

Michigan's Black Lettermen

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The major purpose of this research was to take an in-depth look at the experiences of black lettermen throughout the history of the University of Michigan's athletic program to determine the degree to which race affected participation in athletics, social life, academic training, and the search for employment after college.

The process of identifying the black lettermen was accomplished largely through records kept at the University's Athletic Department and with the assistance of several coaches whose affiliation with Michigan extends to World War I. University yearbooks and scrapbooks in the Athletic Office were helpful in describing the achievements of the lettermen, but oral history methods were essential in obtaining candid reflections regarding racism. Twenty-five of the 161 men who lettered through the fall of 1972 were selected for interview. Among them were as many as possible of those lettering before World War II, and, thereafter, a sample from each sport within each decade.

It was found that by the mid-1890s some sports were definitely closed to blacks. Moses Fleetwood Walker played baseball in 1882 and '83, and George H. Jewett played football in 1890 and '92, but access to these and other sports was soon thereafter denied to blacks. This prescription of black athletes, their reappearance in some sports after World War I, their significant increase in numbers after World War II, and the decidedly more unbiased treatment accorded black athletes since the mid-1960s, was in keeping with national patterns of racism outside the deep South. Track and field provided the most consistent opportunity for competition. A few blacks appear in that sport at Michigan as early as 1913. The first letterman was DeHart Hubbard, the 1924 Olympic long jump champion. He was only the third varsity letterman in all sports at the University. Beginning with Hubbard came a trickle of black athletes in track and field and nearly every one of them, at least until the early 1950s, was a superstar. It was 1923 before a second black athlete made the baseball team; the third appeared in 1952, and there have only been a total of seven from 1882-1973. Not until 1932 was a second black athlete, Willis Ward, permitted to play football, and this was achieved only because Michigan's head coach Harry Kipke threatened to fight, *physically* fight, those alumni and fellow coaches who opposed his playing Ward. By 1950 only six black athletes had lettered in football. Needless to say, all were of superstar calibre. It was 1951 before black athletes were accepted into Big Ten basketball, and Michigan's first letterman in that sport came in 1952. Track and field, football, and basketball account for all but 16 of the 161 lettermen in this study. The small number found outside these three sports is explained more by racist patterns in American society denying black youth the early training essential to college success rather than the desire of particular Michigan coaches to exclude them. At the University today, black athletes believe that if they have the talent they have access to all varsity teams except baseball. They are nearly unanimous in describing the baseball coach as a racist who refuses to recruit black players.

Racism at Michigan made its most insidious appearances in the area of social life. No matter what racial stereotypes an athlete's opponents or teammates may have held, if he could make all-American he invariably advanced in their esteem and his self-esteem flourished. At Michigan, from 1932 on rooming on athletic trips was integrated, but rooming on campus for black students was segregated until the late 1950s. Finding decent living quarters in Ann Arbor was agonizing. Landlords steadfastly refused to

accommodate black students until the United States Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1965 and the University then began to actively support students against such landlords. Fraternities and sororities have consistently maintained racist traditions, even today. The few black letterman who have been rushed by white fraternities have been denied brotherhood by the national office, the most recent refusal coming in 1969. Until the 1970s there were very few black students at Michigan, and most were men. Attempts by black athletes to date interracially were interpreted by coaches as grave offenses and cause for their dismissal from the team. Not until the late 1960s did coaches begin overlooking interracial dating.

Finding employment commensurate with their academic training and capabilities was nearly impossible for blacks in the early years. In the face of tremendous odds the Michigan lettermen consistently rose to positions of responsibility, especially in the fields of law, medicine, and education. The civil rights marches and riots of the mid-'60s spawned various minority employment quotas in industries and professions, and many of the Michigan lettermen have since risen to new heights.

Several imaginative programs aimed at attacking racism have been initiated at the University of Michigan and by the Big Ten Conference. In athletics, Michigan has added black coaches, an athletic trainer, and an equipment manager, all since 1968. A summer program was launched that year bringing black youths from Detroit to Ann Arbor to receive sports instruction from the Michigan coaches. Elsewhere on the campus the Opportunity Awards Program has brought the minority student enrollment up from less than one percent of the student body in 1964 (the year of the program's origin) to nearly seven percent in 1973. To retain and graduate these students refinements were introduced in the counseling system. The use of peer counselors (black students) to lead study groups is being used to supplement the work of professional counselors. The Office of Student Services provides counsel in matters of housing, career planning and employment, health needs, and personal or social problems. There are black employees working in this office, but many students probably would not avail themselves of their services were it not for the peer counseling and the recently established black student center. Officially known as the William Monroe Trotter House the center engages guest speakers, minority members serving on the Michigan faculty, and others for formal and informal dialogue. Jazz concerts highlight social gatherings, and counselors from the Office of Student Services make regular visits as does the Black Advocate. The latter is a law student recently appointed to represent the views of black students to the faculty and administration. The number of blacks now employed in faculty and staff positions at the University has increased markedly in the past five years. A faculty exchange program was begun with Tuskegee University in 1963 and a similar program involving Virginia State University was started in 1971. There can be little doubt, black athletes at the University of Michigan today find a much more supportive atmosphere on campus than did their predecessors. The atmosphere at other Big Ten schools is changing also.

Blacks have never had a voice in policy-making in the Big Ten Conference until late in 1972. Then, an Advisory Commission was established to identify the most pressing problems concerning black athletes. The Commission's recommendations were acted upon decisively by the Conference in 1973. Course *content* was added to the scholastic eligibility rules to prevent keeping athletes eligible through "Mickey Mouse" courses that do not really count toward graduation. Now if the athlete is continuously eligible for athletics he can also expect to graduate in four to five years. A fifth year of financial aid is now provided for all athletes who need it. A black academic counselor is to be added by the athletic department of each Conference school and is to be responsible not to the coaches but to the school's faculty representative. Progress is being made by the Big Ten in training and hiring black officials for athletic contests. Efforts are underway to add black employees to the athletic department staffs of member schools—secretaries, team physicians, athletic board members, etc. Most significantly, a black

Associate Commissioner will soon be appointed to see that all these resolutions for change are effected throughout the Conference.

This study concluded that racism permeated Michigan athletics throughout the University's history much to the same degree that it was present at nearly every other school in the country outside the deep South. Only when civil rights gains were made for all black Americans through national political changes were similar gains evident in athletics at Michigan. Some of the ideas being implemented at this University and in the Big Ten Conference have given blacks a voice in policy-making and enforcement as never before. These ideas merit close examination by other schools and could serve as guidelines for other conferences and national bodies governing sports.