

Pennington, Richard. *Breaking the Ice: The Racial Integration of Southwest Conference Football*. Jefferson, N.C., and London: McFarland, 1987. Pp. ix, 182. Illustrations, interviews and personal communications, select bibliography, index.

A Texas journalist with an interest in sports and civil rights, Richard Pennington has written a brief but valuable book which combines both interests. *Breaking the Ice* details the collapse of the athletic racial barrier in the Southwest Conference, one of the last bastions of lily-white college football during the 1960s. With the publication of Pennington's *Breaking the ice* and Ronald Marcello's "The Integration of Intercollegiate Athletics in Texas" [*JSH* (Winter 1987)], the desegregation of college football in the Lone Star state has been well documented.

Pennington begins his book with a glance at minority athletes who played major college football during the first half of the twentieth century. The focus of the study, however, is on Warren McVea of the University of Houston, John Westbrook of Baylor, and Jerry LeVias of Southern Methodist University, three black athletes who pioneered the desegregation of Southwest Conference football. The author examines the gridiron successes and failures of each of the three men. A Texas high school star who was heavily recruited, McVea brought respect to the Houston football program. Recruiting violations, however, prohibited post-season play. Injuries and perhaps a reluctance to give his best effort prevented him from reaching his potential. Still, he enjoyed a brief professional football career. Westbrook was sensitive and religious (as a youth he once drowned several cats trying to baptize them). He injured a knee and played only sporadically for Baylor. LeVias, the "fly in the milk" at SMU, was a spectacular wide receiver who was often compared with the legendary Doak Walker. As a sophomore, he led SMU to a Cotton Bowl bid against Georgia. In his final year, he was a consensus All-American and finished fifth in the Heisman Trophy balloting. He had a successful professional career with the Houston Oilers and San Diego Chargers. As pioneers, the three athletes had to endure physical, social and emotional hardships and the author does a fine job of relating their anguish. Pennington also examines the desegregation of the University of Texas football program. He censures Texas coach Darrel Royal for excessive caution on the issue of integration. The volume concludes with an analysis of the breakdown of segregation in varsity football at the remaining Southwest Conference colleges (Texas A&M, Texas Christian, Texas Tech, Rice, and the University of Arkansas).

*Breaking the Ice*, like most books, has some weaknesses. Lamentably, there are no notes. Sources of quotes and historical information go undocumented. Too often the author uses "integration" when "desegregation" would have been a more accurate description. Clearly one or two blacks on a team or conference does not constitute integration. The author at times assumes a familiarity with the University of Texas. Is Forty Acres a football stadium, campus athletic facility or what? Though readable, the volume's use of exclamation points,

jargon (“black jocks”) and other journalistic flourishes will doubtless disturb some readers. At one point Pennington disagrees with a coach’s opinion with the comment “Gotcha, coach” (p. 155). The final chapter includes a preachy digression about the superiority of black athletes which would have been better left to anthropologists, sociologists or Jimmy the Greek.

Despite these misgivings, *Breaking the Ice* is a successful book. Generally, Pennington writes lucidly and with sensitivity. He is also mindful of the historical context and properly relates his story to the larger civil rights and black power movements. Despite the lack of notes, the volume has a useful bibliography and is well crafted. In sum, Pennington has produced an interesting and, at times, insightful contribution to sports studies.

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