
Introduction

College Sports, “Fair Play,” and Black Masculinity

In November 1939, the editors of the *Crisis*, the monthly publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), nominated a rather unusual “honor roll.” Instead of successful black students, or even black businesses or schools, the list consisted of predominantly white southern universities: Southern Methodist University, Texas Christian University, Duke University, the University of Oklahoma, and the University of Maryland. What had these schools, many of which would not admit African American students until decades later, done to deserve such an honor? All had played football games in the previous year against racially integrated teams from schools in the North and West. Considering the tenacious hold of Jim Crow segregation over the South, and the exclusion of African American athletes from every major professional sport, including Major League Baseball (by far the most popular and lucrative professional circuit), these contests were indeed significant developments in the realm of sports. But the editors of the *Crisis* saw implications beyond the playing field, writing, “Fair play in sports leads the way to fair play in life. May the honor roll increase!”¹

The NAACP’s emphasis on encouraging racial integration in American society helps explain the editors’ eagerness to assign larger meanings to these football games. But they were hardly alone in believing in the potential of sports to model fairness in American life. In countless publications and forums, observers throughout the twentieth century identified the “level playing field” of sports as a realization of the “American dream” of equal

opportunity. The notion of a meritocracy, deeply embedded in American culture, seemed best realized in athletic competition, an arena many hoped could be free from the racial prejudice that abrogated millions of Americans' opportunities in business, politics, and social life. When barriers to participation fell—when, for example, blacks competed against, or later for, white southern schools—the path seemed clear for players to succeed on the playing field or court by merit alone. Their effort and ability, not the color of their skin, would determine their standing as athletes. Observers on both sides of the color line clung to this ideal as proof that the American democratic system could work, that an equal-opportunity society was, in fact, possible.

That faith constitutes the central theme of this study, which explores how Americans responded to changes in the nation's racial politics. By analyzing the public discourse surrounding men's college athletics from 1915 to 1973—in black and white newspapers, national magazines, school publications, memoirs, legal documents, and correspondence—I trace how Americans of all stripes used sports to discuss and contest issues of race, equality, citizenship, and masculinity. The range of these diverse reactions can be seen in my five case studies: Paul Robeson at Rutgers College, 1915–1919; the 1939 University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) football team; Wilt Chamberlain at the University of Kansas (KU), 1955–1958; Charlie Scott at the University of North Carolina (UNC), 1966–1970; and the integration of football at the University of Alabama, 1969–1973. As the varied responses to these pioneering athletes illustrate, sports, and college sports in particular, were central to how many people conceived of American society.²

Although residing in the leisure-time realm of “fun” and “play,” and supposedly remote from the everyday world and its consequences, spectator sports grew tremendously popular in the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, often mirroring the altered rhythms of everyday life as American society shifted and changed. In watching sports, in reading about the games, and in discussing the performances afterward, people drew entertainment value from the competition, but they also used sports as a shared cultural language to help them understand their world.³ Inevitably, race was a central topic of these discussions. More than any other marker of identity, including gender, class, and sexual preference, race has been intertwined with sports history from its earliest origins in American life. From the first American boxing championship contender, Tom Molineaux, to the early dominance of the Kentucky Derby by black jockeys, to the struggles of pioneers such as Jackie Robinson, to contemporary athletes such as professional golfer Tiger Woods, sports figures have embodied racial politics in myriad ways.⁴ Scholars and casual observers alike have looked to these athletes for their ability—or inability—to change racial beliefs. This topic has dominated sports history, particularly in recent years, as historians, sociologists, and journalists

have sought a middle ground between two competing, and often overly simplistic, arguments. On the one hand, some analysts and commentators have found sports to be an advanced model for social change, in which the “even field of fair play . . . serves to break down social divisions and boundaries.”⁵ On the other hand, other scholars have emphasized the limitations of sports as agents of change and have even suggested that sports act more effectively as barriers to progress. According to this mind-set, sports contribute to beliefs in black intellectual inferiority, maintain traditional power relationships in which whites control most of the ownership and management positions, and provide false hopes for impoverished African American youths hoping to escape poverty.⁶

