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Professional Football and the Black Experience: A Historical Review

Since the end of World War II, African Americans have made some significant gains in professional football, particularly in the player force. From 1960 to 1997, the number of blacks on National Football League (NFL) rosters increased from 12 percent to 67 percent. Previous scholars have suggested that professional football integrated faster than both professional baseball and basketball in the postwar era. They suggest that the increased agitation for black political power, international circumstances, the shifting attitude of whites towards blacks, and the quest for additional profit by sports entrepreneurs facilitated the process of desegregation of professional football team sports. While these forces were significant in the integration of the team sports industry, they are generally more stated than substantiated.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to analyze the existing research literature on professional football by historians, sociologists, economists, journalists, and social scientists; and, second, to suggest avenues for future research endeavors.