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Author(s): Charles H. Martin

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Racial Change and “Big-Time” College Football in Georgia: The Age of Segregation, 1892-1957

BY CHARLES H. MARTIN

ON a cool Friday evening in early December 1955, an angry mob of Georgia Tech students poured into the streets of Atlanta and staged a series of large and rowdy demonstrations. The target of their wrath was Governor Marvin Griffin, who had earlier in the day announced his intention to prevent the Yellow Jacket football team from playing in the 1956 Sugar Bowl game in New Orleans on January 2. After burning an effigy of Griffin on campus, the unruly Tech students then unexpectedly staged a march toward downtown, catching local police off guard. A boisterous crowd of nearly 2,000 demonstrators eventually assembled at the state capitol, where they hung another effigy of the governor and damaged trash cans and several building doors. Still upset, many of the protesters then marched on to the governor's mansion, where a phalanx of jittery policemen and state highway patrolmen blocked their path. After a lengthy standoff, the crowd eventually dispersed peacefully in the early morning hours of Saturday, December 3.¹

Football games have frequently inspired much passion and excitement in the Deep South and in Georgia, but rarely have they

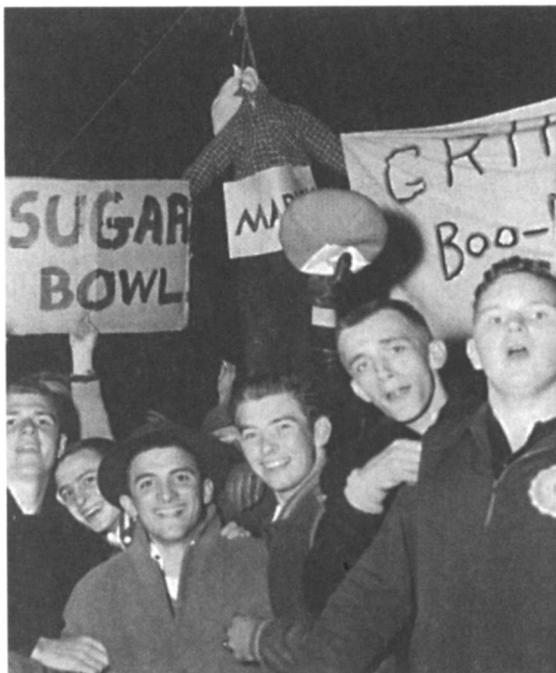
¹*Atlanta Journal*, December 3-5, 1955; *Atlanta Constitution*, December 3-5, 1955.

MR. MARTIN is assistant professor of history at the University of Texas at El Paso. Research for this article was funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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come close to setting off a mob attack on an elected governor. What ignited this particular explosion was a direct collision between the contemporary political campaign to maintain strict segregation in Georgia and the desire of the state's premier college sports programs to pursue national athletic prominence free from external meddling. Governor Griffin, a leader in the emerging "massive resistance" movement against federally mandated school desegregation in the South, opposed Tech's Sugar Bowl trip because the school's opponent would be an integrated team from the University of Pittsburgh. The governor apparently feared that allowing a Georgia university to participate in such a highly publicized athletic contest would be inconsistent with his commitment to total segregation and might undermine massive resistance. Griffin's efforts and a subsequent campaign in early 1957 by extreme segregationists in the state assembly to pass a law prohibiting all interracial sporting events thus clashed head-on with previous decisions by administrators at Georgia Tech and the Uni-

When Governor Marvin Griffin announced his opposition to Georgia Tech's participation in the 1956 Sugar Bowl against the University of Pittsburgh because it had a black player on its team, students staged an angry demonstration on December 2, 1955, in which they hung Griffin in effigy, and then proceeded to march on the state capitol and the governor's mansion. *Photograph from the Atlanta Constitution.*



versity of Georgia to abandon their long-standing tradition of racial exclusion in athletic competition.

This article describes the history of Georgia and Georgia Tech's institutional policies concerning race and sports from 1892 to 1957, focusing primarily on football, by far the most popular college sport in the state. At the start of the twentieth century both schools had committed themselves to a policy of rigid racial exclusion, refusing to play against any team whose ranks included an African-American member, even if the game were played in the North. During the 1920s and 1930s, both universities successfully defended this policy against northern critics. But after World War II, the growing presence of black athletes on non-southern teams forced the two schools to re-evaluate their commitment to full segregation, which now threatened to interfere with their passionate desire to win a national championship. During the early 1950s, both schools cautiously began to display a willingness to schedule an integrated contest if it were held outside the Southeast, a racial deviation which Governor Griffin and several influential legislators attempted to halt. The failure of extreme segregationists to reverse the process of racial change thus marked the end of the age of full segregation in big-time college sports in Georgia. Although the actual integration of both universities' football teams still lay over a decade away, the shift to a policy of integrated competition outside the state demonstrated that by the mid-1950s the state's college athletic establishment placed a greater emphasis on the pursuit of athletic glory than on the maintenance of total racial exclusion.

The Americanized version of English rugby which came to be called football spread rapidly across college campuses in the Northeast during the 1870s. By the mid-1880s many white students in Dixie were excitedly experimenting with the new fad.² Georgia Tech students began playing formal matches against other colleges in 1892, only four years after the school had opened its doors to young men seeking a technical education which would prepare them for careers in an industrializing New South. In 1904, Tech lured Coach John Heisman away from Clemson for what was

²Ronald A. Smith, *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics* (New York, 1986), 67-98; Benjamin G. Rader, *American Sports*, second ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1990), 101-112, 172-88; Patrick Miller, *The Playing Fields of American Culture: Athletics and Higher Education, 1850-1945* (forthcoming, Oxford University Press).

then a remarkable salary of \$2,250, plus 30 percent of the gate receipts from football, making him the first full-time paid coach in the South. During an incredibly successful sixteen-year reign, the legendary Heisman, for whom the annual award to the most outstanding college football player today is named, built the Yellow Jackets into a powerhouse and led them to a share of the national championship in 1917. His successor, William A. Alexander, coached the Engineers to five conference titles in the 1920s and the national championship in 1928. Succeeding "Coach Alex" in 1944 was another legendary figure—Bobby Dodd. The amazing Dodd spent twenty-two highly successful years at Tech and directed the team to the national championship in 1952.³

At the University of Georgia, an all-male institution until 1918, Professor Charles H. Herty introduced the eastern version of football to eager students in 1890. In early 1892 the school fielded its first intercollegiate football team, defeating Mercer and losing to Auburn. Rough play was common in the new game, and injuries were frequent. After the tragic death of a player in 1897 due to a head injury, the state assembly almost prohibited the sport. Despite this violence, and to some extent because of it, the football squad generated tremendous enthusiasm and soon became an integral part of campus life. In order to improve the quality of play, the college hired W. A. Cunningham as head coach in 1910. Cunningham subsequently produced winning teams in seven of his ten seasons. James Wallace (Wally) Butts was the best known of Cunningham's successors, serving as head coach from 1939 through 1960. Butts' outstanding 1942 team won the Southeastern Conference title and defeated UCLA in the 1943 Rose Bowl. Located just eighty miles apart, Georgia and Georgia Tech soon developed a fierce rivalry with each other. Their annual confrontation, held at the end of the regular season after 1926, quickly became a major spectacle which captured the fancy of sports fans across the state, many of whom had never set foot on a college

³Robert C. McMath, Jr., Ronald H. Bayor, James E. Brittain, Lawrence Foster, August W. Giebelhaus, and Germain M. Reed, *Engineering the New South: Georgia Tech, 1885-1985* (Athens, Ga., 1985), 124, 138-40, 172-74, 232, 272-74, 350-51, 390; *Georgia Tech Football 1992* (Atlanta, 1992), 238-43.



