

Outside the Pale: The Exclusion of Blacks from the National Football League, 1934-1946*

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With the exception of coaching and front office personnel, discrimination in professional football has virtually disappeared. Today 55 percent of National Football League rosters and 62 percent of all starters are Afro-Americans. Blacks also constitute 81 percent of starting skill position athletes (quarterback, wide receiver, running back, cornerback, and safety). Only a few decades ago, however, professional football was a “popcorn” sport-played only by whites. Talented minority athletes performed for predominantly white colleges, but they were excluded from the professional game. Owners denied the existence of a color ban, but no blacks played in the NFL from 1933 to 1946. With the end of World War II and the emergence of a new league to compete with the NFL, the racial barrier was toppled. Many Afro-Americans considered 1946 to have been a “banner year” because two professional sports-minor league baseball and major league football-were desegregated. This paper focuses on the efforts of blacks to expose and eradicate the policy of exclusion in professional football.¹

During the 1920s and early 1930s, the formative years of the National Football League, a few blacks graced the gridiron. Robert “Rube” Marshall, the first black to appear in an NFL game, played for the Rock Island team. Fred “Duke” Slater, a premier tackle, starred for the Chicago Cardinals from 1926 to 1931. Paul Robeson, Fritz Pollard and Jay “Inky” Williams were also standout professionals. After Ray Kemp and Joe Lillard were released in 1933, however, another black did not play organized professional football until 1946.²

A graduate of Duquesne University, where he played three years of varsity

* The author wishes to thank Don Leonard, Alan Reinhardt and Dave Wiggins for their suggestions.

1. Will McDonough in the Boston *Sunday Globe*, 22 February 1988. For “popcorn” I am indebted to Richard Pennington, *Breaking the Ice: The Racial Integration of Southwest Conference Football* (Jefferson, North Carolina, 1987), v.

2. For blacks in the early years of professional football, see Joe Horrigan, “Early Black Professionals” (unpubl. paper, courtesy of Pro Football Hall of Fame, Canton, Ohio); Bob Curran, *Pro Football’s Rag Days* (New York, 1969), 50; “Top Negro Stars in Pro Football,” *Sepia* 12 (November 1963):76. For professional football in the 1920s and 1930s, see Ernest L. Cuneo, “Present at the Creation. Professional Football in the Twenties,” *American Scholar* 56 (Autumn 1987): 487-501; George Halas, “My Forty Years in Pro Football,” *Saturday Evening Post* 230 (November 23, 1957): 34ff. (November 30, 1957): 34ff; “Increasing Popularity of Pro Football,” *Literary Digest* 116 (December 9, 1933): 24ff; Benny Friedman, “The Professional Touch,” *Collier’s* 90 (October 15, 1932): 16-17, 46-47.

football, Ray Kemp signed with Art Rooney's newly created Pittsburgh Pirates in 1933. After playing two games at tackle, he was released by Pirates' coach Jap Douds. Recalled to the team in December, Kemp played the final game against the New York Giants. When he attempted to join his teammates at the hotel in New York following the game, he was informed that no rooms were available. He reluctantly agreed to stay at a YMCA in Harlem. Released in 1933 after one season, he began a long career as a college football coach. In a recent interview, Kemp cited racism as the reason for his release. "It was my understanding," he noted, "that there was a gentleman's agreement in the league that there would be no more blacks."³

Joe Lillard's career, though more spectacular, was also cut short. A gifted athlete who excelled at baseball, basketball and football, Lillard played for the Chicago Cardinals in 1932 and 1933. A star running back at the University of Oregon, his college career ended when a rival coach discovered that he had played baseball and basketball for semi-professional black teams.

Signed by the Cardinals, Lillard was the only black in the NFL in 1932. In a mid-October scoreless contest against the cross-town Bears, he gave a strong performance as a punt returner, kicker, and running back. The following week, he helped the Cardinals defeat the Boston Braves. An ebullient Boston columnist wrote: "Lillard is not only the ace of the Cardinal backfield but he is one of the greatest all-around players that has ever displayed his wares on any gridiron in this section of the country." Approximately one month later, Lillard was suspended by the Cardinals and out of football.⁴

Apparently, Lillard lost favor with teammates and management due to a lackluster effort and prideful attitude. Coach Jack Chevigny explained that Lillard disrupted practice by being tardy or absent, missed blocking assignments in games, and disobeyed team rules. The team's public relations officer, Rocky Wolfe, claimed that teammates resented his selfishness and swaggering style. They wanted Lillard to be more team-oriented, humble, and accommodating. "Football players, like anyone else, will always be jealous," remarked Wolfe. "But a fellow can always clear up such a situation by living, walking and breathing in a manner that does not bespeak supremacy—a thing Lillard hasn't learned." Worried that his cocky demeanor might deny opportunities to other minority athletes, black sports scribe, Al Monroe, urged Lillard to "learn to play upon the vanity" of whites. "He is the lone link in a place we are holding on to by a very weak string."⁵

The following year, Paul Schlissler, the new coach of the Cardinals gave Lillard another opportunity. On October 7, Lillard threw three passes for 75 yards but missed a point after touchdown in a 7 to 6 loss to Portsmouth, Ohio. The next week he drop kicked a field goal to defeat Cincinnati 3-0. And the

3. Bob Barnett, "Ray Kemp Blazed Important Trail," *Coffin Corner* 5 (December 1983): 3, 8; Mike Rathet and Don R. Smith, *Their Deeds and Dogged Faith* (New York, 1984). 220.

4. Al Monroe in Chicago *Defender*. 15 October 1932; Bill Grimes of the Boston Evening *American*, reprinted in *Defender*, 22 October 1932.

5. Al Monroe in Chicago *Defender*. 3 December 1932. See also *ibid.*, 12 November, 10 December 1932.

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following week in a 12-9 loss to the Bears, he kicked a field goal and returned a punt 53 yards for a touchdown. A black weekly, the *Chicago Defender*, described him as “easily the best halfback in football” during the 1933 season. Injuries limited his play, however, and his contract was not renewed the following year.⁶

The black press claimed that Lillard had been “Too Good For His Own Good” and that the “color of his skin had driven him out of the National Football League.” In 1935 Coach Schlissler conceded that an unwritten rule barred blacks from the game for their own protection. Lillard, he said, had been a victim of racism. “He was a fine fellow, not as rugged as most in the pro game, but very clever,” he explained. “But he was a marked man, and I don’t mean that just the southern boys took it out on him either; after a while whole teams, Northern and Southern alike, would give Joe the works, and I’d have to take him out.” Lillard’s presence, the coach continued, made the Cardinals a “marked team” and the “rest of the league took it out on us! We had to let him go, for our own sake and for his too!”⁷

Professional football owners, like their baseball counterparts, denied the existence of a racial ban. “For myself and for most of the owners,” Art Rooney of the Pittsburgh Steelers explained decades later, “I can say there never was any racial bias.” George Halas of the Chicago Bears declared in 1970 that there had been no unwritten exclusionary agreement “in no way, shape, or form.” Tex Schramm of the Los Angeles Rams did not recall a gentleman’s agreement.



Chicago *Defender* ran this photo with the caption “Too Good for His Own Good.” Joe Lillard is being pursued by Red Grange #77 (Courtesy Pro Football Hall of Fame)

6. *Chicago Defender*. 7, 14, 21 October 4 November 1933, 6 January 1934. In the off season. Lillard played semi-professional basketball for the Chicago Savoy Five. *Ibid.*. 10 December 1932. 16, 30 December 1933.

7. Al Monroe in *Chicago Defender*. 29 September 1934; Harold Parrott in *Brooklyn Eagle*. reprinted in *Defender*, 23 November 1935.

