

## **Slouching Toward a New Expediency: College Football and the Color Line During the Depression Decade**

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Nineteen ninety-seven marked the fiftieth anniversary of Jackie Robinson's rookie season as a Brooklyn Dodger and the dawning of a new era in American sport. For more than half a century before that epochal event, Jim Crow policies and practices had dominated major league baseball. Critically, it was only a matter of months after Robinson signed a contract with the Dodger organization that professional football readmitted African Americans to participation; a few years after the desegregation of the "national pastime," the fledgling National Basketball Association would follow suit.<sup>1</sup> What one historian has called "baseball's great experiment" constituted a landmark in race relations in the United States, setting a precedent for other institutions and organizations where social justice had long been denied. Just as Robinson joined boxing's heavy-weight champion, Joe Louis, as an icon of race pride for countless African Americans, the breaching of the color line on the diamond was remarkable for its symbolic significance nationwide—to blacks and whites alike. Not again until the *Brown* decision of 1954 would any one instance speak so forcefully of the momentum being gathered by the civil rights crusade.<sup>2</sup>

Celebrated in song, reenacted on film, the life and legend of Jackie Robinson has also been inscribed in scholarly accounts of the quest for racial equality. Appropriately, numerous historians of the civil rights movement have highlighted key figures and watershed events, describing in rich detail episodes of black heroism in confrontation, first with the customs and codes of the Jim Crow South, then with the most extreme outbursts of white resistance to racial reform. Those writers have accentuated the dramatic victories won by black activists and

the developments that promised at the time to transform American society and politics. Tellingly, David Garrow's work on Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, *Bearing the Cross*, assesses the religious impulses that animated the civil rights crusade. In documenting many of the ordeals and triumphs that highlighted the mid-century struggle for equality, Taylor Branch has similarly underscored the biblical proportions of the movement and its meanings in his epic studies, *Parting the Waters* and *Pillar of Fire*.<sup>3</sup>

Monumental history certainly deserves its place. Yet, equally important, many students of the African American experience and race relations have focused their attention on local activism and subtle changes in interracial dynamics in order to elucidate the intricate politics of the civil rights movement. Thus in recent years we have come to know more about the efforts of black union members and churchwomen to organize campaigns for better working conditions, better schools, and better hospitals, or the hour-to-hour details that dominated the lives of community activists as they mounted bus boycotts and voter registration drives during the 1950s and 1960s. We have also gained insight into the ways that a seemingly isolated incident such as a sit-in at the Woolworth's in Greensboro swiftly brought thousands of black students together in protest, or the means by which impromptu or short-term interracial gatherings—a debate, a concert, a sporting contest—first suggested changing patterns of thought and behavior within the mainstream culture. The *process* was, and remains, enormously significant. As an increasing number of scholars have argued, specifically *how* the most egregious aspects of segregation were eventually overcome is as much a story of small steps as of major “strides toward freedom.”

Most important, within the broader history and sociology of race relations, “local people”—once anonymous or little-known—have become not merely praiseworthy but also prominent for the overall impact of their “lives in the struggle.” At the same time, recent investigations have highlighted the range and complexity of responses by various white authorities to the leverage exerted by racial reformers at critical moments during the civil rights crusade. The adjustments and concessions made by white businessmen and elected officials to the boycotts and protests mounted by black activists in Nashville, for instance, or in Atlanta, Charlotte, and Houston, also form a part of the larger story. For every heroic bus ride or historic march, there were also corridor consultations and backroom deals. Ultimately, accounts of how desegregation was in such cases quietly negotiated render our understanding of social change all the more expansive.<sup>4</sup>

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Within the realm of sport, a number of intercollegiate athletic encounters before the era of Jackie Robinson illuminate the dramatic element in the campaign for civil rights, just as they shed light on the ways black achievement in popular pastimes subtly reshaped prevailing thought about integration. These episodes

also attest to the importance of the local and incidental in the transformation of American culture. From the vantage of more than half a century, such occurrences tell us that the pace of change has often been slow, the terms subtle, and the direction uncertain. In a number of instances, though, racial reformers were successful in exploiting the ambiguities in the philosophies and practices that defined American culture, or in turning one ideal—sportsmanship, for example—against another orthodoxy—which had long maintained the separation between the races. Certainly, the triumphs by African Americans in sport would never be so numerous or influential as to alter completely the social, economic, and political arrangements that still largely characterize a nation bound to the color line. Yet the victories won by black athletes, before the Second World War as well as afterwards, subverted some dominant racial stereotypes. At the same time, black activists also held up instances of exclusion in sports as a mirror to the ideology of equality and opportunity, challenging white America to live up to its shibboleths.

The increasing number of successes by blacks in sport did indeed become a part of a larger civil rights strategy. Journals of uplift, such as *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, as well as the African American press, not only highlighted the accomplishments of black athletes; they also argued that triumphs on the playing fields translated into more significant victories in far broader fields of endeavor. The notion of “muscular assimilationism” was clearly modeled on the success of new immigrant groups—Germans, the Irish, Italians, and Jews—in embracing sports as a way to display “All-American” talents as well as to establish a platform for social mobility.<sup>5</sup>

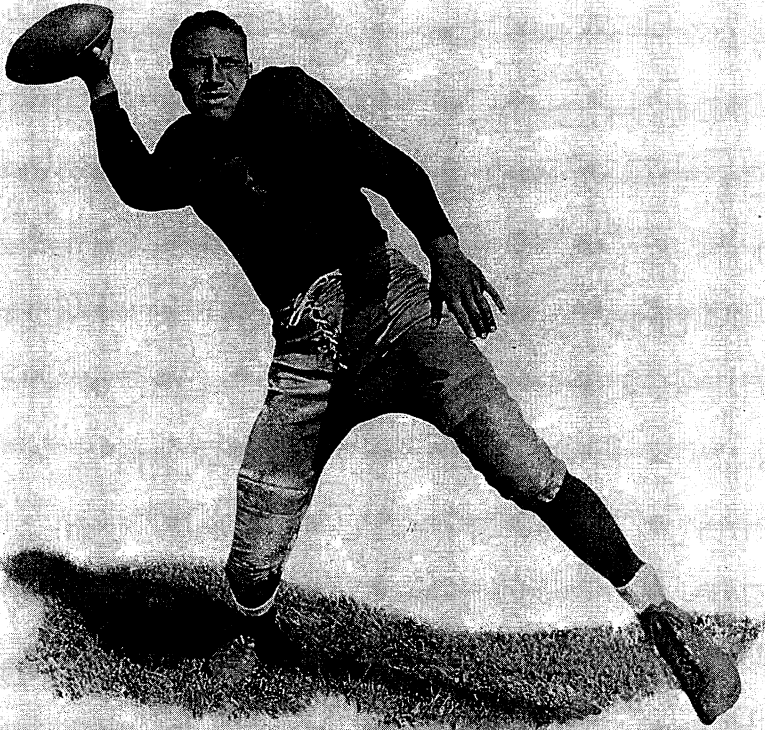
Ideally, the participation of African Americans in popular pastimes would evoke the principles of sportsmanship and fair play within the mainstream culture. Racial reformers also believed that the skill, strength, and speed of a growing number of black athletes would create new “imperatives,” in a highly competitive *national* sporting culture. Within this context, “muscular assimilationism” was intended to remind white America that the benching of a black athlete meant that all Americans would be deprived of the chance to see “the best man win.”

Although there were many testaments to the ideal, perhaps the most compelling issued from the pen of Roy Wilkins, editor of *The Crisis*. Writing in 1935, Wilkins averred “that a Negro historian or editor or philosopher or scientist or composer or singer or poet or painter is more important than a great athlete.” But none of those “worthy individuals,” he also asserted, possessed more power or influence than the athlete. “Infinitesimal intellectual America” needed no instruction on race relations, he asserted optimistically. For the “rank and file,” however, “who hold the solution of the problem in their hands, the beautiful breasting of a tape by Jesse Owens and the thud of a glove on the hand of Joe Louis carry more ‘interracial education’ than all the erudite philosophy ever written on race.”<sup>6</sup>

Against the backdrop of such considerations about principles and pragmatism, the racial negotiations surrounding two football games—the 1936 contest

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SYRACUSE'S SIDAT-SINGH

*(He got revenge on Maryland, 53-0; beat Cornell—See page 350)*

**Figure 1:** Wilmeth Sidat-Singh, star quarterback, Syracuse University, 1938. *Courtesy of The Crisis Publishing Co., Inc., the publisher of the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.*

between the University of North Carolina and New York University, then the encounter in 1938 between Duke University and Syracuse—possess a significance that extends far beyond the results, as the sports pages rendered them. Indeed, the stories of those games engage not just the particulars of the drive to desegregate athletics, but also how scholars interpret the processes of social change. Though neither event attracted much attention from the mainstream press at the time, contemporary black journalists saw them as turning points in the broad-based crusade for racial justice. Together the games represented a subtle but substantial shift in the practices that defined intersectional—and interracial—athletic competition in the United States.