College sports provide a unique opportunity to explore these contrasting beliefs. In an era when professional basketball and football had yet to reach a broad national audience and achieve the heightened levels of income and stardom we know today, college sports were tremendously popular and important to many communities, as fans connected team success to a sense of civic pride. Football games, for example, were often surrounded by weekend-long social events that brought fans from across an entire state together. Since fans often saw local college stars as emblemizing how their team, school, and even region were better than those of their competitors, college athletes were particularly intense receptacles for hopes and anxieties. That these athletes were also students further heightened the significance of the games. College represented a path to upward mobility through education, and many viewed these young men as representing the best and brightest in their respective communities and their communities’ ambitions for recognition and respect. Thus, college star athletes were icons to their fans, who followed their exploits closely, and all the black athletes discussed in this book were superior talents widely recognized for their skills. Men’s basketball and football, both in the past and into the present day, constituted the most popular and financially lucrative sports in the collegiate realm and generated the most discourse. A few features of these sports made them especially relevant for discussions of racial equality. Both basketball and football were team sports that required individuals to work together at nearly all times on the field and court. They were also contact sports, in which bodies collided frequently, and organized violence was part and parcel of the games. The sports therefore provided rich symbolic examples of blacks and whites working together and overcoming differences.

The location and timing of these five stories also provides unique insights into the intersection of sports and race. There were certainly other noteworthy star black athletes in the college ranks, including Jesse Owens at the Ohio State University in the 1930s, Bill Russell at San Francisco University and Jim Brown at Syracuse University in the 1950s, and Lew Alcindor at UCLA in

the 1960s. However, the five case studies in this book follow the overall pattern of sports desegregation across the nation. Since the Northeast tended to integrate its athletics teams first, Robeson, one of the first black stars as newspaper sports coverage matured, and a figure who earned significant media coverage because of his proximity to New York, makes a compelling starting point for the project. Similarly, the other case studies generally followed the broader trend of integration in the collegiate athletics realm, moving from the North to the West (with the 1930s UCLA football team) to Middle America (with Chamberlain in Kansas in the 1950s) and then finally to the upper and lower South (with Scott at UNC and the Alabama football team in the late 1960s and early 1970s). Because these athletes were pioneering figures at their institutions *and* in their regions of the country, they faced additional pressure and engendered heightened dialogue about their roles.

Racial integration in sports, including college athletics and even some of the stories told here, has become a hot topic in recent years for scholars, journalists, and Hollywood film producers alike, but much work remains to be done.⁷ A number of biographies have been written about Robeson, including Martin Duberman's thorough account and Lloyd Brown's exploration of his younger years.⁸ However, no works consider in any depth the public reception to Robeson's athletic accomplishments, especially the disparities in reporting between the mainstream and black presses. Similarly, although Michael Oriard and others have mentioned the remarkable 1939 UCLA football team in passing, and Lane Demas summarizes the team in his work, a substantial analysis of some of the most pivotal events of their story—including a remarkably racist homecoming display and the employment of derogatory nicknames—has gone unwritten.⁹ For all his celebrity, Wilt Chamberlain's experiences at KU have been surprisingly underreported, with only Aram Goudsouzian's narrative history of his time at the school.¹⁰ Charlie Scott has received good coverage in Barry Jacobs's journalistic account of the first black basketball players in the two major athletic conferences in the South, but Jacobs's work lacks the scholarly analysis to situate Scott's story in regard to racial politics and competing definitions of masculinity.¹¹ Finally, of the many books about Alabama football, only Andrew Doyle has taken a scholarly approach, and his work fails to consider the story of Alabama's integration in connection with some of the key larger developments of the time, including the controversies over affirmative action and contested notions of black manliness.¹²