“You just didn’t do it [sign blacks]—it wasn’t the thing that was done.” Wellington and Tim Mara of the New York Giants also denied that minorities had been blackballed. Despite the disclaimers, however, blacks had disappeared from the game.⁸

The racial climate of the 1930s no doubt contributed to the policy of discrimination. True, blacks made important strides toward racial justice during the Roosevelt years. Above all, Roosevelt’s New Deal offered hope. Encouraged by the New Deal promise of “no forgotten men and no forgotten races,” blacks deserted their traditional allegiance to the Republican party. In 1936, FDR attracted about 75 percent of the black vote. New Deal relief programs, especially the Works Progress Administration headed by Harry Hopkins, helped blacks cope with hard times. In all, about 40 percent of the black population received some federal assistance during the Great Depression. Roosevelt appointed William H. Hastie, Mary McLeod Bethune and other influential blacks to important government positions. And throughout the 1930s Eleanor Roosevelt denounced bigotry and worked for social justice.⁹

Despite modest gains and heightened expectations, Afro-Americans continued to experience injustice. In agriculture, tenant farmers and sharecroppers suffered from plunging prices. In industry, the jobless rate soared as blacks were the “last hired and first fired.” Some New Deal assistance programs discriminated against minorities. More than 60 percent of black workers were not eligible for Social Security benefits because the plan did not cover farm workers and domestics.¹⁰

In the South where more than two-thirds of the black population resided, a vicious system of segregation existed. Blacks were terrorized and lynched. They were denied access to hospitals, colleges, hotels, restaurants, churches, polling places, playgrounds, and parks. Transportation facilities, public schools and cemeteries were segregated. At the premier of “Gone With The Wind,” in Atlanta, Georgia, blacks were banned from the theatres.¹¹

Discrimination extended beyond regional boundaries. “The Negro is a sort of national skeleton-in-the-closet,” lamented one black editor. In the North, employers and unions, schools and colleges, denied opportunities to Afro-Americans. Motion pictures and radio shows portrayed blacks in stereotypical roles of Uncle Tom, Sambo or Aunt Jemima. It is little wonder that some minorities found the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the United States Constitution hypocritical. Some drew parallels with the discriminatory treat-

8. Letter, Art Rooney to author, 15 January 1988; Halas quoted in Myron Cope, *The Game That Was: The Early Days of Pro Football* (New York and Cleveland, 1970), 7; Schramm quoted in Rathet and Smith, *Their Deeds*, 220; Tim Mara interview with Wendell Smith in *Pittsburgh Courier*, 1 June 1946.

9. FDR speech at Howard University in Baltimore *Afro-American*, 31 October 1936; Robert Divine, et al., *American: Past and Present*. Vol. II, 2nd edition (Glenview, Illinois, 1987), 766-767; Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal For Blacks. The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York, 1978), 326-335; Sitkoff, “The New Deal and Race Relations,” in *Fifty Years Later: The New Deal Evaluated*, ed. Harvard Sitkoff (New York, 1985), 93-111.

10. Divine, *America*, 766; Mary Beth Norton, et al., *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States*. Vol. II, 2nd edition (Boston, 1986), 752.

11. Norton, *People and a Nation*, 721; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 29 July, 23 December 1939.

ment of Jews in Nazi Germany. Until Jim Crow ends, commented the Pittsburgh *Courier*, “only hypocrites will condemn the German Nazis for doing all of a sudden what America has been doing for generations.” And when war erupted in Europe in 1939 the *Courier* cautioned that “Before any of our people get unduly excited about SAVING DEMOCRACY in Europe, it should be called to their attention that we have NOT YET ACHIEVED DEMOCRACY HERE.”¹²

Not surprisingly, discrimination and segregation extended to the sports field. While some blacks were distinguishing themselves in professional boxing and track and field, others were being denied opportunities in other sports. Most “major” colleges either excluded blacks or denied them a chance to participate on varsity teams. Professional sports such as basketball, baseball and football also banned Afro-Americans. In response, blacks organized their own professional teams and leagues. In football the most successful team was the New York Brown Bombers. Coached by Fritz Pollard, the Bombers attracted Otis Troupe, Joe Lillard and other black stars. Black teams existed in many cities, but talented players were overlooked or shunned by NFL owners.¹³

Many reasons, other than race prejudice, were used to explain the absence of blacks from the professional game. Some blacks charged that NFL owners used Joe Lillard’s volatile personality as an excuse to ban other minority athletes. Proud and hot-tempered, Lillard rarely overlooked a racial slur or dirty play. When wronged he retaliated and earned a reputation for being a “bad actor.” In a game against the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1933 he was ejected for fighting. Lillard “was an angry young man,” Ray Kemp has recalled, “and the players on the other teams knew what would set him off.”¹⁴

During the 1920s, Fritz Pollard has observed, fledgling NFL teams may have signed black All-Americans to gain recognition and fan support. Having gained popularity and stability during the 1930s, the league no longer was willing to sign “name” black players. And during the depression decade it was bad public relations to hire blacks when so many whites were without jobs.¹⁵

Other observers have blamed Redskins owner George Marshall for the color ban. The West Virginia-born owner, one of the most influential in the league, helped bring organization and structure to the NFL. During the 1920s there were numerous teams (as many as 22 in 1926) and franchises often went out of business or relocated. In 1933, at Marshall’s request, the league was re-organized into two five-team divisions with a season-ending championship

12. Pittsburgh *Courier*, 11, 25 September 1937, 10 August, 10 September. 8 October 1938, 7 January, 29 July, 23 September, 4 November, 23 December 1939; Stanley High, “Black Omens,” *Saturday Evening Post* 210 (May 21, 1938): 5-7 ff. (June 4, 1938): 14-15ff; Baltimore *Afro-American*, ed., 5 December 1936. On blacks and Jews, see Chicago *Defender*, ed., 5 October 1935; Lewis K. McMillan, “An American Negro Looks at the German Jew.” *Christian Century* 55 (August 31, 1938): 1034-1036.

13. For the Bombers, see Chicago *Defender*, 2 November 1935; Baltimore *Afro-American*, 9, 16 November 1935, 26 September, 24, 31 October, 21 November, 5 December 1936. For black achievements in boxing and track and field, see Edwin Bancroft Henderson, *The Negro in Sports*, rev. ed. (Washington D.C.: 1949), 54-63; “Negro Stars on the Playing Fields of America,” *Literary Digest* 119 (March 2, 1935): 32.

14. “Top Negro Stars in Pro Football,” *Sepia* 12 (November 1963): 76; Barnett. “Ray Kemp,” 3, 8.

15. Al Harvin, “Pollard, At 84, Reflects On His Days of Glory.” *New York Times*, 7 February 1978, p. 7.

game. Four years later, Marshall established a franchise in the South by transferring his Boston team to Washington, D.C., a segregated city. To avoid offending Marshall and southern white players and fans, NFL owners may have tacitly agreed to shun black athletes. Marshall himself once publicly avowed that he would never employ minority athletes. Indeed, the Redskins were the last NFL team to desegregate, holding out until 1962.¹⁶

Some owners, like George Halas, lamely attributed the absence of blacks in the NFL to the lack of quality college players. Others, like Art Rooney, claimed that financial constraints prohibited NFL teams from developing adequate scouting systems. Financial realities no doubt did discourage owners from scouting black colleges, but there were several standout minority athletes on major college teams in the 1930s. Since white players were scouted and signed, it seems reasonable to expect black athletes who played in the same conferences to have been discovered. But none were.¹⁷

Blacks had to have extraordinary ability and a serene temperament to play for desegregated college teams. At tryouts, they were quickly tested to see if they had the courage and perseverance to "take it." Harry Kipke, coach at the University of Michigan, ordered his veterans to pound a black candidate "without mercy" during practice. "If, at the end of the week," said Kipke, "he doesn't turn in his uniform, then I know I've got a great player." Coach Ossie Solem of Iowa confided: "There's no use kidding anyone—a colored player, even when opponents play cleanly, always gets plenty of bumps and particularly when he is the star."¹⁸

Black players also created logistical problems. Coaches had to deal with discrimination in travel, lodging and restaurants. Should they insist upon equal treatment for all team members or ask minority players to endure humiliating Jim Crow laws? The black player, explained one coach, "through no fault of his own, but because of uninformed and prejudiced individuals, creates a problem for us, which we, in combating, frequently find so disagreeable that we wonder whether it is worth the battle we put up."¹⁹

Then, too, there were scheduling problems. Southern colleges usually refused to play against desegregated teams. Consequently, blacks were benched or games were cancelled. Fitzhugh Lyons and Jesse Babb had to sit-out when Indiana played Mississippi State in Bloomington. Windy Wallace and Borce Dickerson were benched when Iowa met George Washington University. The Iowa coach explained that he had "asked the boys to stay out of the contest for the good of the sport." The United States Naval Academy refused to play against Bill Bell of Ohio State, but had no objections to NYU's Manuel Riviero because he was a "white Cuban." And despite heated protests from University

16. On Marshall, see Thomas G. Smith, "Civil Rights on the Gridiron: The Kennedy Administration and the Desegregation of the Washington Redskins," *Journal of Sport History* 14 (Summer, 1987): 189-208.

17. Letter, Art Rooney to author, 15 January 1988; Cope, *The Game That Was*, 7.

18. Kipke in Baltimore *Afro-American*, 16 November 1935; Solem in *ibid.*, 17 November 1934; Ira Lewis in Pittsburgh *Courier*, 16 October 1932.

