

The Reaction of the Popular Press to the Last Two Black National Football League Players, 1932-1934

C. ROBERT BARNETT

Marshall University

From the founding of the NFL in 1920 through the 1933 season, thirteen black players appeared on NFL rosters. The last two black players were Joe Lillard, who joined the Chicago Cardinals in 1932 and played through the 1933 season and Ray Kemp, who played part of the 1933 season with the Pittsburgh Pirates. In 1934 there were none.

This study attempted to determine if the white press in the NFL cities was a factor in the absence of black players from NFL rosters following the 1933 season. Primary consideration was given to the evaluation of their performances, racist comments, and the coverage given racial incidents. Information in the black newspapers in the NFL cities was used as a counterpoint to comments found in the white press.

Ray Kemp, a Pittsburg area native and “honorable mention” All-American at Duquesne University, joined the Pittsburgh Pirates during their first NFL season in 1933. Unfortunately his career spanned only four games. He played as a substitute tackle in the first three games of the season but was then cut from the team. Kemp was reactivated three days before the final game of the season against the New York Giants and, strangely enough, was in the starting line-up.

Kemp’s presence on the Pittsburgh Pirates was virtually ignored by the white press. The white daily *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* mentioned him only in the box score section of game summaries, as did the *Chicago Tribune* and *New York Times*.

Black newspapers did, however, give Kemp somewhat more coverage. Both the *Philadelphia Tribune* and *Pittsburgh Courier*, black weeklies, carried brief pre-season articles noting that Kemp would be a member of the team. When Kemp rejoined the team late in the season, the *Courier* responded with an article headlined "Ray Kemp Re-Signs with Pirate Pros." And at the completion of the season the *Courier* noted that Kemp would retire from professional football and added that "Kemp is anxious to get lined up as a coach with one of our colored colleges. . ."

Because of his spectacular play in a number of games, it was impossible for the white press to ignore Joe Lillard's presence on the field. In almost every instance the sportswriters on white newspapers were profuse in their praise of Lillard's play. In various game accounts writers for the *Boston Globe*, *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Portsmouth (Ohio) Times*, and the *Cincinnati Enquirer* indicated that Lillard was clearly the star of the Cardinals, if not the games' outstanding player.

The only newspaper in an NFL city which made overtly racist comments about Lillard was the *Portsmouth (Ohio) Times*. The *Times*, located in the smallest and most southern NFL city, did recognize Lillard's playing ability, but also referred to him in racist terms. The 1932 and 1933 game accounts referred to Lillard variously as Negro, colored, dusky, and ebony panther, a dark cloud, an Ethiopian in the wood pile, a dark menace, and an ebony-hued bird in the Red Bird covey.

Throughout Lillard's two-year career he and the Cardinals were involved in an inordinate number of on-the-field fights and incidents. For example, Lillard was involved in fights in each of the first three games of the 1933 season and was ejected from two of the games, but Lillard was not reported as being a participant. In most instances these fights were not reported as having racial motivation. Again the *Portsmouth Times* was the only newspaper in an NFL city to attach racial significance to the on-the-field problems.

It must be noted however, that each of the reports of fights was in the game account of the home teams' newspapers. In almost every instance the wire service accounts and stringer reports of games which appeared in other newspapers did not mention the incidents.

The amount of reporting of Lillard's accomplishments in the black press was somewhat less than might be expected largely because of the lack of coverage of pro football. The major black national weeklies in the North extensively covered the Negro Baseball Leagues and black colleges football. *The Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Philadelphia Tribune* and *New York Age* did, however, carry some brief game accounts and editorial comments focused on Lillard's accomplishments.

During the euphoria created by Lillard's success early in the 1932 season, both the *Chicago Defender* and *New York Age* questioned the segregation of organized baseball in light of Lillard's presence in the NFL. When he was suspended from the team late in the 1932 season, it became apparent that his position had been tenuous and the editorials ceased. Near the end of the 1933 season the *Pittsburgh Courier* said, "Rumor has it that Joe did not fit in with the All-Stars (Cardinals) as did Slater and other colored stars before him." When the 1934 NFL season opened Lillard was playing for a west coast semi-pro team and black players were absent from NFL rosters.

The material in this paper suggests that the popular press was not a factor in the segregation of the NFL following the 1933 season. The coverage of Ray Kemp and Joe Lillard by the major white newspapers in the NFL cities (with the exception of

the *Portsmouth Times*) was not a racist nature nor were potential racial incidents highlighted. On the other hand the white press did not encourage the use of additional black players. Nor was the black press much of a positive factor for keeping black players in the NFL.