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“Breaking the Plane”: Integration and Black Protest in Michigan State University Football during the 1960s

by
John Matthew Smith

Before top-ranked Notre Dame played second-ranked Michigan State University (MSU) in November 1966, the media built up the contest as “the game of the century.” It was the first time in college-football history that the top two teams would meet so late in the season. Millions of college-football fans anticipated what they hoped would be “the greatest battle since Hector fought Achilles.”¹ Equally remarkable was the racial makeup of each team: Michigan State would start twelve black players while Notre Dame had only one. By 1966, MSU fielded so many black players that the team was often compared to those of Historically Black Colleges and Universities like Grambling, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical, and Morgan State.² For Michigan State star player Charles “Bubba” Smith, a black Texas native who had never played in an integrated stadium until he went to college, this would be the pinnacle of his college career. If Smith symbolized Michigan State football, Jim Lynch, a white Irish-Catholic Ohioan and All-American linebacker, epitomized the kind of player for whom Notre Dame fans

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¹ “Fans, Bets, and Alcohol Abound as Nation Sets for Big Football Game,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 18, 1966. See also Mike Celizic, *The Biggest Game of Them All: Notre Dame, Michigan State, and the Fall of '66* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992). Celizic, a journalist and Notre Dame alumnus, provides a fine account of the buildup to “The Poll Bowl” and the game itself. However, while his work does discuss the fact that MSU had a large number of black players, there is little analysis of the significance of the game in the context of the civil rights movement.

² Alan Page was the only black player on Notre Dame’s varsity squad. *Souvenir Program*, Michigan State versus Notre Dame, November 19, 1966; Lawrence Casey, “Sports Ledger,” *Michigan Chronicle*, October 30, 1965; “And He’s You Know What,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 18, 1966.

were used to cheering. At a pep rally two days before the game, on Notre Dame's pristine campus in South Bend, Indiana, forty-five hundred students and fans flooded the old field house as the marching band played the school's fight song. With chants of "cheer, cheer for Old Notre Dame" ringing from the rafters, the overwhelmingly white male crowd hanged Bubba Smith in effigy next to a sign that read "LYNCH 'EM."³

Coaches and athletes were often hanged in effigy by the fans and students of opposing schools, but "hanging" Smith next to a sign that said lynch 'em suggested some mixture of insensitivity and outright racial bias at Notre Dame. Two years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and nearly twenty years after Jackie Robinson broke major-league baseball's color barrier, the "dummy in the green uniform with a number 95" represented not only Bubba Smith but a rejection of racial equality.⁴ Well into the twentieth century lynching had expressed and enforced white supremacy in the South, and the powerful memory of mob rule was reinforced for African Americans in the 1960s when their churches were bombed, or they were clubbed and hosed by police or stoned by white crowds. Notre Dame's rally was emblematic of a dominant white sports culture that resisted integration.

The racial makeup of each school's football team illustrates the uneven progress of the civil rights movement. On one end of the spectrum, Notre Dame represented how hard blacks had to struggle to move beyond token athletic integration at predominantly white institutions. At the other end, Michigan State's squad was an example of what a fully integrated team might look like. While many northern football programs firmly believed that it would be dangerous to play more blacks than whites, in 1966 Michigan State's defense started eight black players and three whites. The offensive backfield started two black running backs and a black quarterback, and the team's two captains were black. In an era that accepted without question the myths that teams could not win by playing more blacks than whites and that black players did not have the intelligence to handle leadership positions, Michigan State's 1965 and 1966 football teams were unlike any others in the prior history of integrated college football.

Not only were Michigan State's teams in those two years fully integrated, but also they were the best that the school's head coach

³ Roy Damer, "Frenzied Irish Fans Give Heroes Sendoff," *Chicago Tribune*, November 18, 1966.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Hugh “Duffy” Daugherty had ever fielded, finishing a combined 19-1-1 as well as sharing the 1965 national championship. What separated these MSU teams from others in the country was a nucleus of talented black players, many from the South. In the late 1950s Daugherty took advantage of a talent source previously untapped (at least by coaches at primarily white schools) by developing relationships with black high-school coaches at coaching clinics in the South. Michigan State’s integrated teams were created in an era when television had begun to come of age; young athletes and high-school coaches could see blacks and whites lining up beside one another.

Despite the widespread perception that Daugherty had built a color-blind football program, Michigan State’s black athletes later challenged the assumption that all of the university’s sports programs were free of racism by boycotting spring practice in 1968. At the height of the Black Power movement, these black athletes protested racial discrimination in MSU’s athletic department and transformed their privileged position into one of empowerment. Thus, football provided a way for Michigan State’s black athletes to challenge segregation both on and off the field.

For the first half of the twentieth century, the integration of Michigan State’s football team moved at the same slow pace of most other northern schools. In the Big Ten, George Jewett in 1890 became the first African American to play on a University of Michigan football team, followed by Fred Patterson at Ohio State University, Preston Eagleson at Indiana University, Jewett again at Northwestern University, and Kinney Holbrook at the University of Iowa.⁵ At MSU, tackle Gideon Smith broke another barrier when he became the school’s first African American varsity athlete in 1913.⁶ By the 1930s African Americans were making significant contributions on football fields throughout the Big Ten. Many of these athletes played prominent roles on their respective teams, including Jesse Babb and Fitzhugh Lyons at Indiana University, William Bell at Ohio State University, Ellsworth Harpole at the University of Minnesota, Willis Ward at the University of Michigan, and James McCrary and William Baker at Michigan State, among

⁵ Arthur Ashe, Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory—Football: The African American Athlete in Football* (New York: Amistad Press, 1993), 71-72; Charles H. Martin, “The Color Line in Midwestern College Sports, 1890-1960,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 48 (June 2002): 88-92; Gregory Bond, Madison, Wis., email to author, August 27, 2006.

⁶ *The Wolverine* (Michigan State University yearbook), 1914, 151-52.

others. Yet, each of these athletes was victimized by a “gentleman’s agreement,” an unwritten rule that prevented African Americans from playing against southern opponents. During the decade between 1935 and 1945, Michigan State’s head coach Charles Bachman played only one black player until Horace Smith joined the squad in 1946. That season, the talented halfback played in every game except those against Mississippi State University and the University of Kentucky, which were segregated institutions. Such pandering to segregationists revealed one of the northern schools’ dirty little secrets: they operated under the policy of “segregated integration,” where integration was accepted in some spheres of both public life and private life, but not in others.⁷

The arrival of a new head coach, Clarence “Biggie” Munn, in 1947 might have presented an opportunity to change this practice and stop benching black players when MSU played against southern colleges. But in his first year as head coach, Munn benched Horace Smith against Mississippi State. Michigan State’s schedule still included Kentucky, and the *Michigan Chronicle*, the state’s African American newspaper, excoriated the athletic department for continuing to accommodate Jim Crow. The Detroit branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) urged Michigan’s governor, Kim Sigler, to investigate racial discrimination in Michigan State’s football program. Civic and religious leaders throughout the state sent letters to Sigler and Michigan State officials protesting the decision to remove black players when the team played southern opponents. Local civil rights activism succeeded, and Horace Smith played against Kentucky in what turned out to be an unspectacular 7–6 loss. In a decisive move, Michigan State’s president, John Hannah, made it clear that the Spartans would no longer bow to the demands of their opponents from segregated institutions.⁸

⁷ “Big Ten Football,” *Opportunity*, December 1931, 386–87; Ed Nace, “Negro Grid Stars, Past and Present,” in *ibid.*, September 1939, 272–74; Martin, “The Color Line,” 95–98; “Michigan State Football Squad, 33 Strong, Starts Long Trek to San Antonio,” *State Journal* (Lansing), December 5, 1934; “MSC Bows to Race Bias: Smith Out of Tilt,” *Michigan Chronicle*, October 4, 1947; Bill Matney, “MSC ‘Appeasement’ Policy Hit by Alumnus as Kentucky Game Nears,” *Michigan Chronicle*, October 25, 1947. The term “segregated integration” is from Keith R. Widder, *Michigan Agricultural College: The Evolution of a Land-Grant Philosophy, 1855–1925* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005), 343.