19. Bill Gibson in Baltimore *Afro-American*, 16 November 1935.

of Michigan students, Willis Ward was not in uniform against Georgia Tech. "MICHIGAN U. BOWS TO DEMANDS OF SOUTH; WARD IS BARRED FROM GEORGIA TECH GAME," ran a front page headline in a black newspaper.²⁰

Finally, racial prejudice prevented minorities from winning the recognition they deserved. Those who excelled often did not win team captaincies, conference honors or All-American recognition. They were rarely chosen to play in an annual game between the college all-stars and the NFL championship team.²¹

Despite the obstacles, some blacks did play big-time college football, especially in the Big Ten Conference. Horace Bell and Dwight Reed of Minnesota, Clarence Hinton and Bernie Jefferson of Northwestern, and Willis Ward of Michigan were all talented athletes who performed during the 1930s. None received NFL offers, although Jefferson, a gifted running back, was eventually signed by the Chicago Rockets in 1947, long after his prime.²²

Oze Simmons, a 185 pound running back at the University of Iowa, was perhaps the most talented and celebrated player in the Big Ten in the 1930s. A four-sport high school star from Fort Worth, Texas, Simmons played on the team with his brother Don and two other blacks, Windy Wallace and Homer Harris. In his first varsity game against Northwestern in 1934, he ran back a kickoff for a touchdown, returned 7 punts for 124 yards, and rushed for 166 yards on 24 carries. An elusive, speedy running back, he was nicknamed the "Wizard of Oze." The Northwestern coach, Dick Hanley, who had seen Fritz Pollard and Red Grange, called Simmons "absolutely the best I've ever seen."²³

The following year the junior continued to impress, scoring 5 touchdowns on runs of over 50 yards. "Simmons is All-America, sure fire," wrote white scribe Harold Parrott of the Brooklyn *Eagle*. Actually, Simmons made only the Associated Press second team.²⁴

Acrimony, more than accolades, surrounded Simmons during his varsity year. Rumors, which had begun in 1934, persisted that his teammates resented the attention he was getting and refused to block for him. He was the logical choice for team captain in 1936, but his teammates voted to do away with that honorary position for that year. At the end of the season, they selected Homer

20. Chicago *Defender*, 15 October, 5, 19 November 1932, 14, 28 October 1933, 22 September, 20, 27 October 1934; *University of Michigan Daily*, ed., in *ibid.*, 3 November 1934; Baltimore *Afro-American*, ed., 3 December 1932.

21. Al Monroe in Chicago *Defender*, 4 November 1933, 22 September 1934. Jesse Owens won four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics, but failed to receive the Sullivan Trophy. That honor, given to an American amateur athlete for contributions to sportsmanship, went to Glenn Morris, a Caucasian who won the decathlon at the Olympic games. Baltimore *Afro-American*, ed., 9 January 1937; Ollie Stewart in *ibid.*, 16 January 1937.

22. Henderson, *The Negro in Sports*, 114-118; Roy Wilkins, "Negro Stars on Big Grid Teams," *The Crisis* 43 (December 1936): 362-363 ff.

23. Al Monroe in Chicago *Defender*, 13 October 1934; Hanley quoted in *ibid.*, 20 October 1934.

24. Parrott quoted in Chicago *Defender*, 23 November 1935; see also *ibid.*, 4, II November 1934, 19 October, 2 November, 14 December 1935; Bill Gibson in Baltimore *Afro-American*, 17 November 1934.



Oze Simmons (Courtesy University of Iowa)

Harris, a black end, as the team's most valuable player and captain for 1937. Harris became the first black player to captain a Big Ten football team.²⁵

Simmons also had a falling-out with his coach, Ossie Solem. In mid-November, after a 52-0 loss to Minnesota, Simmons left the team after being berated by Coach Solem for a lack of effort. Reinstated for the final game against Temple, Simmons romped for a 72 yard touchdown. On the whole, however, it was a disappointing season. Despite considerable talent, he was bypassed for both the team's most valuable player award and for All-America honors. Shunned by the NFL, he signed with a black semi-professional team, the Patterson Panthers, in 1937.²⁶

Skilled black athletes also appeared on eastern college gridirons. Two of the best players, were Wilmeth Sidat-Singh of Syracuse University and Jerome "Brud" Holland of Cornell.²⁷

The adopted son of a Hindu physician, Sidat-Singh attended Dewitt Clinton High School in New York. A basketball standout, he made the Syracuse varsity team as a sophomore but bypassed the football tryouts. A coach who noticed him playing intramural football, urged him to go out for the varsity squad. In 1937 he made the starting backfield as a junior. He was coached by Ossie Solem, who had moved over from Iowa, and Charles "Bud" Wilkinson.

Sidat-Singh developed into one of the finest passers in the nation. Sports-writers compared his skills to Sammy Baugh, Sid Luckman and Benny Friedman. "Singh's Slings Sink Cornell," ran one alliterative headline. "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Singh," ran another. In 1937 Singh helped Syracuse beat Penn State and Cornell, two tough rivals. Against the University

25. Baltimore *Afro-American*, 24 October, 5, 12 December 1936; Al Monroe in Chicago *Defender*, 27 October 1934, 23, 30 November 1935.

26. Baltimore *Afro-American*, 14 November 1936; F. M. Davis in *ibid.*, 21 November 1936; Frank Young of the St. Louis *Call* in *ibid.*, 28 November 1936; editorial in *ibid.*, 5 December 1936; Pittsburgh *Courier*, 25 September 1937.

27. Henderson, *Negro in Sports*, 108-110.

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of Maryland, another strong opponent, Sidat-Singh was benched when the southern college objected to playing against a black. Syracuse lost 14-0. The following year at Syracuse Sidat-Singh played against Maryland and led the Orangemen to "Sweet Revenge," a 51-0 victory.²⁸

Sidat-Singh's most celebrated performance came against Cornell in October, 1938. Heavily favored, Cornell led 10-0 with nine minutes to go in the fourth quarter. Sidat-Singh threw three passes covering 50 yards to narrow the score to 10-6. Cornell then ran back the kickoff for a touchdown to take a commanding 17-6 lead. Obtaining the ball on the 31 yard line, Sidat-Singh tossed two passes covering 69 yards for a quick touchdown which cut the score to 17-12. When



Wilmeth Sidat-Singh (Courtesy Syracuse University)

²⁸ *Pittsburgh Courier*, 6, 13 November 1937, 22, 29 October 1938; *New York Times*, 17 October 1937, V, 1.

Syracuse recovered a fumble on the 30 yard line of Cornell, Sidat-Singh promptly completed a touchdown pass to win the game, 19-17. In the final nine minutes of play he had thrown 6 passes for 150 yards and 3 touchdowns. Famed sportswriter Grantland Rice called the performance "one of the most amazing exhibitions of machine gun fire I've ever seen, where the odds were all the other way." And Sam Balter, a respected NBC radio broadcaster, proclaimed it "the outstanding one-man show of the gridiron season of 1938."²⁹

Cornell, the team that had been victimized by Sidat-Singh, itself boasted one of the premier football players in the nation. Jerome "Brud" Holland from Auburn, New York played end on the varsity squad from 1936 to 1938. Strong and agile, he was famous for the end-around play and excelled at his position on offense and defense. In his first season, he was voted to the All-Eastern college football team.³⁰

In 1937 Holland led Cornell to a record of 5 wins, 2 losses, and 1 tie. In the team's biggest game of the year against favored Colgate, he scored three touchdowns in a 40-7 victory. During the season his superb offensive and defensive play won plaudits from both black and white sportswriters. The Yale coach, Clint Frank, called him the best end in the nation. The black press touted Holland for All-America honors. The odds seemed "virtually insurmountable" because he was black and only a junior; nevertheless, he was named to five different All-American teams. He was the first minority athlete to win the honor since Paul Robeson in 1918. When he was again honored in 1938, he became the first black since Robeson to be recognized in consecutive years.³¹

Despite the acclaim, Holland failed to receive an offer from an NFL team. Sidat-Singh also was snubbed. Both athletes were chosen by writers to play for the college all-stars in a game against the New York Giants, the first time blacks had been invited. "Neither Holland nor Sidat-Singh will play in the National Professional Football League this season," lamented one black weekly, "but it's not because they haven't got what it takes."³²

Like the east and midwest, western colleges had long produced talented

29. Grantland Rice quoted in Henderson. *Negro in Sports*. 126; Baker quoted in Arthur L. Evans, *Fifty Years of Football at Syracuse University*, 1889-1939 (Syracuse. 1939), 127-128, 130-131. 183-184; Rod Macdonald, *Syracuse Basketball: 1900-1975* (Syracuse. 1975). 36.

30. Baltimore *Afro-American*. 7, 14 November 1936, 5, 26 December 1936; *Cornellian* (Cornell University Yearbook) for 1937. 364-371.

31. *Cornellian*, 1938. 390-399; Alison Danzig in *New York Times*, 3 October 1937, V, 1: John Kiernan in *ibid.*, 4 October 1937, 27; Robert F. Kelley in *ibid.*, 10 October 1937, V, 1: Pittsburgh *Courier*, 9, 16, 23 October, 20, 27 November, 11 December 1937; Heywood Broun column reprinted in *ibid.*, 25 December 1937; *ibid.*, 24 September. 8 October, 19, 26 November, 3 December 1938; *Cornellian*. 1939, 132-138.

