

Slouching Toward a New Expediency: College Football and the Color Line During the 1930s

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Two very dramatic incidents, occurring in 1936 and 1938, respectively, marked a subtle but significant shift in the practices characterizing intersectional competition in college football. When the University of North Carolina engaged New York University in a gridiron contest at the Polo Grounds, then two years later when Duke journeyed northward to take on Syracuse University, they took an important step in altering the racial policies governing American sport. The UNC-NYU game featured the African American running back Ed Williams as one of the stars of the Northern contingent and the matchup between Duke and Syracuse was a showcase, not just for the vaunted "Iron Duke" defense but also for the passing talents of Wilmeth Sidat-Singh, the black quarterback for the Orangemen. In just two years, Southern institutions, which had long insisted that Jim Crow would dictate the conduct of all the games they played with Northern schools, began to acknowledge the agitation for the desegregation of sport and to abide by the principles of sportsmanship and fair play that were inscribed in the athletic creed.

The shift of patterns of thought, like the alteration of athletic practices, however, is not entirely a story about idealism in practice. Rather, it involves a number of circumstances that fairly dictated a new set of terms, "a new expediency," in the setting of athletic schedules. Before the episodes of the late 1930s, a special clause had been written into the contracts between intersectional rivals which clearly stipulated that no African American athlete would be permitted to compete in a certain upcoming contest. Alternatively, Northern and Southern schools had abided by what were called "Gentlemen's Agreements" which had the same effect. And from the turn of the century through the interwar years, as such scholars as Charles Martin and Donald Spivey,

O'Connell, and Arthur Ashe, Jr. have demonstrated, these terms prevailed. Increasingly, though, during the late-1920s and early-1930s the agitation of student protesters and civil rights organizations raised the issue of the color line to popular consciousness.

While the leaders of Northern institutions were not noteworthy for their efforts to alter the old athletic arrangements, numerous other people, on campus and beyond certainly were. At the same time, it was increasingly apparent that coaches and journalists who rated and ranked teams throughout the season noted the difficulty of a school's schedule when making their tabulations. This greatly influenced the selection process for the lucrative and prestigious bowl games. To play a team whose star performer was forced to the bench because of the Jim Crow clause or "Gentlemen's Agreement" could be for the Southern squad an impediment to a high ranking at season's end. Thus a great deal was at stake in the playing out of inter-sectional rivalries.

Within these broad contexts the breakthrough games of 1936 and 1938 were played. The immediate contexts underscore the diverse ways the breaking of the color line in sports might occur. UNC was headed by a prominent, and controversial, Southern moderate, Frank Porter Graham. In the case of the games *versus* NYU, he personally assured his Northern counterpart that North Carolina would play against any and all members of the Northern squad. Praised by the NAACP in the aftermath of the game, some alumni and Southern defenders of segregation criticized. But the school continued the series with NYU, with Ed Williams on the field. In contrast, the leading figure in the Duke-Syracuse contest was Wallace Wade, the widely popular and extremely pragmatic coach of the Blue Devils. After checking with the President and Vice-President of his institution, he waived the Jim Crow clause in the contract with Syracuse and permitted Sidat-Singh to play. Duke had been rising up the rankings throughout the season and had its eye on a Rose Bowl invitation; Syracuse was a formidable opponent with Sidat-Singh, and much less impressive without him. As Wade later recalled, there would have been no credit in a victory over a squad that was forced to bench its quarterback.

These episodes seem but modest events in the brief telling. To survey the newspaper coverage of those football seasons is to discern that they did not cause much stir. But they served to alter prevailing racial practices in sport, marking breaches in the color line that would widen in ensuing years. Such events tell us a great deal about the processes by which the desegregation of sport was effected, how a "new expediency" in the conduct of college football played into the larger civil rights crusade.

The paper is based on extensive research in both secondary and archival materials, specifically the Frank Porter Graham Papers at the University of North Carolina and the holdings of the Perkins Library at Duke University. It also uses an interview with Wallace Wade, made some years ago about the Syracuse-Duke game of 1938.