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SPORT HISTORY, RACE, AND THE COLLEGE GRIDIRON

A Southern California Turning Point

By Lane Demas

On December 3, 1898, the season-ending banquet to honor Harvard's football team was a raucous affair.¹ Having completed an unbeaten season, the squad celebrated surprise victories over several Ivy League rivals, including the University of Pennsylvania and Yale. The evening's featured speaker, Theodore Roosevelt, proved to be a boisterous, energetic orator and a huge football fan. Roosevelt, a Harvard alum and newly elected governor of New York, received a warm ovation from an audience of influential administrators, students, and boosters. Yet the evening's largest cheer came with the introduction of assistant coach William Henry Lewis. While a student at Harvard's law school, the popular Lewis had become one of the first African Americans to integrate a college squad when he joined the team in 1892.² Upon graduation, Lewis was named an assistant coach—also a first for a black man.

Lewis' popularity, eloquence, and skill as a jurist helped him join Roosevelt's inner circle—a group of old football chums, Harvard gentlemen, and future "Rough Riders" in the Spanish-American War. While Lewis

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himself stayed home during the war and continued to coach, his relationship with the new president persisted until 1907, when Roosevelt promoted him to assistant U.S. attorney in Boston. Under the subsequent administration of William Howard Taft, Lewis became assistant attorney general of the United States, at that point the highest-ranking federal office ever held by an African American.

William Lewis used the burgeoning game of college football to earn a reputation in the press as a “very strong,” “intelligent,” and “heady” player.³ This image made him a nice fit for Roosevelt’s posse of headstrong leaders and administrators. In a period of renewed racial animosity, contemporary black politicians had to find some means to forge positive public images if they had any hope of advancement. And yet Lewis is not thought of as a black sporting hero in the same way as Jackie Robinson or Joe Louis. Unlike boxing and baseball, college football has never been a subject of serious study in terms of culture, race, and integration. Rather than examine the nebulous story of integration in collegiate football, scholarly attention and popular memory have both chosen instead to focus on clear and powerful individual stories of integration—the legendary biographies of professional black athletes like Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Jackie Robinson. This remains the case even for the postwar era, when television exposure launched a boom in the popularity of college football and made some student athletes household names alongside professional boxers and baseball players. Scholars have explored the process by which black sports celebrities were appropriated in a number of debates, including the biological nature of blacks and African American physical prowess, dissension over the emphasis placed by the black community on achievement in sports and entertainment, and the debates surrounding the role of black athletes as community leaders or racial “spokesmen.”⁴ Yet these issues emerged out of a growing African American presence in select *professional* sports at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly boxing and Negro League baseball, not amateur college athletics. Many later observers found them particularly difficult to apply in the realm of collegiate football.

Indeed, there never was a single “color line” or integrating figure in college football, but rather a tediously slow and arduous process—one that spanned nearly eighty years and countless players. While William Lewis had played successfully for both Amherst and Harvard in the 1890s, black football players sparked very different reactions throughout the rest

of the country. In 1897, the *New York Times* announced the “first football game ever played by negroes in Tennessee.”⁵ The result was a fight between the players and a group of “drunken white men,” leaving one player dead and six seriously injured. Only a few dozen African American students played on major college squads for the next forty years, while zero competed for southern universities before World War II.⁶ However, an important exception is the UCLA football team of 1939–41. Five African American players (including Jackie Robinson) won the support of national sports writers, the UCLA student body, and the university administration—even with the prospect of playing segregated teams.⁷ Three UCLA players—Kenneth Washington, Woodrow Strode, and Jackie Robinson—held prominent starting positions, each playing both offense and defense. Washington, who graduated in 1940 after contributing to the team’s most successful season ever, was regarded as the best football player in UCLA’s history. Jackie Robinson played two seasons at UCLA, transferring in 1939 from Pasadena City College and excelling in four sports—football, basketball, baseball, and track. Although he left in 1941 without graduating, Robinson’s short career at UCLA is perhaps the most impressive in collegiate athletic history. Woody Strode was a powerful starting end for the Bruin football squad and also earned considerable success throwing the shot put. Later in life, his athletic frame and good looks helped land him movie roles throughout the ’60s and ’70s. Washington, Robinson, and Strode, often nicknamed the “Sepia Trio” by the mainstream media, formed the core of the team. Washington and Strode also went on to become the first African American football players to join the National Football League, while Robinson’s first season as a Brooklyn Dodger has joined the Montgomery bus boycott, *Brown v. Topeka*, and the March on Washington as a seminal event in the history of American civil rights. Although not a consistent starter, African American end Ray Bartlett also made significant contributions to the UCLA squad, while black teammate Johnny Wynne played sparingly as a lineman. Yet these UCLA athletes garnered support not so much as individual race heroes (as Robinson would in 1947) but rather as a “black team,” a group of young men who often endured derogatory references, taunts, and police brutality.

While UCLA was not the first major team to allow African American participants, it was the first to feature a group of black players in starting positions. Rarely was a prominent team with a national following even

willing to accept a lone black player. Many of the celebrated teams of the period were clear segregationist powerhouses—the University of Tennessee, the University of Alabama, Duke University, and others—yet even northern football shrines like Notre Dame remained all white. On the West Coast, the king of football was undoubtedly the University of Southern California, a school that had not featured a black player since the 1920s.

In 1922, the *American Physical Education Review* published an article entitled “Racial Traits in Athletics.” The author, Elmer D. Mitchell, articulated both the scientific and popular sentiment prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s regarding black student athletes. According to Mitchell, “a colored youth who remains in school until the age of interscholastic competition is usually of the bright industrious type, and the same qualities show when he participates in athletic games.”⁸ When black students competed on predominately white teams, they were praised only insofar as they followed the directions and leadership of their white teammates. White students were often given free reign over initiating “inferior” players, including lower-classmen and blacks. Again, Mitchell praised the black athlete who took such racist criticism from his fellow college students:

The negro mingles easily with white participants, accepting an inferior status and being content with it. I have often seen a gay-spirited crowd of college players play pranks upon a colored teammate . . . and in all cases the spirit of reception was a good-humored one. The negro, as a fellow player with white men, is quiet and unassertive; even though he may be the star of the team he does not assume openly to lead.⁹

Northern teams with one or two black players in the 1920s and 1930s drew praise for “mingling” the races, all within a racial hierarchy completely separate from skill, experience, or the game itself. However, Mitchell ominously noted the danger of teams featuring more than a few black students:

I have seen cases though where such a star player, if allowed authority, quickly assumed an air of bravado. . . . [W]hen the negro plays on a team composed of members of his own race . . . he is an inferior athlete, because many things crop out to handicap his natural skill. One of these is the tendency to be theatrical or to play to the grandstand. . . . The great prizefighter, Jack Johnson, always jested and carried on repartee while he was fighting.¹⁰

In terms of popular “black teams,” Mitchell could only refer to the barnstorming, amusement-oriented baseball teams made popular by the Negro leagues. However, by the late 1930s football fans would face the prospect of major college teams featuring large numbers of black students. This would be driven specifically by UCLA’s success on the eve of World War II. Until the war, however, northern schools that allowed black players to participate expected them to function under the very racial hierarchy that Mitchell praised in the *American Physical Education Review*. By 1939, one black newspaper counted only thirty-eight black players on major white teams throughout the country.¹¹ Most of these were lone individuals who rarely saw playing time. Moreover, because they were not viewed as integral to their team’s success, coaches and administrators could bench their black players without stirring much animosity, a useful tool whenever a northern squad faced a southern school with strict segregation policies.

From William Lewis—who integrated Harvard football in 1892—to the integration of the University of Mississippi, Louisiana State University, and University of Georgia football programs in 1972, the men who integrated college football acted as a “collective” Jackie Robinson. This was a movement towards integration that more closely resembles the reality of the postwar struggle for civil rights—grass roots, populist agitation at the local level, particularly in the public sphere (transportation, leisure, education, etc.). Nevertheless, while the geo-political ebb and flow of college integration offers a better parallel to the broader struggle over African American civil rights, sports history still emphasizes the larger-than-life persona of the professional “race hero.” This is why athletes like William Henry Lewis remain largely unknown in popular memory, while professional personalities like Lewis’ contemporary, Jack Johnson, remain fully ingrained.

Nevertheless, despite their value and power, the popularity of these individuals—Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, Jack Johnson—and their stories point to a fundamental undercurrent that continues to influence our understanding of the civil rights movement. Namely, it is a desire to reduce or simplify a history that revolves around individual champions breaking binary racial “lines” or “barriers.” Furthermore, this attempt to ingrain such a formula in popular memory is ongoing even in the twenty-first century. For example, in his study of golfer Tiger Woods, Henry Yu

examines how Woods' popularity exemplifies important changes in American notions of race. In particular, Yu focuses on the obsession to define Woods' racial background—a mixture of Caucasian, African American, and Southeast Asian ancestry that Woods himself has dubbed “Cablasan.” Yu argues that “contemporary descriptions of cultural difference retain many of the problems of older languages of race.”¹² Accordingly, soon after his arrival in the professional ranks the popular press began to classify Woods only as “black” or “African American.” In reality, Woods' life and racial attributes characterize the shifting migrations of the twentieth century and the complex displacement of race and culture from specific geographic locales. His father was an African American GI who served in the Pacific, his mother a woman of mixed Southeast Asian lineage. However, Yu aptly states that Tiger's image is best marketed toward a global audience that still imagines “the end of race-based conflict in the United States as an act of individual redemption, blinding Americans to the structural bases of racial hierarchy.”¹³ Thus, Woods' “Cablasan” heritage has been “blackened” by the mainstream press and the golfing star placed comfortably within the pantheon of twentieth-century African American race heroes.

This is why biographical portraits of “individual redemption” and the breaking of binary racial barriers have dominated scholarly attention devoted to the sporting world. As a result, historians have focused much more on professional and individualized athletics instead of amateur, team-oriented sports. This line of analysis yields the canon of “race hero” biographies—Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, and Muhammad Ali—even John L. Sullivan and Rocky Marciano have been treated largely as race (or ethnic) figures.¹⁴ All of these scholarly treatments have laid an invaluable foundation, yet they can also obscure the more complex history of racial integration in all facets of American society, not just entertainment or leisure.

In many ways, this historical-biographical approach to the history of sport and race mimics the mainstream historiography of the civil rights movement. In his multi-volume biography of Martin Luther King Jr., Taylor Branch grapples with these very issues. As opposed to socioeconomic conditions or grass-roots populism, Branch chooses to focus on King's leadership and individual will as the human agency responsible for the course of the movement, claiming that “King's life is the best and

most important metaphor for American history in the watershed postwar years."¹⁵ However, Branch is also adamant that a biography of King as individual hero is not enough to capture the movement's progress or appeal. "But to focus upon the historical King," writes Branch, "as generally established by his impact on white society . . . makes for unstable history and collapsible myth."¹⁶ To what extent King shaped the movement—or the movement shaped King—is a difficult question, and Branch has devoted three volumes to answering it. Even the very layout of the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee, hints at this tension in civil rights historiography. While presenting wonderful exhibits on the courage of countless people, the final display is a shrine to King located in the very motel bedroom outside which he was gunned down in 1968.

Yet perhaps King's story is not even the best parallel to the biographical portraits of athletes like Robinson, Louis, and Johnson. Rosa Parks invariably comes to mind when defining this question of a single, progressive figure or lone integrating moment as defining the movement. Here, too, the parallels are striking. Branch reveals the painstaking effort with which the Parks episode was employed as a symbol. Local activists picked up on the Parks case precisely because her image seemed impeccable. Like Robinson's stint as a Dodger, the commitment to Parks and her case was an experiment that hinged on her ability to fulfill her role and "make a good impression on white judges."¹⁷ According to Jo Ann Robinson, Parks was "respected in all black circles . . . a medium-sized, cultured mulatto woman; a civic and religious worker; quiet, unassuming, and pleasant in manner and appearance; dignified and reserved; of high morals and a strong character."¹⁸ Although scholars have emphasized the movement's populism, many still find that the personality-driven characterizations of the "King years" or the "Parks episode" are too powerful to leave behind.