When UNC met NYU in the 1936 contest at the Polo Grounds in New York, and then two years later when Duke journeyed northward to confront Syracuse University, the two southern schools took important steps toward the alteration of the racial policies that had long governed American sport. The episodes were significant because the UNC-NYU game featured the African American running back Ed Williams as one of the stars of the northern contingent, and the matchup between Duke and Syracuse was billed as a showcase, not just for the vaunted “Iron Duke” defense, but also for the passing talents of Wilmeth Sidat-Singh, the black quarterback for the Orangemen of Syracuse. In the brief compass of two years, southern institutions, which for decades had insisted that Jim Crow would mandate the conduct of all the games they played against northern rivals, had begun to acknowledge the increasing agitation for the desegregation of sport. From a different perspective, or in a larger sense, some white southerners showed an inclination (albeit a grudging one) to abide by the principles of fair play that had long been inscribed in the notion of the “level playing field”—and had long been betrayed.

The changing patterns of thought regarding race and sport revealed in these events were neither deeply-rooted nor broad-based. Nor did the modification of athletic practices in mainstream culture amount to an inspirational tale about the ideals of equality and opportunity finally being put into practice. Rather, those shifts and turns involved a number of circumstances that dictated a new set of terms, what might be called “a new expediency,” in the forming of football schedules. Still, the changes were no less significant for being tentative and largely cloaked in silence. Simply stated, the importance of such precedents as those set by the UNC-NYU football game and the contest between Duke and Syracuse evolved over the years, just as the drama of the events has largely been shaped in retrospect, in light of their consequences.

Since the turn of the century and the advent of intersectional sports rivalries, northern and southern schools had maintained a certain understanding, a “Gentlemen’s Agreement” that no African American athlete would be permitted to compete when the teams met. The protocol was simple: when an understanding had been reached—after a phone call, for instance, or an exchange of telegrams between coaches—the color line would be drawn on the playing fields whether the games were contested in Birmingham, Alabama, or Boston, Massachusetts.

By the 1930s, however, some disputes and the threat of cancelled games prompted athletic officials to go beyond informal accords. What they did was to strike contracts that included a forfeiture or cancellation clause—whereby if a school withdrew from a scheduled contest it was bound to indemnify its opponent against the loss of revenues. Such legal documents, though often vaguely worded, were generally intended to maintain the color line in college sports. Throughout the interwar era, the “Gentlemen’s Agreement” and Jim Crow clause would be the arrangements that largely prevailed in intersectional competition.<sup>7</sup>

Yet during the late 1920s and 1930s, a countercurrent of belief and action also clearly gained momentum. The timing was significant. As the historian John Higham has asserted, the “power and confidence” radiated by the civil rights movement after the Second World War “could not have existed without a slow accumulation of guilt and protest from the late 1920s through the 1930s. . . . From a revulsion against Southern lynchings in the late Twenties through the diffuse egalitarianism of the New Deal years, public opinion prepared the way for a communalizing experience of national dedication and sacrifice.”<sup>8</sup> Within the domain of sport, student demonstrations and the protest campaigns led by organizations such as the NAACP, as well as expressions of outrage by sports-writers, white as well as black, bespoke increasing opposition to discriminatory policies on the playing fields. They also helped raise the color line in athletics from a matter of fact to the level of controversy.<sup>9</sup>

The cases of several black athletes who had been forced to the sidelines during intersectional football contests illustrate the state of race relations in sport before the breakthrough contests of 1936 and 1938. In the most dramatic of these instances, Dave Myers, the African American star of the NYU squad, had been benched against the visiting University of Georgia in 1929. An injury—“a damaged acromioclavicular ligament”—had been concocted by team physicians to “meet such a delicate emergency,” as a Georgia newspaper gloated. Clearly, Myers’ removal from the lineup had been carefully orchestrated by the host school in accordance with its agreement with Georgia. Just as important, though, was the outcry among local sportswriters and prominent civil rights leaders, who excoriated New York University for accommodating the segregationist policies of the southern institutions. Heywood Broun, one of the most progressive columnists on the athletic scene, documented the ways NYU had earlier capitulated to the demands made by southern opponents, but it was his denunciation of the “gutless coach of a gutless school,” that was picked up by other metropolitan journalists in their coverage of the game. Significantly, New York Congressman Emmanuel Celler—for many years the representative of a racially mixed constituency as well as a conscientious spokesman for civil rights—noted his disgust at the incident.

And for its part, the NAACP registered its displeasure with Myers for his compliance in the scheme.<sup>10</sup> A year later, when William Bell was forced to stay home while his Ohio State teammates traveled to Annapolis to play the Naval Academy, not only did black commentators condemn the two schools for their

maintenance of segregation; some also exhorted Bell to give up his tainted scholarship rather than bow to bigotry.<sup>11</sup>

The African American press continued to inveigh against the submission to racism by Minnesota, Iowa, Colgate, and Boston College, supposedly enlightened northern institutions. The profits from such intersectional athletic contests exacted a huge moral sacrifice, wrote Wendell Smith of the *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, Sam Lacy of the *Afro-American* newspaper syndicate, and Edwin B. Henderson for *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*. In similar fashion, the Communist Party *Daily Worker* and other leftist publications drew attention to the hypocrisy embedded within American college sport. Throughout the 1930s, moreover, protests by northern students increased in size and intensity. In 1934, for example, when the University of Michigan forced its star football player, Willis Ward, to sit out the game against visiting Georgia Tech, the southerners agreed to bench one of their stars in “compensation” for the withdrawal of Ward from the Michigan team that day. This arrangement did not mollify everyone in Ann Arbor, however, and many students picketed the game.<sup>12</sup>

While the majority of presidents and professors at northern institutions remained notably uninterested in altering conventional athletic arrangements, some educators had begun to advocate a more thoroughgoing ideal of “fair play” in sport by suggesting that intersectional rivalries did not have to be segregated. Significantly, one of those was a white southern college president—UNC’s Frank Porter Graham—a rare racial moderate who intrigued civil rights advocates as much as he infuriated segregationists in his home state and beyond. Another was a southern college coach—Duke’s Wallace Wade—who demonstrated his keen grasp of the pragmatic value of mixed intercollegiate competition. For beyond good sportsmanship, there was yet another dimension of athletic rivalry to be reckoned with. Increasingly during the 1930s, the coaches and journalists who contributed to the polls ranking teams throughout the nation carefully considered the quality of a school’s schedule when making their tabulations. A close scrutiny of the rosters of opposing teams, in addition to the final scores of their match-ups, thus influenced the selection process for the prestigious and lucrative bowl games during the Depression decade. Significantly, the wise coach knew that for a southern squad to force African American athletes out of competition in northern venues threatened a high ranking at season’s end. Simply stated, a great deal was at stake in the playing out of intersectional, and interracial, rivalries.<sup>13</sup>

It is within this broad framework that the games of 1936 and 1938 were contested, and precedents set. The episodes underscore the diverse ways that crossing of the color line in athletics might occur, revealing much about the idiosyncratic and uncertain process of racial reform through sport. Although the stories focus on the efforts of UNC president Frank Porter Graham and Duke coach Wallace Wade to sidestep longstanding patterns of racial exclusion in football, more significant still in the broader racial calculus were the individual black athletes, Ed Williams of NYU and Wilmeth Sidat-Singh of Syracuse.