32. Randy Dixon in the Pittsburgh *Courier*. 3 December 1938; Chester Washington in *ibid.*, 9 September 1939; Ted Posten in *ibid.*, 16 September 1939. Rejecting offers to play semi-professional football for a black team, Holland joined the faculty at Lincoln University as an instructor in sociology. He obtained his master's degree from Cornell in 1941 and his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1950. From 1953 to 1963 he served as president of Delaware State College and headed Hampton Institute during the late 1960s. In 1970 he was named Ambassador to Sweden by President Nixon. Educator, diplomat and civil rights leader, Holland died in 1985.

Overlooked by the NFL, Sidat-Singh played semi-professional basketball for the Syracuse Reds and the Harlem Renaissance. During World War II he joined the Army Air Corps and was killed in a training exercise over Lake Huron in June 1943.

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Jerome "Brud" Holland (Courtesy Cornell University)

gridiron athletes. In the late 1930s UCLA had three minority athletes with NFL potential: Jackie Robinson, Woodrow Wilson Strode, and Kenny Washington.³³

A transfer student from Pasadena City College, Jackie Robinson was a year

³³ Henderson, *Negro in Sports*. 119-121, 130-133.

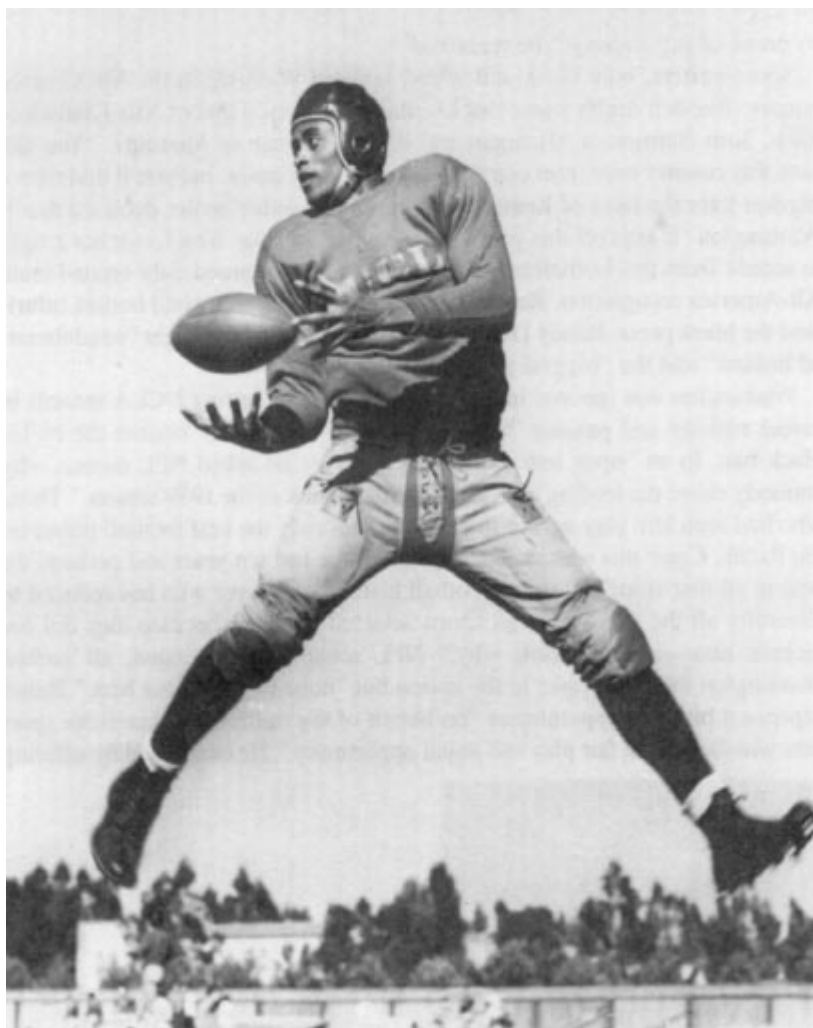
behind Strode and Washington, class of 1940. NFL owners had a chance to sign the “cyclone-gaited hellion” long before he broke baseball’s color barrier in 1947. At UCLA he was the only athlete ever to letter in four sports: baseball, football, basketball, and track. He was the national champion in the long jump, the leading basketball scorer in the Pacific Coast Conference and still retains the school football record for highest average per carry in a season (12.2 yards in 1939). The assistant coach at Stanford University referred to him as “just about the best sprinter on the coast and he’s a great ball carrier. He’s rugged and can play just as hard and long as anyone. We are scared to death of him.” Robinson appeared in the college all-star game in Chicago in 1941 but was bypassed by the NFL. “In those days no major football or basketball clubs hired black players. The only job offered me was with the Honolulu Bears,” Robinson recalled. The football Bears, his first professional team, “were not major league but they were integrated.” Robinson’s football career ended in December, 1941 with the bombing of Pearl Harbor.³⁴

Woody Strode and Kenny Washington played together on the UCLA Bruins for three seasons (1937-1939). Strode was a 220 pound end with speed and sure hands. He also excelled defensively. He was not considered as talented as Brud Holland, but did win selection to the Pacific Coast All-Star team in 1939. Overlooked by the NFL, he played with minor league west coast professional teams until 1946.

Washington, a 195 pound halfback, was one of the best players in college football in the late 1930s. Jackie Robinson described him as “the greatest football player I have ever seen. He had everything needed for greatness—size, speed, and tremendous strength. Kenny was probably the greatest long passer ever.” In a game against USC in 1937 he won national attention by throwing a touchdown pass sixty-two yards in the air. He was also impressive in a game played in Los Angeles against SMU. Madison Bell, the coach at SMU, regarded him as “one of the best players I have ever seen.” Washington and Strode even drew praise from the white Texas press. Horace McCoy of the *Dallas Daily Times Herald* wrote that the “two black boys were everywhere; they were the entire team; they were playing with inspiration and courage, and they cracked and banged the Mustangs all over the field.” At the conclusion of the game, won by SMU 26-13, the Mustang supporters joined UCLA fans in giving Washington an ovation. “In that moment you forgot he was black; he was no color at all; he was simply a great athlete.” The following year, his running and passing prowess earned him a spot on the Pacific Coast All-American team.³⁵

34. *Pittsburgh Courier*, 29 July, 9 September, 4 November 1939; Hendrik Van Leuven, “Touchdown UCLA: The Complete Account of Bruin Football” (unpubl. ms.), Powell Library, UCLA); Jackie Robinson as told to Alfred Duckett. *I Never Had It Made: An Autobiography* (New York, 1972), 22.-24.

35. Wendell Smith interview with Madison Bell in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, 29 October 1938; Horace McCoy quoted by Ira Lewis in *ibid.*, 4 December 1937; Jackie Robinson quoted by Rathet and Smith in *Their Deeds*, 210; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 11 December 1937, 15 October, 26 November 1938; *New York Times*, 8 December 1939.



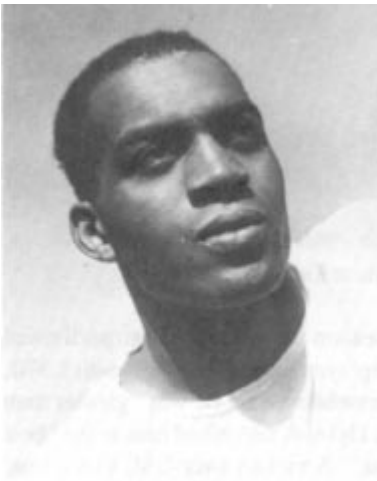
Woody Strode (Courtesy University of California at Los Angeles)

In 1939 UCLA enjoyed an unbeaten season and Washington performed spectacularly. “King Kenny” led all college players in total yardage with 1,370. The University of Montana coach, Doug Fessenden, said he was “greater than Red Grange.” West coast sportswriter, Dick Hyland, described him as the “best all-around football player seen here this year.” A victory over USC in the final game of the year would have sent UCLA to the Rose Bowl. Unfortunately for the Bruins, the game ended in a scoreless tie and USC received the invitation. Washington won praise for his spirited play. Syndicated columnist Ed Sullivan reported that when Washington left the field he was given a standing ovation from 103,000 spectators. “I have never been so moved emotionally, and rarely

so proud of my country,” he remarked.³⁶

Sportswriters, both black and white, boosted Washington for All-America honors. Wendell Smith wrote that his ability surpassed that of Nile Kinnick of Iowa, Tom Harmon of Michigan and Paul Christman of Missouri. “You can look this country over from coast to coast and back again, but you’ll find nary a pigskin totter the likes of Kenny Washington!” Another writer declared that if Washington “is kept off this year’s All-America then the West Coast has a right to secede from the football union.” But Washington earned only second-team All-America recognition. Relegating the UCLA back to second honors infuriated the black press. Randy Dixon of the *Courier* called the slight “unadulterated hokum” and the “biggest joke of the year.”³⁷

Washington was ignored in the NFL draft despite setting UCLA records in career rushing and passing. NBC broadcaster Sam Balter blasted the NFL’s black ban. In an “open letter” over the airwaves he asked NFL owners why “nobody chose the leading collegiate ground gainer of the 1939 season.” Those who had seen him play agreed that he was “not only the best football player on the Pacific Coast this season, but the best of the last ten years and perhaps the best in all that slope’s glorious football history—a player who has reduced to absurdity all the All-American teams selected this year because they did not include him—and all know why.” NFL scouts, he continued, all ranked Washington the best player in the nation but “none of you chose him.” Balter expressed bitter disappointment “on behalf of the millions of American sport fans who believe in fair play and equal opportunity.” He concluded by offering



Kenny Washington (Courtesy University of California at Los Angeles)

36. Rathet and Smith, *Their Deeds*, 210; Fessenden quoted in *Pittsburgh Courier*, 11 November 1939; Hyland quoted by Wendell Smith in *ibid.*, 23 December 1939; see also *ibid.*, 23 September, 28 October, 9, 16 December 1939, *New York Times*, 10 December 1939, V, 1.