⁸ Bill Matney, “NAACP Asks Gov. Sigler to Probe MSC’s Race Bias,” *Michigan Chronicle*, October 11, 1947; “Chronicle Cracks Bias on MSC Football 11,” in *ibid.*, November 1, 1947; “MSC–Penn State Presents Puzzle,” in *ibid.*, November 27, 1948.

During his tenure as head coach, Munn lifted Michigan State's football program to national prominence and began to play more black players. In Munn's second year as head coach, the Spartans joined the Big Ten conference, but the school did not begin conference play until 1953. From 1950 to 1953 Munn's teams recorded a twenty-eight-game winning streak, finished 35-2 overall, won the national championship in 1952, and then toppled UCLA in the 1954 Rose Bowl. Thanks to Munn, Michigan State had become "unquestionably the nation's fastest rising athletic power."⁹ In their first official season in the Big Ten, the Spartans led the league in the number of black players. Michigan State's eight black athletes represented nearly a quarter of all African Americans in the entire conference.¹⁰ By the end of his career, Munn had firmly established a tradition of playing African Americans in key positions and left the program in good condition for his successor, Duffy Daugherty.

Four months before Daugherty ran onto the field as Michigan State's head coach, the United States Supreme Court struck down "separate but equal" education. On May 17, 1954, the court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that segregated educational facilities were "inherently unequal." The court's decision "was the most momentous and far-reaching of the century in civil rights," C. Vann Woodward argued a year later.¹¹ But enforcing the court's ruling proved to be remarkably difficult. All-white southern colleges and universities did everything in their power to block African Americans from attending their schools. When Autherine Lucy enrolled at the University of Alabama in February 1956, she met a mob of Confederate flag-wavers who threw rotten eggs at her while they shouted "kill her, kill her." The next month 101 southern members of Congress signed the "Southern Manifesto," which denounced the *Brown* decision, claiming it would destroy "amicable relations between

⁹ Munn's last season was 1953, but the Rose Bowl was played in January 1954. For a biographical sketch of Munn, see Jack Seibold, *Spartan Sports Encyclopedia: A History of the Michigan State Men's Athletic Program* (Champaign, Ill.: Sports Publishing, 2003), 942. See also Tommy Devine, "N.D. Threat to Mich. State 12 Win Skein," *Sporting News*, November 7, 1951.

¹⁰ The Big Ten as a whole carried thirty-three black players in 1953. The team breakdown was: Michigan State-eight, Illinois-seven, Iowa-six, Michigan-four, Indiana-three, Ohio State-two, Minnesota-one, Wisconsin-one, Northwestern-one, and Purdue-zero. Will Robinson, "Nine of the Big Ten Schools Are Using Negro Football Players," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 3, 1953.

¹¹ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 3rd ed. (1955; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 147.

the white and Negro races.”¹² For at least a decade after *Brown*, white politicians and university administrators prevented African Americans from sharing classrooms and locker rooms with whites in the South.

While blacks were barred from playing football at white colleges and universities in the South, in 1955 Daugherty recruited Michigan State’s first southern black player, Karl Perryman of Mobile, Alabama, who was one of ten blacks on that year’s team.¹³ Playing football at an integrated school in the North was a remarkable experience for this black Alabaman. Because they had no chance of playing “big-time” college football in the South, African Americans in Mobile “didn’t worship football like white Southerners did,” remarked Hank Aaron, a Mobile native and until recently baseball’s all-time home-run champion. “None of us could go to Alabama or Auburn or LSU.”¹⁴ Perryman grew up in an environment where blacks and whites read in separate libraries and lived in different neighborhoods. Blacks sat in the back of the bus, if they were not forced to give up their seats to white passengers.¹⁵ Leaving Mobile to play football and get an education at a predominantly white school in the North was a rare opportunity that posed a number of challenges.

Although Perryman played for only one season, fielding a black player from the South was extraordinarily significant in 1955.¹⁶ By recruiting, signing, and playing Perryman, Daugherty set a precedent of seeking talented black players from a region that most white coaches ignored. Daugherty’s ability to sign a large number of African Americans was strengthened by the fact that the rest of the conference was open to playing black players as well. By 1955 every Big Ten football team had at least one black player.¹⁷ Nationally the Big Ten

¹² Bruce J. Dierenfield, *The Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004), 24-25, 138 (quotation).

¹³ *Spartan Gridiron News* (souvenir program), Michigan State Spartans v. Stanford Indians, October 8, 1955.

¹⁴ Hank Aaron, with Lonnie Wheeler, *I Had a Hammer: The Hank Aaron Story* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1992), 19.

¹⁵ For a history of Mobile, see Michael V. R. Thomason, ed., *Mobile: The New History of Alabama’s First City* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001).

¹⁶ It is not clear why Perryman played only one season.

¹⁷ According to the journalist Will Robinson, the Big Ten had sixty-three black players in 1955. He stated that Michigan State College (MSC) had eleven black players and listed a player named “Rudolph Pope” as part of this group. However, MSC did not list a player by this name in its official roster or in any of its pictures. In 1955 MSC did have a white player named Robert Popp. In any case, Michigan State was clearly among

stood out as a conference that welcomed black athletes. In 1955 the *Baltimore Afro-American* listed the names of “colored players holding positions on major college football teams” (see chart on following page). Although this list does not include every team that had a black player, it does enable us to compare Michigan State with other Big Ten squads and see that the Big Ten teams played more black players than any other conference.¹⁸

In 1955 Michigan State’s depth and speed produced a 9-1 season, including a 17–14 win over a fully integrated UCLA team in the Rose Bowl. According to *Baltimore Afro-American* sportswriter Sam Lacy, the January 1956 matchup “established a new high in tan faces” in Rose Bowl games. From 1916 to 1946 only three black athletes played in the Rose Bowl.¹⁹ Daugherty’s fellow coaches voted him Coach of the Year for the 1955 season by the largest margin in the twenty-one-year history of the award. His appearance on the cover of *Time* in October 1956 reflected Daugherty’s rise as a nationally recognized American sports figure.²⁰ His example of playing black players promoted Michigan State as a symbol of all that was good in sports—fair play, equal opportunity, and sportsmanship.

Duffy Daugherty had achieved more than he could have ever imagined. The son of a coal miner, Daugherty was raised in a Presbyterian, Scots-Irish home in Barnesboro, Pennsylvania, twenty-five miles northwest of Johnstown in Cambria County. Until the turn of the twentieth century, most residents of the county were from western Europe or traced their ancestry there. After 1900, immigrants from southern and eastern Europe came to the region, followed by black migrants from the South during the Great War. The new arrivals found work in the steel and coal industries, and sometimes mingled in union halls.

the leaders in a conference that had a growing number of black players. See Robinson, “Every Team in Big Ten Has Negroes Listed,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 15, 1955.

¹⁸ These statistics should be used with caution because only the names and numbers of the Michigan State players could be corroborated. White-run newspapers in the 1950s rarely reported the number of black players on predominantly white squads. The *Baltimore Afro-American*’s statistics appear to refer to players with actual playing roles whereas the *Pittsburgh Courier*’s statistics indicate the total number of players, both active and inactive, on the rosters of each Big Ten team. See “Pigskin Parade,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 11, 1955. Northwestern’s statistics come from the school yearbook, *The Syllabus*, 1956, Northwestern University Archives, Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill.

¹⁹ The first three blacks to play in the Rose Bowl were Brown University’s Fritz Pollard, Washington and Jefferson College’s Charles West, and the University of Southern California’s Brice Taylor. Sam Lacy, “A to Z,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, December 27, 1955.

²⁰ Lawrence Robinson, “Daugherty Coach of Year by Coaches’ Vote,” *Sporting News*, December 14, 1955; “Driving Man,” *Time*, October 8, 1956, 66.

**“Colored Players Holding Positions on
Major College Football Teams”**

Indiana-12	Wisconsin-3
Illinois-11	California-3
Michigan State-10	Nebraska-2
UCLA-8	Northwestern-2
Miami (Ohio)-6	Cornell-2
Iowa-5	Minnesota-1
Ohio State-4	Pittsburgh-1
Purdue-4	Colorado-1
Detroit-4	Penn State-1
Michigan-3	Syracuse-1

Source: *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 11, 1955.