How can the study of popular sport inform these analyses of the civil rights movement? If it remains committed to the study of transcendent professional athletes—who merely symbolized broader shifts in America's racial landscape—sport history will fail. There is little benefit to thinking of the late 1930s as the "era of Joe Louis" instead of the era of a "cultural front," as Michael Denning has so eloquently written.¹⁹ Instead, sport history is in need of the kind of enrichment that scholars have

brought to the study of movies, music, and literature. Brian Ward's examination of postwar music is an excellent example. In *Just My Soul Responding*, Ward outlines the stark difference between the black music of the 1960s and the "sweet, biracial pop" of the late 1950s. Ward argues that neither genre was a more "authentic" expression of popular black consciousness, even though whites were much more likely to embrace the likes of Sam Cooke, while soul artists increasingly employed rhetoric that emphasized black separatism. Rather than a question of authenticity, Ward instead sees the era of biracial music as emblematic of a positive hope for social integration, a moment of optimism in music that paralleled public sentiment in the aftermath of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. According to Ward, the failure of this broader hope allowed for an era of interracial pop music to fade with it.²⁰

These same kinds of questions need to be applied in the realm of sports. Is there such a thing as a more "authentic" black athlete? Randy Roberts, Gail Bederman, and others may point to Jack Johnson. Through his constant manipulation of the press, Johnson was the first professional black athlete to consistently transcend his sport and influence the larger discourse of race in America. Reaction to Johnson from both the boxing world and the American public revealed that influential athletes would be subject to the same scrutiny as African American community leaders. However, critics by and large reserved such judgments for Johnson's behavior outside the ring, not in it. Although Bederman has emphasized Johnson's public persona in the ring—and there are numerous stories, such as the fighter's penchant for wrapping his penis in gauze to make it appear larger to audiences—in reality, Johnson was discredited as a racial spokesman because of perceptions surrounding his "private" life.²¹ However, that rubric would posit Joe Louis' success in constructing an image that pacified white America as a form of inauthenticity. Certainly no one is prepared to criticize Louis for his demeanor or question his "authenticity" as an African American. Johnson enflamed white sentiment and embodied white anxiety surrounding the social and economic transformations of the 1920s. Yet Johnson, too, was self-consciously constructing an image for the public just like Joe Louis, meaning his persona cannot be characterized as more "authentic" than Louis'. Perhaps the success of Louis represents a similar moment of biracial hope fueled by postwar patriotic sentiment. The study of culture invariably brings up notions of authenticity, and yet sport history has virtually ignored the topic. The

problem with applying these (and other) questions to the sporting world is not that sports have lagged in popularity to other cultural expressions. Nor is it true that sporting fans have historically enjoyed their hobby in a vacuum devoid of meaning. The problem instead is our own knowledge of sports—namely, its lack of depth and limited scope.

This is why an understanding of athletes like William Henry Lewis and the integration of college football represent an important departure from the history that has triumphantly celebrated men like Johnson, Louis, and Robinson. In theory, college football was an amateur sport—one that featured student athletes as young as eighteen, participating in a sport that lacked the kind of imaging necessary in constructing “race heroes.” Even as its popularity soared with the advent of television, victory on the gridiron most often brought prestige to institutions and mascots, not individual athletes. College football remained dominated by anonymous students, and a majority of players never received recognition outside their campus newspapers. Many Americans undoubtedly know that Jackie Robinson broke Major League Baseball’s racial barrier in 1947. Few realize, however, that Robinson had earlier appeared in college football games at UCLA and played in front of bi-racial crowds that exceeded 100,000—twice as many spectators as in most contemporary baseball stadiums.²² In addition, the contests drew large support from the African American community in Los Angeles—a community that had little to do with UCLA. “If we drew 100,000 people to the Coliseum,” recalled Woody Strode, “40,000 of them would be black; that was just about every black person in the city of Los Angeles.”²³ Black newspapers in the city were the first to foresee the importance of collegiate integration at UCLA beyond the region. The *California Eagle* emphasized coverage of black athletes in Westwood, clearly supporting the Bruins throughout the period.

Black college football players made headlines throughout the twentieth century, especially after World War II. A few were well known around the country, but most were not. Some spoke out against racism—from the team, on campus, or in the broader community. Many were praised in the black press as symbols of positive change, while others were chastised for not adequately representing the black community. And yet, when it comes to athletes as popular racial spokesmen, scholars still insist “there was no Jackie Robinson in football.”²⁴ Perhaps, but nevertheless there are a number of intriguing case studies that exemplify how public

reaction over college football integration affected the mainstream discourse of race, especially in postwar America. As a unique form of cultural expression, the study of popular sport offers rich historical insight. It has a fictional component—like the novel or movie—a presentation offered to a consuming audience and designed with prescribed messages or meanings. Yet a sporting event is no movie, and its participants are more than mere characters. There is also a quite human and uncertain aspect of sport that distinguishes it from other forms. This opportunity for impromptu—or even unintended—individual expression is what distinguishes sport from movies, books, or plays.

THE BLACK BRUINS, 1938–1941

Jackie Robinson's team is a logical place to start. From 1938 to 1941, a group of black students made UCLA's squad the most racially integrated college team Americans had ever seen. Five African Americans—Robinson, Woody Strode, Kenny Washington, Ray Bartlett, and Johnny Wynne—played on the Bruin team, and their collective impact led to disparate reactions on the campus itself, among mainstream media outlets and African American sportswriters, and within the Jim Crow South. UCLA's on-field success garnered high national rankings and publicity, while their popularity within the African American community made them Black America's most celebrated team.²⁵

Yet, both critics and fans struggled to fit the Bruin team within the prevailing "race hero" framework popularized by athletes like Joe Louis and Jack Johnson. At the height of Louis' prime, many blacks were hesitant about having young college football players act as spokesmen for the broader civil rights movement. In addition, before 1940 most integrated teams agreed to have their black players sit out when playing segregated opponents. The Bruin's "black team" forced college football to rethink this method that had previously allowed segregated teams to play integrated schools throughout the country, especially in the Deep South. The story of the Bruins—juxtaposed with the rise of Joe Louis in the late 1930s—helps delineate the broader context of integration directly before World War II. Some Americans had already begun comparing racial politics at home with perceived injustice abroad, and many blacks considered the war an opportunity for a "double victory" over totalitarian aggression in foreign lands and racism in American society.



KENNY WASHINGTON

All photos courtesy of Associated Students, UCLA.