37. Wendell Smith in *Pittsburgh Courier*, 18 November, 16 December 1939; Randy Dixon in *ibid.*, 4, II November, 16 December 1939; Chester Washington in *ibid.*, 18 November 1939; Harry Culvert in *ibid.*, 2 December 1939; *New York Times*, 9 December 1939, 21.

air-time to owners to explain why neither Washington nor Brud Holland were “good enough to play ball on your teams.” The offer was not accepted.³⁸

Jimmy Powers, a columnist for the New York *Daily News*, also scolded NFL owners. After watching Washington play for the college all-stars against the Green Bay Packers in 1940, he urged Tim Mara and Dan Topping, owners of the New York teams, to sign the UCLA star. “He played on the same field with boys who are going to be scattered through the league. And he played against the champion Packers. There wasn’t a bit of trouble anywhere.” The black ban, however, was not lifted.³⁹

One owner, George Halas of the Chicago Bears, did agree to play a black all-star team in a charity game at Soldiers’ Field in 1938. Many Afro-Americans saw this charity game as an opportunity to show that minority athletes could compete in the NFL. In fact, some black sportswriters predicted that the “sons of Ham” would “lambast the Bears.”⁴⁰

Coached by Duke Slater and Ray Kemp, and selected by popular vote, the All-Stars were made up of players who had already graduated. Many represented black colleges. The backfield consisted of Big Bertha Edwards of Kentucky State, Tank Conrad of Morgan State, Oze Simmons, and Joe Lillard. Unlike the backfield, the line was light, inexperienced and no match for the Bears. Coach Ray Kemp, who had not played the game since 1933, toiled at tackle for nearly the entire game. Moreover, the team had less than two weeks of practice.⁴¹

The game was a rout, with the powerful Bears winning 51-0. The All-Stars made only four first downs and lost 51 yards rushing. The Bears, forced to punt only once, amassed 605 total yards. “We’ve just finished witnessing the most disappointing sports spectacle of the decade . . . a ‘promotion’ which will set Negro college football back years,” lamented William G. Nunn of the Pittsburgh *Courier*. Actually, most black fans took the game in stride. “Grin and Bear it.” joked one sportswriter. Coach Ray Kemp pointed out that the Bears were a great football team. (Indeed, in 1940 they would defeat the Redskins in a championship game 73-0). Still, he regretted the fact “that we didn’t have a longer period to train.” The game was a disappointing loss, but it seemed to make blacks more eager than ever to achieve desegregation in both professional and college football.⁴²

Blacks and whites persistently denounced segregation on southern college

38. For the NFL draft, see *New York Times*. 10 December 1939, V, 1; Sam Balter broadcast reprinted in Pittsburgh Courier, 13 January 1940; Chester Washington in *ibid.*, 23 December 1939.

39. Powers quoted by William A. Brower, “Has Professional Football Closed the Door?” *Opportunity* 18 (December 1940): 376.

40. Pittsburgh Courier, 6, 27 August, 3 September 1938; Chicago *Defender*, 6, 20 August. 10 September 1938; Randy Dixon in the Pittsburgh Courier, 3 September 1938.

41. Pittsburgh Courier, 10, 17 September 1938.

42. William G. Nunn in the Pittsburgh Courier, 1 October 1938; Chicago *Defender*, 17, 24 September 1938; Fay Young in *ibid.*, 3 September, 1 October 1938; John Lake in *ibid.*, 1 October 1938; Frank Young in *ibid.*, 1 October, 1938. The game was ignored by the white press. See, for example, the Chicago Tribune, 1-5 September 1938.

gridirons. To be sure, some Dixie schools did play desegregated teams. For three consecutive years the University of North Carolina played against Ed Williams of NYU "and the sky didn't fall." In the Southwest, Southern Methodist University in 1937 "pushed aside petty prejudice" to play against Strode and Washington of UCLA. Madison "Matty" Bell, the long-time SMU coach, had played in the NFL with Pollard, Slater and Robeson, and opposed "drawing the color-line in sports . . . , because when you do it takes something out of it. I think every boy should have his chance to participate regardless of color." An anomaly in the South, Coach Bell looked forward to the day when all gridirons would be integrated.⁴³

Northerners, too, made headway against football segregation. Universities, such as Notre Dame and Pittsburgh, were ridiculed for their lily-whiteism. Northern college football teams that agreed to bench black players against Dixie schools were denounced. Boston College, coached by Frank Leahy, caused a furor when it benched Lou Montgomery against the University of Florida and Auburn. Despite the protest, BC again submitted to southern custom when it agreed that Montgomery would not participate in the Cotton Bowl game against Clemson. BC administrators asked Montgomery to accompany the team to Dallas, but to sit-out the game. He could sit with teammates on the bench, but could not participate in pre- or post-game ceremonies, stay in the same hotel, or eat in the same restaurants. Montgomery refused to make the trip if he could not play. "To go down there under restrictions and possibly run into some embarrassing situations, that would be plain silly. Surely no one with self respect would place himself and his teammates in that position knowingly."⁴⁴

The black and white press denounced the "cruel snub." The Pittsburgh *Courier* criticized Boston College for abandoning its democratic and Christian ideals. Jack Miley of the *New York Daily News* scored BC for one of the most "spineless, mealy-mouthed, weak-kneed, craven bits of business in the whole history of college football." College authorities should have rejected the Cotton Bowl bid, rather than submit to race prejudice. "Even Hitler, to give the bum his due, didn't treat Jesse Owens the way the Cotton Bowl folk are treating Lou Montgomery-with the consent of the young Negro's alma mater. . . . For Adolf, at least, let Owens run, and . . . he had the good grace not to try to bar Jesse before the games got under way." Miley's sentiments were shared by many eastern sports fans. A white letter writer to the *New York Times* lamented the fact that Jim Crow "practices have become living denials of our democracy-the discrimination, with official tolerance, against Negro football stars, in particular."⁴⁵

The Montgomery incident prompted the black press to intensify its attack on the NFL color ban. William Brower, writing in *Opportunity*, the magazine of

43. Pittsburgh *Courier*. ed., 29 October 1938; Madison Bell interview with Wendell Smith in *ibid.*, 29 October 1938.

44. Pittsburgh *Courier*. 11 September 1937. 4 November 1939; Arthur Siegel of Boston *Traveller* in *ibid.*, 26 October 1939; Montgomery in *ibid.*, 30 December 1939.

45. Miley quoted in Pittsburgh *Courier*. 30 December 1939; letter to editor, *ibid.*, 23 December 1939.

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the Urban League, denounced NFL owners for “cheating Negro players out of the opportunity to participate in their league.” Football “bigwigs,” the author feared, were trying to emulate the exclusionary policy of major league baseball. Yet there were “no arresting or rational excuses for professional football to follow the dubious precedent set by professional baseball.” The explanation that desegregated squads would create discord and offend southern sensibilities was nonsense. Oze Simmons, who played for two years with the Paterson Panthers in the American Association, claimed that “not only did the southern boys block for me; they even fought for me.” Then, too, with the exception of Washington D.C., NFL franchises were located in northern cities “where athletic miscegenation is not prohibited.” Brower could not find “any authenticated commitment” to a racial ban by the NFL owners. Yet “one look at the workings of their draft system” was sufficient evidence to indicate that a gentleman’s agreement existed. Halas, Marshall and Rooney had made considerable contributions to the professional game and it was hard to believe that they would continue “to flout fair-minded fans” or “injudiciously disregard the professional and commercial value of such Negro players of excellence as Kenny Washington, Brud Holland and Oze Simmons.”⁴⁶

World War II proved a major boon to sports integration. Not only did the war promote the ideals of democracy and fair play, it also gave blacks a chance to showcase their talents on college, semi-professional and service teams. In football, three of the most talented minority athletes during the war years were Bill Willis, Marion Motley and Claude “Buddy” Young.