In 1904, John Heisman became the South's first full-time paid football coach when he came to Georgia Tech from Clemson. He spent sixteen years building Tech into one of the nation's most formidable powerhouses. Two years after leading the Yellow Jackets to a national championship in 1917, Heisman left Atlanta to become the head coach at Penn. *Photograph of Heisman from Clemson University.*

campus. For both schools, then, football proved to be “the ultimate public relations weapon.”⁴

⁴Thomas G. Dyer, *The University of Georgia: A Bicentennial History, 1785-1985* (Athens, Ga., 1985), 165, 183-85, 246, 285; *Georgia: 1993 Football Media Guide* (Athens, Ga., 1993), 132-37; McMath, et al., *Engineering the New South*, 350; Germaine M. Reed, “Charles Holmes Herty and the Establishment of Organized Athletics at the University of Georgia,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 77 (Fall 1993): 525-40; Jesse Outlar, *Between the Hedges: A Story of Georgia Football* (Huntsville, Ala., 1973), 14-18, 109; Clyde Bolton, *Unforgettable Days in Southern Football* (Huntsville, Ala., 1974), 128-35.

In the 1890s, football programs also began to spread to southern black colleges, where students proved to be just as enthusiastic about football as their white counterparts. By World War I, Atlanta University, Clark College, Morris Brown College, and Morehouse College were all fielding varsity teams and enthusiastically participating in the frenzy of college football.⁵ Despite their shared devotion to football, the University of Georgia and Georgia Tech inhabited an athletic world totally separated from these African-American colleges. In an age of rigid segregation, neither university ever considered playing against a southern black team. In fact, even the idea of playing against a northern squad which included one African-American player was unacceptable. Such a contest would have violated the Jim Crow practices of the times and disrupted the racial hierarchy that most white southerners cherished so strongly. Judge Ben Jackson, a member of the Georgia Board of Regents, voiced the classic white supremacist position in 1941 when he declared that “an unintelligent white man, if he is white, is better than the most educated Negro on earth.” But even more than social status was at stake. Since the culture of college football emphasized manliness and physical prowess, interracial competition would also open up the possibility of white defeat, an intolerable threat to white masculinity and the social order. Nonetheless, intersectional matches, which proved to be highly popular with fans and quite profitable at the box office, occasionally created the unthinkable when at the last minute a northern team was discovered to include an African-American player.⁶

Southern white universities (and colleges in several border states as well) sought a strategy which would avoid these racial confrontations. Such unexpected problems began in the early 1900s when northern baseball teams came south in the spring for early season games in warm weather or when southern football teams headed north in the fall to gain broader national exposure. The result was the so-called “gentlemen’s agreement,” an arrangement

⁵Biddle University and Livingstone College played the first intercollegiate football game between black colleges in December 1892, at Salisbury, North Carolina. Ocania Chalk, *Black College Sport* (New York, 1976), 197-203, 218, 275-77; Arthur R. Ashe, Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory*, 3 vols. (New York, 1988), 2: 103; “Run for Respect” (reprint) *Atlanta Constitution*, September 7-14, 1986, p. 6.

⁶Dyer, *The University of Georgia*, 233.



In 1892, the University of Georgia football team (pictured above), coached by chemistry professor Charles H. Herty, engaged in its first intercollegiate rivalry, with games against Mercer and Auburn. A rough game with little bodily protection, football was almost banned by the legislature when a player died of a head injury in 1897. *Photograph from the Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.*

which had become widely accepted by the early 1920s and which lasted until the 1950s. According to this one-sided compromise, any northern school with black players on its squad was expected to withhold them from competition when playing a southern white school, even if the game site were located in the North. Sometimes this was explicitly stated in the game contract; more commonly it was merely an understanding among “gentlemen.”

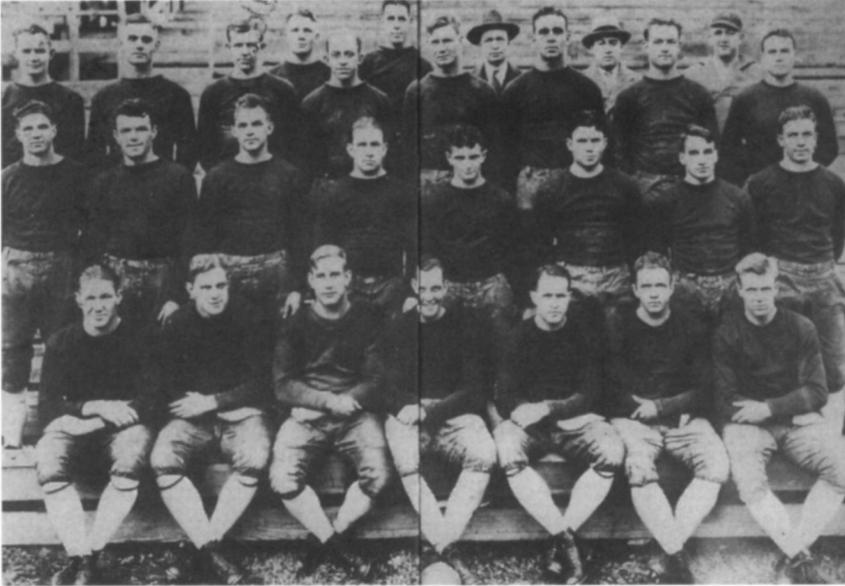
Several incidents involving intersectional matches illustrate the seriousness of white southerners’ concerns and the changing northern response. One of the earliest examples of racial conflict came in June 1907, after the touring University of Alabama baseball team arrived in Burlington for two games against the University of Vermont. Alabama coach John H. Pollard promptly demanded that the New England squad bench its two black regulars for the series. When Vermont declined to do so, Pollard refused to play the games and paid a \$300 cancellation fee. In October 1923, the Washington and Lee football squad dramatically demonstrated southern white intransigence at a game in Pennsylvania against Washington and Jefferson College. Before

they would take the field, the visiting southerners unexpectedly demanded that their hosts bench star quarterback Charles West, an African American. When Washington and Jefferson indignantly refused to comply, the Virginians picked up their bags and drove back home. A different result occurred the following April, when the University of Georgia baseball team traveled to Cambridge for a two-game series against Harvard University. The Crimson roster included pitcher Earl Brown, a black hurler, but the home team simply adjusted his pitching schedule so as to insure that he did not take the mound against the Georgians.⁷

By the early 1920s most northern teams had accepted the gentlemen's agreement, bringing predictability to intersectional contests. At the same time, college football was enjoying unprecedented national popularity, as the popular press helped turn matches into public spectacles for ever-growing audiences. Reassured by the security of the gentlemen's agreement and the acceptance of racial segregation across the country, southern universities eagerly sought full entry into the national mainstream of big-time sports, which provided an athletic version of sectional reconciliation. The financial rewards of intersectional games were important too. As Georgia Tech coach William Alexander once sagely observed about playing in the North, "If you've got to lose, lose before a crowd of people and bring a lot of money home." Southern football achieved an important milestone in 1926, when the University of Alabama became the first southern team to participate in the prestigious Rose Bowl. Inspired by the Crimson Tide's upset win, one Georgia newspaper characterized the triumph as "the greatest victory for the South since the first battle of Bull Run." Georgia Tech's 1929 Rose Bowl triumph over the University of California, which solidified the Yellow Jackets' number one national ranking, likewise evoked a massive outpouring of sectional pride and won additional public support for the university.⁸

⁷*Harvard Crimson*, April 24-28, 1924; Chalk, *Black College Sport*, 22-23, 29-30; *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 13, 1923; *New York Age*, October 23, 1923.