More generally, this book departs from these other accounts in two major ways. First, my emphasis here is less on what individual athletes and coaches *did* and more on what people *said* about their actions and performances. To that end, in addition to sifting through correspondence and university documents, I have systematically explored the local mainstream and black

press response to each of these figures. This analytical focus provides a much more thorough engagement with people's conceptions of fairness and equality in American life. The black press's coverage of these athletes provides a startling contrast to the mainstream press in its assessment of athletic achievement, black male leadership, and the process of integration, a viewpoint often neglected (or only marginally explored) in these other works. The national scope of this book also sets it apart from most of its peers. Although many fine regional studies have been commissioned in recent years, this book provides a broader picture of college sports integration, and thus Americans' changing sense of equality, by comparing and contrasting the responses of New York-area residents to those of southerners, midwesterners, and people on the West Coast. By following the process of big-time college athletics integration, from the early pioneers in the Northeast in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century until the last holdouts in the Deep South in the 1970s, we get a sense of how sports integration fit into *national* debates regarding race, manliness, equality, and citizenship. Indeed, these case studies need to be put into dialogue with one another in order to best understand their significance. Pulling these five case studies together, over such a wide range of time and space, provides a more thorough understanding of the interrelated nature of sports integration, the quest for civil rights, national and international politics, gender ideals, and debates regarding higher education.

As people discussed these athletes, several key themes emerged, shedding light on some of the major issues that divided, and continue to divide, Americans regarding civil rights and the nation's egalitarian ideals. These themes included (1) regional and temporal variations in ordinary Americans' sense of racial politics, (2) contested notions of black masculinity, (3) differing perspectives on citizenship and race, such as access to the roles of breadwinner and citizen-soldier, and (4) competing models of sports as a blueprint for how equality might be achieved, including issues related to leadership in broader society.

The nationwide reach of college sports made them especially apt sounding boards for issues of racial equality. The most prominent professional team sports, including Major League Baseball (MLB), were largely confined to the northern half of the country until the late 1950s. But college games took place at schools in all regions of the nation. Thus, their contests illuminated responses to desegregation in locations and time periods often absent from traditional civil rights histories. In fact, surprising continuities and contrasts emerge when looking at these five case studies. One thread that tied all of these case studies together across time and space was the surprisingly strong gravitational pull of the South's strict Jim Crow segregation—which, in addition to college athletics in North Carolina and Alabama, also affected athletic contests in the New York area in the 1910s, Southern California in the

1930s, and even the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) men's basketball tournament in the 1950s. But there were peculiarities for each location and time period as well. North Carolina's reputation as a "progressive" state with regard to race affected the discourse surrounding integrated athletic competition in ways that differed profoundly from, say, the coverage of Wilt Chamberlain in Kansas. From these different reactions, we can see more clearly how Americans adjusted to the changes in racial politics that took place throughout the twentieth century.

The athletes being discussed in these varied locations were almost exclusively male—a sign of traditional gender assumptions and the dearth of opportunities available to female athletes. The gendered nature of these sports naturally affected people's perceptions of athletic achievement, especially because of the circumscribed position of black men in American society.¹³ Systematically denied access to many of the conventional attributes of manliness—including the right to vote and the capacity to be the breadwinner for their families—black men looked for hopeful signs of progress wherever they could be found, including in the realm of athletics. White men, on the other hand, expressed their anxieties about a loss of stature, as black male athletic success portended competition in other arenas of life—most notably the workforce. Thus, sports coverage could refute stereotypes that paradoxically labeled black men as shiftless and inconsequential yet also sexually charged and menacing—or it could uphold those stereotypes for the sake of buttressing white men's privileged position in society.¹⁴ This tension would be played out numerous times and in numerous ways as individuals discussed these college athletes' accomplishments and shortfalls.