**Figure 2:** Ed Williams, New York University football player during the late 1930s. *Courtesy New York University Archives.*



Ultimately, the prowess of Williams and Sidat-Singh, as well as of a host of other African American athletes, was crucial to the gamesmanship that gradually, effectively, rearranged intersectional competition during the late-1930s and beyond.<sup>14</sup> Interpreted from a different perspective, the participation by black athletes in intersectional rivalries suggested a tentative shift in white southern attitudes regarding race relations and regional pride. As the historian and civil rights activist Howard Zinn would later suggest, the discriminatory old social regime was imperiled once losing at football came to be considered a “fate worse than integration.”<sup>14</sup>

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In an article written for *The Crisis* in 1933, the educator and activist George Streater acknowledged that there were times in its history when North Carolina had been reckoned less intolerant on the matter of race than had other parts of the South, just as “liberal forces” within the state appeared to encourage the aspirations of African American reformers. Concerning the maintenance of historically black institutions of higher learning, Streater remarked that “the colored world was pleased with a Southern State which supported three [black] state colleges and two normal schools.”<sup>15</sup>

The state was also home to two institutions that were widely recognized as moderate to progressive concerning race relations. One was the Raleigh *News and Observer*, which by the 1930s carried numerous editorials denouncing “lynch law” and espousing racial tolerance while publishing occasional items on black sport, from Josh Gibson’s Negro League home run record to the football schedules of historically black Shaw University. The other was the University at Chapel Hill. Significantly, in October 1936 it was the *News and Observer* that declared that a “Negro” from NYU would get “the Starting Job Against [the] Carolina Eleven” in an upcoming game. That announcement, simple and stark as a headline, indicated the role that UNC, and specifically its president, would play in altering both the terms and tone of intersectional athletic relations during the years to come.<sup>16</sup>

Inaugurated in 1930 as president of the University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham had become controversial among southern whites long before he took a stand on mixed athletic competition. Within the decade following the Scopes trial, he fought the state legislature regarding the right of the university to teach theories of evolution, and he consistently defended the academic freedom of a socialist professor in the English department as well as that of liberals scattered among the rest of the faculty.

Such stances gained Graham far fewer friends than enemies among alumni and influential politicians, however. A speaking appearance at the university by the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, author of the controversial text, *Marriage and Morals*, suggested some of the perils of southern progressivism. So too did the campus visit by the African American writer Langston Hughes, who had

recently published the poem, “Christ in Alabama.” If those incidents were not sufficient to inflame old “segs” and young, then an invitation to join the board of directors of the American Civil Liberties Union and another to become a major official in the National Recovery Administration thoroughly reinforced for many white Carolinians Graham’s provocative political stances. For many southern conservatives, as Graham’s biographer has contended, “that man at Chapel Hill” had become as dangerous as “that man in the White House.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite hostility to many of his positions and programs, Graham continued to champion liberal causes. Early in 1936 he joined in the sponsorship of a Committee on Fair Play in Sports. Knowing full well that the Nazis had pursued a broad-based campaign of discrimination against German Jews, this organization urged that the United States boycott the Berlin Olympic Games if *any* German citizens were barred from competition. Then, midway through the autumn football campaign Graham initiated the first of several communications with the president of New York University that subtly but firmly challenged the prevailing arrangements between northern and southern schools concerning the fielding of African American athletes. Graham’s action made only one prominent headline: when the *News and Observer* announced that a Negro would take the field against UNC. But neither that newspaper nor the black press uncovered all the details behind the historic football contest between North Carolina and New York University—or chose to reveal them. Though it represented but a small step in a process that would require decades to complete, for close observers the episode nevertheless signaled that the great wall of white resistance to desegregation was neither as tall nor as thick as they had once supposed.

The University of North Carolina had not recently competed against a northern institution that might have fielded a black athlete. This may explain why UNC’s athletic department had neither a “Gentlemen’s Agreement” nor a Jim Crow clause in its football contracts with opponents from above the Mason and Dixon line. At the outset of the 1936 season, however, Graham clearly understood that one of the school’s upcoming rivals, New York University, was led by the African American running back, Ed Williams. Perhaps Graham was aware of NYU’s reputation for benching black players during intersectional contests, as in the Dave Myers episode seven years earlier. Or maybe his special interest in the matter was piqued by the lecture delivered on campus three days before the game by the passionate Negrophobe, Thomas Dixon, author of *The Clansman* and *The Leopard’s Spots*, the novels that inspired D. W. Griffith’s epic film “Birth of a Nation.” Dixon’s avowed purpose in Chapel Hill during the autumn of 1936 was to fulminate against the “communistic” tendencies of the Roosevelt administration.<sup>18</sup> But this juxtaposition of events, though it went unremarked upon at the time, remains intriguing.

In any event, Graham sent a telegram to Chancellor H. W. Chase of NYU on the eve of the contest to be held at the Polo Grounds in New York. The message was meant to reassure Chase that “in case any issue arises we simply desire you



**Figure 3:** Frank Porter Graham, President of the University of North Carolina, 1930-1949. *Courtesy Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill.*

to know we would not want to interfere or make any suggestions with regard to the composition of the football team of N.Y.U. We leave that entirely to Coach Stevens and New York University.” Graham then reiterated his position that the NYU coach should know “that we play the team he puts on the field and hope it is the best team. To our knowledge no question has originated here.”<sup>19</sup>

Compared to the vagueness of statements made by other college authorities in the past or the devious means used to exclude blacks from competition, this document was exceptionally clear and resolute. It is equally clear, however, that Graham had not made this position public: on the eve of the contest, an editorialist for the UNC student newspaper, *The Daily Tar Heel*, was pleased to report that Ed Williams would be kept out of the game. The next day, Governor J. C. B. Ehringhaus was among 700 Tarheel fans who watched Carolina prevail, though they also witnessed a strong performance turned in by Williams. Significantly, the respective college newspapers highlighted only the dramatic runs and passes made by their gridiron contingents; their coverage of the game appeared strictly in football terms. For their part, the metropolitan dailies merely reported the results of an interesting intersectional match-up.<sup>20</sup>

It was left to the black press to emphasize the larger meaning of the game. One reporter did so in words that, for all the irony they were meant to convey, expressed something enormously inspirational as well. Roy Wilkins, who had recently succeeded W. E. B. Du Bois as editor of *The Crisis*, discussed the game only briefly in his own journal. But he wrote a lengthy, vigorous account of the contest for the New York *Amsterdam News*. He had heard “no boos” from Carolina fans, Wilkins reported, and

none of the familiar cries of “Kill the Negro.” So far the University of North Carolina is still standing and none of the young men representing it on the gridiron appears to be any worse off for having spent an afternoon competing against a Negro player. It is a fairly safe prediction, that no white North Carolinian’s daughter will marry a Negro as a result of Saturday’s play, much to the chagrin of the peddlers of the bugaboo of social equality.<sup>21</sup>

Wilkins then praised UNC’s actions more broadly, condemning those institutions that refused to advance even one small step on the issue of race. The theory behind the “shenanigans” generally called “Gentlemen’s Agreements” was “that the prestige of a Southern school suffers in some way if its sons compete in games with Negroes,” he asserted. “Not only that, but the South and the white race generally were supposed to suffer something or other. Sociology, anthropology, and political science were dragged into the argument, the whole thing topped off by a rehash of the war of 1860-1865.”<sup>22</sup> When “the North Carolinians merely said they would not object and would not protest” if a black man competed, race

reformers knew they had accomplished something very simple and at the same time quite profound, breaking the tradition of southern schools forcing their hometown rules on northern institutions. Carolina's decision to play NYU, with Williams, suggested to Wilkins "that a younger generation of white Southerners want to approach the difficult business of race relations on a different basis than that used by their fathers and grandfathers." Ultimately, he hoped such an action would "set an example for other Southern schools," and he anticipated upcoming contests that might have the same admirable outcome.<sup>23</sup>

Both the terms and tone of Wilkins' editorial spoke to the frustration and alienation wrought by half a century of Jim Crow practices in the South. They also suggest his hope that one small victory over segregation on the collegiate playing fields would be multiplied and magnified in the coming years until it amounted to more significant successes in "the difficult business of race relations." What pleased Wilkins most was the precedent this game set. He did not mention Graham by name in his dispatch to the *Amsterdam News* or in the shorter article in *The Crisis*. But it was readily apparent to him as well as to Walter White, Executive Director of the NAACP, that in Graham they had found a valuable ally. For several years after the pathbreaking football game, the three men engaged in a wide-ranging correspondence concerning racial reform, North and South. The initial exchanges dealt with sports. First, White sent Graham a reprint of the Wilkins' article in the *Amsterdam News*. In his response, Graham reiterated much of the message he had sent to NYU Chancellor Chase and went on to mention, "incidentally," that Williams "was probably the best player" on the NYU team, and that he "conducted himself in a most gentlemanly manner."<sup>24</sup>

