

Gerald R. Gems
North Central College

The Construction, Negotiation, and Transformation of Racial Identity in American Football

Using archival materials, primary and secondary sources, newspapers, and magazine articles, this study analyzes the construction of racial identities for both American Indians and African-Americans through the game of football. It assumes that both groups have multiple identities as football players, men, and members of distinct racial groups but also that the social identities of both groups are subject to interpretation by the white media and white, middle-class norms. The paper examines both the white media construction of non-whites' identity, and the non-whites' reaction to that construction—both on the football field and in the black press—the role of sport in that process, and the transformation of identities over time.

The initial acceptance of both native American Indians and African-Americans on northern gridirons in the 1890s served and upheld white perceptions of democracy, equality, and opportunity. Yet the exclusion of blacks from southern playing fields reinforced a regional social hierarchy, and characterizations by the white media and coaches of native American Indians as primitives, or noble savages, and blacks as brutes fueled the racist tenets of Social Darwinism. The playing field, however, proved to be contested terrain where subordinate groups regularly defied racial caricatures and racist beliefs.

Sport's role in that process of negotiation was central, as it was one of the few areas in which racial interactions were highly visible, receiving intense media attention and public scrutiny. Racial athletes formed the vanguard of a progressive experiment in assimilation and the so-called "Americanization" of non-white groups. For both native American Indians and African-Americans, that process accompanied the transition from rural, agricultural lifestyles, to those of an urban, industrial culture. Success on the field of play notwithstanding, non-whites' dislocation and limited inclusion in the mainstream white culture caused a shift from their acceptance of the progressive integration model to a critical questioning, adaptation, and eventual formation of alternative, residual subcultures. By the 1920s both native American Indians and African-Americans sought racial solidarity, pride, and independence in their own race-based teams.

Sport served both groups as a form of cultural expression; but white control of bureaucratic structure forced compliance to dominant group norms. Failure to conform meant being excluded from full participation and this ensured that white identity went unthreatened. While other ethnic groups won acceptance as "white," non-whites' depiction as "other" left them with only a limited ability to construct a positive identity of their own.

This study helps to fill a gap in the historical research in sport's role in the formation of racial identity. John Hoberman's recent *Darwin's Athletes* and Nelson George's *Elevating the Game* are among the few works that attempt to analyze the African-American experience, but neither focuses on football's place in that experience. Jack Newcombe's *The Best of the Athletic Boys* offers a critical analysis of the Carlisle Indian School, but is limited in its scope.