**The Big Ten conference (teams in bold) led the
country in the number of black players on its teams.**

By the early 1920s “Cambria had become, in its remarkable ethnic and racial diversity, America in miniature.” While his father struggled to put food on the table during the Depression, Duffy worked as a deliveryman and a miner to help his family survive. In 1936 his football prowess landed him a scholarship at Syracuse University.²¹

In 1937, with Biggie Munn as his line coach, Daugherty played with star quarterback Wilmeth Sidat-Singh, an African American.²² An extraordinary athlete, Sidat-Singh also played basketball for Syracuse. The legendary sportswriter Grantland Rice, evoking images of Americana and the violence of the West, wrote of Sidat-Singh after he led his team to victory: “A new forward pass hero slipped in front of the great white spotlight of fame at Syracuse today. His name is Wilmeth Sidat-Singh, a Negro boy from Harlem wearing an East Indian name with the deadly aim of Davy Crockett and Kit Carson.”²³ Clearly,

²¹ John F. Coleman, “Cambria County: Coming Full Circle,” *Pennsylvania Heritage* 12, no. 1 (1986): 16; “Driving Man,” 74.

²² Patrick Miller, “Slouching toward a New Expediency: College Football and the Color Line during the Depression Decade,” *American Studies* 40 (Fall 1999): 20.

²³ Quoted in Edwin Bancroft Henderson, *The Negro in Sports* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1939), 116.

Sidat-Singh was critical to the team's success, but thanks to a "gentleman's agreement" the Syracuse quarterback was barred from competition when Maryland refused to play against him in 1937. While Daugherty's reaction to this event is unknown, it probably taught him firsthand about the limits of integration in sports.²⁴

Daugherty admitted that without football he would never have been able to attend Syracuse. Later, when he was a coach, Daugherty recruited players by looking for aspects of his own character in the young men he considered as prospects. He sought out working-class kids and appealed to their parents since he looked "like anything but a big-time football coach." The former army major had "neither the portentous air nor commanding presence of the typical big-time football coach."²⁵ Daugherty's ability to relate to people of all backgrounds made him a great public speaker. Whether he was speaking at the Michigan High School Coaches Association banquet or alumni dinners or just sitting in a living room drinking coffee with the mother of a future player, Daugherty's honest, friendly, and gregarious nature appealed to all who met him.²⁶

Daugherty's focus on recruiting black players depended on the support of John Hannah, Michigan State's president, who took many steps to improve race relations at the college (later university) during his tenure in that position (1941 to 1969). In 1941 Hannah integrated all student dormitories and followed this act by removing racial identification from student records.²⁷ Under Hannah's leadership Michigan State refused to play schools that demanded that blacks be barred from competition.²⁸ In 1957, as Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) pushed for the protection of black voting rights, Hannah, in recognition of his actions, was appointed chairman of the United States Commission on Civil

²⁴ I have not located any sources that report Daugherty's reaction to this event. However, *Baltimore Afro-American* sportswriter Sam Lacy claims that Sidat-Singh's teammates initially "sought to protest" the decision. In the end, however, the game was played without a demonstration. Lacy, with Moses J. Newson, *Fighting for Fairness: The Life Story of Hall of Fame Sportswriter Sam Lacy* (Centreville, Md.: Tidewater, 1998), 36.

²⁵ "Driving Man," 66-75, 66 (quotations).

²⁶ Tommy Devine, "Duffy Daugherty, Study in Honesty," *Sporting News*, October 9, 1957.

²⁷ Robert Young, "John A. Hannah to Head Civil Rights Board," *Chicago Tribune*, December 24, 1957; Paul L. Dressel, *College to University: The Hannah Years at Michigan State, 1935-1969* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1987), 10-11.

²⁸ "Chronicle Cracks Bias on MSC Football 11"; "MSC-Penn State Presents Puzzle."

Rights, which was created “to monitor, rather than redress” civil rights complaints.²⁹

In the same month that the commission was created, Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, became the focal point of a national crisis when Governor Orval Faubus called out the National Guard to prevent nine black students from entering the school. Reluctantly, President Dwight Eisenhower sent in ten thousand federal troops to protect the students.³⁰ The only senior among the nine students, Ernest Green, graduated on May 25, 1958, and was given a full scholarship to Michigan State University by an anonymous donor. Not until 1994 was the identity of the donor revealed. Peter McPherson, who was MSU’s president at the time, read Hannah’s personal papers and learned that Hannah himself had paid for Green’s education.³¹

As Hannah began his duties as chairman of the Commission on Civil Rights, the *Sporting News* declared in the fall of 1957 that Michigan State was a “powerhouse.”³² As the football program continued its climb to the top, the school promoted the fact that it had a large number of African American athletes. At the beginning of the 1958 season Michigan State’s sports information office distributed a press release that read “MSU’s Grid Squad Lists 9 Negroes.”³³ In calling attention to the number of black players on the team, the university and the football program were aware of the potential benefits of being known as the Brooklyn Dodgers of college football. What better way could the university promote itself as an institution that believed in and supported equality than by fielding an integrated football team that millions of viewers could see on television?

The growth of television paralleled the increasing presence of African Americans in college and professional sports in the 1950s. Before games were televised, only those in attendance could see a football game or a baseball game. When games were televised, however,

²⁹ Dierenfield, *Civil Rights Movement*, 50.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29-37.

³¹ Maryanne George, “The Courage of 9 Students Gave Nation an Education,” *Detroit Free Press*, February 12, 2004; “The Great Experiment: MSU, the Pioneer Land Grant University,” presentation on WKAR-TV, October 5, 2005.

³² Tommy Devine, “Spartan Success Saga Ten-Year Stunner,” *Sporting News*, October 23, 1957, section 2, p. 3.

³³ Though the sports information office listed biographical information for nine black players, Bill Wyatt did not make the official roster, and the team carried eight black athletes for the 1958 season. See “MSU’s 1958 Grid Squad Lists 9 Negroes,” Herb Adderley player file, Michigan State University Sports Information Records (hereafter MSU-SIR), Michigan State University, East Lansing.

millions of Americans could watch sporting events in their homes. David Halberstam observed that in the 1950s sports were essentially “going from the periphery to the very center of the culture” where a “dual revolution” began to take place in terms of black athletes entering the public consciousness and far larger numbers of people being able to watch them perform.³⁴

When young black athletes saw MSU’s African American players on television, it was clear that East Lansing was a destination where they might realize their dreams. When Herb Adderley, who lived in Philadelphia, watched the Spartans he “noticed that black players could get a chance at Michigan State.” He wanted to play for Duffy Daugherty because “at that time black players couldn’t go south. I had seen Michigan State on television. Number 26, Clarence Peaks, was my idol.” Adderley, who was not heavily recruited, found himself wearing number 26 at Michigan State after Daugherty met Adderley’s high-school coach at a coaching clinic.³⁵

After great back-to-back seasons, even the outstanding play of Herb Adderley could not prevent the Spartans from falling to 3-5-1 in 1958. The Spartans had lost twenty seniors, including many star athletes.³⁶ The Spartans failed to win a single conference game that year, but that did not stop Daugherty from beginning to schedule coaching clinics for black high-school coaches in the South.³⁷ Daugherty’s coaching clinics did not immediately result in large numbers of blacks from the South coming to MSU. In 1960 only one black southerner played for the Spartans. Nonetheless, Daugherty began to establish a relationship with southern black coaches that he hoped would grow and be mutually beneficial over time.

The 1960s was a turbulent era when African Americans and their white supporters marched, boycotted, fought the Klan, and demanded freedom and equality. The struggle for equality was in many ways a struggle to break the color line. Sports not only reflected the progress of the civil rights movement but also actively contributed to that progress. Liberals of the 1960s hoped that the integration of athletics would

³⁴ David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 692.