For the black community, the “double victory” strategy helped solidify Joe Louis’ popularity, yet it also created the tense environment of criticism and tension that surfaced over the expectations placed on black college athletes. By the 1940s, black sportswriters began to realize that student athletes who were integrating important football programs would have to face the same scrutiny as professionals like Louis. Indeed, the trials of individual black football players sometimes met with outright crit-



JACKIE ROBINSON

icism from those in the black press. "DO COLORED ATHLETES HELP CAUSE OF JIM CROW AT BIG WHITE UNIVERSITIES?" asked one *New York Amsterdam News* headline.²⁶ According to sportswriter Neil Dodson, the answer was clear. "White coaches have a subtle form of convincing colored players to stay on the bench," Dodson wrote. "Negro athletes, caught between their desire to play and the knowledge that they are being discriminated against, usually succumb to the first." Dodson went on to actually criticize "the average young athlete" who "brushes aside or refuses to face the fact that accepting discrimination is putting it a step ahead, entrenching it deeper."²⁷

According to Woody Strode, by 1936 UCLA was "looking to compete in athletics on a national level" and willing to give African American athletes its full support.²⁸ Within four years, the Bruins were not only national contenders on the field but also major fodder for a growing public dialogue surrounding the role of race in American sport and society. However, on the campus itself the players enjoyed widespread acceptance. The Associated Students of UCLA (ASUCLA), precursor to the athletic department, routinely offered players loans and financial support, including Robinson and Washington.²⁹ Yet the greatest example of institutional support came in the wake of Robinson's arrest in October of 1938. While cruising with teammate Ray Bartlett after a softball game in Brookside Park, Robinson became involved in an altercation after a white motorist "said something about niggers" at an intersection.³⁰ Bartlett initially confronted the man, and soon police arrived to find "between 40 and 50 members of the Negro race," all of whom quickly dispersed with the exception of Robinson.³¹ Charged with hindering traffic and resisting arrest, Robinson immediately received quick help from powerful Bruin loyalists and head coach Babe Horrell. The university refunded Robinson his court costs and fines, hired a "prominent sports attorney," and requested to the judge that "the Negro football player be not disturbed during the football season."³²

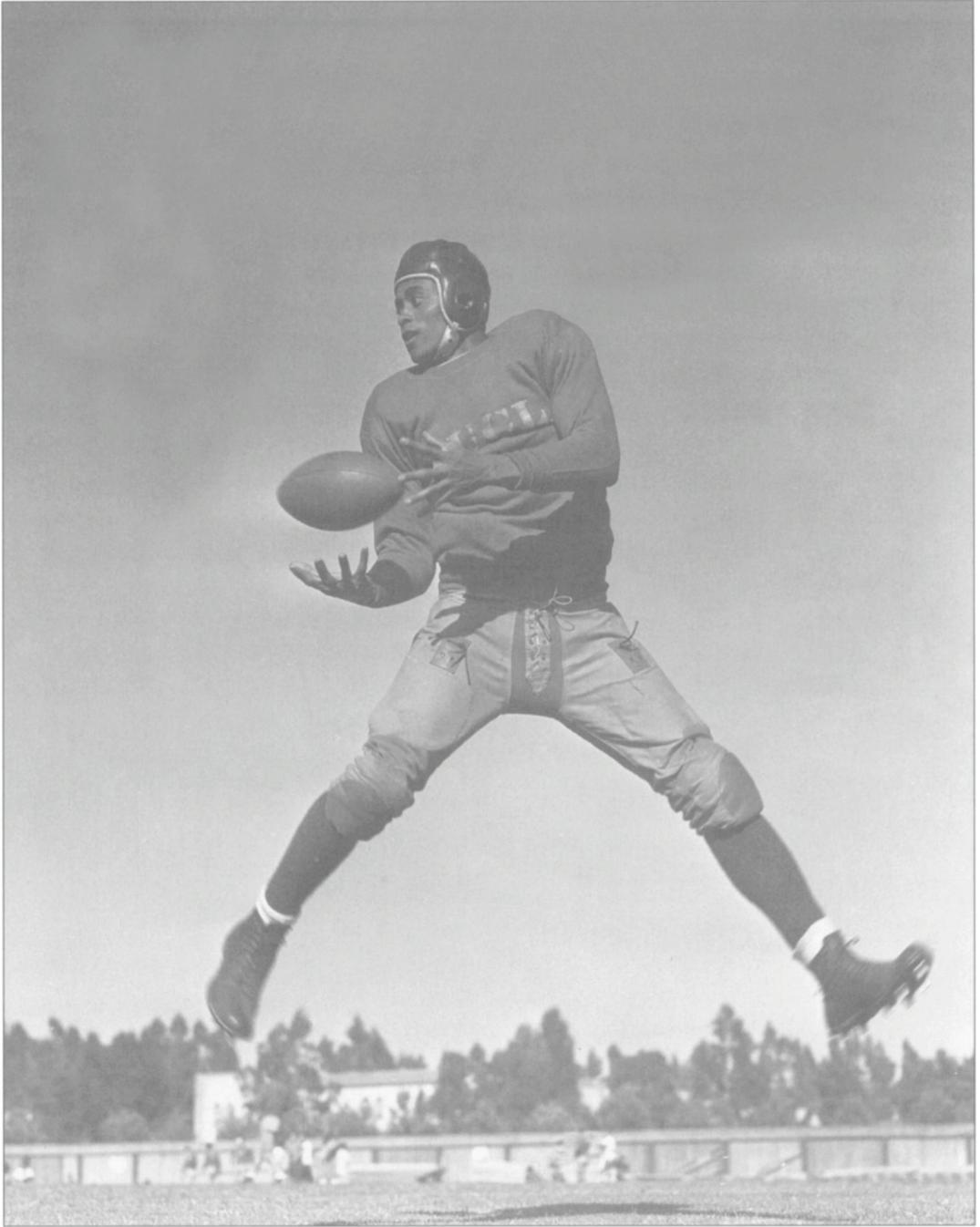
Nevertheless, despite such institutional support the players remained among the few African American students at UCLA, a school that drew its student body from around the country. Even as most on campus seemed to embrace the team, Strode recalled that his first introduction to the "Southern mentality" occurred while on the freshman squad in 1936. He and Washington heard that "there are some players on the varsity saying

they don't want to play with any niggers."³³ After one particularly brutal confrontation on the scrimmage field, a lineman nicknamed "Slats"—a "blond-haired, blue-eyed farm boy from Oklahoma"—called Strode a "black son of a bitch." Recalled Strode, "The bulldog came out of me. I climbed on top of Slats and started punching. The coaches stood around and watched for a little while. Finally they said, 'That's enough, Woody!' and they came and pulled me off."³⁴

Even when lauding the African American athletes, student sportswriters usually praised the black players with racially tinged terminology that emphasized the differences between the black students and the rest of the campus. Along with nicknames like "Kingfish Kenny" and "Jackrabbit Jackie," students routinely invoked such cringe-worthy allusions as "sideline-stepping sepia" and "dusky flash."³⁵ Such terminology was hardly unique to the *Daily Bruin*, as many of the most progressive sportswriters and publications nationwide continued characterizing athletes with racial nicknames and descriptions. Perhaps a bigger slight came from the black players' own teammates—for Robinson, Washington, and Strode mysteriously were never named as team captains, a distinction voted on by the entire team.