⁸Richard H. Edmonds, editor of the *Manufacturer's Record*, enthusiastically praised the Georgia Tech squad for "rendering an invaluable service . . . by showing to all sections the superb physical and mental stamina and alertness of the people of the South." Andrew Doyle, "'Causes Won, Not Lost': College Football and the Modernization of the American South," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 11 (August 1994): 231-51; *Atlanta Constitution*, January 1-4, 1929; Al Thomy, *The Ramblin' Wreck* (Huntsville, Ala., 1973), 104. On the rise of college football as a public spectacle, see Michael Oriard, *Reading Football* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1993).



Georgia Tech's 1928 team, pictured above, became national champions with a Rose Bowl victory over the University of California on New Year's Day of 1929. Because there were no black players on the California team, there was none of the controversy that would plague both UGA and Tech in later intersectional match-ups. *Photograph from Georgia Tech Archives.*

Georgia Tech's Rose Bowl trip did not involve the gentlemen's agreement, since there were no African-American players on the California team.⁹ But just ten months later, the University of Georgia unexpectedly stumbled into a well-publicized test of the new policy. The controversy over that fall's Georgia-New York University football game clearly illustrated the conflict between democratic sportsmanship and racial exclusion in intercollegiate sports. The 1929 season was a memorable one for Georgia's athletic pro-

⁹Historical studies by Edwin B. Henderson and Arthur Ashe erroneously state that Georgia Tech unsuccessfully tried to prevent California from using a black halfback in the 1929 contest. The player in question, Brice Taylor, actually played at the University of Southern California, and the incident described by the two scholars probably happened at the 1924 Christmas Festival game in Los Angeles between USC and the University of Missouri. Edwin B. Henderson, *The Negro in Sports*, revd. ed. (Washington, D.C., 1949), 120-21; Ashe, *A Hard Road to Glory* 2: 93, 110.

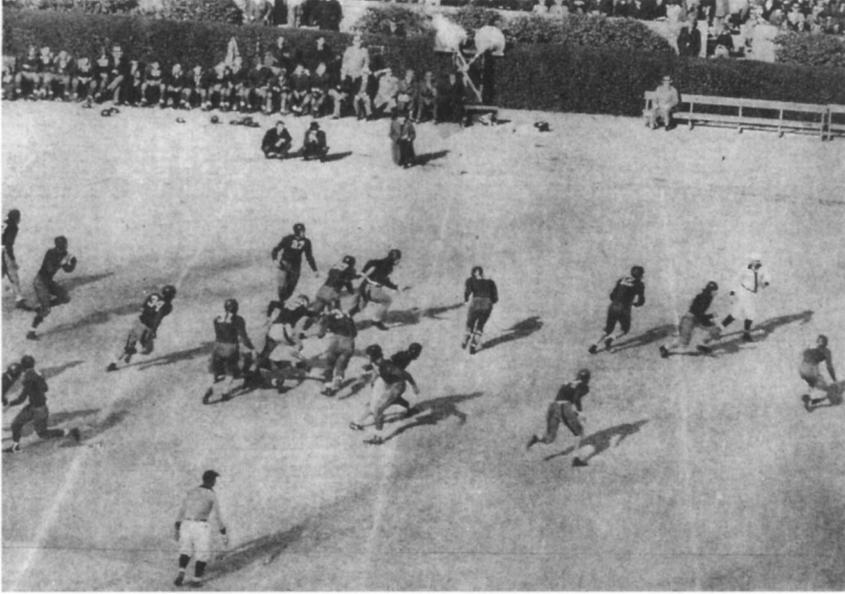
gram. On October 12, the university proudly dedicated Sanford Stadium, its handsome new facility which featured what was then considered an enormous seating capacity of 30,000. Georgia's opponent that day was Yale University, bearer of a rich football tradition as one of the originators of college football and a school which had not previously visited the Deep South. Public interest in the match was so widespread that the state assembly declared the day a legal holiday. Paced by end Vernon (Catfish) Smith, who scored two touchdowns, Georgia successfully turned back the northern invaders by a score of 15-0 before an overflow crowd of nearly 35,000.¹⁰ Four weeks later, the Bulldogs returned the inter-sectional favor by leaving Dixie and traveling north to play New York University at Yankee Stadium in the Bronx.

Georgia's trip north set off a controversy in the eastern press over whether NYU would use its two African-American players, David Myers and William O'Shields, against the Bulldogs. Since O'Shields rarely played, attention focused on the talented Myers. New York newspapers reported in late October that NYU had agreed to honor the gentlemen's agreement and withhold Myers from the match. Several white sportswriters including Ed Sullivan of the *New York Evening Graphic* and Heywood Broun of the Scripps-Howard chain condemned NYU's plans. Sullivan praised Myers as "a fine type of colored boy" and urged the NYU administration not to allow "the Mason-Dixon line to be erected through the middle of Yankee Stadium."¹¹ The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), several black leaders, and New York congressman Emmanuel Celler also voiced angry protests to NYU president Elmer E. Brown. Celler denounced Myers' benching as "a slap in the face to good sportsmanship," while the NAACP singled out head coach "Chick" Meehan for special censure, accusing him of a "cowardly capitulation to color prejudice." Broun also subjected Meehan to withering criticism, denouncing him as "the gutless coach of a gutless university."¹²

¹⁰Outlar, *Between the Hedges*, 11-12, 40-41; *New York Times*, October 13, 1929.

¹¹Ed Sullivan column, n.d., in C. M. Snelling Papers, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries; *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 2, 23, 1929.

¹²Emanuel Celler to Elmer E. Brown, November 4, 1929, Snelling Papers; *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 2, 1929.



In October 1929, the University of Georgia inaugurated its new Sanford Stadium, with hedges already in place, in an intersectional contest against Yale (pictured above). A month later, the Bulldogs went north to face New York University, whose two black players led to a showdown between the two teams and the two regions of the country they represented. *Photograph from Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library.*

The New York protests alarmed supporters of the University of Georgia and other southern white fans. In late October and early November, President Charles M. Snelling and the student newspaper, the *Red and Black*, both received several letters warning them that the New York press was exploiting the issue of Myers' forthcoming benching. These writers strongly urged President Snelling to respect southern athletic traditions and to uphold the gentlemen's agreement. James Thayer Pate wrote from Washington, D.C., that "it is unthinkable that such a typically Southern school as Georgia would condescend to enter into any athletic contest against a team on which a negro plays." Thayer and the other correspondents contended that playing against an integrated team would "lower" the stature of the university and that any compromise on segregation would be morally wrong. One writer even asserted that fundamental principles such as racial purity were far more important "than the doubtful honor of winning a foot ball

game.” But President Snelling was not alarmed. As he calmly reassured one of his nervous correspondents, “The athletic authorities of the two institutions have understood each other all along; the colored boy will not be in the game.”¹³

Embarrassed by mounting public criticism, NYU officials defended the school’s actions. In a letter to Congressman Emmanuel Celler, Acting Chancellor William H. Nichols blithely insisted that NYU only wanted to put its best players on the field. While issuing such disclaimers, NYU officials desperately sought to find a face-saving device which would enable them to honor their promise to Georgia without provoking additional negative publicity. Five days before the game, the school conveniently announced that Myers had reinjured a shoulder the previous Saturday and would be physically unable to participate in the upcoming match. Such a remarkable turn of events prompted the *Atlanta Constitution* to comment, “Fate came to the rescue of a delicate situation.” When Georgia and NYU finally squared off before 42,000 fans in Yankee Stadium on Saturday, November 9, Myers was not in uniform. In “the wildest blood and thunder football game of the season,” the Violets derailed the visitors by a score of 27-19.¹⁴

Although disappointed over the loss to the Yankee squad, Georgia supporters were pleased that they had at least won the battle over the gentlemen’s agreement. Despite conceding that Myers was undoubtedly injured, Ed Danforth, sports editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, congratulated NYU coach Meehan for withholding “his best back simply to keep his word with Georgia.” Apparently referring to Myers’ decision not to sit on the NYU bench after his exclusion, Danforth crudely noted that even “powerful binoculars could not discern the nigger in the grid pile.”¹⁵ On the other hand, black spokesmen harshly criticized both universities.

