

# Tackling Jim Crow: Segregation on the College Gridiron Between 1936-1941

Author: Kevin Callaway Gregg

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# **Tackling Jim Crow: Segregation on the College Gridiron Between 1936-1941**

Kevin Gregg

Advisor: James O'Toole

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## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTION

As football was emerging as a major collegiate sport at the turn of the twentieth century, its role in American society was also becoming increasingly important. With racial tensions still brewing from largely unsuccessful Reconstruction efforts, many in the white community began to view football as a symbol of white superiority, both physically and mentally. The looming possibility of blacks becoming equal in society made many whites more resistant to the influx of blacks into mainstream society on all levels. It was with this in mind that W. Cameron Forbes, grandson of Ralph Waldo Emerson and a football coach at Harvard declared that “Football is the expression of the strength of the Anglo-Saxon. It is the dominant spirit of a dominant race, and to this owes its popularity and its hopes of permanence.”<sup>1</sup> With its combination of strength and aggression with intellect and instinct, the game of football was seen as the ideal form of expression for white athletes. Blacks were considered too barbaric and dimwitted to understand the complex rules and schemes of football. As seen by Forbes’ comments, many whites saw the purity of football as a representation of the superiority of the white race. Because of this, the desegregation of football was looked at by many whites as a threat to their inherent superiority and their role as the dominant race. While it may seem irrational from a modern perspective, this idea of a racial destiny led to widespread segregation and prejudice towards black athletes in college football that would continue through most of the twentieth century.

Despite the prevailing belief that football was a white man’s sport, the few blacks who were allowed to compete often proved themselves more than worthy. William Henry

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Oriard, King Football, Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 2001, 229

Lewis served a prime example of the potential of black athletes. Born to former slaves in Virginia in 1868, Lewis moved north and attended Amherst College where he played football and, along with teammate William Tecumseh Sherman Jackson, was the first black collegiate football player. Lewis was a captain during the 1890 and 1891 seasons. After graduating, he attended Harvard Law School and played for the Crimson squad, furthering his football accomplishments by being named to Walter Camp's inaugural All-American team in 1892 and again in 1893.<sup>2</sup> Lewis clearly showed that black athletes could do more than just compete at the collegiate level; however his accomplishments were looked at as the exception rather than the rule and brought about very little immediate increase in the number of black college football players.

Through the first two decades of the twentieth century, the number of black college football players at white northern schools began to steadily increase. Although their increasing numbers seemed to be a positive omen for the future, it soon became apparent that the struggle for total desegregation would be a long one. Black players began to face growing discrimination from all directions. The press, alumni, fans, opposing teams, and even their own teammates and coaches attacked them, both literally and figuratively, on and off the field. Black players had to work harder to prove their worthiness by putting up with verbal and physical abuse from teammates and coaches. The most shocking and telling form of discrimination came in the periodic benching of black players for games against southern schools in both the South and the North.

As college football continued to grow in popularity, it turned from a recreational activity to a money-making opportunity. Schools began spending large sums on stadium

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<sup>2</sup>[http://www.aaregistry.com/african\\_american\\_history/606/William\\_Lewis\\_displayed\\_physical\\_and\\_mental\\_gifts](http://www.aaregistry.com/african_american_history/606/William_Lewis_displayed_physical_and_mental_gifts), accessed on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

construction and expansion. In order to fill the seats in these new stadiums, it was imperative to provide an attractive product. The most effective way of doing this was to bring in high profile opponents and create cross-regional rivalries. While the Ivy League schools had initially been the football powerhouses, southern schools were now moving into the football elite. As the *Boston Globe* pointed out in 1940, “Because southern teams now rate among the best, because they make good gate attractions and because they are willing to travel North without demanding a return game on their home grounds, many northern graduate managers find it almost impossible to get by without them.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed it was a win-win situation as many southern teams were made up predominantly of northern players and could thus use games in the North as recruiting trips. However, because of their importance, northern teams became reliant on games with southern schools. Northern schools were thus obligated to mediate the tension that still existed between the two different regions.

