

The Arrival and Ascendence of the Black Athlete in the Southeastern Conference: 1966-1980

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The Southeastern Conference evolved in 1932 as a splinter organization from the old Southern Conference. For thirty-four years this conference remained lily-white. When the first black athletes were accepted in 1966, several articles referred to this act as the integration of the last bastion of white supremacy. This study involved a two-year collection of data on intercollegiate male athletes in varsity football, baseball, basketball, swimming, golf, tennis, and track&field from the ten universities in the Southeastern Conference. An analysis was made on data that covered a fifteen year period to (a) identify the first black athletes to become team members in each of the sports at each university, (b) verify the year of integration of each sport in each university, (c) observe the patterns of integration in the sports, and (d) note the contributions of the black athletes to the various Southeastern Conference university teams. The first black varsity athletes, a total of seven, appeared on football, basketball, and track teams at the Universities of Kentucky, Tennessee, Vanderbilt, and Georgia during the 1967-68 academic year. Slowly other universities in the Conference recruited black athletes, but primarily for the same three sports. Alabama, Auburn, and Tennessee each had one black tennis player during this period while there were no black golfers or swimmers on any teams in the Conference. In basketball the black player began to show signs of dominance in the Conference by 1976 which was typical in athletic conferences across the United States. Black football players generally made up between 18-43% of the teams by 1980, but while they dominated certain player positions they were scarcely represented in others. With few exceptions, the track & field teams have been composed to a greater extent of white athletes. However, the black athletes on the teams became leaders in the sprints, long, triple, and high jumps but rarely held records in middle or long distances races, the pole vault. or the throwing events. Except for the individual sports and the team sport of baseball, the majority of athletic records in the Southeastern Conference are held by black athletes.