materialized), Rollins has placed itself in a very compromising and constricting position. It is a heavy price to pay.*

Besides Starr, several faculty members also wrote separate letters of protests. Even more telling, at a faculty meeting held on December 11, 1947, Royal W. France, Professor of Economics, proposed that the president appoint a committee to express faculty collective sentiment to the Board of Trustees and draft a general statement on the principles and procedures to be followed by a

liberal arts college in dealing with race relations in the Deep South (Minutes of Faculty Meeting 1947). While his motion was defeated, the controversy persisted. Although most of students accepted the explanations provided by the president, a number of them were not satisfied with Holt's remarks, among those was John Van Metre, an undergraduate student at Rollins, who felt Holt only gave "lip-service" to the racial issue in America, and action must speak louder than "fine words" (John Van Metre 1947, 2). In his open letter to Holt, he praised that:

*Men who have 'stuck their necks out' for what they believed in are among the greatest figures in history — Socrates, Jesus, Luther Darwin, and Lincoln, to name a few. And forgive me if I mention Branch Rickey... But the Robinson experiment was an unqualified success, and a major battle was won toward the elimination of race prejudice and a solution of the race problem. This battle was won mainly through the courage and ability of a Negro athlete, Robinson, and through the courageous right action of a businessman, Branch Rickey. Despite your slightly cavalier attitude toward Mr. Rickey, he could teach you a thing or two about democratic action (Ibid).*

Shocked by the cancellation out of racial considerations, Martin Dibner, a veteran who returned for graduate art study at Rollins after serving in the Navy during World War II, issued a separate open letter to President Holt with a series of questions: Is Rollins advancing culture by acquiescing to racial prejudice? Does

an act of intolerance qualify Rollins to teach others how to make mature judgments? What can Rollins students be expected to learn from this? That discrimination because of race, color, creed, or religion is the American heritage? He then passionately argued:

*(It was a game of football. Sport, we call it. We Americans pride ourselves in sportsmanship. We talk modestly of fair play and the spirit of the thing. The same spirit that carried White man and Black alike to war, where shrapnel never heard of race prejudice. Believe me, I have the utmost respect for you as a man of unassailable integrity, as an educator who has put into practice the most advanced and progressive ideas in this country. That is why I refuse to believe that you will let this matter end here, with the reputation of this college in the most serious danger it has seen. In times like these, when hate rides high and intolerance plagues the world, no institution of learning should compromise with any act contrary to the American Way (Dibner 1947).*

Beyond Winter Park, Florida and Delaware, Ohio, the cancellation of football game between Rollins and OWU also generated attentions in the national news media. Under the heading “Rickey’s appeal for Negro is lost,” New York Times (1947, 41) reported that “Rollins cancels game when Ohio Wesleyan refuses to play without Woodward.” While Herald Tribune (1947) carried a simple headline of “Rollins cancels game, denies racial bias,” New York Post’s (1947) descrip-

tion was more sensational: “Rickey loses, Jim Crow wins.” However, at least one newspaper in the South had a different perspective. After citing Rollins’ reason for cancellation and mentioning the Major League and Jackie Robinson, Orlando Morning Sentinel (1947) noted that the personal intervention of Branch Rickey on the negotiations between Rollins and OWU “may muddle the situation plenty”; and since the Major League had been conducting spring training in the sunshine state for years, the conservative paper in Central Florida further questioned if Rickey “was trying to ‘guinea pig’ Rollins in this instance for the possible benefit of his baseball club’s training future.” Nevertheless, the responses from local communities were different, apparently not everyone agreed with the Sentinel. One upset reader commented on the perceived racial tension and potential violence in Central Florida as the reason for game cancellation:

*Clearly, it was made out of deference to what it believed was the will of the community. I hope that the college has rated us wrongly... I am sending this protest with the same reluctance which must have marked the decision of Rollins College. The war, in which the question of race played perhaps the crucial part, has placed this issue in the forefront of the world’s thought and we must all stand up and be counted. This decision, made in all courtesy, has forced our community to be counted on the side where Greenville and Talmadge and Rankin and Hitler stand. To the growing majority of our*



*fellow countrymen we must seem to be living in an enclave shut off not only from all international assemblies but also from the respect of the world of sport, whose fundamental tenant is fair play (Vernon 1947, 6).*

In addition to the letters to newspapers, dozens of concerned citizens and alumni from all over the country also wrote directly to Rollins, with the clear majority strongly condemned the decision made by President Holt (Ohio Wesleyan University Football Game 1947).

