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**New Orleans, New Football League, and New
Attitudes: The American Football League All-Star
Game Boycott, January 1965**

In January 1965, twenty-two African American All-Star players from the American Football League staged a boycott of the scheduled All-Star Game in New Orleans. Arguing that the city and its citizens discriminated against the African- American players, the athletes collectively were able to have the league relocate the game in Houston, Texas. This paper will examine several themes. This is a paper that examines race consciousness within the context of an emerging professional league seeking legitimacy. The American Football League was struggling to compete with the established National Football League and the boycott occurred during the time when a merger between the two leagues was being discussed. Moreover, the American Football League gained popularity in large part because of the talent and excitement the African- American athletes brought to the playing field.

This paper seeks to answer several questions. First, at a time when boycott movements, sit-ins, and marches were becoming common practices in the struggle for civil rights, how were these 22 Black athletes able to successfully have the game relocated to a new city when they simply stated they would not play? Why were they willing to go to the lengths of boycott when they faced losing pension funds, and retaliation from owners and fans? How important was it that many of them came from Historically Black Colleges and Universities? Second, what role did the city of New Orleans play in this event? They had just

hosted their first integrated Sugar Bowl and were hoping to gain a bid for an AFL expansion team. They were also struggling with how to apply the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Third, why has this event been overlooked? Instead we attribute much of the activism of Black athletes in the 1960s to the example set by Muhammad Ali, but the All-Star Game boycott comes prior to much of Ali's activism. Fourth, what happened to the players? The majority of the athletes did not suffer any repercussions. One was traded to a team he requested. Though one owner wanted to establish a punishment for future incidents, the other owners voted him down. The league commissioner and the players association supported the players. Essentially, the AFL needed their talent to present a legitimate challenge to the NFL and any hopes of a merger with the already established league.

The final issue was how the event has been used to promote the National Football League and their efforts toward integration. Specifically, how was this event manipulated for public consumption? At the Football Hall of Fame, in Canton, Ohio, there is a small exhibit detailing the integration of professional football. A brief video clip addresses the boycott and credits the players (and implicitly the National Football League, although at the time it had no involvement with the players) with changing two racial laws in New Orleans. There is no evidence to support the video's claim, but it is interesting to see the alignment of the NFL toward a position that reveals the league to be an agent of change in the civil rights movement.