A second round of correspondence further suggests the ways such contests as the UNC-NYU football game played into a larger civil rights campaign. In one letter, Wilkins said that he admired Graham's stance as a "fine expression of the New South," then asked if he could share the president's statement of policy about intersectional contests with certain sportswriters and collegiate authorities. Graham assented. Almost immediately thereafter, the NAACP forwarded that position statement—"we play the team [your coach] puts on the field and hope it is the best team"—along with a commentary of its own, to coach Bernie Bierman of the high-ranking University of Minnesota football team, who had—in customary fashion—benched two black players, Dwight Reed and Horace Bell, for a game against the University of Texas, also contested in 1936. Graham's attitudes and actions stood as a model, Walter White avowed. This was an ideal upon which northern college officials ought to insist in their dealings with other southern institutions. Thus White berated Bierman: "high standards of sportsmanship would necessitate refusal to play southern schools unless they are able to attain the standards of fair play and gentlemanly conduct manifested by the University of North Carolina."<sup>25</sup>

Interracial activities could proceed without resistance and rancor, the NAACP urged; working together, northern and southern institutions could make significant strides in improving race relations. The precedent set by Graham continued

to loom large in attempts by Wilkins and White to persuade other college officials to promote racial tolerance in sport. Beyond that, in their correspondence with Graham they sent letters and clippings from *The Crisis* that acknowledged the efforts by the North Carolina legislature to improve education for blacks. Additionally, they welcomed publication by the University of North Carolina Press of some of the best books on race relations written by whites up to that point. The NAACP officials also congratulated Graham for sponsoring the appearances of black speakers at university forums and seminars. For his part, Graham was pleased to report some of the achievements made both by UNC and the state. For the rest of his presidency, he exchanged letters with African American educators, joined several national committees devoted to “interracial cooperation,” and delivered a considerable number of commencement addresses at historically black colleges and universities.<sup>26</sup>

Notwithstanding their expressions of pride and hope, all three writers seemed aware of the slow pace of racial progress, and the limits on their activities imposed by southern white custom and law. It is telling, in this context, that the correspondence continued to be amiable even after Graham resisted the desegregation of UNC in a much-publicized case in 1939. That incident, in which he denied Pauli Murray admission to the graduate school in Chapel Hill on a technicality, reflected the ambiguities in such designations as “Southern liberal” as well as the fragility of interracial alliances during the early stages of the modern civil rights movement.<sup>27</sup> In sum, Graham had cooperated with the NAACP in a policy of racial moderation that extended the boundaries of intercollegiate sport, but in other respects he would not be a party to bolder challenges to the old social order in the South. As his policy positions and correspondence indicate time and again, Graham reserved for himself, and other “progressive” white leaders, the role of determining when and where desegregation would occur.

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Frank Porter Graham’s career in the politics of race relations did not end with the Pauli Murray case; neither does the story of his “football experiment” end with the NYU game of 1936 and his correspondence with the NAACP. For more than half a century to that point, even modest attempts to loosen the hold of Jim Crow had occasioned uncompromising, often brutal, reactions from the white South.<sup>28</sup>

Rarely, though, was the clash of old-school segregationist beliefs and a new set of social concerns expressed more vividly than in another set of letters that crossed Graham’s desk. J. W. Cantrell, of Kissimee, Florida, never identified himself as an alumnus of UNC or as a spokesman for any organization or cause. Yet he claimed—with what most historians would agree was considerable justification—that he represented the dominant view of the white South, when he started writing Graham in 1938. He began by scrutinizing recent athletic “imperatives” with respect to many of the arguments long made on behalf of the imperative of strict segregation. Appalled by the prospect of more interracial,

intersectional sporting competition, Cantrell exclaimed that “we Southern people are repeating a very ancient racial complication which in other cases always turned out ruinously for our race.” Alluding to “unprecedented factors” and fearing “hideous consequences,” he admonished Graham that “behind every incident of Negro percolation into the White man’s living looms an ominous power, the power of Walter White’s society, organized, endowed, and tremendously astute, consecrated to the earthy purpose of advancing the black man without regard for the cost to mankind generally.”<sup>29</sup>

In the ensuing exchange of letters, Cantrell rejected both Graham’s appeal to “fair play and good sportsmanship” and his invocation of Olympic ideals. Cantrell thus clearly showed his understanding of the precedent set by the UNC-NYU athletic contest. By omitting the “no negro stipulation” in athletic contracts, Cantrell declared, southern universities would permit “leverages” to “find their pivots among ourselves which belong to agencies who have never professed any zeal for the improvement of our race or even for its conservation . . . .” “The sophistications of history and science,” that had influenced his particular racial views suggested to Cantrell that what was needed was the will, the “spiritual power,” of like-minded people to resist the “enthusiasts” of racial mixing. “If we could only hold a little longer what we have held so long, enough might become generally known about genetic values in man and enough might become humanely felt regarding racial incongruities to open our escape from the vast entropy in which always situations like ours have ended.”

One football game where blacks and whites played together led to another, Cantrell’s argument ran. Cumulatively those contests meant a lot, providing yet another mechanism by which a great race might decline. In effect, the president of UNC had invoked fair play in sports over and above white supremacy. Distressed by the choice Graham thus made between two “values separated by many orders of magnitude,” Cantrell concluded his dispatch in apocalyptic terms, pointing out what he believed was the vast “disparity between the requirements of an athletic program and the fate of the most valuable accumulation of chromosomes on earth.”<sup>30</sup>

Given the themes dominating white racial rhetoric ever since the mid-nineteenth century, it is not surprising that Cantrell’s letters raised the specter of miscegenation. Strikingly, his invocation of “genetic values” and, beyond that, the particular value of the chromosomes of white southerners also revealed that he had imbibed some of the notions that constructed racial difference in “scientific” terms. In ensuing years, such assertions would pose still another challenge for racial reformers to surmount.<sup>31</sup> Yet within the context of intersectional athletic competition, the references to “leverages” and “pivots”—the mechanisms of social change—were most intriguing. From the vantage of civil rights advocates, the efforts of “Walter White’s society”—the NAACP—to awaken southerners as well as northerners to interracial fair play were highly significant. In addition to exhortation and agitation during the 1930s, however,

and even beyond the commitment of white educators like Graham to some aspects of a program for racial justice, it was the excellence of individual black athletes, like Ed Williams of NYU, that provided the leverage necessary to reverse the customary pattern of exclusion.

The 1936 football meeting between North Carolina and New York University may have marked one path toward racial progress. But the road to desegregation in college sport was paved by the pragmatism of savvy coaches more often than by the principles of seemingly well-intentioned academics. In other words, while Ed Williams had an increasing number of counterparts in the North, Frank Porter Graham had relatively few among southern educators.<sup>32</sup> Yet a contest held two years later further suggested the complex processes involved in remapping the intercollegiate athletic landscape. Its telling, perhaps inevitably, places a white southern coach at the center of the story. But again the drama could not have been enacted without a talented northern black athlete. With only minor revisions, then, this was the scenario that for many years “muscular assimilationists” had waited to see.

Contested in November 1938 the game pitted powerhouse Duke University against regionally prominent Syracuse, whose quarterback, Wilmeth Sidat-Singh, had already been compared to several of the greatest collegiate athletes of the era. According to Grantland Rice, Sidat-Singh most resembled marquee players Sid Luckman and Sammy Baugh, though in characteristically flamboyant metaphor, the renowned sportswriter would also write that the African American athlete possessed “the deadly aim of Davy Crockett and Kit Carson.”<sup>33</sup> A few years earlier, the name “Sidat-Singh” had created some uncertainty about the racial identity of the Syracuse star—who was not, as some thought, a Hindu. The African American athlete had been formally adopted when a child by his Sikh stepfather, and though Wilmeth Sidat-Singh had never attempted to disguise his racial heritage, some sports reporters as well as rival players remained confused by his name. The previous year, when authorities at the University of Maryland had become certain that the athlete was a black man, they hastily contacted the coach of the visiting Syracuse team and insisted on the maintenance of prevailing racial restrictions. This was the “Gentlemen’s Agreement” in practice. Ultimately, through the machinations of athletic officials from both schools, Sidat-Singh was kept out of that game in Baltimore, which Syracuse lost.<sup>34</sup>