¹³*Red and Black*, November 1, 1929; Brown Bufford to C. M. Snelling, October 25, 1929; Snelling to Bufford, October 28, 1929; W. T. Nettles to Snelling, October 28, 1929; Snelling to Nettles, October 30, 1929; James Thayer Pate to Snelling, November 5, 1929; Snelling to C. R. Spence, Jr., October 25, 1929, Snelling Papers.

¹⁴Myers was not originally among the NYU players listed as injured at the start of the week. He also sat out the following week’s home game against Missouri, which usually declined to play against African Americans, before returning to action in the season’s final two games. William H. Nichols to Celler, November 6, 1929, Snelling Papers; *Atlanta Constitution*, November 9, 10, 1929; *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 16, 1929; *New York Times*, November 5, 6, 9, 15, 1929.

¹⁵*Atlanta Constitution*, November 10, 1929; *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 16, 1929.

Somewhat surprisingly, they also chastised Myers himself in heavily gendered language, questioning his masculinity and honor for quietly accepting his exclusion. The *Pittsburgh Courier* contended that if NYU officials had told Myers that he could not play, then he should turn in his uniform, “if he has the manhood and self-respect to quit the team.” Iconoclastic columnist George S. Schuyler praised white sportswriter Heywood Broun for his “manly stand on the matter” but characterized Myers’ silence on his benching as reflecting a lack of “manly spirit.” Tragically, Myers ended up excluded by the Georgians, abandoned by his own university, and shunned by fellow African Americans who questioned his manliness.¹⁶

The Myers incident dramatically revealed the widespread acceptance of the gentlemen’s agreement in big-time college sports at the end of the roaring twenties. In fact, racial prejudice was so prevalent during those years that several universities outside the ex-Confederate South also required visiting teams to bench African-American players. Colleges in the border states of Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, West Virginia, and even the District of Columbia were at times guilty of such practices. For example, William Bell, an all-conference tackle at Ohio State University, was subjected to a bench-warming in 1930 when the Buckeyes played the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. In 1937 the University of Maryland required Syracuse University to withhold black quarterback Wilmeth Sidat-Singh from a game held in Baltimore.¹⁷

The 1934 intersectional game between Georgia Tech and the University of Michigan further demonstrated the strength of the gentlemen’s agreement but also revealed the beginnings of an important shift in student opinion in the North. The controversy centered around Willis Ward, an outstanding end and Big Ten track star for the Wolverines. At the beginning of the year, Coach Alexander informed Michigan officials that it would be impossible for Tech to play the game unless provisions were made for Ward

¹⁶*Pittsburgh Courier*, November 9, 30, 1929; *The Crisis* 37 (January 1930): 30.

¹⁷*Pittsburgh Courier*, October 17, November 7, 1931; Henderson, *The Negro in Sport*, 113; Ashe, *A Hard Road to Glory* 2: 83, 94, 97.

to sit on the bench. "Public sentiment in the southeastern states simply demands that no team in this section play against a Negro athlete," he explained. In March, Tech officials reminded Michigan athletic director Fielding H. Yost about their concern and suggested that it would "be better for us to call the game off than for the incident to cause either institution unfavorable criticism." Sometime during the summer, Michigan officials apparently assured Georgia Tech that Ward would not see action in the match.¹⁸

As the Rambling Wreck headed north by train to Ann Arbor for its October 20 game against the Wolverines, Coach Alexander and his players were primarily concerned about the team's bumbling early season performance, which had produced two straight losses after an opening win over Clemson. But when the Golden Tornado reached Ypsilanti, they were shocked to discover that the issue of Ward's exclusion had unexpectedly been reopened.¹⁹ Reports in the national press about Michigan's plans to bench its star end had resulted in a growing wave of protest and forced a reluctant Coach Harry Kipke, Athletic Director Yost, and the Board in Control of Intercollegiate Athletics to reconsider their decision. Roy Wilkins, assistant national secretary of the NAACP, urged Kipke not to withhold his black star. Appealing to idealism and self-interest, Wilkins cleverly suggested that Georgia Tech sought "behind the cloak of race prejudice, to take an unfair advantage of the Michigan team." The *New York Age* criticized college coaches who gladly shared in the championships won by their black athletes but who did not "have enough manhood to stand up and defend" these very athletes against "a cracker from the South." A disappointed Ward had initially indicated his desire to compete against the Georgians, but as the game approached he grew silent. Many students, led by members of the Communist-influenced National Students League and the *Michigan Daily*, joined in the pro-

¹⁸Ward was reportedly the first black football player at Michigan since 1892, and Coach Harry Kipke had to overcome considerable opposition from alumni and administrators in order to recruit him. W. A. Alexander to Fielding H. Yost, January 3, 1934; Alexander and A. H. Armstrong to Yost, March 17, 1934; Dan E. McGugin to Yost, May 2, 1934, Board in Control of Athletics Papers, Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan; John Behee, *Hail to the Victors!* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1974), 19, 23.

¹⁹*Atlanta Daily World*, September 26, 30, 1934; *Atlanta Constitution*, October 18, 1934.

tests, holding demonstrations on campus and urging students to boycott the game.²⁰

Briefly contemplating a reversal of their earlier pledge, Michigan officials quickly huddled with Alexander. Despite their pleas, Alexander held firm to Tech's position that it was unthinkable for a Deep South team to compete against an African-American player. If Michigan violated the agreement, he warned, Georgia Tech would refuse to play the game. On the other hand, if Tech actually played against Ward, Alexander's job would be placed in jeopardy. Furthermore, some of his players feared that if they abandoned the color line an angry crowd of "bitter rednecks" might greet them back in Atlanta. "What they would have called us, or done to us, I cannot imagine," one member of the team later speculated. After a heated discussion, Yost and Alexander reached a bizarre compromise whereby Michigan would withhold Willis Ward from the game, and in return Tech would hold out star end Hoot Gibson. This last minute agreement would permit Tech to maintain racial purity without placing Michigan at a competitive disadvantage.²¹

The two football teams finally took the field on Saturday, October 20, 1934, under an overcast sky. The uncertain weather and a call by student protesters for a boycott of the game kept attendance below expectations. In a rather dull contest, the Wolverines defeated their southern visitors by a score of 9-2. Some of the disappointed Georgia Tech fans blamed their defeat on the player compromise. Journalist Ralph McGill, then a youthful Atlanta sportswriter, flatly stated that "Willis Ward won the football game," since the exchange "hurt Tech more than Michigan." But in a

²⁰Roy Wilkins to Kipke, September 20, 1934, Board in Control Papers; Wilkins to Alexander G. Ruthven, October 11, 1934, Ruthven Papers, Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan; *Atlanta Daily World*, September 26, 1934; *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 6, 1934; "Run for Respect," p. 1; *New York Age*, October 13, 1934; Robert P. Cohen, *When the Old Left was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941* (New York, 1993), 22, 211; Howard H. Peckham, *The Making of the University of Michigan, 1917-1967* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1967), 190.