Despite these shortcomings, African American players at UCLA enjoyed an unprecedented college experience that was simply unavailable at other white universities. "We were out there knocking down people like we thought we were white," wrote Strode.³⁶ While other black athletes had infiltrated major white teams around the country, they routinely succumbed to the unwritten rule that they were not to face Jim Crow teams from the South. As members of large and powerful college squads, the few black individuals who participated in football felt pressure to "take one for the team" and remain on the sidelines rather than stir up controversy. However, black sportswriters soon recognized that such a proposition would not work with UCLA. "We have yet to find another single coach in the history of football that has had the guts to play three of our race at one time and have five on the squad," Fay Young wrote in the *Chicago Defender*, adding, "The three continued to start in the game even against southern teams."³⁷

During the 1939 season, the Bruins were heavy underdogs versus the previous year's number-one team in the nation, Texas Christian University. The Bruins defeated the all-white Horned Frogs squad and raced to



WOODY STRODE

an unbeaten 6–0–3 record. As the ninth-ranked team in the country, the Bruins also had a legitimate chance to win their conference championship and secure an invitation to the prestigious Rose Bowl. However, sportswriters around the nation realized that a UCLA Rose Bowl bid would almost certainly match the team against the nation's number-one-ranked team, the University of Tennessee Volunteers. As an institution, Tennessee was unabashedly committed to segregation at all levels—from the coaching staff and athletic department to the university administration and state legislature. Some sportswriters were not convinced that Tennessee would even be willing to participate in an integrated Rose Bowl, nor were Tennessee officials, coaches, and players. When Allison Danzig of the *New York Times* asked Tennessee coach Bob “Major” Neyland what stand the Volunteers would take if UCLA were the host team, the coach “side-stepped the issue by turning aside to speak to friends.”³⁸

In December 1939, observers around the nation anxiously awaited the results of UCLA's last game versus USC, a victory all but assuring them a spot in the Rose Bowl. According to Danzig, as Coach Neyland gathered with a host of other writers and administrators at the Farragut Hotel in Knoxville, “shouts went up” whenever news came that the USC Trojans were moving the ball against the Bruin defense. “It was evident that everybody in the room was pulling for Southern Cal to win or get a tie,” wrote Bob Wilson in the *Knoxville News-Sentinel*.³⁹ Despite this overtly racist reaction to black players from a southern coach and institution, the fact remained that the African American Bruins were poised to unleash one of the largest racial scandals college sport fans had ever witnessed.

But dreams of what one black sportswriter called “a 1939 ‘Civil War’” were shattered when the Bruins could only muster a 0–0 tie with USC, to this day one of the most celebrated contests in the rivalry's long history.⁴⁰ As a result, an all-white USC squad was invited to play Tennessee in Pasadena. This delayed the impending crisis, but only until lucrative television contracts after World War II would again force some segregated schools to consider accepting prestigious bowl bids without regards to the opponent. Nevertheless, UCLA's African American players had nearly created a national confrontation over race that could have challenged Robinson's Dodger debut seven years later. It was a confrontation that many would have feared and others would have cherished. Either way, by both cheering and jeering the Bruins throughout 1938–1941, Americans were participating in a cultural spectacle that held deeper meanings for all.

THE BRIGHT INCIDENT, 1951

After World War II, another example of integration in college football made headlines beyond the nation's sports pages. In 1951, Oklahoma State (A&M) University was seeking membership in the Big Seven Conference, one of the most prominent and successful conferences in college football. Students and administrators at several Big Seven schools—including Kansas and Nebraska—resisted because of A&M's segregationist policies. The war had severely disrupted America's social fabric, and in certain regions of the country African Americans had taken advantage to advance the cause of civil rights. When Jackie Robinson integrated the Dodgers in 1947, it exemplified the transformations beginning to take place in the urban North. Meanwhile, however, the South remained largely immune to these changes, and many southern states used the war to reinforce racial dominance. In cities like Birmingham and Atlanta, black troops returning from abroad were still greeted with segregated public facilities and intensified efforts to maintain racial hierarchies in the midst of heightened criticism from the North. While programs like the University of Alabama and the University of Georgia tightened the bonds of segregation and continued to field all-white football teams, virtually every school in the North was incorporating black student athletes by the mid 1950s. While these teams were usually able to stay in their respective regions and refuse to schedule opponents from across the country, conferences like the Big Seven and the Missouri Valley became hotspots for disagreements over integration. Since the era of partisan warfare in "bleeding Kansas," the Midwest and upper South had acted as battlegrounds in the war to define American racial policy. As the popularity of football progressed in the 1950s, these regions suddenly became highly influential to the game—with schools from Kansas, Oklahoma, and Nebraska beginning to draw as much attention as powerhouse teams in the Deep South.⁴¹

While postwar American society offered blacks a complex mixture of unprecedented opportunity and new barriers, certain issues dominated civil rights discourse. By 1950, national attention was firmly drawn to public education in the South, where states like Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama continued to aggressively pursue segregation. However, institutions of higher education in the Midwest—like Oklahoma A&M College—also found themselves in the midst of turmoil regarding the prospect of integration. Just as UCLA's football team had made national

headlines over the prospect of integrating the Rose Bowl in 1939, the growth of powerful athletic conferences in the Midwest after the war introduced racial discord in that region to many observers for the first time. Large universities in the South had traditionally fielded many of the most committed, successful athletic programs in the country—all of them staunchly segregated. Meanwhile, universities in the Midwest were seeking to capitalize on everything athletic prestige had to offer, and fill a growing void left by many northern schools that had already begun to deemphasize their athletic programs. Unfortunately, the nation's attention was not drawn to Midwest football because of a successfully integrated Big Seven team. Instead, the country witnessed what the *New York Times* later called "one of the ugliest racial incidents in college sports history," an episode that took place in the smaller Missouri Valley Conference, specifically at OAMC.⁴²