³⁵ Herb Adderley played at Michigan State from 1958 to 1960 before the Green Bay Packers selected him in the first round of the NFL draft in 1961. In 1980 he was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. See Jerry Green, “Adderley: From MSU to Hall,” *Detroit News*, May 12, 1996.

³⁶ Fred Stabley, *The Spartans: Michigan State Football* (Tomball, Tex.: Strode, 1988), 202.

³⁷ Drew Sharp, “Michigan State’s Greatest Legacy in Football was ’50s Integration,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 30, 1996.

“create a highly visible model of interracial cooperation” that could be recreated in other areas of American life, while segregationists saw the integration of athletic programs as a threat to white supremacy.³⁸

In the 1961 season the University of Mississippi’s lily-white squad and Michigan State’s team with fifteen black players remained undefeated through October. Ole Miss continued to refuse to play integrated teams. After Michigan State defeated Indiana in a 35–0 blowout, the Spartans led both the Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI) polls. After learning that the Spartans had moved ahead of the Rebels in both polls, the *Mississippian*, Mississippi’s school newspaper, claimed that MSU’s victory should not have pushed Ole Miss out of the top ranking.³⁹

In a dialogue between the school newspapers, Jimmie Robertson of the *Mississippian* wrote to the *Michigan State News* to make clear that the students at Mississippi “would love to see the Rebels play one or two Big Ten teams each year. And on the other hand, we would like to see your Spartans and other Big Ten teams play southern squads.” Robertson acknowledged that Ole Miss faced three major problems scheduling games against top schools: the school’s location, the unwillingness of other teams to play the Rebels because Ole Miss had such a strong team, and “the race issue.” “We can’t play any teams which have Negro players,” Robertson lamented. “I feel this is ridiculous; so do the majority of the students at Ole Miss.” The *Mississippian* began campaigning to play integrated sports teams in 1959. As Robertson admitted however, this was unlikely: “The archaic thinking which prevails in our capital city makes this impossible.”⁴⁰ Ironically, the week after these exchanges between the students at Mississippi and MSU, both football teams lost.

Nonetheless, it was clear that recruiting more black players than other coaches gave Daugherty an advantage. “Our biggest job,” Daugherty asserted, “is recruiting. The thing we do least is coach. Eighty percent of a winning team is material.”⁴¹ Lawrence Casey, sports editor of the *Michigan Chronicle*, took note, suggesting that Daugherty would be

³⁸ Charles H. Martin, “Jim Crow in the Gymnasium: The Integration of College Basketball in the American South,” in *Sport and the Color Line: Black Athletes and Race Relations in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Patrick B. Miller and David K. Wiggins (New York: Routledge, 2004), 234.

³⁹ “Desegregating College Sports Creates Scheduling Problems,” *Southern School News* 9 (May 1962): 15; Paul Schnitt, “On Pep Riots,” *Michigan State News*, October 25, 1961. (The *State News* reprinted the article from the *Mississippian*.)

⁴⁰ “Ole Miss Has Problem, Too,” *Michigan State News*, November 2, 1961.

⁴¹ “Driving Man,” 74.

“a good candidate for the NAACP’s annual Spingarn Medal,” which had been created by NAACP chairman Joel E. Spingarn in 1914 to “distinguish merit and achievement” among African Americans, especially those who set an example for young people. After all, Casey argued, even though Daugherty was technically not eligible for the award, how many other white men were responsible for giving fifteen scholarships to African American students at a predominantly white school? “True, it’s a pretty fair distance from the cleat-scarred football turf to the civic-minded NAACP,” Casey argued, “but Duffy through his liberal employment of Negro players has ably bridged the gap.” He concluded by noting, “We’re not saying the answer to a winning team is the Negro player, but there’s no doubt they help, eh, Duffy?”⁴²

Despite winning praise from the African American community, Michigan State’s team struggled, ending the 1962 season at 5-4, good for a fifth-place tie in the conference. It was clear the Spartans would have to rebuild. Although the team was floundering on the field, Daugherty’s program continued to receive national attention for playing African Americans. The AP reported that MSU “has probably the largest delegation of Negro players in the history of major college football.”⁴³ Slowly other coaches began to realize the benefits of recruiting black players. Ohio State’s Woody Hayes contended that most coaches began playing black players not because they believed in the importance of equal opportunity regardless of color, but because they believed in the importance of winning and the financial rewards that accompanied success. While speaking to a group of coaches at a clinic Hayes stated, “We had a Negro problem once, I know. That was in 1959, when we had no Negroes on the team and we lost four [conference] football games. I hope we never have a problem like that [again].”⁴⁴ Even so, most coaches like Hayes and the University of Michigan’s Chalmers “Bump” Elliot were slow to play as many black athletes as Daugherty. Meanwhile, the MSU coach increased his recruitment of black players, especially in the South.

After moderate success in 1963, finishing 6-2-1 and second in the Big Ten, the 1964 team slid back to 4-5, placing sixth in the conference. The Spartans’ record left fans dissatisfied, but Daugherty

⁴² Lawrence Casey, “Sports Ledger,” *Michigan Chronicle*, November 10, 1961.

⁴³ The AP’s story was reported in the Nation of Islam’s newspaper *Muhammad Speaks*. “MSU’s 17 Negro Players May Top Major Colleges in Football,” *Muhammad Speaks*, October 31, 1962.

⁴⁴ “Colorless’ Cast Lost Big Ones,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 24, 1963.

had begun to develop talented players who would be critical to the team's success in the coming years, when it would have some of its best seasons. Many of these gifted players were blacks who had migrated from the South. Of the twenty-one black players on MSU's 1964 squad, ten were from the South, a major shift from Daugherty's first team in 1954, which did not have a single black southerner. In contrast, only three of Daugherty's fifty-seven white players were from the South.⁴⁵ Clearly, Daugherty limited recruiting in the South mainly to black players.

Yet, even as Daugherty worked to establish MSU's football program as a place of opportunity for black athletes, many whites decried Daugherty's liberal policies about integration. A number of alumni questioned why Daugherty used so many black players. He recalled one alumni meeting where in the middle of his speech someone yelled, "Hey, Duff, how many niggers are you gonna start this year?" Daugherty responded by questioning the manhood of the racist who was willing to yell an epithet from the back of the room but unwilling to step forward, identify himself, and take responsibility for his words. The room fell silent. Daugherty explained that it was his policy to "play the best players, whether they happened to be all black or all white." At another gathering at one alumnus's home, the man threatened the coach, "Duffy, you've been using a lot of niggers lately. You know, the minute you start four or five of them in the same backfield, you've lost me." Daugherty looked the man straight in the eye and said, "Then I've lost you right now," and with that he left.⁴⁶ Daugherty played African Americans to win, not to be known as a civil rights activist. Nonetheless, he risked his career by recruiting so many black players. What if his "experiment" had failed? It was one thing to play a few black players here and there, but to start more black players than whites, as he did with his 1965 defense, was unprecedented. At the beginning of the season, the only question that remained for Daugherty was whether it would work.

Twenty-three African Americans made the 1965 team, a new high for Spartan football. Not only were there more blacks than ever before, but they stood out as top playmakers as well. Among those starting on

⁴⁵ African American players hailed from Indiana (one), Louisiana (one), Michigan (four), Mississippi (one), New Jersey (one), New York (one), North Carolina (one), Ohio (two), Pennsylvania (two), South Carolina (three), Texas (two), and Virginia (two). *Band Day Program*, Michigan State v. Southern California, October 3, 1964.