Black athletic success was also seen to have important ramifications for citizenship itself. Although athletics were seemingly far removed from the realms of politics and the law, they had the potential to alter people's conceptions of African Americans' place in society, what the political theorist Judith Shklar has referred to as the idea of citizenship as "standing."¹⁵ Having a black man earn praise and recognition as a star athlete indicated a certain level of respect to which most African Americans, and other suppressed minority groups, aspired. This understanding of citizenship helps explain why so many black leaders continued to believe in the transformative possibilities of athletics, despite numerous setbacks over the years: public respect and admiration for African American achievements and contributions to society revealed blacks and whites on an even plane, overcoming symbolic and legal barriers that relegated African Americans to an inferior position.¹⁶ Claims for African Americans' right to serve in the military—as was the case in Paul Robeson's time—stemmed directly from an attempt to affirm black men as full citizens, with all the rights and responsibilities of their white peers. Understanding citizenship as standing in this way also underscores why whites beholden

to Jim Crow attempted to minimize or denigrate the achievements of black athletes—threats to the privileged position of the white male citizen were not taken lightly.

The role of the media in situating sports and race deserves special mention. Given the many contradictory readings that observers made of integrated sports competition—including proof of black male potential, a justification for the continued degradation of African Americans, and, as we will see, a host of responses in between—it is no small wonder that commentators on both sides of the color line continued to turn to sports as a powerful symbol of equal opportunity in action. Generally speaking, I have divided analysis of press coverage between that of the mainstream (or white) press and that of the black press. Clearly, these two institutions had different biases and goals that affected their perceptions and their editorial decisions. The mainstream presses, owned almost exclusively by white men with ties to the local business communities in which their papers operated, faced market pressures as they sought to keep up with their competition. As this book shows, those market pressures helped shape the discourse regarding racial conflict—especially in the Jim Crow South. Generally speaking, mainstream white newspapers did not promote athletics as a way to advance black civil rights. However, they nonetheless consistently praised sports as an arena free from prejudice and bigotry, where sportsmanship dictated fair play between all participants. Often ignoring racial slights and the verbal and physical abuse levied on black athletes (and employing racially coded language of their own), these publications held fast to the idea of sports as a color-blind institution in American life.

The black presses, on the other hand, were smaller in number and size but occupied a particularly important place in the black community. As one of the few options available for black voices to be heard in public, black newspapers did more than report and entertain. Many black editors and publishers saw themselves as the voice of the black community and used their papers as sounding boards for issues neglected in white political, intellectual, and cultural circles.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, then, these men and women often invested sports coverage with greater meanings than that of harmless entertainment, hoping to use sports to push for pressing issues to African Americans. Pursuing a strategy of “muscular assimilation,” many black leaders hoped black success in sports would lead white Americans to recognize the potential of African Americans to contribute meaningfully in all aspects of society.¹⁸ As my research reveals, black publications across the country, including the *Crisis* in New York, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Kansas City Call*, and the *California Eagle*, celebrated black athletic achievement, lamented incidents of discrimination, and expressed their hopes that sports would open up ever more areas of American life to equal

black participation. Those hopes would become more cautious in the 1960s and 1970s, and articles in the *Carolina Times* and the *Birmingham World* reflected the growing unease with integration's unintended effects on black-run institutions. But even these publications still found hope in black athletic success and expressed some degree of faith in its transformative capabilities.

That both black and white sportswriters, given these different sets of circumstances, would turn to sports as a model for American society speaks to the allure of the level playing field. However, these shared hopes for the inherent fairness of sports, expressed by writers across the nation and over the course of many decades, often masked very different readings of some key ideals. In particular, the malleability of the term *equality* made it possible for observers to assign different meanings, and draw different lessons, from the achievements of black sports figures. Even when a variety of people all lauded sports as being a proving ground for equality, or equal opportunity, they often had conflicting ideas of what those terms meant. Indeed, as political theorists such as Bernard Williams have noted, even bigots generally believe that all human beings share certain fundamental characteristics that make them deserving of fair and equal treatment. Prejudiced people simply operate from the assumption that something such as a person's race correlates with other factors that make those people "deserving" of an inferior place in life.¹⁹ This way of thinking helps explain how white southern writers could praise the "democracy" and "equality" of the United States while still supporting the legal system of Jim Crow segregation that relegated African Americans to an inferior position in society. Their visions of "democracy" and "equality" rested on rarely stated assumptions of white superiority in a variety of human characteristics. However, as commentators discussed black stars in their respective contexts, they often outlined a more precise vision of those ideas, circumscribing athletics' importance or "explaining" success by falling back on damaging stereotypes.

