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College Football and the Culture of Segregation in the American South, 1890-1930

Conceived contemporaneously with the passage of Jim Crow legislation, college football in the American South reflected the values of an all-encompassing culture of segregation. Prior to the advent of the civil rights movement after World War II, the race issue was rarely mentioned in the press or in the correspondence of the men who controlled the sport. Only when a southern team was scheduled to play an integrated opponent from outside the region did race become a salient issue in southern football. The controversies that arose around these games demonstrate the rigidity of the system, but they also obscure the more subtle, ambiguous, and complex elements of the culture of segregation. Close contact with blacks was a usually unstated, but deeply necessary element of this social system. From the intimate relationships that many white families had with their household servants to the white need for ritualized subservience from blacks to contact between white and black consumers in the marketplace, the white South often defined its own race privilege in terms of close intermingling with blacks. This paper will examine how, between the 1890s and 1930s southern college football often blurred the nominally rigid color line, simultaneously reflecting and helping to reinforce cultural notions of white privilege and black subordination.

To southern whites, the nurture accorded them by black servants offered reassurance that some blacks still retained the loyalty and docility of the plantation myth, even amid the pervasive white fear that blacks freed from the controls of slavery would destroy southern civilization. Accordingly, most southern football programs had beloved, non-threatening black figures who served as the male counterpart to the mammy, whom historians have seen as crucial to the construction of the culture of segregation within the domestic sphere. Blacks served as janitors, equipment managers, waterboys, masseurs, and trainers for

southern college football programs. The *Vanderbilt Alumnus* described Bowling Fitzgerald as a father figure, confidant, and a “bone doctor” to that school’s football players, second only to coach Dan McGugin in his love for them. “He advises him, keeps his secrets, nurses him, encourages him . . . and also makes him behave. He has turned more than one star football player across his knee and supplied the place of the mother.” “Uncle Remus,” the personal servant of Vanderbilt athletic director William Dudley, served in a similar capacity. Bob Frazier, a janitor and masseur for the athletic department at Alabama Polytechnic Institute (Auburn), served as Auburn’s team mascot during the 1890s. Frazier’s servility and ritualized humiliation undoubtedly assuaged the racial anxieties of Auburn students, who reacted to a black man’s “insolent” treatment of a white woman by organizing a mob attack on Auburn’s black residents in 1895.

College football programs’ perennial need for increased revenues created a further blurring of the color line by the 1910s. By that time, blacks who accepted their second-class status became welcome at white football games. Homer Plessy’s attempt to board a whites-only railroad car had posed a real threat to white supremacy in 1891. Two decades later, whites felt secure enough about the ascendancy of segregation to encourage black attendance at white football games, albeit segregated. Both Auburn’s athletic director and the *Montgomery Advertiser* solicited black patronage at Auburn football games during the 1920s in a quest to maximize revenues. Likewise, Montgomery city officials encouraged nearby Tuskegee Institute to play games at the city-owned Crampton Bowl. The *Advertiser* called on whites to witness the quaint and reassuring spectacle of black collegians emulating the culture of their white counterparts. Cartoons depicting football scenes in southern newspapers often included one or more buffoonish black men at the periphery of the crowd, providing iconographic reinforcement that obsequious and marginalized blacks were an accepted and acceptable part of the rituals of white football.

This paper will demonstrate that some public and private contact between the races characterized southern college football from the 1890s through the 1930s. These apparent breaches in the often rigid wall of racial separation did not betoken a weakened adherence to white supremacy. Rather, they served as a ritualized affirmation of the southern culture of segregation. Sources will

include newspaper and periodical articles, oral histories, and archival sources from such southern universities as Vanderbilt, Auburn, Alabama, Sewanee, and Georgia.