⁴⁶ Hugh "Duffy" Daugherty, with Dave Diles, *Duffy: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 29-30.

defense were Charles “Bubba” Smith, George Webster, Charles Thornhill, Jim Summers, Jess Phillips, and Harold Lucas.⁴⁷ Willie Ray Smith, Bubba Smith’s father and the head football coach at the all-black Charlton-Pollard High in Beaumont, Texas, had a big impact on Daugherty’s success in recruiting black players in the state. After meeting Daugherty at a coaching clinic in Dallas in 1960, Willie Ray Smith and the Spartan coach developed a level of trust that created a pipeline for talent stretching all the way from Smith’s hometown of Beaumont to East Lansing.⁴⁸

When eighteen-year-old Charles “Bubba” Smith left Beaumont in the summer of 1963 to play football at Michigan State, the East Lansing campus looked nothing like his hometown. Before his trip to Michigan, Smith had not known very many whites well. In addition, Smith had been scarred by racial violence as a young boy when he witnessed a black man cry for mercy as five members of the Ku Klux Klan branded the letters KKK into the man’s chest with a hot iron. Those three letters burned into Smith’s memory, leaving him wondering, “Why do white people hate me?” As Bubba prepared to leave Beaumont, one of his father’s assistant coaches predicted, “You’ll never make it up there with the big boys. Those corn-fed white boys will lynch your fat ass without your pappy.”⁴⁹ This coach’s attitude highlights the ambivalence some black southerners felt toward the North. Blacks faced a complex set of unspoken rules there that forced them into the precarious world of de facto segregation.

Football enabled Smith to escape the endemic violence of a segregated South. In Michigan there were no “colored only” signs hanging above water fountains or nailed to bathroom doors, and no “colored sections” for blacks at football stadiums. But he faced other indignities. When Smith’s own fans, a predominantly white crowd, shouted, “Kill, Bubba, Kill!” Smith became, figuratively speaking, animalized. The command bore an eerie resemblance to the order one might give an attack dog. While Notre Dame students hanged him in effigy, Smith’s own fans cared only for his usefulness in winning games and raising the reputation of their school.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Michigan State football, 1965 team file, MSU-SIR; “23 Negro Gridders to Aid MSU!” *Michigan Chronicle*, September 25, 1965.

⁴⁸ “Bubba’s Father Cited as Star Maker,” *Chicago Defender*, December 10-16, 1966, (weekly paper).

⁴⁹ Smith does not disclose the assistant coach’s name, but the entire coaching staff was black. Bubba Smith and Hal DeWindt, *Kill, Bubba, Kill!* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 35-37, 67-69, 67 (quotation).

⁵⁰ These are not Smith’s exact words but are based on my own interpretation of events. Dick Schaap, “The Revolt of the Black Athletes,” *Look*, August 6, 1968, 76.

Off the field, Smith and his teammates had a difficult time finding an apartment in East Lansing. Even though Smith had left the segregated South, racism was also alive and well in his new northern surroundings.

Many of the African American players on MSU's 1965 and 1966 teams came to the university because so many schools, particularly in the South, did not recruit blacks. George Webster went to school at Westside High, a segregated school in Anderson, South Carolina. When Webster first became a starter in 1964, his talents led Daugherty to change the way Michigan State played defense. He even invented an entirely new position, "roverback," for Webster in order to take advantage of his lateral speed and tackling skills. Webster played from sideline to sideline, disrupting the opposing offense on virtually every play. But even his immense talent was not enough for Clemson University, only seventeen miles from Anderson, to recruit him. Clemson head football coach Frank Howard, born and raised in Alabama, once said on television, "I'll never have a nigra at Clemson."⁵¹ Ironically it was Howard, who knew Daugherty, who suggested Webster look at Michigan State.⁵² While many southern coaches had to adhere to the demands of alumni and fans who expected their teams to be segregated, many of these men were also part of a larger coaching fraternity and did favors for one another. In this case, Daugherty benefited from the South's insistence on segregation, gaining the talents of a black player whom Howard could never have recruited.

Just as Frank Howard pointed Webster to Michigan State, another coach from the South convinced Charles Thornhill of Roanoke, Virginia, to play for Daugherty. Thornhill may have been the best athlete Roanoke had ever seen. In 1962, at the end of his senior year, Thornhill was the only running back to gain more than one thousand yards in each of his four seasons at Addison High School. Local white citizens came to watch Thornhill compete against other all-black high schools. Thornhill recalled that at his last high-school game, "There were eight thousand whites on one side of the field and eight thousand blacks on the other side." After he led the city in scoring, the Roanoke Touchdown Club put race aside, and Thornhill became the first African American to receive a trophy from the segregated organization.⁵³

By the end of his last season at Addison, Thornhill had all but decided he was going to Notre Dame until Paul "Bear" Bryant, head

⁵¹ Alexander Wolff, "Ground Breakers," *Sports Illustrated*, November 7, 2005, 61.

⁵² Celizic, *Biggest Game*, 89.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 74; Charles Thornhill player file, MSU-SIR.

football coach at the University of Alabama and Daugherty's good friend, gave a speech at the Roanoke Touchdown Club awards banquet. Bryant called Daugherty and told him about Thornhill. Although Bryant still did not play African Americans, his legendary status carried a great deal of weight with Thornhill. "When Bear spoke to you, it was like God speaking," Thornhill declared. "You did what he said."⁵⁴ In addition, MSU's national reputation for playing African Americans led the black community in Roanoke to encourage Thornhill to follow Bryant's advice and sign with MSU.⁵⁵ As long as coaches like Bryant and Frank Howard continued to send black athletes to Duffy Daugherty instead of recruiting them for their own programs, however, African Americans' progress in the top-tier of college football would remain limited to the North.

While Thornhill, Smith, and Webster anchored the best defense in the country, MSU's offense thrived on the spectacular playmaking of Eugene Washington of La Porte, Texas. For Washington, Michigan State offered an opportunity that did not exist in Texas. "I left because I wanted to be a full American citizen." In his hometown, "everything was segregated and the colleges were a part of it. I'm quite certain that if I had gone to the University of Texas and tried out for the football team, they wouldn't have accepted me."⁵⁶ In an offense otherwise designed around running the football, Washington made a name for himself as one of the premier receivers in the country. In the past MSU had relied heavily on running the football, but Washington's talents allowed the team to expand its passing game. By the end of 1965, after only two years of varsity play, Washington had set new receiving records at MSU for career pass receptions and receiving yards as well as the single-season record for receptions and receiving yards.⁵⁷

In 1965 Michigan State shattered the myth that teams could not win by playing more blacks than whites. The defense started six black players and five whites. After the team defeated its first six opponents, *Sports Illustrated* suggested, "It would appear that the only way to keep the Spartans from the Rose Bowl would be to have Northwestern, Iowa, and Indiana play them simultaneously."⁵⁸ When the Spartans held Notre Dame to minus twelve yards rushing in a 12–3 win, it marked the third

⁵⁴ Thornhill player file, MSU-SIR; Dave Dye, "MSU's Thornhill Is Tough, Just Like His 'Mad Dog' Dad," *Detroit News*, September 15, 2005.

⁵⁵ Charles Thornhill player file, MSU-SIR.

⁵⁶ Richard Pennington, *Breaking the Ice: The Racial Integration of Southwest Conference Football* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1987), 10.

⁵⁷ Eugene Washington player file, MSU-SIR.

⁵⁸ John Underwood, "Leap for the Roses," *Sports Illustrated*, November 1, 1965, 19.

time that season that the Spartan defense had held opponents to negative yards on the ground; the other two victims were Michigan (minus fifty-one yards) and Ohio State (minus twelve yards). Notre Dame's head coach Ara Parseghian remarked, "I don't recall anything like this before."⁵⁹ The success of the 1965 team rested on Daugherty's ability to recognize talent in players whom other coaches refused to or could not pursue. "Duffy Daugherty," the *Michigan Chronicle's* Lawrence Casey wrote, "is getting a lot of the second-guessers or Monday-morning quarterbacks off his tail with his liberal treatment of those 23 Negro (count 'em—23) players."⁶⁰

Michigan State's ten-game winning streak ended in a 12–14 upset by UCLA in the Rose Bowl. The Spartans' perfect season might have been spoiled, but the team's record-breaking performances and the remarkable achievements of its star athletes were not erased. Eight Spartans made All-Big-Ten first teams, and five of them were African Americans. A number of organizations and media, including the Football Writers Association, the *Sporting News*, and the *New York Daily News*, named Daugherty as their coach of the year. Despite losing to UCLA, Daugherty's team was awarded the national championship by UPI and the Football Writers Association.⁶¹