Football, like other aspects of American life, had to endure wartime hardships. Manpower difficulties forced NFL teams to reduce their rosters from 33 to 25. Some colleges ended football programs for the duration. And most college players had their education and playing days interrupted by wartime commitments.

Bill Willis, a native of Columbus, Ohio, was an exception. He entered Ohio State University in 1941 and graduated four years later. A 212 pound tackle nicknamed the “Cat” for his quickness, he played three varsity seasons. At OSU, Willis has related, he never experienced a racial slight from a teammate. “One reason was because I always attempted to show respect and conducted myself in such a way as to demand respect from my fellow players.” Ohio State won conference titles in 1942 and 1944. As a senior Willis was regarded “one of the greatest tackles in football history” and was named to several All-American and all-star teams. Although the NFL was desperate for competent players, it bypassed Willis. Upon graduation, he took a football coaching position at Kentucky State.⁴⁷

Claude “Buddy” Young was perhaps the most sensational college gridiron

46. Brower, “Has Professional Football Closed the Door?” 375-377; Ed Nace, “Negro Grid Stars, Past and Present,” *Opportunity* 17 (September 1939): 272-274; Brower, “Negro Players on White Gridirons,” *Opportunity* 19 (October 1941): 304-306.

47. Cope, *The Game That Was*, 250; Wendell Smith in the Pittsburgh *Courier*, 2 December 1944; *New York Times*, 26 November 1944, III, 1, 30 November 1944, 17, 9 December 1944, 19; Baltimore *Afro-American*, 21 April 1945.

star during the war years. A freshman running back at the University of Illinois in 1944, he captured national attention. "Not since the days when Red Grange was ripping up the sod . . . for Bob Zuppke and the Illini has there been so much pigskin excitement on the University of Illinois campus," wrote one sports columnist.⁴⁸

A native of Chicago, the 5'5" "Bronze Bullet" had exceptional quickness and acceleration. A track star, he won the national collegiate championships in the 100 and 220 yard dashes, tied the world record for the 45 and 60 yard dashes, and was the Amateur Athletic Union's 100 meter champion.⁴⁹

Young was equally impressive on the gridiron. In his first game against Iowa, he scampered 64 yards for a touchdown on the first play from scrimmage. On his second carry, he ran for a 30 yard touchdown. In all, he gained 139 yards on 7 carries, an average of 19.7 yards. Before the season concluded, he had touchdown runs of 93, 92, 74, 64, and 63 yards. He averaged 8.9 yards per carry and scored 13 touchdowns equalling the Big Ten Conference record established by Red Grange in 1924. Sportscaster Bill Stern called him "the fastest thing in cleats and the runner of the year." Ray Eliot, Young's coach, referred to him as "the best running back I have ever seen." Only a freshman, Young was named to several All-America teams.⁵⁰

In late January, 1945, Young was drafted by the Navy. Initially he reported to the Great Lakes Naval Training Station, but was eventually transferred to the naval base at Fleet City, California. Like many star athletes, Young played football for the service team. Coast service teams, one writer claimed, "unquestionably played the toughest football extant during the war. The personnel of the league was 30 percent All-America, 30 percent professional and 40 percent better than the average college squad."⁵¹

Coached by Bill Reinhart, the Fleet City Bluejackets was, in 1945, the best football team on the coast. Besides Young, the squad consisted of such NFL stars as Charlie O'Rourke (Bears), Aldo Forte (Bears), and Frank "Bruiser" Kinard (Redskins). College stars included Bill Daddio (Pittsburgh), Edgar "Special Delivery" Jones (Pittsburgh), Harry Hopp (Nebraska), and Steve Juzwick (Notre Dame). Games were scheduled against other service teams and one semi-professional team, the Hollywood Rangers.⁵²

The Bluejackets' toughest competitor was the El Toro, California Marines. Like the Bluejackets, the El Toro team was brimming with talent: Paul Govern-

48. Wendell Smith in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, 7 October 1944 Illinois had two other black players in 1944: Don Johnson and Paul Patterson. Other black collegiate stars in 1944 and 1945 were Paul Robeson, Jr (Cornell), George Taliaferro (Indiana), Joe Perry (Compton Junior College), and Gene Derricotte (Michigan). See *ibid.*, 30 September, 7 October 1944, 29 September, 8 December 1945.

49. *Baltimore Afro-American*, 16 December 1944; Stanley Frank, "Buddy Totes the Ball," *Collier's* 118 (November 23, 1946): 21.

50. *Pittsburgh Courier*, 14, 21, 28 October, 4 November, 2 December 1944; *Baltimore Afro-American*, 4 November, 2, 23 December 1944; Eliot quoted in Frank, "Buddy Totes," 109; Stern quoted in Wendell Smith, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 21 October 1944.

51. *Pittsburgh Courier*, 27 January 1945; *Baltimore Afro-American*, 27 January, 14 April, 11 August 1945; Frank, "Buddy Totes," 107.

52. *Pittsburgh Courier*, 6, 27 October, 10, 17 November, 22 December 1945; *Baltimore Afro-American*, 8 December 1945.

ali of Columbia, Elroy "Crazy Legs" Hirsch of Wisconsin, Bob Dove of Notre Dame, and Wee Willie Wilkin of the Washington Redskins. In mid-December, the two teams met for the championship. In an earlier contest the Bluejackets had prevailed 7-0. The championship game was played in Los Angeles at Memorial Stadium before 65,000 fans. It was one of Buddy Young's greatest games. After a scoreless first quarter, Young returned a kickoff for a 94 yard touchdown. He ran back another kickoff for an 88 yard touchdown and took a hand-off from O'Rourke and scampered 30 yards for another. The Bluejackets won the game 45-28 to complete an unbeaten season. They challenged the unbeaten West Point team, but the cadets refused the invitation.⁵³

Young's performance won accolades from players, coaches, writers, and fans. Charlie O'Rourke still talks excitedly about the game and Young's ability. Ernie Nevers had "never seen his equal" and Aldo Forte remarked: "I've seen the greatest in pro football. None can compare with Young," El Toro coach Dick Hanley, who had coached Northwestern, called Young "the greatest college back I've ever seen." Bluejackets Coach Bill Reinhart declared that he had "never seen anything like Buddy Young . . . and I've seen Cliff Battles, Tuffy Lemmans, George McAfee, Dot Blanchard, Glenn Davis, and Bill Dudley, among others." Sports columnist Slip Madigan also considered Young superior to Blanchard and Davis. And comedian Bob Hope observed: "I'd heard of black magic. Now I've seen it."⁵⁴

Rumors circulated that once Young fulfilled his service obligation he would be drafted by the NFL or lured to UCLA to play for the Bruins. Neither proved true. Young returned to the University of Illinois and helped the Illini win the 1947 Rose Bowl.⁵⁵

Marion Motley was another superb service team player. A strong and swift 220 pound fullback from Canton, Ohio, he played briefly at the University of Nevada. During the war he joined the Navy and was assigned to the Great Lakes Naval Training Station. There he played on the football team coached by Paul Brown who was familiar with Motley's achievements as an Ohio high school player. Harry "Bud" Grant, an aspiring fullback, recalled that during tryouts Brown asked players to organize themselves by position. Motley walked to "where the rest of the fullbacks were, and at that moment I became an end because there was no way I was going to beat Marion Motley. I didn't know him and hadn't heard of him, but I knew he was awfully tough." Playing against college teams such as Illinois and Notre Dame, Motley was virtually unstoppable. And when Paul Brown became coach of the Cleveland Browns, he sought out the powerful, durable Great Lakes fullback.⁵⁶

53. Pittsburgh *Courier*, 15 December 1945; Baltimore *Afro-American*, 22 December 1945; *New York Times*, 27 November 1945, 19, 28 November 1945, 23; Joe King, "Buddy Young," *Sport* 3 (December 1947): 44; Hal Rosenthal, *Fifty Faces of Football* (New York, 1981), 76-77.

54. Charles O'Rourke, interview with author, 3 February 1988; Pittsburgh *Courier*, 19 January, 23 February 1946; Baltimore *Afro-American*, 22 December 1945, 12 January, 16, 23 February 1946.

55. Pittsburgh *Courier*, 29 December 1945, 26 January 1946; Sam Lacy in the Baltimore *Afro-American*, 12 January 1946, 11 January 1947; Frank, "Buddy Totes," 108; *New York Times*, 2 January 1947, 17.

56. Cope, *The Game That Was*, 241; Paul Brown with Jack Clary, *PB: The Paul Brown Story* (New York,



Buddy Young (Courtesy Athletic Association, University of Illinois)

Minority athletes who had fulfilled or escaped their military commitment had an opportunity to play minor league professional football on the west coast. In 1944 both the American Professional League and the Pacific Coast Professional League fielded desegregated teams. Kenny Washington played for the San Francisco Clippers, and Ezzrett Anderson for the Los Angeles Mustangs. The Los Angeles Wildcats and San Diego Gunners also had black players. In the Pacific Coast League, Jackie Robinson represented the Los Angeles Bulldogs and Mel Reid was one of 12 blacks on the Oakland Giants. The following year the two leagues merged into the Pacific Coast League. The Hollywood Bears,

1979), 114-115; Paul Brown, interview with author, 8 February 1988 (hereinafter cited as Brown interview); Baltimore *Afro-American*, 8 September, 10 November, 8 December 1945.