During the 1938 season the Orangemen were touted as one of the finest football teams in the Northeast, especially after Sidat-Singh had led them to a lopsided 53-0 victory over the Maryland squad, played in Syracuse under a contract that was designed to prevent any racial incident.<sup>35</sup> For its part, Duke was even more highly regarded, having advanced through the campaign undefeated, untied, and unscored upon. This set the stage for what would be a dramatic game, and because of its importance, yet another crossing of the color line in sport. Gradually climbing in the national polls, from twenty-first early in the season, to nineteenth then to twelfth, the Blue Devils were gaining increasing publicity, largely on the basis of their “Iron Duke” defense. By November 1 they had moved



up the rankings to tenth and thus figured as one of the principal candidates for a bid to the Rose Bowl.<sup>36</sup>

For the vast majority of commentators, these circumstances could be attributed principally to the acumen of Wallace Wade, Duke's formidable coach. Wade had been a member of the Brown University Rose Bowl squad of 1916 and a teammate of Fritz Pollard, one of the great black athletes of his era. Of far greater significance, Wade had taken two Alabama contingents to the Rose Bowl in the 1920s, then guided Duke to the top of the Southern Conference during the following decade. By 1937 he was famous throughout the nation, the standard-bearer of southern football ascendancy, the subject of a cover story in *Time* magazine. Wade had also become as much an institution as anyone in Durham, including the two men he called "the powers" at Duke: longtime president William P. Few and the vice president and dean of the university, William Hane Wannamaker. He was, therefore, in a strong position to alter southern athletic practices—if the need arose and if he was inclined to do so.<sup>37</sup>

Midway through the season, Wade told the press that he envisioned that his "boys would be studying hard after playing a hard season" and would not want to participate in a bowl game. Additionally, because January 1, 1939, fell on a Sunday, he was not certain, he said, that officials at a Methodist institution would allow a football game to be played on the Sabbath. Those comments notwithstanding, Wade undoubtedly had his eye on a mid-winter journey to southern California. In the meantime, though, he needed to complete the regular season as auspiciously against his northern opponents—Syracuse and then Pittsburgh—as he had begun it in the South. To that purpose he endeavored to clear the way for Duke to compete against Sidat-Singh. Syracuse without its black star was a solid team at best; with Sidat-Singh it offered a substantial challenge, a highly visible contest. Such an encounter would be an important consideration for those who compiled the national rankings.

"Syracuse did not ask for permission to use Sidat-Singh," Wade later recalled, "but the situation developed whereby he was an important cog in their offense and rather than take unfair advantage, we decided to give Syracuse a free hand in the matter." Taking his case to Wannamaker, Wade asserted that he could defeat Syracuse, even with Sidat-Singh. This was a significant detail in the discussion. As he later recalled, Wade told Wannamaker "If he doesn't play, no matter what the score is, we'll get no credit for winning." Besides, the game would be played in the North, and there had been precedents, the University of North Carolina game versus NYU in 1936 and Maryland versus Syracuse earlier in 1938. "The powers" agreed to his position, and Wade subsequently wired Syracuse authorities that even though "a previous contract states he will not be allowed to participate against Duke," the southern school would not object to the use of Sidat-Singh.<sup>38</sup>

Wade would later maintain that there had been "no static" about his efforts to compete in a controversial game. But Ted Mann, one of the first and most

prominent sports information directors in the South, recalled that, in fact, among players, around the campus, and throughout the city of Durham, the decision raised some alarm. The alumni, especially, were “up in arms” about the participation of the African American athlete, according to Mann’s recollections, and the coach had to persuade many players on his squad to take the field. In the end, however, Wade prevailed in all of his efforts. He would later maintain that it was his appeal to athletic honor that was decisive. To others, such as Mann, it was the coach’s authority, his special status on campus and beyond, that won the day.

Sidat-Singh started the game. But the Duke defense early and effectively thwarted his passing as well as his running efforts. Sidat-Singh, injured in the first quarter, did not return for the rest of the contest.<sup>39</sup> The Blue Devils returned home not only with a 21-0 victory, but also with a number five ranking and the inside position for an invitation to the Rose Bowl. *The Crisis* offered only a brief report of the contest. Noteworthy for its earnestness as well as a certain naivete, it lauded the southern institution for its enlightened stand.<sup>40</sup>

\* \* \* \*

Slouching toward a new expediency in the ensuing years, other southern schools joined the University of North Carolina, Maryland, and Duke in waiving Jim Crow clauses in their contracts or in abandoning “Gentlemen’s Agreements”—for games played in northern or western venues.<sup>41</sup> They did so for various reasons, though never with specific references to “Negro rights” or racial justice. For some, such as Duke, it might have seemed necessary to compete against the most talented African American athletes in order to improve a national ranking or to enhance an athletic reputation. Additionally, the magnificent performances of black runners and passers appeared to “soften” the once-solid southern position regarding race, much as the “muscular assimilationists” had hoped and promised. Neither Southern Methodist University nor Texas Christian, for instance, raised the issue in 1937 when those teams competed against UCLA, with its black stars Kenny Washington and Woody Strode. Speaking for a younger generation of southern journalists, Horace McCoy, a reporter for the *Dallas Times Herald*, agreed with SMU coach Madison Bell that the impressive abilities of the players overwhelmed concerns about color. Recalling a brilliant run by Washington, McCoy declared, “In that moment you forgot he was black; he was no color at all; he was simply a great athlete.”<sup>42</sup> During the late 1930s an increasing number of commentators on race and sport perceived in these episodes a significant pattern of increasing interracial understanding, even as others wrote more warily or in sardonic terms about the complicated relationship between athletic principle and practice. Two decades later, Howard Zinn would note wryly that “white Southerners are not in effect for segregation when it means losing something they value even more than the separation of the races.”<sup>43</sup>

States on the edge of the Old South—Maryland, North Carolina, and Texas—were thus the first to begin the process of desegregation in college sport.



**Figure 4:** Wallace Wade, Coach of Duke University, 1930-42, 1946-50. Wade guided Duke to two Rose Bowl games. *Courtesy Duke University Archives.*

By 1946 Virginia would join the list, when UVA hosted Harvard—with a black athlete, Chester Pierce—for a football contest in Charlottesville. Still, the history of southern institutional racism and northern acquiescence in it had not yet run its course by the end of the Second World War, and no one could have pointed to a clear pattern of progress in the desegregation of college sport even in the years afterward. In 1939, for instance, the University of Wisconsin, and then Notre Dame, decided not to attend a triangular track meet if the University of Missouri insisted on barring black athletes from the northern squads. In stark contrast, during the spring and autumn of 1941, Harvard, NYU, and Boston College benched African American players in deference to the demands of their southern opponents—not only in major football match-ups but also in the sport of lacrosse. There would be many more controversies during the late forties, fifties, and early sixties, especially regarding bowl games played in southern cities on New Year's Day or the participation of southern squads in national basketball tournaments. Indeed, as the historian Charles Martin has shown, the “reconstruction” of intercollegiate athletics would be an achievement claimed by activists of another era. Not until the late 1960s and 1970s would pathbreaking episodes in the history of desegregation point toward a more broad-based leveling of the playing fields of southern sport.<sup>44</sup>

For this reason, the athletic contests of 1936 and 1938 seem in the brief telling but modest events. They occasioned little newspaper coverage beyond the black press, and they did not create a major groundswell of support for the larger crusades of the civil rights movement. Yet, to speculate for a moment, the relative absence of segregationist condemnation of these instances could suggest a “strategic silence” on the part of white newspaper editors who might have styled themselves racial moderates. Meanwhile, racial reformers worked strenuously behind the scenes to build a more substantial framework for institutional and ultimately constitutional challenges to segregation. Among some things we know for certain is that when Branch Rickey recruited Jackie Robinson in 1945, he did so in secrecy. In that way he could announce the signing of the first black player in modern baseball as a *fait accompli*. Likewise, the newspaper “blackout” that veiled the desegregation of public buildings in Houston during the early 1960s spoke to subtle methods, indirection, and to the sharp bargaining that sometimes led to “the strange demise of Jim Crow.” These episodes stand alongside the direct assaults on segregation that occurred in the sit-ins, the boycotts, and marches of protest that we have come to know rather well. They were less dramatic than the confrontations at Greensboro, Birmingham, and Selma, for example, but in their own way they also formed a part of the campaign for racial justice.<sup>45</sup>

Apart from what the mainstream press left unrecorded, such intersectional contests as the games between UNC and NYU, Duke and Syracuse *were* remembered—across the racial divide—and thus served to alter prevailing practices in sport, marking breaches in the color line that would be widened in the years that followed. They would be cited as precedents by whites who wanted to get on with their games, specifically lucrative and prestigious bowl match-ups.