Even among those opposed to segregation or the idea of racial bigotry, the notion of "equal opportunity" was slippery enough to accommodate a wide range of meanings. As Williams argues, although most express support for "the . . . equal opportunity for *everyone in society* to secure certain goods," a variety of interrelated factors often make achieving that goal impossible and open the door to a wide range of interpretations.²⁰ For example, a state university could consider black students for admission on equal terms with whites and insist that it was fulfilling the goal of equality of opportunity. However, if most black high school students in the state went to underfunded, segregated schools, leading to lower test scores and admission rates, one might wonder if black students in the state truly had "equal" access to state schools.²¹ Complexities such as these were rarely discussed in the press, but sports provided an opening for this dialogue. In their competing interpretations of these

athletes' careers, black and white writers (often unwittingly) wrestled with competing definitions of equality and equal opportunity precisely because of the widespread belief in sportsmanship and the level playing field. As a result, they naturally identified different ways in which sports served as a model for an equal opportunity society.

College sports, then, provided a particularly compelling arena (pun intended) in which to discuss racial identities, manliness, citizenship, and equality. A popular activity among diverse spectators—young and old, men and women, black and white—college sports served as a lingua franca for many Americans, a more accessible mode of communication than the relatively abstract languages of law and politics. When people discussed the experiences of these black athletes, they articulated their sense of how American society worked and how it ought to work. At other times, however, these discussions masked contentious debates, inhibiting a thorough analysis of the thorny issues still inhibiting the attainment of a color-blind and racially equitable society.

Chapter 1, “Our Own ‘Roby’ and ‘the Dark Cloud,’” explores reactions to Paul Robeson’s career as an All-American football player at Rutgers College from 1915 to 1919. Although Robeson would earn considerable fame later in life as an actor, singer, and activist, his first entry in national public discourse came from his considerable talents on the football field, where he helped pull perennial also-ran Rutgers briefly into the ranks of the elite. In the waning years of “Muscular Christianity,” just after black boxer Jack Johnson’s loss of the heavyweight championship, and as the United States prepared for war in Europe, Robeson’s extraordinary career inspired black and white observers, although the terms by which they discussed his career suggested very different conceptions of black men’s proper place in the nation.

Chapter 2, “‘Harbingers of Progress’ and ‘the Gold Dust Trio,’” studies responses to the very successful football squad fielded at the University of California at Los Angeles in the fall of 1939. With three black starters—Kenny Washington, Woody Strode, and Jackie Robinson—this team offered hope to many blacks and whites who saw the New Deal era as an ideal time to craft a new civic nationalism that could welcome the contributions of ethnic and racial minorities. The increasing threats of Hitler’s fascist regime and its hate-filled rhetoric fueled discussions of how this team might (for good or ill) represent an expanded sense of American egalitarian democracy.

Chapter 3, “‘A First-Class Gentleman’ and ‘That Big N——r,’” explores the extraordinary response to Wilt Chamberlain, the legendary seven-foot basketball player, during his time at the University of Kansas. As the modern civil rights movement began in earnest, with the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* acting as a catalyst, Chamberlain’s

reception by blacks and whites prodded observers to consider the barriers to full black male citizenship. Recruited explicitly by area black leaders to help improve “race relations” in the area, Chamberlain attempted to perform a number of tasks in the glaring media spotlight that accompanied him: lead his team to a national championship, set a good example for African American youths, and persuade whites to abandon racial segregation (which existed in the supposedly “free state” of Kansas).