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with Kenny Washington, Woody Strode, and Ezzrett Anderson, dominated play and won the title.⁵⁷

The war years, as historian William Chafe has noted, "served as a crucial catalyst aiding black Americans in their long struggle for freedom." In 1941 black labor leader A. Philip Randolph proposed a march on Washington to protest the government's discriminatory hiring practices. That proposed action prompted FDR to issue an executive order creating the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practices. The FEPC and the wartime emergency sharply increased black employment. Lured by opportunity, millions of blacks migrated to northern and western cities. In some cities, such as Detroit, race prejudice provoked riots.⁵⁸

Increasingly, blacks assailed the Roosevelt administration for failing to endorse a federal anti-lynching measure and refusing to support the elimination of the poll tax. Jim Crow policies in schools and the armed forces frustrated Afro-Americans as did Roosevelt's close association with "conspicuous Negrophobes" such as Senators Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi and Walter George of Georgia. Black columnist Ralph Mathews wrote that "after our armies have marched on Berlin and Tokyo, if the GI Joes, both colored and white, don't turn around and march on Washington and drive out the Fascist coalition of Southern Democrats and Republicans who are trying to Nazify America, they will not have learned what they were fighting for."⁵⁹

Blacks, too, denounced the lack of opportunity in professional sports. For blacks the desegregation of major league baseball was of ultimate importance during the 1930s and 1940s. The national pastime was extremely popular among minority athletes and dozens of qualified blacks played in the Negro leagues. Unlike football, however, blacks had never participated in major league baseball in the twentieth century. Indeed, during the early 1930s when professional football was desegregated minority writers condemned baseball for being the "only national sport that bars Race players." Even after the color barrier was established in professional football, blacks were slow to attack it because they were reluctant to admit that it existed.⁶⁰

The black press, led by Wendell Smith of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, worked diligently for the desegregation of major league baseball. Some writers urged blacks to boycott games until the ban was lifted. Others wondered why owners would forego able-bodied, honorably discharged minority athletes to sign disabled veterans such as Chet Morrissey from Binghamton, New York. Finally,

57. On the Pacific Coast League. see *Pittsburgh Courier*. 30 September, 14 October, 4, 11, 18 November, 2, 16 December 1944. 13 January, 4 August, 22 September, 13, 20 October, 3, 10, 24 November. 8, 29 December 1945, 5, 12 January 1946.

58. William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York, 1986), 18-21.

59. *Pittsburgh Courier*, eds., 30 September, 14, 21, 28 October 1944; Mathews in Baltimore *Afro-American*, ed., 3 February 1945.

60. *Chicago Defender*, 28 October 1933; Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson And His Legacy* (New York, 1983). 30-46.

in November, 1945 Branch Rickey, the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, broke the color ban by signing Jackie Robinson to a minor league contract.⁶¹

Blacks also expected the fulfillment of the American ideal in professional football. In 1944 two leagues were created to compete with the NFL: The United States Football League and the All-America Football Conference. Red Grange, the president of the USFL, announced that "our new league has set up no barriers. Any athlete, regardless of color, will be invited to try out for our teams, and if he has the ability, he will be welcomed. The Negro boys are fighting for our country; they certainly are entitled to play in our professional leagues." Unfortunately, the USFL never became a reality.⁶²

The AAFC, organized by Arch Ward, sports editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, was more successful than the USFL. Run by "men of millionaire incomes," franchises were created in New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Buffalo, Brooklyn, and Miami. The fledgling league, which existed only on paper until 1946, drafted Steve Juzwick, Harry Hopp, Frankie Albert, Crazylegs Hirsch, and several other college stars who had played on service teams. Blacks, however, were initially ignored. Buddy Young was bypassed, perhaps because he still had college eligibility. But to the dismay of blacks, the AAFC overlooked Kenny Washington and Woody Strode.⁶³

Desegregation hopes flagged when the Miami Seahawks entered the league in January, 1946. Miami, wrote Wendell Smith, was the most "nazified of all the cities in the world on matters of racial equality." AAFC officials, like their NFL rivals, denied the existence of a color barrier. "But you can bet that Sunday topper," Smith continued, that blacks will be excluded. Afro-Americans had hopes that the AAFC would be "operated by more liberal men-men who wouldn't draw the color line as the NFL has been doing for years. But it's the same old story. Negroes won't be permitted to play."⁶⁴

Expectations ebbed, but blacks pushed for desegregation. In Los Angeles, two teams, the Rams of the NFL, recently transferred from Cleveland, and the Dons of the AAFC, hoped to use spacious Municipal Stadium. At a Coliseum Commission meeting, several black writers, including Halley Harding of the *Los Angeles Tribune* and Herman Hill, the west coast correspondent of the *Pittsburgh Courier* objected to the use of the coliseum by any organization that practiced racial discrimination. Since both leagues banned blacks, they should be denied the use of the facility. Representatives from the Rams and Dons promptly announced their intent to sign black athletes and the Coliseum Commission allowed both teams to use the stadium.⁶⁵

61. David K. Wiggins, "Wendell Smith, The *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal* and the Campaign to Include Blacks in Organized Baseball, 1933-1945," *Journal of Sport History* 10 (Summer 1983): 207-219; Sam Lacy in *Baltimore Afro-American*, 20 January, 3 February, 31 March, 7, 14 April 1945. On the signing of Jackie Robinson, see *Pittsburgh Courier*, 21 April, 3 November 1945.

62. Grange quoted in *Pittsburgh Courier*, 17 February 1945 and *Baltimore Afro-American*, 3 March 1945; *New York Times*, 20 November 1944, 18, 28 November 1944, 28, 2 June 1945, 19.

63. *New York Times*, 3 September 1944, III, 1; *Baltimore Afro-American* 29 December 1945; Fay Young in *Chicago Defender*, 3 January 1946

64. Wendell Smith in *Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 January 1946.

65. *Pittsburgh Courier*, 26 January, 2, 9 February 1946; *Baltimore Afro-American*, 23 February 1946.

The breakthrough came in late March, 1946 when the Rams signed Kenny Washington. Rams backfield coach Bob Snyder later conceded that the team signed the 27 year old black star as a precondition to obtaining a coliseum lease. He also believed that Washington would attract black fans and boost gate receipts. "I doubt we would have been interested in Washington if we had stayed in Cleveland," he stated.⁶⁶

Not surprisingly, the black press hailed the signing of Washington. "Kenny finally gets a break," wrote Wendell Smith. Parallels were drawn with Jackie Robinson. "Both athletes had performed brilliantly at UCLA. Both became pioneers for their race in professional sports." In mid-May, the Rams purchased the contract of Woody Strode from the Hollywood Bears. But Strode was 31 years old and beyond his peak. And Washington was hampered by an injured knee. Both athletes spent several seasons with the Rams, but neither excelled.⁶⁷

The AAFC delayed signing blacks. To obtain its lease from the Coliseum Commission, the Los Angeles Dons had agreed to provide blacks an opportunity to play. The Dons, however, violated that pledge. Sharply criticized by the black press, the Dons eventually relented, but not until the following year. Meanwhile, AAFC Commissioner James Crowley reminded fans that the league had "no rule that bars a Negro athlete from playing." The AAFC, he informed a black newspaper, "is just what the name implies; it is All America in every respect." Only the Cleveland Browns, however, proved that point in 1946.⁶⁸

In mid-August, Paul Brown, coach and part-owner of the Cleveland franchise, invited Bill Willis and Marion Motley to tryout camp at Bowling Green University. From the moment he was appointed coach in 1945, Brown has written, he was determined to sign the best athletes available regardless of color. He was aware of the unwritten black ban, but had no intention of adhering to it. Both athletes impressed the coaches and were signed to contracts. Only a few owners, Brown recalls, took exception to his actions.⁶⁹

The invitation to training camp caught Willis by surprise. Due to the black ban it was "inconceivable to me that I would play pro ball." In camp, he encountered few difficulties. He demanded respect and Brown insisted that all players be treated fairly. Invited to camp a few days after Willis, Motley ran the fastest times in the sprints and left little doubt that he had the ability to play professional football.⁷⁰

Motley and Willis were well-liked and got along with teammates. Both men, however, often encountered race prejudice from opposing teams. Neither athlete was allowed to play in the game against Miami because state law forbade