What is more, they would find their place on “Honor Rolls” compiled by black journals desiring to find allies in the cause of racial justice. In the desegregation of college sport, a “new expediency” thus played into the larger civil rights crusade. The contests between UNC and NYU in 1936, and between Duke and Syracuse two years later, scored points against Jim Crow, both on the athletic field and beyond it. As case studies in race relations, those intersectional rivalries also reveal a complex dynamic of idealism and pragmatism, not only in the contesting of old social practices but also in the forging of new patterns of thought and culture.

## Notes

This article could not have been written without the timely assistance of Charles Martin. David Wiggins, Kirsten Fischer, Johanna Garvey, Ursula Bielski, Craig Smith, June Sochen, Steven Riess, Paul Spickard, Elliott Gorn, and Peter Hoffenberg read various drafts of the manuscript—all with care and insight. I would also like to thank the editors of the journal and the anonymous readers for their comments on the work.

1. The sequence of events is significant. After a series of secret meetings, in October, 1945, Branch Rickey signed Robinson to play with the Brooklyn Dodgers. During the spring and summer of the following year, Robinson competed for the Dodgers’ top farm team, the Montreal Royals. Meantime, in March, 1946, the Los Angeles Rams of the National Football League offered contracts to Robinson’s former UCLA teammates, Kenny Washington and Woody Strode. The Cleveland Browns of the All-America Conference, a newly-formed rival of the NFL, then signed Bill Willis and Marion Motley. (African Americans had played in the professional circuit until 1934). During the draft of 1950, the Boston Celtics and Washington Capitols of the National Basketball Association tapped Chuck Cooper and Earl Lloyd, respectively, for places on their teams. Several months later, the New York Knickerbockers acquired Nat (Sweetwater) Clifton from the Harlem Globetrotters. See Jules Tygiel, *Baseball’s Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York, 1984), 71-95; Tygiel, ed., *The Jackie Robinson Reader* (New York, 1997); Arnold Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson: A Biography* (New York, 1997); Robert W. Peterson, *Cages to Jumpshots: Pro Basketball’s Early Years* (New York, 1990), 170-173; Thomas G. Smith, “Outside the Pale: The Exclusion of Blacks from the National Football League, 1934-1946,” *Journal of Sport History* 15 (Winter 1988).

2. Tygiel, *Baseball’s Great Experiment*; see also David Falkner, *Great Time Coming: The Life of Jackie Robinson from Baseball to Birmingham* (New York, 1995).

3. See Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York, 1988) and *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-64* (New York, 1998). See also, Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America’s Struggle for Equality* (New York, 1975); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986).

4. See, for example, George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia, 1988); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, 1993); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 1992) and “We Are Not What We Seem”: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History* 80 (June 1993), 75-112; Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville, 1987); Robert J. Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York, 1985); Jack Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987); Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago, 1982); Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York, 1984); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, 1994); Miles Wolff, *Lunch at the 5 & 10* (Chicago, 1990); Charles W. Eagles, *Outside Agitator: Jon Daniels and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama* (Chapel Hill, 1993); Clarice T. Campbell, *Civil Rights Chronicle: Letters from the South* (Jackson, Miss., 1997); Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South* (New York, 1977). Like Raines’ book, many studies of the movement are works of oral history. Likewise, documentary films such as *Eyes on the Prize* focus considerable attention on local activism.

5. On the notion of “muscular assimilationism” see Patrick B. Miller, “‘To Bring the Race Along Rapidly’: Sport, Student Culture, and Educational Mission at Historically Black Colleges

During the Interwar Years," *History of Education Quarterly* 35 (Summer 1995); Miller, *The Playing Fields of American Culture: Athletics and Higher Education, 1850-1945* (forthcoming), chs. 7, 8. The foremost proponent of this ideal was Edwin B. Henderson, who wrote for *The Crisis*, journal of the NAACP and *Opportunity*, organ of the National Urban League, as well as for the more militant periodical, *The Messenger*. For more on Henderson, see David K. Wiggins, "Edwin Bancroft Henderson, African American Athletes, and the Writing of Sport History," in *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in White America* (Syracuse, 1997), 221-240.

Those who have written about the European immigrant experience in America have engaged the themes of social mobility and the assimilative potential of sport, as well as the ways athletics has in some ways reshaped the sense of ethnic community. See, for examples, Richard Sorrell, "Sport and Franco-Americans in Woonsocket, 1870-1930," *Rhode Island History* 31 (Fall 1972), 117-26; Gary Ross Mormino, "The Playing Fields of St. Louis: Italian Immigrants and Sport, 1925-1941," *Journal of Sport History* 9 (Summer 1982), 5-16; Tilden G. Edelstein, "Cohen at the Bat," *Commentary* 76 (November 1983), 53-56; Steven A. Riess, "A Fighting Chance: The Jewish-American Boxing Experience," 74 (1985), 230-252; Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana, 1989), 93-123; Riess, "Professional Sports as an Avenue of Social Mobility in America: Some Myths and Realities," in Donald G. Kyle, ed., *Essays on Sport History and Sport Mythology* (College Station, Tex., 1990), 83-117; Peter Levine, *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field: Sport and the American Jewish Experience* (New York, 1992). One might also note in this regard that at the turn of the century, football was considered a prime means of acculturating Native Americans in the Indian boarding schools. For analysis of athletic rites of passage at schools such as Carlisle, see David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence, Ks., 1995), 181-191.

6. Roy Wilkins in *The Crisis* (August 1935), 241. The white sportswriter, Ed Sullivan, would further suggest the significance of Joe Louis in altering the popular consciousness: "The fists of Joe Louis are the megaphones and microphones of his race on the nights that he defends his championship. . . . He is, to all intents and purposes, never an individual—he is all the sorrows and joys, and fears and hopes and the melody of an entire race. . . . He is a compound of every little cabin in the Southland, every tenement or apartment in the Harlems of the North; he is the memory of every injustice practiced upon his people and the memory of every triumph. . . . In eighteen victories, Louis has done more to influence better relations between two races than any single individual. . . ." quoted in Chris Mead, *Champion: Joe Louis: Black Hero in White America* (New York, 1985), 185.

7. Ocania Chalk, *Pioneers of Black Sport: The Early Days of the Black Professional Athlete in Baseball, Basketball, Boxing, and Football* (New York, 1975); Arthur Ashe, Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African-American Athlete* (New York, 1988); Glen Stout, "Jim Crow, Halfback," *Boston Magazine* (December 1987), 124-131; James R. Coates, "Gentlemen's Agreement: The 1937 Maryland/Syracuse Football Controversy," unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Maryland, 1982. I am indebted to Professor Coates for sharing this with me. See also Charles H. Martin, "Racial Change and 'Big-Time' College Football in Georgia: The Age of Segregation, 1892-1957," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 80 (Fall 1996), 532-562; Martin, "The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow in Southern College Sports: The Case of the Atlantic Coast Conference," *North Carolina Historical Review* (forthcoming). According to Martin, "obviously, such clauses didn't exist so long as Southerners had confidence in either the absence of blacks on northern teams or the automatic nature of the Gentlemen's Agreement. Sometimes there was a code stating a cancellation fee. Sometimes these clauses were inserted and had nothing to do with race, but at other times they were apparently put in with the understanding that the Northern team would leave their black player(s) at home. Letter, Charles H. Martin to author, July 11, 1998.

8. John Higham, "America's Three Reconstructions," *New York Review of Books* 44 (November 6, 1997), 52.

9. Heywood Broun was perhaps the first and most emphatic of mainstream columnists to raise the issue of discrimination in sport. Though they did so in different tones and terms, a growing number of white sportswriters—Paul Gallico, Grantland Rice, Westbrook Pegler, Jimmy Powers, Shirley Povich, John R. Tunis, and Ed Sullivan most prominent among them—joined Broun in the movement to desegregate athletics in the name of good sportsmanship. Major League Baseball received by far the most column inches on this subject. Concerning the "conversion" of sportswriters in the metropolitan dailies, see Richard Crepeau, *Baseball: America's Diamond Mind, 1919-1941* (Gainesville, Fla., 1980), 171; Tygiel, "Baseball's Great Experiment," 34.