Johnny Bright—a star African American halfback at Drake University and arguably the nation's best player—was severely injured on the first play of the game when an A&M opponent viciously attacked him. With a shattered jaw and multiple facial injuries, Bright's college football career ended with this wanton act of violence. Administrators at Drake—and from schools around the country—called on the Missouri Valley Conference to punish A&M and its coaches for encouraging the deliberate injury of its star player. Almost immediately, the issue of race became deeply embedded in the controversy. Accusations from players, coaches, and fans swirled in the national press that Oklahoma A&M had deliberately tried to intimidate black athletes in the MVC and perhaps the larger Big Seven. Drake threatened to leave the conference if sanctions were not imposed on A&M, while students at schools throughout the Midwest debated the role of race in the attack. In the black press, anger that had circulated over the refusal to recognize Bright's accomplishments now turned to outrage over the failure to punish what many concluded was a deliberate act of racial violence, thinly veiled under the auspices of the game. Eventually, Drake and Bradley University severed ties with OAMC and the Missouri Valley Conference, and Bright left the country to become a star in the Canadian Football League. Shortly thereafter, OAMC became Oklahoma State University, now one of the most prominent football programs in the region.

The debate over the physicality of football—which had circulated in the sport ever since Theodore Roosevelt and Congress had first acted to

limit its brutality—now tangled with the debate over racial integration. As the mainstream press ran pictures of the attack on Johnny Bright, certain authors invoked race immediately while others refused to acknowledge the role of racial tension. While the Bright attack may have fallen in line with certain rules and racial policies still prevalent in the South, it was certainly a blatant affront to the rules of the game. The diversity of responses to the incident illuminates how many sports fans in the Midwest and around the country were transforming their views of race through the lens of a college football game, instead of merely in response to the carefully groomed personas of professional athletes like Joe Louis or baseball's Jackie Robinson. National attention was drawn to Stillwater, Oklahoma, in late 1951 over the treatment of a single African American player on an opposing team, yet reaction to the incident can help scholars understand how the dynamics of race in an isolated, almost forgotten region could influence national debate on the cusp of the postwar civil rights movement.

THE SUGAR BOWL CONTROVERSY, 1955

In 1954, the issue of integrating America's public schools had finally reached the Supreme Court. While the landmark *Brown* decision officially codified integrated education in American law, it also sparked a legislative backlash in a number of southern states. In the world of sport, integration had also progressed since the period of uncertainty characterized by the reaction to the black Bruins at UCLA. Joe Louis had ended his career as perhaps the biggest star in the sporting world (white or black), while Jackie Robinson had emerged a national hero in 1947. On the gridiron, the National Football League and most northern schools had opened their athletic facilities to blacks at unprecedented levels.⁴³ However, at southern institutions like Georgia Tech University, the school's desire to reap the rewards for national success in football—television dollars, recognition, etc.—clashed with the state legislature's reaction to *Brown v. Board of Education* and the specter of forced integration. The issue came to a head in 1955, when a successful Tech football team was invited to New Orleans to participate in the prestigious Sugar Bowl. Football fans, including Governor Marvin Griffin, remained ecstatic until it became apparent that the Tech squad would have to face the University of Pittsburgh, a team "integrated" with one lone African American player. The governor and state legislature held eleventh-hour

negotiations and forbade the team from playing, whereupon hundreds of white students on the Georgia Tech campus burned the governor in effigy and protested the potential forfeiture.

For such a passionate controversy to explode over the participation of a lone black player in the 1955 Sugar Bowl reveals much. It certainly exemplifies how strict segregationist ideology still permeated certain regions of the country. It also enriches our understanding of the legislative backlash in the South to the *Brown* decision and how that reaction trickled into the realm of popular culture. At the same time, the reaction of Tech's administrators and student body reveals how the greater rewards awaiting successful college football programs could generate a willingness to fight segregation in exchange for winning football teams. The stark reaction of some Tech football fans—on and off campus—is a striking juxtaposition to the 1962 riot over James Meredith's admission to the University of Mississippi. While southern institutions of higher education largely enjoyed the support of white citizens and students, the importance of participating in a prestigious bowl game seemed to trump, if only briefly, the clear code of segregation at Georgia Tech, seven years before the violence at Oxford, Miss.⁴⁴

THE "BLACK FOURTEEN," 1969

Other examples of integration in college football reveal insights into the heightened period of radicalism emerging out of the civil rights movement in the mid 1960s. While riots, marches, and public confrontations over race began to merge with growing disillusionment over American foreign policy, college campuses became seedbeds for the Black Power movement and increasingly militant Black Nationalist organizations. Many Americans bore witness to this period of heightened black protest through the lens of athletics, most notably the Black Panther protest at the 1968 Olympics.⁴⁵ At San Jose State University, radical sociologist Harry Edwards specifically encouraged black collegiate athletes to use their platform in the popular press for the purpose of protest.⁴⁶ In the world of football, however, the concept of protest was virtually non-existent and vehemently punished. With the exception of the occasional lengthy beard or "Afro" haircut worn in defiance of team rules, most major football programs in the late 1960s successfully clamped down on athletes' self expression.

This makes the controversy over the University of Wyoming's "Black Fourteen" even more intriguing. By 1969, major college teams (with the exception of a few holdouts, like the University of Mississippi) had integrated their football programs. Indeed, the floodgates had opened around the country and college football was quickly becoming a sport that predominantly featured black players. On the University of Wyoming campus in Laramie, the racial makeup of the football squad mimicked most teams across the country, and yet the fourteen African American players were virtually the only black students enrolled in the entire school. The "protest" conceived by the fourteen Wyoming students seems anything but revolutionary when juxtaposed with the concept of black radicalism that dominates popular memory and scholarly histories. The black players asked the coach for permission to wear armbands during a game against Brigham Young University, a rather conservative protest against the Mormon Church's policy of excluding blacks from the priesthood. (Indeed, at least one of the black players apparently considered himself a practicing Mormon.) Yet the reaction of the coach and Wyoming administrators—to arbitrarily expel the athletes from the team without recourse to appeal—reveals just how large the specter of black protest loomed in the minds of many.⁴⁷

As national media outlets converged on Laramie to cover the story and its conclusion, counter-protests in support of the head coach and governor increased the tension. The players were accused of organizing at the request of a new Black Student Alliance (BSA) chapter on campus, and local papers propagated the myth that caravans of Black Panthers and other protesters were on the way from California to protest at the upcoming game versus Brigham Young. Last-minute meetings between state lawmakers, the players, head coach, and governor failed to reach a conclusion. As the black athletes were forced to watch their team from the grandstands for the remainder of the season, National Guard troops were stationed below the stands and the town largely rallied in support of the coach's decision.⁴⁸