²¹Alexander had first suggested the idea of a player trade-off in his January letter to Yost, but Michigan administrators had not pursued the idea until the campus protests erupted. Alexander to Yost, January 8, 1934, Board in Control Papers; *Atlanta Constitution*, October 20, 1934; "Run for Respect," p. 1; *Georgia Tech Alumnus* 13 (November-December 1934), 26; *Atlanta Daily World*, October 21, 1934; interview with Bobby Dodd, by August W. Giebelhaus and Larry Foster, July 5, 1983, University Archives, Georgia Tech.

larger sense, Georgia Tech actually won the more important battle, because the Yellow Jackets had forced Michigan to honor the gentlemen's agreement, even though Tech was also inconvenienced. At the same time, the unexpectedly strong opposition on campus at Ann Arbor showed that politically conscious students and African-American leaders were increasingly demanding that the concepts of "fair play" and "good sportsmanship" be applied to interracial sporting events. The episode further suggested that more serious attacks on the color line in college sports might be expected in the future.²²

In the North, the controversy left Willis Ward privately bitter and black representatives openly hostile toward Michigan. The *Pittsburgh Courier* termed the incident "a stinging and bitter insult" which would discredit the university's name for generations. The newspaper pointed out that this was especially disheartening since black track stars William DeHart Hubbard and Eddie Tolan had brought glory to their alma mater in recent years by winning gold medals in the Olympics. *The Crisis*, the NAACP monthly magazine, scolded Michigan for not defending Ward's right to play and Georgia Tech for falsely assuming that its players were superior to Ward. *The Crisis* ridiculed the Yellow Jackets as "superior sons of the South who got that way by never going into a situation where a black boy might have an equal chance, under common rules, to show them up." Writing in the *Atlanta Daily World*, the city's black newspaper, sportswriter Art Randall, a 1934 Michigan graduate and former roommate of Ward, praised the Wolverine star. Randall congratulated Ward for not turning in his uniform, arguing that "he should be praised for swallowing his pride and disappointment like a man." Any criticism in the affair, he suggested, should be aimed at Georgia Tech, which had demanded Ward's benching "because of its fear that he might humiliate its team by dumping their superior bodies on the grass."²³

²²According to Georgia Tech coach Bobby Dodd, Hoot Gibson became quite upset over being benched for Ward and remained "bitter until his death bed" over the incident. *Atlanta Constitution*, October 21, 1934; *Georgia Tech Alumnus* 13 (November-December 1934), 26; Dodd interview. For details on the rise of the student movement during the 1930s, see Cohen, *When the Old Left was Young*.

²³*The Crisis* 41 (November 1934), 333; *Atlanta Daily World*, October 3, 1934; *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 27, 1934; Behee, *Hail to the Victors!* 29-30.



Despite efforts at intervention from the NAACP, Georgia Tech coach William Alexander (left) held firm in his insistence that a black player for the University of Michigan be benched when the Rambling Wreck went to Ann Arbor to play in 1934. *Photograph from Georgia Tech Archives.*

As a result of the episode, several observers suggested that the desirability of intersectional matches should be re-evaluated. After criticizing Michigan administrators for surrendering to Georgia Tech, the *Michigan Daily* declared that the college's "principles are incompatible with the South's position on racial differences" and urged greater care in selecting future opponents. Writing in the *Atlanta Constitution*, Ralph McGill agreed that better scheduling was indeed needed in order to head off confrontations over the gentlemen's agreement. "Until this time-honored custom is honored more in the breach than the observance, it might be well for southern and northern teams to avoid scheduling games when there is any possibility of racial friction," he suggested.²⁴

The 1934 controversy over the gentlemen's agreement left a painful legacy with the participating schools. It took nineteen years before Michigan would again meet a southern team on the football field. Georgia Tech (and also the University of Georgia) rejected McGill's call for a suspension of intersectional play, but both schools began to screen potential nonsouthern opponents

²⁴Ashe, *A Hard Road to Glory* 2: 94; *Atlanta Constitution*, October 18, 1934.

more carefully so as to avoid integrated teams. For example, Georgia accepted an invitation to play UCLA in the January 1943 Rose Bowl, which brought a substantial financial windfall to the university. Since black stars Jackie Robinson and Kenny Washington had previously completed their highly successful careers for the Bruins, and there were no new black players on the 1942 UCLA squad, the intersectional contest did not endanger the Bulldogs' racial traditions. Apparently administrators at the two Georgia institutions believed that the substantial fan interest and the national publicity generated by high-profile intersectional games were essential to big-time football in the state. Proper advance screening therefore became an important corollary to the gentlemen's agreement and the maintenance of athletic segregation.²⁵

World War II unleashed forces which ultimately led to the demise of the gentlemen's agreement. The war had a profound effect on race relations in the United States, particularly by discrediting Nazi doctrines of racial superiority, which in turn put white supremacy and segregation on the defensive. The three major American professional sports—football, baseball, and basketball—were all influenced by these trends and slowly began to abandon the color line. In the most dramatic development of the period, Jackie Robinson successfully integrated major league baseball, the country's most popular sport, when he joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. National Football League teams had quietly resumed signing black players the previous year after a twelve-year ban, and in 1950 three African-American players signed contracts with members of the National Basketball Association, indicating that racial integration in professional team sports was here to stay.²⁶ The postwar racial climate on northern college campuses was decidedly more liberal than in the 1930s. At the same time, the composition of northern football teams also changed, as it became less unusual for them to have one or two African-American players in uniform. Some of these black athletes were veterans, but regardless of their military status northern white students were no longer willing to accept passively their exclusion from intersec-

²⁵Michigan did not recruit another African-American football player for seven years. Beehe, *Hail to the Victors!* 30.

²⁶Rader, *American Sports*, 308-313; Ashe, *A Hard Road to Glory* 3: 65, 129-30.

tional play. In this new campus environment, the compatibility of the gentlemen's agreement with the continuation of big-time inter-sectional games would be called into question.

Attitudes at southern white colleges changed more slowly than in the North. Still, a growing pragmatism about an occasional interracial sporting event, if held far away from one's state, was beginning to appear in Georgia and especially in the border South. Administrators at the University of Georgia and Georgia Tech were less frightened by the possibility of playing against an African-American athlete than were their counterparts in Alabama and Mississippi. Scheduling by the two schools revealed caution but not total opposition to the possibility of integrated matches. Administrators refrained from addressing the issue publicly, but at the start of the 1950s they quietly revised their traditional policies in order to permit an occasional integrated game outside the South if the home team would no longer honor the gentlemen's agreement. The policy concerning home games remained unchanged, however.

