

Charles K. Ross
University of Mississippi

Fritz Pollard and the Establishment of the Color Barrier in the National Football League

The 1926 retirement of one of the truly great early “black pioneers” in professional football, Fritz Pollard, marked the height of African American participation in the sport in the period before World War II. The struggle by African Americans to fully integrate professional football has, in many ways, been overshadowed by that of baseball. But

interestingly, unlike professional baseball whose color barrier was established in the late nineteenth century, from 1904 professional football was open to black players.

This paper addresses a number of important questions: Why were blacks allowed to play professional football from 1904 to 1933? Why was the color barrier established in the National Football League (NFL) after the 1933 season? What impact did the few black players have on the league prior to the raising of the color barrier? What was Pollard's experience of the NFL like and how did his retirement contribute to a decline in the number of black players? Was one NFL owner largely instrumental in creating the color barrier?

The paper argues that Pollard's retirement left a void that subsequently led to black players being forced out of the NFL after the 1933 season. Black players were allowed to play professionally in small numbers during the 1920s because football was viewed as a relatively minor sport. But professional football grew in popularity and the NFL was reorganized in 1933. These changes, together with a supposed suggestion from one owner that a color barrier should be instituted, helped to remove black players from the game. From 1934 to 1946 no blacks were allowed to play in the NFL, although the owners of professional football teams, like their baseball counterparts, denied the existence of a racial ban or "gentleman's agreement."

These themes are part of two larger subjects in American history: the development of leisure and sporting activity in American life after the Civil War, and the socio-economic impact of this on professional football and race relations during America's golden age of segregation. And although, ordinarily, historians do not consider African American athletes as leaders in the struggle to gain full rights as citizens, athletics was one of the few areas of social life in which blacks could compete with whites under equal or nearly equal conditions.