This story of protest in the heartland is valuable in helping understand the evolution of and resistance to the civil rights movement and the working of "black radicalism" in rural America. Such a mild protest on the part of the athletes—juxtaposed with the overblown and popularly supported reaction—illuminates how racial integration on a football

team by 1970 could still reinforce many of the barriers it was meant to dissolve. As the racial majority on the school's nationally ranked football team, Wyoming's black students generated much of the school's successful image and financial success. Yet in the same year that Laramie was voting to expand the football stadium so it could fit nearly 80 percent of the town's inhabitants, residents were not willing to accept even a hint of militancy on behalf of racial equity, even with the national spotlight upon them. Local fans and media overwhelmingly supported the decision to expel the students, even as the once-unbeaten football squad went on to lose every game during the rest of the 1969 season.⁴⁹

Each of these cases—UCLA, Oklahoma A&M, Georgia Tech University, and the University of Wyoming—drew particularly large amounts of attention nationwide. They are four of the largest postwar conflicts over integration in college football that transcended the realm of sport and entertainment. Using these (and other) examples, college football itself can be an analytic tool for examining issues of race in the American twentieth century and revealing the complex undercurrents regarding America's commitment to racial equality, instead of the traditional image of popular individual athletes breaking down the barriers of racism at the professional level. An examination of the diverse public reactions to integrated football reveals how African Americans, cultural critics, mainstream sportswriters, and southern institutions all symbolically appropriated these teams in vastly different ways, attempting to comprehend the geopolitics of college athletics, and anonymous student athletes, within the traditional binary frameworks of "race figures," "color lines," and Jim Crow segregation.

At UCLA, student publications celebrated the success of Kenny Washington throughout his career and helped make him one of the most popular students on campus. Upon his final game versus USC in 1939, Washington received an extended standing ovation from the student body. The 1938 Bruin yearbook hailed Washington as "our hero," while student sportswriters concurred with opposing coaches that he was the best athlete in UCLA's history, his abilities surpassing even the mythical talent of Red Grange.⁵⁰ When Jackie Robinson joined the club in 1939, the only debate among student sportswriters was whether Robinson and Washington would be awarded the All-American honors they deserved.⁵¹

Most important, student sportswriters at UCLA recognized the broader significance of the team's African American players and were the first to

decry prejudice towards the Bruins. Although the *Daily Bruin* sports department did not appear to have any African American students on staff, its editor and columnists were among the more progressive students on campus, especially when it came to issues of racial prejudice. When many writers around the country left Washington off their All-American lists, *Daily Bruin* columnist Milt Cohen responded with a plea to “pick again, boys” and correct the slight against UCLA. “It’s with a distinct sour taste in our mouth that we read the lists of All-American selections that are now pouring out of all sections of the country,” wrote Cohen. “We don’t care what they do with any other ball player in the nation—but we don’t like the way they’re treating our Kenny Washington.”⁵² In an even greater slight, Robinson was later left off the first team of the All-Division basketball selections in 1941 despite the fact he had led the conference in scoring. According to one student, “[T]his in itself is no cause for protest, but the fact that Price didn’t even mention Jack on three teams strikes a new low in sportsmanship.”⁵³ While a senior in 1939, Washington was the focus of a fierce campaign mounted by African American sportswriters, an attempt to get the Bruin runner on the Associated Press All-American team and immediately drafted into the National Football League. Washington was lauded for his “level-headedness,” while readers were reassured that “no amount of favorable publicity, however great, would affect the demeanor of this young man.”⁵⁴ Unfortunately, Washington was inexplicably left off the team despite finishing the season as the nation’s leading rusher. UCLA’s subsequent decision to hire Washington as a coach reverberated across the country during the following year, when in New York the *Amsterdam News* gave the former Bruin its highest support—not because Washington was playing for the Rose Bowl, but because he was “the first Negro in history to coach a major white eleven.”⁵⁵

NOTES

¹ While popular history yields no lone integrating moment or figure in college athletics, it is nevertheless true that numerous African American students increasingly helped lead the country’s most popular college football programs throughout the twentieth century. Thus, an examination of integrated football at colleges across the nation represents a logical point of departure from the older scholarship of individual professional heroes. In some cases, these same student athletes emerged from the amateur ranks of college athletics and went on to join the pantheon of figures credited with breaking racial barriers at the professional level. More often, however, they retreated from the public sphere altogether and were rarely recognized as individuals—like the rank-and-file who marched on the road to Selma, or the anonymous thousands who gathered on the National Mall in 1963. Over an eighty-year span, this group of unknown, under-appreciated student athletes used college football to change the racial landscape at America’s universities and reconfigure the role of African Americans in the public sphere. Such pressure fell on the shoulders of young black college students, who struggled to keep up with their coursework and fit into cam-