Most of the team's star black players returned to play in 1966, and some sportswriters began to compare the Spartans to all-black schools. "When the Spartans come out of the tunnel for pre-game or half-time warm-ups," Lawrence Casey observed, they look "like Grambling or Florida A & M, don't they?"⁶² The 1966 team returned twenty-three lettermen from the national-championship team, and a total of eighteen black players, eleven of whom were from the South.⁶³ Twelve of the eighteen African American players were starters. This indicates that only relatively exceptional black players were recruited in the expectation that they would start for the team, while white athletes disproportionately

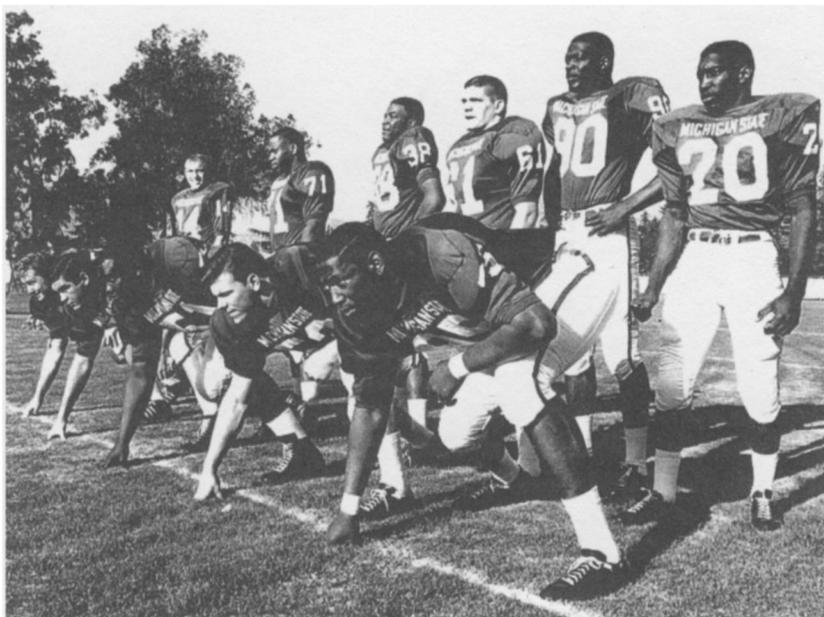
⁵⁹ Remarkably, the Spartans also held Northwestern to seven yards rushing and Iowa to just one yard on the ground. "Rival Coaches Agree: They've Never Seen Anything Like Michigan State's Defense," *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 1965.

⁶⁰ Lawrence Casey, "Sports Ledger," *Michigan Chronicle*, October 30, 1965.

⁶¹ Although there was no "official" national champion, these two rating agencies voted the Spartans number one, while Alabama finished first in the AP poll.

⁶² Casey, "Sports Ledger," October 30, 1966.

⁶³ Interestingly, the *Michigan Chronicle's* so-called tan stars, who were returning to the 1966 squad, included MSU's three Hawaiian players as well as the team's African American players. See "Tan Aces Sprinkle MSU '66 Roster," *Michigan Chronicle*, September 10, 1966.



Source: Photo courtesy of the Michigan State University Sports Information Office.

Michigan State's 1965 starting defense poses for a team photo. Bottom row, right to left: Bubba Smith, Buddy Owens, Harold Lucas, Don Bierowicz, Robert Viney. Top row, right to left: Jim Summers, George Webster, Ron Goovert, Jess Phillips, Charles Thornhill, and Don Japinga.

earned scholarships in reserve roles.⁶⁴ The most significant change from 1965 to 1966 was the new prominence of black players in key leadership roles. Seniors George Webster and Clinton Jones were named cocaptains, and for the first time in the team's history, the Spartans had an African American starting at quarterback.

Like many of his black teammates, Jimmy Raye had never played against white athletes while growing up in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Even though Raye wanted to attend North Carolina State, the University of North Carolina, or Wake Forest University, Michigan State

⁶⁴ The statistics on MSU's black and white players were compiled by examining official rosters and team pictures taken from various football programs.



Source: Photo courtesy of the Michigan State University Sports Information Office.

Duffy Daugherty gave Jimmy Raye the chance to play quarterback at a time when most college-football coaches refused to play African Americans at this position.

was the only “big-time” program that offered him a scholarship.⁶⁵ Equally important, Daugherty offered him the chance to play quarterback at a time when most coaches were reluctant to entrust the most important position on the field to an African American. Raye would prove to be an excellent leader, helping to break down the stereotype that blacks could not handle the pressures of making key decisions and snap judgments. Of the thirteen black quarterbacks playing at

⁶⁵ A. J. Carr, “Spartans’ Raye Anxious to Play State,” *The News and Observer* (Charlotte, N.C.), August 26, 1966; Robert Markus, “There’s Still a Raye of Hope at M.S.U.,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 26, 1967.

predominantly white schools, two were at Michigan State—Raye and backup Eric Marshall.⁶⁶

The Spartans opened 1966 with what *Sports Illustrated* called a “soul-brother backfield—three Negroes and a Hawaiian.”⁶⁷ Playing Raye, Clinton Jones, Dwight Lee, and Bob Apisa, while throwing the ball mostly to Gene Washington, meant entrusting the entire offense to a group of players that did not include a white ballcarrier. In addition, Michigan State’s defense went well beyond breaking the “50 percent color barrier” by starting eight African Americans. When Duffy Daugherty called out all eight names in the fall, Bubba Smith thought to himself, “Emancipation at Michigan State [has] arrived.”⁶⁸ When the defense huddled, for the first time in their lives Pat Gallinagh, Nick Jordan, and Phil Hoag, the three white players, found they were in the minority. Daugherty continued to push the envelope when it came to integration, and even obstinate white alumni could not argue with the results.

The 1966 Spartans won their first nine games, outscoring their opponents 283–89. Heading into the last game of the season the Spartans were undefeated, as were Alabama and Notre Dame. State’s final game against Notre Dame received unprecedented media buildup since the Fighting Irish were ranked number one and the Spartans number two in both major polls.⁶⁹ In the minds of sportswriters and fans, “The Poll Bowl” would determine the national championship.

Notre Dame had not won a national title since 1953, which was also the year that the team included its first black players. After this beginning, however, the integration of Notre Dame’s football team was a slow process. For years Notre Dame was arguably the most successful football program in the North without black players. Notre Dame remained mostly white since Catholics all across the country wanted to play for the Fighting Irish. Unlike most other football

⁶⁶ In addition to Raye and Marshall at MSU, the University of Minnesota had two black quarterbacks, Curt Wilson and Ray Stephens. Other black quarterbacks included Stanford University’s Gene Washington and Dave Lewis, Colgate University’s Ron Burton, Xavier University’s Carroll Williams, the University of Cincinnati’s Tony Jackson, West Texas State University’s Hank Washington, the University of Nebraska-Omaha’s Marlin Briscoe, the University of Tulsa’s Mike Stripling, and the University of Missouri’s Garrett Phelps. See Robert G. Hunter, “1966: Year of the Quarterbacks,” *Ebony*, December 1966, 39; “Negro Quarterbacks Are Rapidly Gaining Stature on Way to Pros,” *Michigan Chronicle*, November 12, 1966.

⁶⁷ “Scorecard: All-America Problem,” *Sports Illustrated*, May 6, 1968, 8.

⁶⁸ Smith and DeWindt, *Kill, Bubba, Kill!*, 84.

⁶⁹ Stabley, *Spartans*, 239.

programs, Notre Dame did not have to search the country for players since so many high-school coaches at Catholic schools sent their top recruits to South Bend. Notre Dame head coach Ara Parseghian found it difficult to recruit black players. "The school was lily white," he explained. "Trying to find a black athlete who was academically qualified and was willing to accept Catholicism as it was in those days, at an all-male school, was a problem."⁷⁰

The racial makeup of Notre Dame's sports teams shaped African Americans' views of the university. Terrence Moore, a sports columnist for the *Atlanta Constitution*, grew up in South Bend in a large black family. Most of Moore's relatives were not Notre Dame fans because "in the black community Notre Dame was seen as a racist institution." When his family got together to watch the game against Michigan State, Moore remembered that "except for me, my mother, and my two brothers, everybody was cheering for Michigan State. It was the racial issue. So essentially, to my family, it was the white boys at Notre Dame against the black Michigan State team."⁷¹ "The Poll Bowl" demonstrated that Michigan State football was more progressive than the most celebrated football program in the country.

