

# Racism Rears Its Ugly Head In the Midwest: Football, 1923 and 1951

Jan Beran

Iowa State University

Two incidents involving football, one in 1923 and another in 1951, present the possibility of a critical examination of the tripartite question of football, violence and racism. In 1923 Jack Trice, a powerfully built negro, the first black to play at Iowa State College wrote while segregated from the rest of his team in Minneapolis, "My thoughts before the first real college game of my life; the honor of my race, family and self are at stake. . . Everyone is expecting me to do big things.. ." In the game Jack did big things, played well and hard. On one play he threw a dangerous body roll which was not completed properly. He was trampled, left the field, checked by a physician, allowed to travel home on the overnight train with the team, hospitalized due to internal hemorrhaging in the chest area the following Monday. Iowa State faculty, students and townspeople paid hi homage at the time and sixty years later. In the 1980's the new football field in Cyclone stadium was named the Jack Trice field and a 6'6" bronze statue in the likeness of Trice was placed on center campus.

In 1951, Drake University senior Afro-American John Bright was the leading ground gamer in the United States. Drake planned its offense around his talents. In a major mid season Missouri Valley Conference game, Drake versus Oklahoma A&M, Bright was hit three time when not handling the ball in the first seven minutes of the game. Film and photos of the game provided documentation of the illegal plays which resulted in Bright being eliminated from the game because of a broken jaw. Bright played later that season wearing a specially fitted mask. He was the 1951 professional football draft choice but opted to play pro ball in Canada because of fear of racial incidents. He was inducted into the Canadian Football Hall of Fame in 1964 and posthumously the United States Football Hall of Fame in 1984.

As a result of the incident Drake University withdrew from the Missouri Valley Conference because of the unwillingness of conference officials to investigate the assaults on Bright and to take any action.

The Bright incident brought into national prominence a social problem that had not been recognized in the sport world. In retrospect Jack Trite's treatment raised questions about racism. He experienced segregated housing in Minneapolis and racism when Nebraska and Kansas refused to play ISC if Trice played. Because of fears of a racial incident in St. Louis. Jack did not play with his teammates against the University of Washington. The Bright injury publicized in major newspapers, *Time* and *Life*, the fact that a black man could be deliberately knocked out and in some regions of the country, nothing would be done.

Following the 1951 Bright incident the Missouri Valley Conference could have led the way in bringing a level of equality and decency if the university sport officials had deemed it important. The future and solidarity of the conference was more important. Although the episode was one among many that eventually caused the National Collegiate Athletic Association to examine sports and initiate change. Sadly, sports in the 1950s in the Midwest, south of the Mason-Dixon line, was not the engine it might have been for moving reform in race relations.