Georgia was the first of the two schools to take the plunge and abandon its tradition of racial exclusion. In late September 1950, the Bulldogs traveled west to San Francisco to play St. Mary's College. Led by their star black halfback, John Henry Johnson, who ran back the opening kickoff of the second half ninety yards for a touchdown, the St. Mary's Gaels battled the favored Bulldogs to a 7-7 tie. Newspapers in Georgia noted Johnson's participation in the contest but did not make an issue of the color line, indicating resignation rather than resistance to this important modification of the gentlemen's agreement. Two years later, the Bulldogs traveled north to Philadelphia, where they defeated the University of Pennsylvania and its black star "Big Ed" Bell by a score of 34-27, confirming Georgia's abandonment of the agreement for games played outside Dixie.²⁷

During the 1950s, Georgia Tech football enjoyed its finest era. Under the brilliant leadership of Bobby Dodd, Yellow Jacket teams claimed two SEC championships and made six consecutive bowl appearances, beginning with the 1951 squad. More remarkably,

²⁷*Red and Black*, September 29, October 6, 1950; *Los Angeles Mirror*, October 2, 1950; *Atlanta Constitution*, December 1, 1955.

the Engineers won all six of those postseason games. The undefeated 1952 team was arguably Dodd's most outstanding, and it earned a share of the mythical national championship by defeating Ole Miss in the Sugar Bowl. In October of the following year, in the midst of these "glory days," the Yellow Jackets journeyed to South Bend, Indiana, to battle Notre Dame in the premier inter-sectional match of the college season. The Irish, rated number one in the wire service polls, eventually prevailed over the fourth-ranked Engineers by a score of 27-14, ending Tech's remarkable string of thirty-one straight games without a loss.²⁸

Mostly overlooked in the massive publicity surrounding the inter-sectional showdown between two of the country's most successful programs was the fact that two African Americans, halfback Dick Washington and end Wayne Edmunds, saw action as substitutes for Notre Dame. This important racial milestone meant that, in order to play the best teams in the country, Tech was now willing to quietly waive the gentlemen's agreement in the North. As was the case with Georgia, however, university officials made no public announcement about the policy change. Self-interest and the pursuit of athletic success had triumphed over the principle of total segregation, provided that the violations of traditional racial etiquette took place far from the Peach State.²⁹

The next major incident involving race and Georgia Tech sports arose unexpectedly in late 1955 when the team accepted an invitation to play in the Sugar Bowl. The ensuing controversy exposed a growing split among white Georgians over whether to accept or challenge the emerging trend toward playing interracial football games, especially since public school integration had just become a vital concern across Dixie in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's famous *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in May 1954, which the high Court had reconfirmed in May 1955. A disagreement between these two forces quickly escalated into a major public showdown over athletic policy, involving university administrators, students, the Board of Regents of the University System,

²⁸*Atlanta Constitution*, December 1, 1953; *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 31, 1953.

²⁹*Pittsburgh Courier*, December 5, 1953; John E. Heisler to author, June 24, 1994; *Technique*, November 27, 1953.

the governor, extreme segregationists, and numerous Georgia Tech football fans.

The 1955 Yellow Jacket team enjoyed another highly successful season, finishing with a number seven national ranking and a coveted invitation to the January 2, 1956, Sugar Bowl game. The New Orleans business and civic leaders who ran the Mid-Winter Sports Association, sponsor of the postseason classic, had been re-examining the association's racial policies for several years. Reflecting a "booster" mentality and a pragmatic approach to racial matters, they sought to secure for the Sugar Bowl the most attractive possible match of teams from all over the country, not just from the Deep South. Since the classic's main competitors, the Cotton Bowl and the Orange Bowl, did accept integrated teams, New Orleans leaders worried that they were facing a competitive disadvantage. For its game the previous year the organization had modified its policy on segregated seating in Tulane University stadium, the match's annual location. The new policy opened up the visiting team's section to unrestricted seating while maintaining the traditional all-black area in one end zone. This concession had been part of a successful effort to entice the U.S. Naval Academy to accept an invitation to the January 1955, bowl game. Ten months later, the association further broke with tradition and extended an offer to the University of Pittsburgh, fully aware that Panther senior Bobby Grier, a black fullback from Massillon, Ohio, would accompany the team.³⁰

Georgia Tech officials were informed about Grier's presence on the Pitt squad when they received their Sugar Bowl invitation. After consulting with the players and key members of the Georgia Tech Athletic Association, President Blake R. Van Leer and Coach Bobby Dodd accepted the bowl bid. As a precaution, Dodd also had contacted Governor Marvin Griffin, who responded, "Bobby, I can't come out publicly and support this. But you go ahead and do it." Since the game would be played outside the state and no major objections had been raised, Tech administrators thought

³⁰Navy did not have any black players on its 1954 squad, but several black midshipmen were part of the student delegation attending the game. *Atlanta Daily World*, January 8, November 27, 1955.

that the issue was settled. But they soon learned that they were quite wrong.³¹

On Wednesday, November 30, the executive committee of the States Rights Council of Georgia, an influential pro-segregation organization, fired off a telegram to Dodd protesting Tech's acceptance of the bowl invitation and urging him to help prevent "any breakdown of our laws, customs, and traditions of racial segregation." Robert O. Arnold, chairman of the Board of Regents of the University System, quickly defended the trip by pointing out that "Georgia and Tech both have played against Negro players in the past." A Georgia Tech spokesman attempted to head off criticism by minimizing Bobby Grier's importance to the Pitt team, inaccurately claiming that he was just a third string fullback. Confined to bed with the flu throughout the crisis, President Van Leer made only one public appearance, telling reporters that he had never broken a contract in his life and that "I do not intend to start now." Officials for the University of Pittsburgh responded to the initial news reports by forcefully stating that Grier was an integral part of their team and that he would "sleep, eat, practice, and play" with the squad in New Orleans.³² At this point Governor Marvin Griffin suddenly jumped into the public debate and deliberately provoked a major controversy. Griffin had won the 1954 governor's race over eight opponents by emphasizing his total opposition to public school integration. Shortly before taking office, he vowed, "Come hell or high water, races will not be mixed in Georgia schools." The outspoken governor soon became a leader in the "massive resistance" movement, which sought to mobilize white southerners to block all federal efforts to implement the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling.³³

On Friday, December 2, 1955, Governor Griffin shocked the Georgia Tech community by reversing his position on the Sugar

³¹"Run for Respect," p. 2; McMath, et al., *Engineering the New South*, 282; Dodd interview.

³²*Atlanta Daily World*, December 1, 1955; *Atlanta Constitution*, December 1, 6, 1955; McMath, et al., *Engineering the New South*, 282; *New York Times*, December 1, 1955; *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, December 3, 1955.

³³According to Robert W. Dubay, Governor Griffin had initially requested two dozen tickets to the Sugar Bowl game, before he changed his mind and decided to oppose the trip. Francis M. Wilhoit, *The Politics of Massive Resistance* (New York, 1973), 42, 115; Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance* (Baton Rouge, La., 1969), 68-72; *El Paso Times*, July 12, 1955; Robert W. Dubay, "Politics, Pigmentation, and Pigskin: The Georgia Tech Sugar Bowl Controversy of 1955," *Atlanta History* 39 (Spring 1995): 23-25.

Bowl trip. Griffin sent Regents chairman Arnold a telegram demanding that he call an emergency meeting of the state university board to consider prohibiting the Yellow Jackets from traveling to New Orleans. Warning in apocalyptic terms of the impending doom to the southern way of life if Tech participated in the game, Griffin dramatically declared: "We cannot make the slightest concession to the enemy in this dark and lamentable hour of struggle. There is no more difference in compromising the integrity of race on the playing field than in doing so in the classroom. One break in the dike and the relentless seas will rush in and destroy us."³⁴

Griffin's action ignited a firestorm "of indignation throughout the state," especially among students, faculty, and administrators at Georgia Tech and Georgia, who bitterly resented his intervention in what they regarded as an internal university matter. The governor announced his new position on the last day of the fall term at Tech. With a tough schedule of final exams awaiting them, male students traditionally used that weekend to cram for exams and to relieve the end of the semester tension through wild behavior, heavy drinking, or even "panty raids." Griffin's statement provided an obvious target not only for students furious over his threat to take away their team's hard-earned bowl trip but also for young men eager to "let off steam" at the end of the term.³⁵

Georgia Tech students quickly displayed their displeasure with Griffin. Early Friday evening they spontaneously gathered on the campus and hanged the governor in effigy. After more students joined their ranks, the demonstrators eventually launched a full-scale march to the state capitol, arriving there around midnight. Finding that the governor had gone home, the students and their supporters, who now numbered nearly 2,000, loudly voiced their displeasure to reporters, hanged another effigy of Griffin, and slightly damaged property on the capitol grounds before some of them decided to march to the governor's mansion. By the time this smaller group finally arrived at the residence, twenty-five law enforcement vehicles and a wall of policemen were already assembled in front of the house. No major altercations were reported

³⁴Apparently Griffin changed his position when several of his segregationist political allies complained. *Atlanta Constitution*, December 3, 1955; "Tempest O'er the Sugar Bowl," *Tech Alumnus* (December 1955), 8.