"The Poll Bowl" had a larger cultural significance as thirty-three million people around the country watched "the white boys at Notre Dame against the black Michigan State team." It drew the largest television audience in college-football history to date.⁷² Restrictions on television appearances initially posed a problem for the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), which was to broadcast the game. It was scheduled to be a regional telecast because Notre Dame had used up its allotment of nationally televised games. Letters and telegrams flooded the offices of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and ABC demanding that they make an exception and broadcast the game nationally. The American Broadcasting Company claimed it received fifty thousand letters.⁷³ Even whites in the South clamored to see the biggest game of the year. The *Baltimore Afro-American* reported, "A Dixie football fan has asked a Federal Court . . . to provide better games on

⁷⁰ Celizic, *Biggest Game*, 106. Notre Dame's first black players were Wayne Edmonds and Dick Washington. See Will Robinson, "Two Negroes Slated for Gridiron Action at N.D.," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 26, 1953.

⁷¹ Steve Delsohn, *Talking Irish: The Oral History of Notre Dame Football* (New York: Avon Books, 1998), 141.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 128, 141.

⁷³ Ronald A. Smith, *Play-by-Play: Radio, Television, and Big-Time College Sport* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 108.

Southern TV screens,” but “this year’s Spartans could cause something of a complex in Dixieland, what with their lineup that has a much stronger resemblance to Morgan or Florida A and M, than to Princeton or Alabama.”⁷⁴ Ultimately, the NCAA television committee gave in, and millions of viewers across the country tuned in to watch the game. This was a watershed for television networks. They realized that a national audience existed for regular-season games and that broadcasting such games could potentially be quite profitable.

On November 19, 1966, more than eighty thousand fans packed a Spartan Stadium that had been designed to hold seventy-six thousand people. For the thousands in attendance and the millions watching across the country, the contest yielded an unsatisfying 10–10 tie. The game ended in controversy when Ara Parseghian elected to run out the clock. With 1:10 remaining and the ball on Notre Dame’s 30-yard line, Parseghian did not want to turn the ball over and give the Spartans a chance to win. As the clock ticked away, Bubba Smith knew that his team’s chance to win the national title was slipping away. He stood in the huddle and said, “Do you think we’re going win the National Championship even if they run the clock out? We got too many niggers on this team to win the National Championship.”⁷⁵ The Spartans’ season had ended. Michigan State did not go to the Rose Bowl, as the Big Ten had an odd rule that prevented schools from playing in the game in consecutive seasons. The next week the Fighting Irish destroyed Southern California 51–0. Both the AP and UPI voted Notre Dame number one in the final polls. Michigan State was second, and Alabama, the only undefeated and untied team in the country, came in third.

Daugherty’s trailblazing recruitment of black players from the South and the subsequent success he had playing African Americans proved to coaches across the country that black athletes could lift a sports program to prominence. “Duffy made a statement to the sports world when he brought in all those blacks,” George Webster declared.⁷⁶ The coaching world began to take notice. “I’m getting fed up with you invading my recruiting territory and I want it stopped,” Duffy Daugherty told UCLA head coach Tommy Prothro in 1965. Surprised, Prothro answered, “What are you talking about? I haven’t set a foot in Michigan.” Daugherty fired back, “I’m not talking about Michigan, I’m talking

⁷⁴ “And He’s You Know What.”

⁷⁵ Stabley, *Spartans*, 240; Dan Jenkins, “An Upside-Down Game,” *Sports Illustrated*, November 28, 1966, 22–27; Celizic, *Biggest Game*, 300 (quotation).

⁷⁶ Celizic, *Biggest Game*, 122.

about Texas.⁷⁷ After the 1966 season, teams across the South began recruiting black players from their home states, making it increasingly difficult for Daugherty to sign the best black players in the South.⁷⁸

The University of Houston's Bill Yeoman was one the first coaches of a major college in the South to follow Daugherty's example. Yeoman, an assistant of Daugherty's from 1954 to 1961, helped break Houston's color barrier when running back Warren McVea joined the Cougars in 1965.⁷⁹ Yeoman made it clear why he played African Americans: "You can play football without Negro boys," he said, "but if you want to win you'd better have three or four."⁸⁰ By 1966 southern football fans grew increasingly frustrated when players from their home states left the South. When Atlanta native Jack Pitts signed with MSU in 1966, the liberal *Atlanta Constitution's* headline read: "Tech, Georgia Fumble; Michigan State Scores."⁸¹ The next year the Southeastern Conference (SEC) color bar fell when Nat Northington debuted as a player for the University of Kentucky. In 1967 the U.S. Justice Department warned the remaining segregated SEC programs to comply with the law or face running a university without federal funds. Federal intervention forced racist administrators and athletic directors to think about their finances and cease Jim Crow seating at football games as well.⁸² Slowly southern schools dropped their bans against black players. In 1971 every Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) team had a black player, and in 1972 the two hold-outs in the SEC—Ole Miss and the University of Georgia—added African Americans to their rosters.⁸³ Thus, a combination of federal intervention, the success of northern teams playing African Americans,

⁷⁷ Scott M. Reid, "Millions Watched the Texas-Arkansas Game in 1969," *Orange County Register* (California), December 23, 2005.

⁷⁸ "LSU to Recruit Top Stars," *Michigan Chronicle*, December 3, 1966; "Southwest AC Ends Race Bar," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 4, 1966.

⁷⁹ Pennington, *Breaking the Ice*, 25-33.

⁸⁰ Elinor Kaine, "Black Players Integrating Colleges," newspaper article (c. 1970), Bubba Smith player file, MSU-SIR.

⁸¹ "Tech, Georgia Fumble; Michigan State Scores," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 5, 1966.

⁸² John Sayle Watterson, *College Football: History, Spectacle, Controversy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 319-20.

⁸³ Clemson and Virginia were the last two ACC teams to integrate in 1971. The SEC's record of integrating its major sports is equally troubling. Of the first fifty-six black players in the SEC, 20 percent left their teams during their initial seasons or the following year. See Joan Paul et al., "The Arrival and Ascendance of Black Athletes in the Southeastern Conference, 1966-1980," *Phylon* 45, no. 4 (1984): 285-88; Charles H. Martin, "The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow in Southern College Sports: The Case of the Atlantic Coast Conference," *North Carolina Historical Review* 76 (July 1999): 269-71.

and pressure from sportswriters pushed southern athletic departments to “cut Jim Crow.”

As southern coaches began to compete with Daugherty to sign black players, coaches at schools that had long been integrated were confronted by protests on the part of black athletes. From 1967 to 1968 more than three dozen such disturbances took place on predominantly white college campuses, including the University of California at Berkeley, Western Michigan University, and the University of Kansas.⁸⁴ The “revolt of the black athlete” merged with the Black Power movement on college campuses, as black students called for self-determination, and racial pride.⁸⁵ The revolt reached MSU after Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, when a white assistant football coach claimed the death of the civil rights movement’s greatest hero did not “have anything to do with practice.”⁸⁶ To this coach, King’s death was irrelevant to tackling, running routes, and throwing a football. But the civil rights leader’s murder deeply affected the young black men who played football; they wanted to join the national mourning for their fallen leader. This assistant coach’s comment typified the insensitivity of many white coaches to the problems faced by African Americans, including their own players.

On April 4, 1968, Robert L. Green, a professor of educational psychology at the university who had been King’s colleague in the SCLC, addressed the mourning students at MSU. In his speech, Green claimed that black athletes had “made Michigan State University what it is today” but pointed out that there were still no black coaches in the entire athletic department.⁸⁷ In response to pressures from the Black Student Association and Green, on April 18 John Hannah and Athletic Director Clarence “Biggie” Munn hired 1951 MSU All-American Don Coleman as the university’s first black assistant football coach.⁸⁸ However, the players saw this move as merely a token hiring. A closed meeting was organized by football players Charles Bailey, Frank Traylor, LaMarr Thomas, and several others to discuss their options.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York: Free Press, 1969), 88.

