

# *Integrating New Year's Day:* The Racial Politics of College Bowl Games In the American South

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This paper examines the racial politics of college bowl games in order to illuminate the broader structure of southern race relations during the period 1935-1965. The specific athletic festivals studied are the Cotton Bowl, Sun Bowl, Orange Bowl, and Sugar Bowl. At the start of this period, southern white teams adamantly refused to compete against African-American athletes. The racial policies of the four southern bowl games reflected fully these values. Consequently, black players were ineligible to participate in their sport's top events, except for the Rose Bowl.

After 1945, however, national racial attitudes became more liberal, and nonsouthern universities began to challenge such racial exclusion. This Yankee resistance forced the civic leaders and businessmen who ran southern bowl associations to reconsider their commitment to Jim Crow. Anxious to obtain the most appealing matchups possible in order to attract fans and fatten gate receipts, and eager to promote tourism to their cities, they gradually abandoned racial exclusion. Thus they revealed themselves to be pragmatic moderates, rather than rigid ideologues.

The January 1, 1948, Cotton Bowl game between Penn State and SMU was the first integrated southern bowl game and only the second integrated major college game football staged in Dixie. The following year the Sun Bowl experienced a crisis when one northern team rejected an invitation to participate because of the local racial policy. Alarmed about the event's future, Sun Bowl officials finally won permission from the state in 1950 to host integrated games.

The Orange Bowl Association also traditionally excluded black players, in part because of policies imposed by the Miami city government. The city relaxed this rule in 1950. In 1954 the Orange Bowl signed an agreement with the Big Eight Conference to automatically invite its champion, which guaranteed the appearance of integrated teams. On January 2, 1955, the Bowl held its first integrated matchup between Duke and Nebraska.

The Sugar Bowl experienced more serious problems concerning its racial policies than did any of the other festivals. After the Supreme Court's famous 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling against segregated schools, southern politicians launched a prolonged fight against integration. Initially resisting this trend, the Sugar Bowl actually hosted an integrated game in 1956 between Pittsburgh and Georgia Tech. However, the Louisiana legislature promptly adopted laws requiring strict segregation in athletic contests and in seating at all public events. Northern teams

refused to compete under these requirements, so it was not until 1964, after the Supreme Court finally struck down both laws, that the Sugar Bowl could again invite integrated teams.

The eventual defeat of the policy of racial exclusion for southern bowl games signified the triumph of inclusive national racial values over narrow regional values. This triumph of pragmatism and self-interest reflected a desire by white Southerners to participate fully in the national sporting culture, rather than maintaining a regional identity which promoted increased marginalization. Thus on January 1 each year, though not necessarily on the other 364 days, Dixie had been "Americanized."