³⁵*New York Times*, December 4, 1955.



Governor Marvin Griffin (above) created an uproar throughout the state when he announced in December 1955 his intention to prohibit Georgia Tech from playing in the Sugar Bowl, where the team would face University of Pittsburgh's black fullback, Bobby Grier, on the field. *Photograph of Griffin from Georgia Department of Archives and History.*

during the ensuing standoff, and state representative M. M. "Muggsy" Smith, a former Georgia Tech football player who lived nearby, eventually persuaded the students to disperse in the early morning hours. Police made six arrests during the "riot."³⁶ Students at several other Georgia colleges also staged demonstrations criticizing Griffin. In Athens, a crowd of over 500 students

³⁶Georgia Tech officials blamed the governor's message, end of the term pressures on students, radio station broadcasts about the march, and the encouragement of two "outside agitators" for causing the demonstrations. Property damages reported to Tech officials totaled \$212.80. *Atlanta Journal*, December 3, 5-6, 1955; *Atlanta Constitution*, December 3-6, 1955; George C. Griffin to Blake R. Van Leer, December 12, 1955; Van Leer to Harmon Caldwell, January 5, 1956, Board of Regents Collection, University Archives, Georgia Tech; McMath, et al., *Engineering the New South*, 283.

marched through downtown streets, displaying a banner which read, "This time we're for Tech."³⁷

The college demonstrations and Griffin's telegram temporarily turned the bowl controversy into the state's major political issue. The president of the Georgia Tech student government, George Harris, issued a public apology to the University of Pittsburgh for the governor's actions. Harris told the press that his fellow students were "not against segregation but against political forces which are trying to prevent us from going to the Sugar Bowl." Tech's campus newspaper, the *Technique*, charged that Griffin's actions had made the university and the state "look like fools before the entire nation." Atlanta resident David Rice, a member of the Board of Regents, warned that the controversy could harm the football teams at Georgia and Georgia Tech by making it difficult for them to recruit out-of-state athletes. In its Sunday edition, the *Atlanta Constitution* condemned Griffin for creating a "teapot tempest" and for damaging the reputations of both Georgia Tech and the state. Several other state newspapers voiced similar criticisms of the governor. College officials reported that President Van Leer had already received over fifty telegrams concerning the incident, with all but one of them supporting the school's participation in the Sugar Bowl.³⁸

The governor's office quickly tried to counter this flood of criticism. Staff members asserted that they too had received numerous telegrams, almost all of which supported the governor's position. Disgusted by the student protests, one angry state representative suggested that the legislature cut off funds to Georgia Tech if it insisted on playing in the Sugar Bowl. Roy Harris, a prominent politician from Augusta and member of the Board of Regents, publicly endorsed the proposed ban on Tech's New Orleans trip. The powerful segregationist leader warned that such actions were necessary because blacks were trying to undermine segregation in the state by attacking it in the areas of entertainment and sports. Ironically, during a 1951 Regents debate on deemphasizing

³⁷Sympathetic students at Emory University and Mercer University also staged small protests against Griffin. *Atlanta Journal*, December 6, 1955; *Atlanta Constitution*, December 6, 1955.

³⁸*Atlanta Constitution*, December 4, 1955; *Technique*, December 6, 1955; "Tempest O'er the Sugar Bowl," 9; *New York Times*, December 3, 4, 1955; Dubay, "Politics, Pigmentation, and Pigskin," 28-29.

football at the university, Harris had passionately defended big-time sports and declared his firm opposition to “doing anything to cripple or embarrass our athletic program.” Despite this segregationist counterattack, public opinion seemed to be running against the governor. Even one pro-segregation newspaper criticized Griffin for acting after the fact and thereby tarnishing “the reputation of our two great state universities whose football teams have brought fame, glory, and prestige to Georgia.”³⁹

The Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia met for three hours on Monday, December 5, to consider Governor Griffin’s request. Regent David Rice vigorously defended Tech’s Sugar Bowl acceptance and openly criticized Griffin for creating an unnecessary crisis. Regent Roy Harris challenged Rice, arguing that the state’s racial traditions should be preserved, regardless of the cost. After extended discussion, the board voted as predicted to approve Tech’s bowl trip. But in a mild surprise, however, it also adopted a general policy governing future games that was less restrictive than expected. According to the new guidelines, state colleges were required to honor Georgia’s segregation laws, customs, and traditions when playing at home, but on the road they would “respect the laws, customs, and traditions of the host state.” Undaunted by the setback, Governor Griffin reaffirmed his commitment to Jim Crow, commenting emphatically that he was still 100 percent behind segregation. As the crisis subsided, almost overlooked on page two of the December 6 issue of the *Atlanta Constitution* was a brief wire service article reporting that African Americans in Montgomery, Alabama, were boycotting the city bus service to protest the conviction of a seamstress named Rosa Parks for violating the local segregated seating ordinance.⁴⁰

The actual Sugar Bowl game in New Orleans and the festivities surrounding it inspired additional debate about changing racial patterns in the Deep South. Most of the attention focused on Bobby Grier and the Pittsburgh Panthers. Because downtown hotels were segregated, Pittsburgh elected to establish its team headquarters uptown at Tulane University, where the squad could use

³⁹*Atlanta Constitution*, December 4-5, 1955; *Atlanta Journal*, December 6, 1955; *Atlanta Daily World*, December 8, 1955; McMath, et al., *Engineering the New South*, 285.

⁴⁰*Atlanta Journal*, December 5, 6, 1955; *Atlanta Constitution*, December 6, 1955; *Atlanta Daily World*, December 7, 1955.

the athletic facilities for practice. A larger than normal group of sportswriters covered the game, provoking an irritated Furman Bisher of the *Atlanta Constitution* to complain that their excessive reporting had unnecessarily exaggerated a "commonplace incident" into an epic event. Bisher sarcastically suggested that the game should be renamed "the Sociological Bowl." Requirements for segregated seating in Tulane University stadium were again modified so as to permit blacks to sit in the Pitt section, and the increased number of African Americans attending helped create a sellout. Several writers representing black newspapers covered the match from the press box, establishing another precedent.⁴¹

The game itself was a low-scoring affair, with Pittsburgh gaining twice as many yards as Tech but failing to score. Ironically the key play of the day was a questionable pass interference penalty called against Grier, which gave the Engineers the ball on the Panther one yard line. On the ensuing play Wade Mitchell scored the game's only touchdown, and Tech clinched its fifth consecutive bowl victory by a score of 7-0. Grier was the leading rusher in the game and received a loud ovation from the crowd when he left the field in the fourth quarter with an injury. After the contest, Grier denied that he had committed pass interference but complimented the Yellow Jacket players for their excellent sportsmanship. That night the Pitt fullback broke another color barrier by attending the awards banquet at the St. Charles Hotel. Grier sat with several of the Georgia Tech players during the presentations but did not stay for the formal dance afterwards, preferring to attend a party arranged by several fraternity brothers.⁴²

Georgia Tech escaped from the Sugar Bowl controversy with its athletic policies intact, a result which also benefited the University of Georgia. But while the Board of Regents seemed content to let the issue fade into the background, several members of the Georgia Assembly had a different idea. Caught up in an emotional

⁴¹*Atlanta Daily World*, January 3, 1956; *Atlanta Constitution*, January 5, 1956; *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 10, 1955; *New York Times*, January 3, 1956; interview with Bobby Grier, June 23, 1994.