### **Conclusion: The Aftermath and the Enduring Legacy**

The cancellation of the OWU-Rollins football game had a profound impact on Hamilton Holt and his remaining years at Rollins. The decision to act against the progressive principles that held southern segregation was morally wrong and ill-suited to changing expectation of the times. While he strongly supported minorities rights and advocated for quality, his peace ideology did not support a more active political philosophy. After living in Florida for more than two decades, Holt felt he had developed a better understanding of the ethnic culture in the Deep South and believed the best approach to solve the racial problem was for Southerners to take incremental and concrete steps. Any drastic actions would only lead to disastrous results and setbacks. Despite the progress in race relations in America since the end of World War II, the reality was that there was still a deep racial divide in the South, and Holt by no means was alone in this line of reasoning. In 1946, the Uni-

versity of Nevada was forced to cancel its Southeast Conference football game because Mississippi State refused to play with its two African American students (Murray 2015). Just several weeks before Rollins-OWU game, the University of Virginia also faced the same dilemma. Upon learning Harvard had an African American tackle (Chester Pierce) in its squad, school officials appealed several times with Harvard without success, and only after the Virginia team voted unanimously to play with Harvard, the game took place on October 11, 1947. When the bus with Harvard players approached the stadium in Charlottesville, it was circled by people on horseback yelling racial slurs and waving Confederate flags. In the end, Harvard lost the match 47 to 0, it was nonetheless a landmark game as the first interracial collegiate football competition in the American South (Sullivan 1997).

As predicted by Dibner in his letter to President Holt, the matter did not end there. Shortly afterwards, Holt began to second-guess whether he had made the right decision to cancel the game. In a private response to John Van Metre, he acknowledged: "It was a sickening decision for me to make and it is quite possible that if we had gone ahead nothing would have happened" (Holt 1947c). In another letter he noted "we may have made a mistake, but it is one of those cases where you are damned if you do and damned if you don't" (Holt 1948a). With a strong belief that education would be the key to advance the cause of African Americans, he began to act to correct the situation and to clear his conscious. At a board meeting in early 1948, Holt proposed to award an honor-

ary degree to Mary McLeod Bethune, a renowned African American educator, civil rights leader, and founder of the Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Florida. Holt had known Bethune from his early involvement with the founding of the NAACP and had invited her to give a speech in the College Chapel in 1931, being “possibly the first negro to speak from the Rollins platform” (Sandspur 1931, 1). However, since no institutions of higher learning in the South had ever awarded honorary degree to African Americans, the conservative Board of Trustees unsurprisingly rejected Holt’s proposal. Unweaving by the refusal, he informed Bethune that his invitation stood: “I’m going to give you the degree anyway” (Seymour 2011, 33), even threatening to resign from his presidency. Unwilling to put Holt on the direct collision course with the Rollins Board of Trustees, Bethune declined the offer: “Your college and the state of Florida need men like you. And while I appreciate the honor that you pay me, I believe far more good will be accomplished by your remaining president of the college than by anything I could possibly say in 15 or 20 minutes of speech-making. With you at the college helm, there will come a day when attitudes will be different” (Bethune 2008).

Determined to take a moral stand this time, Holt decided to take a different approach. Although he could not award honorary degree without the approval by the Board, it was within his power as the college president to award the Rollins Decoration of Honor, and he chose Susan Wesley for such an accolade, a beloved African American housemaid at Rollins since 1924 (Seymour 2009). To

recognize her devoted work of twenty-four years in women’s dormitory Cloverleaf Cottage, during the commencement ceremony on June 2, 1948, Holt presented the first Decoration of Honor ever awarded to an African American in the history of the College:

*Wesley, for your many years of faithful service to Rollins, during which you and I have both worked for the College that we love; for your help to many hundreds of Rollins freshman girls; for your influence in Winter Park through church and club; for your generous service far beyond the call of duty; for your life as a Christian woman and a loving follower of our Lord Jesus Christ, Rollins College is honored in conferring on you the Decoration of Honor and admits you to all its rights and privileges (Holt 1948b).*

After working as the college president for twenty-five years, approaching eighty years old and with failing health, Hamilton Holt finally decided to step down. At his last graduation ceremony in 1949, Holt delivered a poignant speech filled with wisdom from life while deeply reflecting his long tenure at Rollins: sion made by President Holt (Ohio Wesleyan University Football Game 1947).

