

# BIOGRAPHIES

*If he had been white nobody would have paid much attention:* Lester McClain's Quiet Integration of Southeastern Conference Football during the Loud 1960s

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In the fall of 1968, Lester McClain ended racial segregation on the football fields of the Southeastern Conference by earning a varsity letter for the University of Tennessee Volunteers. This paper examines McClain's career as a pioneer African-American athlete within the context of the 1968 to 1970 time period, a tumultuous era of social change in America. McClain began his varsity football career in a year that produced the Tet Offensive, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, and the "black revolt" among athletes at the Mexico City Olympics. His senior season was played in the aftermath of the Kent State killings, the massacre at

Jackson State in Mississippi, and Richard Nixon's calamitous visit to the Tennessee campus in Knoxville. Against a backdrop of such social turmoil and campus activism, McClain desegregated the most popular sport in the most race-conscious region of America.

The story of Lester McClain and the integration of Southeastern conference football furnishes an excellent case study of these chaotic years. Tennessee recruited McClain primarily to be a roommate for an exceptional high school athlete named Albert Davis. Volunteer coaches, players, and fans fully expected Davis to integrate the football program. When an entrance exam controversy sent Davis elsewhere, the burden fell to Lester McClain. In part because of these lowered expectations, the integration process proceeded fairly smoothly at Tennessee, with McClain performing solidly on the field and in the classroom. McClain nonetheless experienced problems common to black athletes at predominantly white universities in the 1960s. He felt a sense of social alienation, some resentment from teammates and coaches, and occasionally even episodes of open hostility. Similar and more severe ordeals led to a surge of anger and restlessness among many African-American athletes in the late 1960s, culminating with the attempted boycott and eventual victory-stand protests of U.S. Olympians at the 1968 Games.

This period also brought the apex of anti-Vietnam War protests and campus unrest in America. Even the Tennessee campus, snugly situated in solidly Republican Knoxville and east Tennessee, did not escape the strife. In May of 1970, Richard Nixon made his first public appearance after the Kent tragedy at the University of Tennessee. Nixon spoke at a Billy Graham crusade at Neyland Stadium, home of the Volunteer football team, in an effort to prove that he could still command respect on the nation's campuses. His selection of Tennessee, with its moderate reputation, was not surprising. Thousands turned out to protest, many were arrested, and the event turned sour for Nixon. Just over three months later Lester McClain began his senior football season. His college years encompassed the most significant social themes of American society between 1968 and 1970.

Oral interviews with players, coaches, students, journalists, and faculty closest to football desegregation at Tennessee, including Lester McClain and then UT football coach Doug Dickey, provided important evidence used for this study. So too did archival materials and contemporary newspaper accounts of the time period. The social significance of college football in the South cannot be overstated; in a decade when so much seemed so wrong in the South, many southerners considered Southeastern Conference football an oasis of excellence. Undoubtedly, some also saw their football teams as the last bastion of a changing world...the Southeastern Conference was the last major college athletic conference to desegregate