⁴²Pitt supporters and the Pittsburgh newspapers later insisted that game films confirmed that one official had unfairly penalized Grier for pass interference on the game's key play. "I had no problems down there," Grier later recalled. "The only problem was that call on the field." Grier interview; *Atlanta Daily World*, January 3, 1956; *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 11, 1956; *Pittsburgh Press*, February 5, 1956; *New York Times*, January 3, 1956.



The Yellow Jacket team posed as they boarded a plane in Atlanta for the 1956 Sugar Bowl in New Orleans. Though the game would bring them their fifth consecutive bowl victory, this contest proved far more memorable for the racial controversy surrounding it than for the game itself. *Photograph from Georgia Tech Archives.*

wave of massive resistance to public school desegregation, many legislators began to view college athletic contests as an integral part of the larger campaign to resist integration, rather than as a privileged area deserving an exemption from broader public policy concerns. In early 1956 a state representative introduced a bill in the assembly to prohibit all athletic events involving competition between blacks and whites, but the proposal died without receiving much attention.⁴³

One year later, however, the 1957 General Assembly gave more serious consideration to another sports segregation bill. The January-February legislative session was a lively one, with assembly members introducing numerous bills designed to reinforce segregation in the state. In one of their more extreme moments, the in-

⁴³*Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 1, 1956, University Archives, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University; *New York Times*, January 18, 19, 1956.

dignant legislators even approved resolutions calling for the nullification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution and the impeachment of Chief Justice Earl Warren and five other members of the U.S. Supreme Court. As part of this segregationist crusade, Senator Leon Butts of Lumpkin County introduced a bill to ban integrated athletics and other social activities. This sweeping proposal sought to prohibit all athletic matches, physical games, social functions, and entertainment events in which blacks and whites participated together. Emphasizing the important symbolic role of sports, Butts argued that interracial athletic competition set a dangerous example, because “when Negroes and whites meet on the athletic fields on a basis of complete equality, it is only natural that this sense of equality carries into the daily living of these people.” Governor Marvin Griffin strongly endorsed the proposal, explaining that he was against “Negroes and white folks playing any type of sport together.” In a mild surprise, the senate unanimously approved the measure in mid-February.⁴⁴

The growing realization that the bill might actually win approval from the house and become law alarmed minor league baseball representatives, university officials, and various sports fans. Columnist Jim Minter of the *Atlanta Journal* promptly attacked the proposal, asserting that it would endanger the national prominence of the Georgia Tech and Georgia athletic programs. Intersectional matches against the top nonsouthern teams might become impossible to arrange, he cautioned, and the future status of the Southeastern Conference could be endangered. Dismissing the measure as unnecessary, columnist Marion Jackson of the *Atlanta Daily World* ridiculed the bill by suggesting that the state needed such legislation about as much “as the proverbial Eskimo” needs “the proverbial refrigerator.” For their part, baseball officials warned that the bill would destroy the Class A South Atlantic League, which had four teams based in Georgia towns, and endanger other minor league franchises as well, since major league teams would no longer tolerate such racial restrictions.⁴⁵

⁴⁴*Atlanta Constitution*, February 15-21, 1957; *Atlanta Journal*, February 16-21, 1957; *New York Times*, February 15, 23, 1957.

⁴⁵*Atlanta Journal*, February 16, 22, 1957; *Atlanta Daily World*, January 29, 1957.

Determined to protect professional and college sports, a small band of legislators led by representatives George Bagby of Paulding County and Charles Gowen and William Killian of Glynn County quietly began working to defeat the bill. Their main strategy focused on preventing the measure from ever coming before the full house for a vote. Representatives of minor league baseball also discreetly lobbied against the measure. Such tactics slowed but did not halt the bill's advancement. On Friday, February 22, the last day of the session, the proposal was finally ready for discussion before the full house, but critics delayed consideration for several hours through parliamentary maneuvers. Late in the afternoon, these opponents then joined with other weary legislators to vote for adjournment before the bill could be returned to the floor. Disappointed by his defeat, Senator Butts told reporters, "I think it's a shame the major league ball clubs and the NAACP have gotten control of the Georgia House."⁴⁶

The Georgia and Georgia Tech athletic programs benefited from the bill's demise. Although the proposal technically would only have enshrined in law what regents' policy already required of the two colleges, it easily could have foreshadowed further interference by the legislature in the schools' athletic policies. By avoiding a legislative decree, the Regents retained the power to grant a temporary exemption to their own rule, or even abandon their own policy, if they later felt that new circumstances so warranted. A state law, on the other hand, would have been much more difficult to repeal. Furthermore, the bill's defeat also helped the two Georgia universities avoid possible retaliation by northern states. For example, during the assembly debate three members of the Michigan legislature publicly called upon the University of Michigan to cancel its scheduled 1957 football game with the Georgia Bulldogs. These three Detroit Democrats had charged that the proposed Georgia law and the exclusion of African Americans from the state university constituted flagrant insults to Michigan's black students and athletes.⁴⁷

⁴⁶*Atlanta Constitution*, February 21-23, 1957; *Atlanta Journal*, February 21-23, 1957; *New York Times*, February 23, 1957, p. 1; *Red and Black*, February 28, 1957; *Atlanta Daily World*, February 23-26, 1957.

⁴⁷*Atlanta Constitution*, February 16, 1957; *New York Times*, February 16, 1957; *Dallas Express*, December 31, 1955.

Despite these efforts at political interference, the Georgia-Michigan game was held as scheduled on October 5, 1957, in Ann Arbor. In front of 85,000 cheering fans, the Wolverines soundly smacked the Bulldogs by a score of 26-0. Atlanta newspapers noted the presence of black players on the Michigan team, but the trip did not provoke any substantial controversy inside the state. An ensuing match against the Naval Academy two weeks later in Norfolk, Virginia, did prompt a few minor complaints when local sponsors agreed to waive the stadium's normal policy of segregated seating. Minimizing the issue, Georgia officials reassured the team's supporters that they could purchase tickets directly from the university for the special section reserved exclusively for Bulldog fans. When questioned by reporters, Governor Marvin Griffin responded that he would not attempt to interfere with the contest, since it was being held in another state. Although Navy downed the Bulldogs 27-14, the successful completion of the two games confirmed that proponents of massive resistance had abandoned their efforts to control athletic policy. The era of total segregation in Georgia college sports was finally at an end.⁴⁸

In this new, post-*Brown* South, segregationist ideologues postulated a racial "domino theory" in which any deviation from a comprehensive and unified system of segregation endangered the basic institution itself. University students, supporters of the Bulldog and Yellow Jacket athletic programs, influential Georgians, and moderate segregationists combined to help the two universities narrowly turn back this extreme segregationist assault. Having survived this threat, Georgia and Georgia Tech continued for the next fifteen years to enjoy strong support for their athletic programs from state residents while participating fully in a national collegiate sports system that necessitated competition against integrated teams outside the state. To be sure, the abandonment of the long-standing tradition of total athletic segregation represented an important break with tradition, but the likelihood of additional change in subsequent years would be influenced more by national developments in racial policy and federal pressure than by creeping liberalism on campus at either the University of Georgia or Georgia Tech.

⁴⁸*New York Times*, October 4, 1957; *Red and Black*, October 4, 1957; *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, October 6, 20, 1957.