⁸⁵ William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement in American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁸⁶ Schaap, “Revolt of the Black Athletes,” 72.

⁸⁷ Brian Valee and Helen Clegg, “Convocation at MSU Honors Martin Luther King,” *State Journal* (Lansing), April 5, 1968.

⁸⁸ “Coleman 1st Negro Coach Picked by MSU,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 19, 1968.

⁸⁹ The date of this meeting is unclear, but journalist Ron Johnson confirmed that the meeting did occur previous to the presentation of grievances. See Johnson, “The Struggle of the Black Athlete,” *Grapevine Journal* (East Lansing), May 9, 1972.

Among the resulting demands were appointment of black coaches for all sports, black cheerleaders, black employees throughout the athletic department, and a black academic counselor.⁹⁰

When the athletes gave Munn their demands, he “scanned the list, chuckled, and began crossing them out one by one.” One player claimed that Munn then smiled and said, “Ho, ho, I guess you want a black ticket manager or something.” Upon hearing that, the athlete determined, “I wasn’t going to be his little black pet anymore.”⁹¹ Munn’s refusal to take the athletes’ demands seriously precipitated the boycott. Spokesman LaMarr Thomas explained that when Munn refused to sign a statement that he would take the black players’ grievances to Hannah, the athletes decided that a boycott was their only option. On April 25, twenty-four football players took the lead and walked out of spring practice, threatening to boycott athletic events for the year if their grievances were not addressed by the athletic department.⁹²

When Michigan State’s black athletes made their protest public, most of the country was surprised, because as sportswriter Pete Axthelm observed, “Duffy Daugherty has built a reputation as the master recruiter and ‘handler’ of Negroes, where big-time football and Negroes have become almost synonymous.”⁹³ Many whites could not understand why black athletes were speaking out against racism in sports. In their view, sports had always been “good to the Negro.” Outraged by the black athletes’ stance, many alumni wrote to President Hannah. One alumnus cancelled his football season tickets because he could not “support a University or an Administration that doesn’t have the guts to stand up to a minority group of any students, such as the group of ‘Black Athletes,’ that are calling the shots for the Athletic Dept.” He added, “It wouldn’t be so bad if this group was poor and downtrodden, but these athletes are the privileged few of the whole

⁹⁰ Joe Mitch, “Negro Athletes Call Boycott; Make Demands of University,” *Michigan State News* (East Lansing), April 27, 1968. Black athletes at MSU also complained that they were forced to take courses that helped them maintain academic eligibility but that did not help to fulfill graduation requirements. Among student-athletes who entered MSU as freshmen between 1960 and 1964, 76 percent of white football players graduated compared to only 33 percent of black football players. See Beth J. Shapiro, “The Black Athlete at Michigan State University” (master’s thesis, Michigan State University, 1970), 14–15.

⁹¹ Pete Axthelm, “The Angry Black Athlete,” *Newsweek*, July 15, 1968, 58.

⁹² In all, thirty-eight athletes joined the boycott, most of whom were football players. Mitch, “Negro Athletes Call Boycott.”

⁹³ Axthelm, “Angry Black Athlete,” 58.

student body.”⁹⁴ Another alumnus stated, “To many [alumni] it appears that Negroes have been treated more than fairly in the athletic department, and that scholarships to these students have almost outnumbered those to white athletes. Several of my friends from rival universities have commented on this and not too acceptably.”⁹⁵ At MSU, black athletes not only took positions away from white players on the field, but also their activism threatened the social order and political power held by whites at the university. To many whites the presence of too many blacks in the athletic program endangered the prestige and good image of *their* school.

Duffy Daugherty, like many whites, could not understand why his black players were boycotting university athletics. When asked about the protest, he referred to the fact that MSU led the country in providing scholarships to African Americans. Daugherty addressed the football players’ protest in his autobiography, referring to it as the “so-called ‘black problem,’” and defended his program, claiming, “It [discrimination] never was a problem.” Daugherty’s inability to understand the feelings of his black players revealed his insensitivity to the problems they often experienced off the field and the subtle forms of racism African Americans still suffered within the athletic department itself. By referring to the athletes’ grievances as the “so-called ‘black problem,’” he illustrated that he did not really understand the players to whom he felt he had given so much. He went on to equate integration with equality: “I was the first coach who actively recruited blacks out of the South. And I didn’t go after them because they were black, but because they were good football players. I never thought of those players as being different, and they knew it.”⁹⁶

Much like the assistant coach who had commented that the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., had nothing to do with football, Daugherty failed to understand the relationship between his black players and the larger protests then taking place on America’s campuses. He wrote, “There was a problem on campus as there was all across the country but it had nothing whatsoever to do with football.” Daugherty could not see that in this case race *did* matter because these were not just players boycotting sports. They were also black students who felt obligated to

⁹⁴ Edward Soergel to John Hannah, May 19, 1968, folder 45, box 55, UA 2.1.12 (General Subject Files), John Hannah Papers, Michigan State University Archives and Historical Collections, East Lansing.

⁹⁵ L. J. Vincent to John Hannah, April 30, 1968, in *ibid*.

⁹⁶ Mitch, “Negro Athletes Call Boycott”; Daugherty and Diles, *Duffy*, 128.

take a stand to raise the status of all African Americans on campus, not just athletes. The coach did not respect the Black Student Association, in which some players were active members, referring to it as the “so-called Black Student Alliance.” To underscore the absence of any racial problems in his football program, Daugherty pointed to the hiring of Don Coleman and noted that the “alliance” also had problems with “other sports.”⁹⁷

After just one full day and the interruption of a total of two football practices, the black players ended their boycott. The athletes softened their stance after the administration took positive steps toward meeting their demands, even though Hannah was at a Civil Rights Commission meeting in Montgomery, Alabama, at the time. After meeting with MSU’s Big Ten faculty representative, LaMarr Thomas, the athletes’ spokesman, explained, “We feel the university is moving toward the alleviation of our grievances. It was not our intention to boycott.” Michigan State administrators agreed to hire another black football coach and a black track coach. On May 17 the university announced the hiring of James Bibbs, a 1951 All-American sprinter at Eastern Michigan University, as its first black assistant track coach.⁹⁸ In addition, MSU agreed to recruit more black baseball players and swimmers; to hire black employees for Jenison Field House, the intramural building, and the ice arena “right away”; to appoint black physicians and trainers; to have black cheerleaders by September; to discuss the hiring of a black counselor; and to meet with black athletes on June 1, 1968, to evaluate the progress of these goals.⁹⁹ Michigan State’s black athletes wanted the athletic department to recruit not just black athletes, but also coaches, cheerleaders, administrative assistants, and laborers. Thus, the boycott’s aim was not primarily to secure benefits for the players themselves, but to ensure equal treatment for future black athletes and provide opportunities for African Americans at all levels of the university.

Examining the fully integrated Michigan State football teams of the mid-1960s allows us to understand better the struggles against racism in that era. Michigan State’s greatest teams, replete with talented black players, became a dominant force in college football, silencing racist

⁹⁷ Daugherty and Diles, *Duffy*, 128.

⁹⁸ “MSU Hires ’61 Track Ace as 1st Negro Coach,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 17, 1968; Seibold, *Spartan Sports Encyclopedia*, 1024. The *Chicago Tribune*’s headline reads ’61, but this is an error; it should read ’51 since Bibbs ran at Eastern Michigan University from 1949 to 1951.

⁹⁹ “Black Athletes Cite Distortion, Misquotation,” *Michigan State News* (East Lansing), May 1, 1968.

critics by defying playing quotas for blacks. Although Duffy Daugherty created a progressive roster, his own black players took the lead in demanding equality beyond the playing field. Risking their scholarships, MSU's black athletes insisted on playing a role in the decision-making process in order to achieve true racial equality on campus. They realized that their own athletic achievements meant little if they were not treated as equals off the field as well. For these athletes, Black Power meant more than dominating their opponents on Saturday afternoons—Black Power meant using collective resistance to end racial inequality throughout athletics.

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