- pus social life—not professional athletes, properly groomed race heroes, or eloquent cultural critics. While the story of Jackie Robinson's first season as a Dodger or Joe Louis' triumphant knockouts appeal to a particular historicization—namely, our desire to create stark racial lines in order to see them break—history yields a much richer story. The integration of college football was a movement of peoples and ideas that better exemplifies the true struggle behind the story of African American civil rights in the twentieth century.¹ “Roosevelt to go to Boston,” *New York Times*, 26 November 1898, 7; Evan J. Albright, “William Henry Lewis: Brief Life of a Football Pioneer,” *Harvard Magazine*, December 2005, 44–45.
- ² Before law school, Lewis and another African American student, W. T. S. Jackson had actually played for two years at Amherst; Donald Spivey, “The Black Athlete in Big-Time Intercollegiate Sports, 1941–1968,” *Phylon*, 44, No. 2 (1983): 117.
- ³ “Harvard's Eleven to Return,” *New York Times*, 24 September 1892.
- ⁴ John Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race*; Othello Harris, “African-American Predominance in Collegiate Sport,” in *Racism in College Athletics: The African-American Athlete's Experience*; David K. Wiggins, “Great Speed but Little Stamina: The Historical Debate Over Black Athletic Superiority,” in *The New American Sport History: Recent Approaches and Perspectives*.
- ⁵ “Negroes Riot at Football,” *New York Times*, 25 November 1897, 1.
- ⁶ Michael Oriard, *King Football* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 299–313; John Sayle Watterson, *College Football: History, Spectacle, Controversy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 308.
- ⁷ Lane Demas, “On the Threshold of Broad and Rich Football Pastures: Integrated College Football at UCLA, 1938–1941,” in *Horsehide, Pigskin, Oval Tracts and Apple Pie: Essays on Sports and American Culture*, ed. Jim Vlasich (North Carolina: McFarland Press, 2005).
- ⁸ Elmer Mitchell, “Racial Traits in Athletics,” *American Physical Education Review*, 27 (1922): 151.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Dan Burley, “Up Football's Glory Road,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 9 December 1939, 18.
- ¹² Henry Yu, “Tiger Woods at the Center of History: Looking back at the Twentieth Century Through the Lenses of Race, Sports, and Mass Consumption,” *Sports Matters: Race, Recreation, and Culture*, ed. John Bloom and Michael Willard (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 322.
- ¹³ Yu, “Tiger Woods,” 322.
- ¹⁴ See Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: Macmillan, 1983); Chris Mead, *Champion—Joe Louis, Black Hero in White America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985); Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (Oxford University Press, 1997); Russell Sullivan, *Rocky Marciano: The Rock of His Times* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Michael Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).
- ¹⁵ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years: 1954–63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), xii.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xi.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.
- ¹⁸ David Garrow, ed., *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 43.
- ¹⁹ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Verso, 1997).
- ²⁰ Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).
- ²¹ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8; Al-Tony Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!: The National Impact of Jack Johnson* (New York: Port Washington, 1975), 14; Roberts, *Papa Jack*, 74; See also Geoffrey C. Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2004).
- ²² Paul Zimmerman, “Bruins, Troy Tie: SC, Vols in Bowl,” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 December 1939, 1; “So, California Ties UCLA; Will Play Tennessee In Bowl,” *New York Times*, 10 December 1939, 103.
- ²³ Woody Strode, *Goal Dust: An Autobiography* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1990), 62.

- ²⁴ Oriard, *King Football*, 10.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 9, 302, 316.
- ²⁶ Neil Dodson, "Do Colored Athletes Help Cause of Jim Crow at Big White Universities?" *New York Amsterdam News*, 21 October 1939, 19.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Strode, *Goal Dust*, 26.
- ²⁹ "Minutes of the ASUCLA Board of Control, June 1935–June 1939," 3 March 1939, 84; "Minutes of the ASUCLA Board of Control, June 1940–June 1941," 8 August 1940, 82.
- ³⁰ Arnold Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 65.
- ³¹ *Pasadena Star-News*, 6 September 1939; Cited in Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, 65.
- ³² *Pasadena Star-News*, 18 October 18 1939; Cited in Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, 66.
- ³³ Strode, *Goal Dust*, 64.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.
- ³⁵ "Frogs Okay," *California Daily Bruin*, 29 September 1939, 7.
- ³⁶ Strode, *Goal Dust*, 64.
- ³⁷ Fay Young, "The Stuff is Here," *Chicago Defender*, 16 December 1939, 26.
- ³⁸ Allison Danzig, "Tennessee Hopes to Insure Rose Bowl Nomination by Beating Auburn Today," *New York Times*, 9 December 1939, 20.
- ³⁹ Bob Wilson, "Path to Rose Bowl Cleared for Vols," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 6 December 1939, 1.
- ⁴⁰ "And Rose Bowl Remains White as a New Lily," *New York Amsterdam News*, 16 December 1939.
- ⁴¹ Oriard, *King Football*, 299–300; Watterson, 273–74.
- ⁴² Gordon S. White, "Taking a Look Back at Drake," *New York Times*, 13 November 1985, B14.
- ⁴³ Thomas Smith, "Outside the Pale: The Exclusion of Blacks from the National Football League, 1934–1946," *Journal of Sport History*, 15, No. 3 (Winter 1988).
- ⁴⁴ Robert Dubay, "Politics, Pigmentation, and Pigskin: The Georgia Tech Sugar Bowl Controversy of 1955," *Atlanta History*, 39 (Spring 1995); Charles H. Martin, "Integrating New Year's Day: The Racial Politics of College Bowl Games in the American South," *Journal of Sport History*, 24, No. 3 (Fall 1997) and "Racial Change and Big Time College Football in Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* (Fall 1996); Watterson, 316–18; Oriard, *King Football*, 308–13.
- ⁴⁵ After winning gold and bronze in the 200-meter dash, John Carlos and Tommie Smith made headlines around the world by demonstrating Black Power salutes during the subsequent medal ceremony. See Amy Bass, "Whose Broad Stripes and Bright Stars? Race, Nation, and Power at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics," in *Sports Matters: Race, Recreation, and Culture*, ed. John Bloom and Michael Willard (New York: New York University Press, 2002).
- ⁴⁶ Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York: The Free Press, 1969); Arnold Hano, "The Black Rebel Who 'Whitelists' The Olympics," *New York Times*, 12 May 1968, SM32. Edwards was pivotal in encouraging Carlos and Smith in Mexico City and even attempted to organize a boycott of the 1968 games with black athletes nationwide.
- ⁴⁷ Anthony Ripley, "Negro Athletes Spark Uproar at University of Wyoming," *New York Times*, 1 November 1969, 15.
- ⁴⁸ Clifford Bullock, "Fired By Conscience: The Black 14 Incident at the University of Wyoming and Black Protest in the Western Athletic Conference, 1968–1970," in *Readings in Wyoming History*, ed. Philip Roberts (Laramie, WY: Skyline West Press, 2000).
- ⁴⁹ Watterson, 322–23, 347–48.
- ⁵⁰ *UCLA Southern Campus* 19 (1938): 215. Jerry Levie, "Ken over Grange!" *California Daily Bruin*, 23 October 1939, 3.
- ⁵¹ John Rothwell, "Jack Robinson Registers in Extension," *California Daily Bruin*, 16 February 1939, 1.
- ⁵² Milt Cohen, "Here's Our Angle," *California Daily Bruin*, 1 December 1939, 3.
- ⁵³ Sam Sale, "Prejudice 'Rumored' to Have Played Major Role in Selections," *California Daily Bruin*, 5 March 1941, 3.
- ⁵⁴ J. Cullen Fentress, "Down in Front," *California Eagle*, 16 November 1939, 2B.
- ⁵⁵ "Chalks Up Another First," *New York Amsterdam News*, 7 December 1940. The article overlooked the case of William Henry Lewis at Harvard five decades earlier. (See above, p. 1.)