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## ***Before Jackie Robinson: Sport and the Civil Rights Campaigns of the 1930s***

Appropriately, the fiftieth anniversary of Jackie Robinson's entry into Major League Baseball was widely celebrated in 1997. "Baseball's Great Experiment" with integration was one of the foremost symbolic events in the Civil Rights' movement before the *Brown* decision. Yet even as scholars have explored how this historic breakthrough

came about, they often overlook many of the ideas and instances that shaped race relations during the 1930s and in critical ways prefigured the epochal event of 1947.

This paper focuses on the 1930s, a decade that was a turning point in the history of race relations in sport. It emphasizes how both black activism and a “new expediency” in big-time sport effectively challenged notions of white supremacy and the prevailing practice of rigid segregation on the playing field. Specifically, the paper examines some of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) legal campaigns to desegregate northern as well as southern municipal athletic and recreational facilities. These were important breakthroughs at the local level that indicated how black activism was beginning to take shape in community organizations.

The paper also speaks to an allied topic, the black sports journalism of the era, concentrating on the “muscular assimilationism” advanced by Edwin Bancroft Henderson. Writing in *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* as well as other forums, Henderson enlisted stellar African American athletes in the larger campaign for Civil Rights by highlighting their accomplishments and revealing the extent of the extreme prejudice they routinely faced. Along with other black journalists, Henderson (whom David Wiggins has called the “father” of African American sport history) pursued an agenda articulated earlier by W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter Woodson. Through their efforts on gridiron and track oval and in the boxing ring, Henderson contended, black athletes made substantial claims against the existence of the ideals of sportsmanship and fair play, equality and opportunity.

Finally, the paper discusses some of the early breaches in the color line that occurred in college sport. The University of North Carolina traveled north in 1936 to play New York University which featured an African American athlete on its roster, and Duke did the same thing in 1938 in a contest against Syracuse. All four institutions thus demonstrated that, at least for a time, Jim Crow could be sent to the sidelines. These were isolated instances, but as they began to mount in number, reformers such as Roy Wilkins of the NAACP could take some pride in the use of sport as a “strategy of appeal” to the dominant culture. Ultimately, these episodes-along with the journalistic activism of Henderson and others, and legal assaults on segregation at the community level-suggest that during the 1930s, racial reformers laid the foundations of the headline events of the post-World War II era.

The paper draws on a wide range of sources, ranging from articles in the black press to editorials from *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and other black journals. It is part of a chapter devoted to race relations in athletics during the 1930s in a forthcoming book co-authored with David K. Wiggins.