Chapter 4, “‘Our Colored Boy’ and ‘Fine Black Athletes,’” analyzes the experiences of black basketball star Charlie Scott at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Although North Carolina, and the town of Chapel Hill, especially, had reputations for “progressive” attitudes regarding race and equality, Scott’s experiences revealed the resistance of southern whites to black claims for civil rights. Attempting to balance his desires to help his team, convince southern whites that racial integration was feasible, and advocate on behalf of African Americans, Scott found little support in the state’s mainstream media, which avoided generating conflict and refused to discuss racial issues frankly. Scott’s frustrations spoke to the challenges faced by African Americans attempting to break through the numerous, and often invisible, barriers of the Jim Crow South.

Chapter 5, “‘Those Nigras’ and ‘Men Again,’” analyzes the long process of desegregating the University of Alabama’s football team, one of the South’s most popular teams. Celebrated head coach Paul “Bear” Bryant’s hesitance to integrate his highly successful squad angered many, particularly because his stature, esteem, and racially moderate views appeared to make him an ideal candidate for such a task. Hemmed in by the words and actions of avowed segregationist governor George Wallace, however, Bryant cautiously waited to welcome black athletes to his squad. In the summer of 1969, the Afro-American Association student group took matters into their own hands, filing a lawsuit in federal court to force the school to seek out black athletes for its prestigious program. In the years that followed, the team showed both the possibilities and limitations of sports in modeling an integrated society in the Deep South, as debates over affirmative action and black activism presented considerable obstacles for southern whites and blacks to overcome in the waning years of the civil rights movement.

Despite the very different cultural, political, and economic contexts these pioneer athletes lived through, observers on both sides of the color line consistently turned to them as symbols of change, some seeing them as models of hope for an equitable society and others as harbingers of doom for an established way of life. These diverse reactions help us understand the issues that were at stake as these athletes moved onto previously privileged courts and fields—nothing more or less than the definitions of U.S. citizenship, the place of athletics in American life, the proper roles of universities and

colleges, changing definitions of gender and racial identities, and the fundamental contours of American democratic society. As these players achieved great success—all of them earning the rank of “All-American” on at least one occasion—while facing racial abuse and idealized praise, they channeled ordinary Americans’ aspirations of what their nation might be.

The changing tenor of responses to these celebrated black athletes reveals the gradual evolution of Americans’ sense of egalitarian democracy. When Paul Robeson took the field for Rutgers in the 1910s, prominent northern and southern white leaders had no qualms marking out full citizenship as the exclusive preserve of white, educated men. Many key black leaders, including Robeson himself, limited their own calls for black equality to basic legal, political, and economic rights, willing to forgo, for the moment, social integration. By the late 1930s, many black and white Americans hoped for a more expansive civic nationalism that welcomed the contributions of previously disparaged minorities, including African Americans. The negative response to Jackie Robinson and his teammates at UCLA indicated that that vision of American democracy had not yet taken hold as the dominant ideal.

But by the mid-1950s, after the pivotal events of World War II and the start of the modern-day civil rights movement, increasing numbers of black and white Americans called for a society in which blacks and whites shared not only equal legal protection but also access to the same social spaces. Although some attempted to cling to segregated society, support was slipping. However, certain issues remained contentious—who would lead this newly integrated society? Whose social spaces and economic institutions would remain intact when the walls of segregation came down? What steps were necessary to ensure African Americans’ economic equality with whites? These debates increased in urgency from Wilt Chamberlain’s time in Kansas, to Charlie Scott’s career at UNC, to the torturous process of integration at the University of Alabama. In many ways, those questions have been left unanswered. The color-blind society aspired to by supporters of an expansive civic nationalism has been attained in some respects—in laws prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations, education, and housing—but has proved elusive in others. Although many white Americans continue to affirm the reality of the American dream of equal opportunity, most African American leaders and other social critics are more skeptical. The dialogue surrounding the experiences of these black athletes helps explain why those significantly different interpretations exist, revealing the contentious issues surrounding civic leadership, social activism, and affirmative action that divide Americans even to this day. And they point to the possibilities—and failures—of college sports, and sports in general—to facilitate the dialogue that will best solve these vexing issues.