*... the memories of the good fight we have fought and the faith we have kept in our common adventure. Our adventure, thank God, has been fundamentally an adventure*

*of service, and service always begets love. This is my commencement as well as that of the seniors. The seniors go out into the morning sunshine. I go out into the evening shade. So be it. I cannot speak for the seniors, but I may speak for myself... But I do blame myself and people of my age for losing their idealism. You have helped me keep my faith in idealism" (Holt 1949a, 1).*

In his profoundly insightful "My Commencement" address, Holt spoke directly to students, faculty and staff in the audience, giving out personal recognitions and practical advices. Then he had his last words with the Board of Trustees. "If I had to live my life over again there are not a few things that I would do differently, I have spent most of my life on the 'firing line,' trying to turn minorities into majorities. That usually makes trouble. I must have tried your patience many a time, but if so you never complained" (Ibid). He continued with his final recommendation: "Fill vacancies on the board with young, vital and liberal men and women of both achievement and promise. Otherwise your board will grow conservative with the passing years and finally reactionary. Business men are essential to any well-balanced board of trustees, but keep them in the minority. Rollins is an educational institution, not a bank or a department store. Imagine a successful business concern filling its board with educators" (Ibid).

It turned out Holt did not have to wait for too long. One of his last actions as the college president was to publicly recognize Mary McLeod Bethune, which

he failed to accomplish a year earlier. During the Founder's Day celebration on February 21, 1949, where thousands gathered in the Sandspur field for Rollins' annual Animated Magazine program, Holt personally presented an honorary Doctor of Humanities to the African American educator and civil rights leader:

*Mary McLeod Bethune, I deem it one of the highest privileges that has come to me as President of Rollins College to do honor to you this morning. I am proud that Rollins is, I am told, the first White college in the South to bestow an honorary degree upon one of your race. You have in your own person again demonstrated that from the humblest beginnings and through the most adverse circumstances it is still possible for one who has the will, the intelligence, the courage and the never-failing faith in God and in your fellowman to rise from the humblest cabin in the land to a place of honor and influence among the world's eminent. In paying honor to you we show again our own faith in the land which made your career a reality" (Holt 1949b).*

Accepting the honor from Rollins, Bethune paid tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, leader of the Indian independence movement, praising his nonviolent civil disobedience as an effective method to push for social change. Along with Bethune on the platform, other recipients of honorary degrees in 1949 included Edward R. Murrow, noted CBS news anchor, and Karl T. Compton, President of

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Rollins Animated Magazine 1949).

Holt's retirement marked an end of an era in the history of the College. Rollins played one more time with Ohio Wesleyan after the 1947 incident, and Tars were defeated by Bishops 7 to 14 in Delaware, Ohio on Saturday, November 6, 1948 (*Ohio Wesleyan Transcript* 1948). After the 1949 season, Rollins' football program was finally eliminated due to financial reasons, a very unpopular move that contributed to the quick downfall of President Paul Wagner, Holt's successor (Davis 1994). Although the memories of the 1947 Rollins-OWU football game have largely been faded, the episode remains a defining moment in Holt's life as well as the history of the institution. It is often said that sport and politics do not mix, nevertheless the history of modern sports has been littered with high-profile incidents in which politics have played a major part. When Branch Rickey recruited Jackie Robinson to break the color barrier in the Major League Baseball, sport has been used to challenge the political environment and eventually lead to social changes and the Civil Rights Movement years later. However, the inspirational story about race and sports through the Jackie Robinson experiment did not translate to the Rollins-OWU football conflict. The decision to cancel the game exposed the myth of sports being on the vanguard of political and social change. At least initially, Rollins administrators and athletic officials failed to step across the color line and used a college football to reinforce the racial norms and to preserve White Supremacy. Nonetheless, through the Rollins-OWU controversy of 1947,

although Holt had his own limit and succumbed to political and racial pressures in the Deep South of his time, he ultimately was able to stand on the right side of history and made his mark on the social integration in the United States.

Hamilton Holt passed away in 1951. Nowadays Rollins not only has its evening study school and a dormitory named after him, Winter Park also renamed the street across campus in his honor. In 1954, after serving in the Black Cabinet and as a national advisor to several presidents, Mary McLeod Bethune fondly reminisced her honorary degree from Rollins. In 1967, two years after his death, Branch Rickey was elected the Baseball Hall of Fame. A year later, when Rollins dedicated its Alumni Stadium, it was named after the long-term serving and beloved Dean of Men Arthur Enyart. Martin Dibner, the Rollins student who issued his open letter to President Holt, became a successful novelist and was known for *The Deep Six* that was based on his war experience. As to Kenneth W. Woodward, after graduation from Ohio Wesleyan, he attended medical school, led a distinguished career in medicine, and later served on the OWU Board of Trustees until his death in 1996. Brette Gillman, whose child was in Rollins class of 2015, fondly remembered Woodward as family physician "Uncle Ken," did not realize his historical connection with Rollins until the story was reported again years later (Gillman 2012).

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