10. As it unfolded, the Myers controversy occasioned widespread newspaper coverage. See the *New York Times*, October 6, 1929; November 10, 1929; though the *Times* devoted approximately twenty-seven column inches to the game itself, it did not mention the benching of Myers. For other accounts, see *New York Graphic*, October 23, 1929; *New York Sun*, October 23, 1929; *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 26, 1929; *Indianapolis Recorder*, December 7, 1929; *Crisis* 37 (January, 1930), 30. See also "It Seems to Heywood Broun," *The Nation* 129 (November, 6, 1929), 514; NAACP Files, Group I, Series C, Container 271, Discrimination, Education, NYU, 1929 in the

Library of Congress. For a fuller account of the episode, see Miller, *The Playing Fields of American Culture* and Martin, "Racial Change and 'Big-Time' Football in Georgia," 540-544.

11. John F. Thomas, "The Negro in Big Ten Football," *Chicago Whip*, November 14, 1931; *Crisis* 40 (January, 1933), 18; *Crisis* 41 (November, 1934), 333; Miller, *The Playing Fields of American Culture*, ch. 8.

12. On the Michigan-Georgia Tech encounter, see John Behee, *Hail to the Victors: Black Athletes at the University of Michigan* (Ann Arbor, 1974), 22-27; Martin, "Racial Change and 'Big-Time' Football in Georgia," 544-548. For the role of the Communist Party, see Mark Naison, "Lefties and Righties: The Communist Party and Sports During the Great Depression," *Radical America* 13 (July-August, 1979), 47-59. On the concerns of student activists, the key work is Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941* (New York, 1993), esp. 206-211. For other episodes during the 1930s and beyond, see Donald Spivey, "'End Jim Crow in Sports': The Protest at New York University, 1940-1941," *Journal of Sport History* 15 (Winter 1988), 282-303; Patrick B. Miller, "Harvard and the Color Line: The Case of Lucien Alexis," *Sports in Massachusetts: Historical Essays* (Westfield, Mass., 1991), 137-158; Martin, "Jim Crow in the Gymnasium: The Integration of College Basketball in the American South," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 10 (April 1993), 68-86.

13. Various rating systems and services were carried in the metropolitan press. Though a conference champion was the likeliest team to be selected for a bowl game, a particularly strong schedule could also influence sportswriters and bowl selectors. Author interviews with Wallace Wade and Ted Mann, September 21, 1981. A tape of the interview with Wade can be found in the Duke University Archives. See also Ted Mann, *A Story of Glory: Duke University Football* (Greenville, S.C. 1985) 96-101.

14. Howard Zinn, "A Fate Worse than Integration," *Harper's Weekly Magazine* 219 (August 1959), 53-56.

15. George Streater, "North Carolina Liberalism on Trial," *The Crisis* 40 (November, 1933), 254. Streater was a frequent contributor to the journal and a close associate of Du Bois; see Herbert Aptheker, ed. *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois: Selections, 1934-1944*. In other writings he expressed his ambivalence about the pace of change in North Carolina.

16. See the Raleigh *News and Observer*, October 10, 1936; October 7, 8, 9, 1937. On North Carolina and southern liberalism, see Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Solid South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue* (New York, 1977), 42-59, 84-87; John B. Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era: Liberalism and Race* (Knoxville, 1980); Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill, 1982), 265-338; Charles W. Eagles, *Jonathan Daniels and Race Relations: The Evolution of a Southern Liberal* (Knoxville, 1982). Eagles describes Daniels' attitude toward race relations in the phrase "distinction, not discrimination." On "the flowering of the University of North Carolina as a relatively liberal outpost of Southern intellectual life," nurtured by such figures as the sociologist Howard Odum and the historian Howard K. Beale, see August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-1980* (Urbana, 1986), 110. Kenneth Robert Janken puts this notion of racial "liberalism" in perspective when discussing such figures as William Terry Couch, editor of the University of North Carolina Press; Jackson Davis, an official of the General Education Board; Mark Ethridge, publisher and editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*; and Virginius Dabney, prominent commentator on matters southern, and their responses to the 1944 anthology, *What the Negro Wants*, edited by the African American intellectual, Rayford Logan. Liberalism meant, for the most part, maintaining segregation but making separate somewhat more equal. See Janken, *Rayford W. Logan and the Dilemma of the African-American Intellectual* (Amherst, 1993), 145-166.

17. Hughes' appearance on campus was enormously controversial. The *Southern Textile Bulletin* not only fulminated against "the insulting and blasphemous articles of the negro [sic];" it also denounced the *North Carolina Daily Tar Heel* for referring to him as "Mr." Hughes. Graham, for his part, was ambivalent about the visit. Both the sponsorship and the staging of Hughes' lecture were contested matters. See Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes* (New York, 1986) I, 224-225. See also Warren Ashby, *Frank Porter Graham: A Southern Liberal* (Winston-Salem, N.C., 1980), 99-140.

18. *University of North Carolina Daily Tarheel*, October 13, 14, 1936.

19. Telegram, Graham to H.W. Chase, October 16, 1936 in Records of the President's Office (Frank Porter Graham Files) in the University of North Carolina Archives, Manuscripts Department: hereafter FPG Files. I am indebted to Michael G. Martin, Jr. for initially sending me many of the documents that inform this discussion.

20. *New York Times*, October 18, 1936; Graham to Walter White of the NAACP, November 4, 1936: FPG Files.

21. Roy Wilkins, "Watchtower," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 24, 1936, enclosed by White in a letter to Graham dated October 23, 1936: FPG Files.

22. "It is said the athletic board of control at Chapel Hill did not grow faint, or grow purple with anger. It did not pound the table and rant of white supremacy. There is no record of anyone asking the

famous question: ‘would you want your daughter to marry one?’” Wilkins, *New York Amsterdam News*.

23. Wilkins, *New York Amsterdam News*. Among those “southern” schools, Wilkins mentioned Princeton, which was then preparing to meet Cornell with its star, “Brud” Holland. Princeton did not admit any African American students until the Second World War, when a military training program on campus enrolled the first black.

24. Letter, White to Graham, October 23, 1936; Graham to White, November 4, 1936 FPG Files. (Graham also mentions that the NYU coach thanked his counterpart from UNC “for the fact that the North Carolina players treated Williams as any other player and did not single him out for any extra hard tackling or give expression to any other unfair attitudes.”

25. Letters, White to Graham, November 5, 1936; Graham to White, November 24, 1936; White to Bernie Bierman, November 30, 1936; White to Graham, November 30, 1936: FPG Files.

26. See FPG Files, “Inter-Racial Matters”; Ashby, *Frank Porter Graham*, 99-170, 227-230.

27. Letter, Graham to Wilkins, November 11, 1938; *Crisis* 45 (November, 1938), 361: FPG Files; Ashby, *Frank Porter Graham*, 227-233. For a vivid description of the Murray episode of 1939 see Pauli Murray, [Song in a Weary Throat] *The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest, and Poet* (Knoxville, 1987) 109-129. The episode raises a number of complicated issues. Graham’s denial revolved around the technicality that while Murray was a native North Carolinian, she had attended Hunter College in New York City for her undergraduate education and was therefore not a resident of North Carolina when she applied for graduate school. Admitting her to the university would also have violated a state law regarding segregation in public institutions. Graham wanted to maintain strong relations with the African American community in North Carolina, and he did so. Within a few years, he even participated in a friendly correspondence with Pauli Murray. Yet at the same time, he harbored larger political ambitions in North Carolina, which were undermined in “the overwhelming popular opinion in this state,” as he phrased it, when he attempted to foster better “interracial relations.” See Graham to White, November 24, 1936, FPG Files. Viewed from a different vantage, Graham’s beliefs centered on the notion that the key to improved education for blacks in the South lay in the strengthening of African American institutions, not desegregation. Still, the stances that earned him his liberal reputation within the white South were the ones that also stymied his political career. See Eagles, *Jonathan Daniels and Race Relations*, 145-153; Julian M. Pleasants, *Frank Porter Graham and the 1950 Senate Race in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 1990); William A. Link and Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *The South in the History of the Nation* (New York, 1999).

28. The history of racial violence in the depression era is documented in such studies as Charles H. Martin, *The Angelo Herndon Case and Southern Justice* (Baton Rouge, 1976); Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge, 1979); James E. Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York, 1995); Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*. From the vantage of racial reformers one of the most cruel of ironies was that “that man in the White House” refused to endorse anti-lynching legislation. See Robert Zangrando *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950* (Philadelphia, 1980).