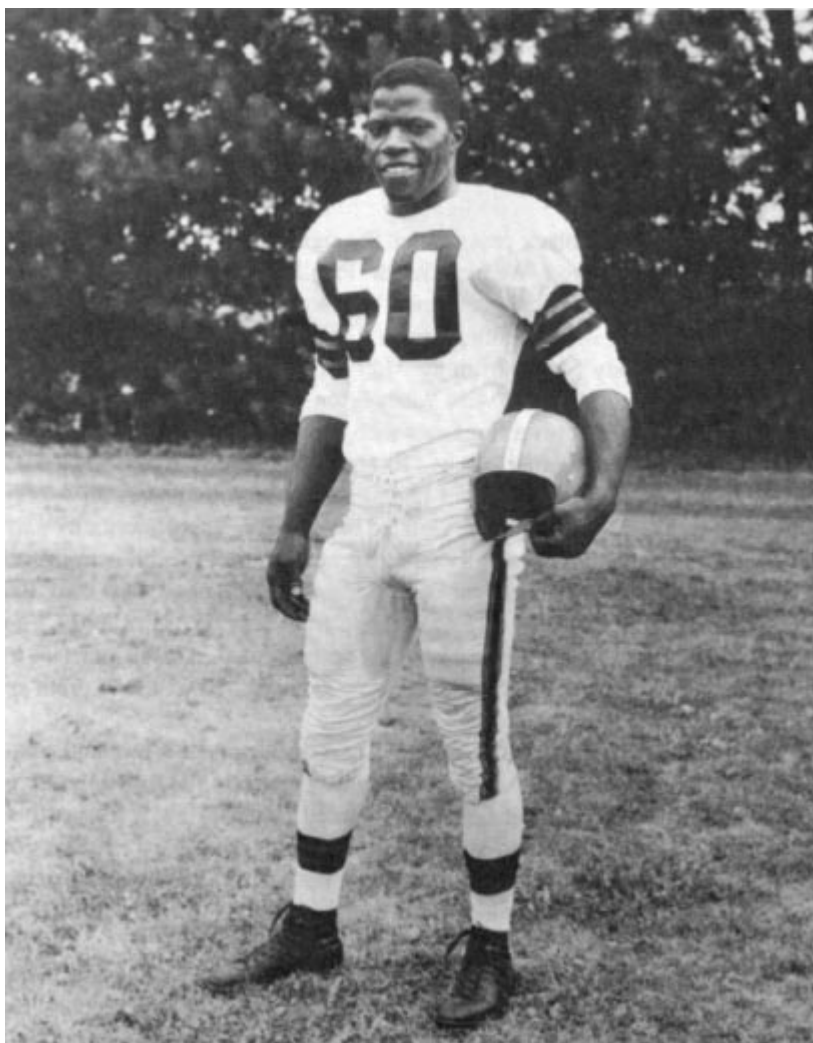
66. For Snyder's view, see Rathet and Smith. *Their Deeds*, 210-211. Snyder contends that the signing of Washington prompted Branch Rickey to obtain Jackie Robinson. That view, of course, is nonsense because Robinson's signing predated Washington's by nearly four months.

67. Pittsburgh Courier, 30 March, 6, 13, 27 July, 3, 10, 24 August 1946; Baltimore *Afro-American*, 30 March, 27 April, 18 May, 27 July, 10, 31 August 1946; Wendell Smith in Pittsburgh *Courier*, 3 August 1946.

68. Pittsburgh *Courier*, 24 August, 19 October 1946.

69. Brown interview; Brown, *PB*, 129; Al Dunmore in Pittsburgh Courier, 17 August 1946.

70. Brown interview; Brown, *PB*, 130.



Bill Willis (Courtesy of the Cleveland Browns)

integration. Rival players sometimes taunted them with racial slurs and provoked them by stepping on their hands with cleats. Usually teammates “took care” of offending parties because Coach Brown warned them to be thick-skinned and composed. “If Willis and I had been anywhere near being hotheads,” Motley recalled, “it would have been another ten years till black men got accepted in pro ball.”⁷¹

Motley and Willis excelled throughout the season and helped lead the Browns to a conference title and the first of four consecutive league cham-

71. Otto Graham, interview with author, 11 February 1988; Cope, *The Game That Was*, 241-245, 249-250.



Marion Motley (Courtesy of the Cleveland Browns)

pionships. Both athletes were named first-team All-Pros, an honor which became perennial.⁷²

The black press considered the desegregation of professional football one of the top stories of 1946. Only the debut of Jackie Robinson with the Montreal Royals was regarded as more important in the sports field than the signing of Strode, Washington, Willis, and Motley. According to Wendell Smith, Paul Brown “automatically becomes one of the ‘men of the year’ in sports because he voluntarily signed Motley and Willis.” The Rams, on the other hand, “are not to be congratulated with the same enthusiasm as Brown” because they hired minority athletes under pressure.⁷³

72. Chicago *Defender*, 7, 21 September, 26 October 1946, 4 January, 1947; Baltimore *Afro-American*, 26 October, 23 November, 14 December 1946, 11 January 1947; Pittsburgh *Courier*, 1 September, 19, 26 October, 7, 14 December 1946. II January 1947. Both Motley and Willis are members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

73. Wendell Smith in Pittsburgh *Courier*, 4 January 1947; Baltimore *Afro-American*, 4, 11 January 1947; Fay Young in Chicago *Defender*, 4 January 1947.

Many black Americans believed that desegregation in the sports field would promote the spirit of equality in other aspects of American life. "It has been proven time and again," wrote Bill Nunn, "that the athletic field has been the front line in this continued battle for racial tolerance." And Wendell Smith believed that athletic success was an "effective slap" at "racial mobsters" because "they know they can't explain these accomplishments and achievements, and at the same time convince you that some people are better than others by virtue of their racial heritage."⁷⁴

The success of the Cleveland Browns, on the field and at the gate, led to the desegregation of other teams. In addition, the replacement of the Miami franchise with Baltimore also facilitated desegregation in the AAFC. Baltimore resisted signing blacks until it joined the NFL in 1953, but it had no objection to playing against minority athletes. In 1947 AAFC teams added more blacks to their rosters. The Browns signed Horace Gillom of the University of Nevada, the Buffalo Bisons selected Dolly King, and the Chicago Rockets took Bill Bass and Bernard Jefferson.

The Los Angeles Dons, who shunned blacks in 1946 in part because they wanted to avoid racial problems with the Miami team, offered contracts to Ezzert Anderson, John Brown and Bert Piggott. Not to be outdone by the baseball team with the same name, the Brooklyn Dodgers signed Elmore Harris. And with considerable fanfare, the New York Yankees football team offered a multi-year contract to Buddy Young. A Rose Bowl hero and the most valuable player in the college All-Star game against the Bears, Young had a successful rookie year. He finished fifth in the league in rushing and helped lead the Yankees to a division title. In 1948, the San Francisco 49ers, the only lily-white AAFC team besides Baltimore, signed Joe Perry. In its four years of existence, the AAFC helped prepare the way for desegregation by signing more than one dozen minority athletes. Not only did AAFC coaches seek talent in "white" schools, but they pursued athletes from black colleges as well.⁷⁵

With the exception of the Detroit Lions who signed two blacks in 1948, NFL owners did not actively pursue black players until the early 1950s. With the collapse of the AAFC in 1950, the NFL added new teams, including the Browns. Cleveland was nearly as successful in the NFL as it had been in the AAFC. Following Paul Brown's example, NFL owners gradually added black players.⁷⁶

The democratic idealism sparked by World War II, the protests of writers and fans, the emergence of the AAFC, and the success of several minority athletes in college football all account for the collapse of professional football's racial barrier. In the eyes of most fans, owners who claimed that blacks were not

74. Bill Nunn in Pittsburgh *Courier*, 21 December 1946; Wendell Smith in *ibid.*, 14 December 1946; Joseph D. Bibb in *ibid.*, 7 December 1946.

75. Al White, "Can Negroes Save Pro Football?" *Our World* 5 (December 1950): 60-65; Chicago *Defender*, 12, 26 April, 23 August 1947; Pittsburgh *Courier*, 11 January, 29 March 1947; Baltimore *Afro-American*, 11 January, 12, 26 April, 14 June 1947. For Buddy Young, see Chicago *Defender*, 25 January, 1 February, 10, 24 May, 30 August 1947.

76. "New Faces in Pro Football." *Our World* 7 (December 1952): 62-64



Horace Gillom (Courtesy of the Cleveland Browns)

qualified to play in the NFL had been discredited. NFL team rosters revealed that complete integration had not been achieved in the late 1940s. Yet blacks were no longer outside the pale. “The limitations have been lifted and, now, the sky’s the limit,” wrote an enthusiastic black sportswriter in 1947. “Come to think of it, that’s all a plain Negro citizen needs in this country—a chance to get to the top.”⁷⁷

77. Lem Graves in *Pittsburgh Courier*, 3 May 1947. See, too, Ric Roberts in *ibid.*, 1 March 1947; Herman Hill in *ibid.*, 19 April 1947.