29. Letter, J. W. Cantrell to Graham, November 1, 1938: FPG files. For further discussion of the kind of racial rhetoric employed by Cantrell, see Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York, 1998); Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York, 1984); I.A. Newby, *Jim Crow’s Defense: Anti-Negro Thought in America, 1900-1930* (Baton Rouge, 1965); Neil McMillen, *The Citizen’s Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-1964* (Urbana, 1971). For a widely-circulated document emphasizing points similar to Cantrell’s, see Tom P. Brady, *Black Monday: Segregation or Amalgamation . . . America Has Its Choice*, (Winona, Miss., 1955), reprinted in Clayborne Carson, et al., *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader* (New York, 1991), 83-94.

30. Letter, J.W. Cantrell to Graham, December 7, 1938. Cantrell repeated his admonitions on July 31 and August 11, 1939; See also Graham to Cantrell, December 3, 1937: FPG Files.

31. Significantly, after desegregation had commenced, one critical issue would be the *meaning* of black athletic accomplishment. On the issue of “scientific” racism and sport, see David K. Wiggins, “‘Great Speed but Little Stamina’: The Historical Debate Over Black Athletic Superiority,” *Journal of Sport History* 16 (Summer 1989), 159-185; John Hoberman, *Darwin’s Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (New York, 1997); Patrick B. Miller, “The Anatomy of Scientific Racism: Racialist Responses to Black Athletic Achievement” in *The Journal of Sport History* 25 (Spring 1998), 119-151 and in *We Are a People: Narrative and Multiplicity in the Construction of Ethnic Identity*, Paul R. Spickard and W. Jeffrey Burroughs, eds. (Temple University Press, 1999).

32. The African American press proudly showcased the achievements of Jerome “Brud” Holland of Cornell, Ozzie Simmons of Iowa, Bernie Jefferson of Northwestern, Julius Frank of Michigan, Archie Harris of Indiana, as well as Kenny Washington and Woody Strode, both of UCLA. See, for example, Elmer Carter, “The Negro in College Athletics,” *Opportunity* 11 (July 1933), 208-210; Roy Wilkins, “Negro Stars on Big Grid Teams,” *Crisis* 43 (December 1936), 362-363.



Edwin B. Henderson, *The Negro in Sports* (Washington, D.C., 1949); Chalk, *Black College Sport*, 188-194; Ashe, *A Hard Road to Glory*, 94-98.

33. Rice quoted in Edwin B. Henderson, *The Black Athlete: Emergence and Arrival* (Cornwell Heights, Pa., 1978), 48-49. Significantly, many of Rice's other images of black athletes were patently racist. See Chris Mead, *Champion*, 30-31, 62-64, 106; Charles Fountain, *Sportswriter: The Life and Times of Grantland Rice* (New York, 1993); Mark Inabinett, *Grantland Rice and His Heroes in the 1920s* (Knoxville, 1994).

34. A close account of this episode is provided by James R. Coates, "Gentlemen's Agreement: The 1937 Maryland/Syracuse Football Controversy."

35. It is significant that the 1938 contract between Syracuse and Maryland contained a forfeiture clause stipulating that if either school cancelled or failed to appear, it would pay its opponent the sum of \$2500. See Coates, "Gentlemen's Agreement," 101.

36. Duke University *Chronicle*, October 25, November 11, 12, 1938.

37. See Robert F. Durden, *The Launching of Duke University, 1924-1949* (Durham, 1993), 218-219, 238-244, 468-469 on Wade and the racial atmosphere at Duke. On the significance of Wade's early trips to the Rose Bowl, see Andrew Doyle, "'Causes Won, Not Lost': College Football and the Modernization of the American South," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 11 (August 1994), 231-251.

38. Duke University *Chronicle*, October 25, 1938. Interview with Wallace Wade, September 21, 1981. I am grateful to Duke University Archivist William E. King, who arranged interviews with Wallace Wade, Ted Mann and others, as well as to Edward Southern for his assistance during my research in Durham.

39. Wade later asserted that he had instructed his team that Sidat-Singh was to be treated like any other player, that is, Duke tacklers were *not* to single him out for rough treatment. The insults and injuries endured by many other African Americans of the era provide the context for this statement. Interviews with Wade and Mann, September 21, 1981.

40. Raleigh *News and Observer*, December 15, 1938; *Crisis* 45 (November, 1938), 350, 361. For an account of the season—which mentioned nothing more than the final score of the Syracuse game—see Ted Mann, *A Story of Glory*, 96-101. Mann cites the Associated Press poll and thus notes slightly different national rankings than those mentioned in other sources.

41. See *The Crisis* 45 (November, 1938), 361.

42. *The Crisis* 45 (November, 1938), 361. See also the Pittsburgh *Courier*, December 4, 1937 and October 29, 1938, as well as Smith, "Outside the Pale," 266.

43. With respect to the mainstream press in the late 1930s and after, one strand of opinion insisted on "scientific" explanations for black athletic success. Another school of thought, which held that black success in sport derived from discipline and hard work, the same traits of character that were long used to defend the athletic ideal in America. Representing those who had embraced the assimilationist ideal, the noted columnist Westbrook Pegler asserted, that "it is a doubtful compliment to a Negro athlete who is qualified to attend college to attempt to account for his proficiency on the field by suggesting that he is still so close to the primitive that whenever he runs a foot-race in a formal meet between schools his civilization vanishes and he becomes again for the moment an African savage in breachcloth and nose ring legging it through the jungle." Quoted in Mead, *Champion*, 105. See also Rufus Clement, "Racial Integration in the Field of Sports," *Journal of Negro Education* 23 (Summer, 1954), 222-230; "When Symbols Clash," *Commonweal* 63 (December 16, 1955), 274; Zinn, "A Fate Worse than Integration," 53-56.

44. What would also be noteworthy about many of those episodes, however, was the outpouring of criticism that campus activists, sportswriters, and civil rights leaders directed at the racist practices of educators, North and South. See *The Crisis* 46 (May, 1939), 145; Spivey, "'End Jim Crow in Sports'"; Miller, "Harvard and the Color Line"; Stout, "Jim Crow, Halfback." For extensive coverage of the desegregation of college sport, see J. Paul, R. McGhee, and H. Fant, "The Arrival and Ascendance of Black Athletes in the Southeastern Conference, 1966-1980," *Phylon* 45 (1984), 284-297; Ronald Marcello, "The Integration of Intercollegiate Athletics in Texas: North Texas State College as a Test Case, 1956," *Journal of Sport History* 14 (Winter 1987), 286-316; Richard Pennington, *Breaking the Ice: The Racial Integration of Southwest Conference Football* (Jefferson, NC, 1987); Martin, "Jim Crow in the Gymnasium"; Martin, "Racial Change and 'Big-Time' Football in Georgia"; Martin, "The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow in Southern College Sports"; Martin, "Integrating New Year's Day: The Racial Politics of College Bowl Games in the American South," *Journal of Sport History* 24 (Fall 1997), 358-377. See also Andrew Doyle, "Bear Bryant: Symbol for an Embattled South," *Colby Quarterly* 32 (March 1996), 72-86.

45. One of the best examples of the elaborate groundwork laid for many civil rights breakthroughs is, in fact, the story of the scouting and signing of Jackie Robinson. Secrecy played a significant role in the now-famous episode; what people like Branch Rickey endeavored to do was set a precedent that could not be overturned or undone. See John Thorn and Jules Tygiel, "Jackie Robinson's Signing: The Untold Story," in Tygiel, ed., *The Jackie Robinson Reader* (New York, 1997).

Recently, it has come to light that during the Second World War, a team of former collegians competing for the Duke University Medical School traveled across the city of Durham to play against the varsity basketball team of the North Carolina College for Negroes (now known as North Carolina Central University). A significant part of the story was the secrecy that surrounded the games played on March 12, 1944. The white press never knew what occurred. The *Carolina Times*, Durham's black weekly, learned of the event but did not report it for fear of provoking white hostility. See Scott Ellsworth, "The Secret Game: Defying the Color Line," in *Duke Magazine* (September-October, 1996), 8-11, 40. Thanks to Kirsten Fischer for sharing this with me. See also, Thomas R. Cole, *No Color is My Kind: The Life of Eldrewey Stearns and the Integration of Houston* (Austin, 1997) and the companion video: "The Strange Demise of Jim Crow: How Houston Desegregated Its Public Accommodations, 1959-1963."