Segregation first appeared in college football in a seemingly minor incident in 1903 which ironically took place between two northern schools. Wabash College of Indiana had a game scheduled against DePauw University, a Methodist school also in Indiana. DePauw’s players and managers had already arrived but refused to play upon learning that Wabash had a black player, Samuel Simon Gordon. As the *New York Times* reported on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, “DePauw’s team was preparing to leave the gymnasium for the hotel when several prominent Methodists [ministers]...appeared [and] besought the young men not to disgrace a Christian college by drawing the color line, and protested against what he denounced as cowardice and barbarism.”<sup>4</sup> The DePauw players finally

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<sup>3</sup> “Captain for Each Game,” *Boston Globe*, (December 4, 1940), 10.

<sup>4</sup> “Color Line in Football,” *New York Times*, (November 22, 1903), 13.

agreed to play, but were defeated 10-0. Although the minor incident was easily resolved, future events would not be met with the same sense of compromise. It was a sign of the times and a sign of things to come.

This segregation would not return to college football on a large scale until 1916. Paul Robeson had emerged as a star football player at Rutgers. Born in New Jersey to former slaves from North Carolina, he had starred at fullback at a non-segregated high school and decided to stay close to home to attend Rutgers. After starting and playing sporadically in his freshman season, an impressive feat at the time, he was named a starter for his sophomore season. As the team waited in its locker room before their October 14<sup>th</sup> game which would celebrate the University's sesquicentennial, Coach George Foster Sanford gathered the team together and told them that their opponent, Washington and Lee of Virginia, refused to play the game against a black opponent. Sanford left the decision up to the team, but Washington & Lee had waited until the last minute to issue their demands and by this point the stadium had been packed and the fans expected to see a game. No doubt influenced by the symbolic importance of the game, none of the players, coaches, or administrators came to Robeson's defense. After a prolonged silence Robeson spoke up and volunteered to sit the game out.<sup>5</sup> Rutgers had set a dangerous precedent by acquiescing to southern demands, especially at a northern venue. This was the beginning of a practice that would see black players benched for games against southern schools in both the North and South.

The next fifteen years were marked by consistent examples of what came to be known as the "Jim Crow clause," in which black players would be benched against

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<sup>5</sup> Sheila Tully Boyle and Andrew Bunie, Paul Robeson: The Years of Promise and Achievement, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001, 59.



southern schools. As it became more common, schools began writing this clause into the contracts which were often signed years in advance. Even if the clause was not explicitly written into the contract, it was assumed as a sort of “Gentleman’s Agreement.” The problem was intensified by schools that made contracts with southern schools years in advance without a black player on the team. When the school added a black player between the time of the contract and the game, they had little choice but to bench him. As Michael Oriard points out in his book King Football, “Such benchings became increasingly common in the 1930s as more major football schools in the North integrated their teams, and as universities from all regions scheduled intersectional contests in quest of national prominence.”<sup>6</sup> While at first most of these benchings did take place in games played on southern soil, a disturbing trend emerged as more northern schools began deferring to southern demands even on their home fields.

These actions were just another hurdle to black athletes in the early twentieth century. These black pioneers had to overcome a long struggle just to be in the position to face this Jim Crow clause. Many of these players were the first black student at their university and frequently had to overcome poverty and substandard education just to have a chance for higher education. Even once they had made the team they faced discrimination. As Douglas Owen Baldwin pointed out in his Documentary History of Sport, “Minority players needed extraordinary ability and a serene temperament to play for desegregated teams.” Coaches and players would test their emotional stamina as much as their physical skills before they would be accepted. Former Michigan coach Harry Kipke was quoted as saying that he “ordered his veterans to pound a black candidate ‘without mercy’ during practice, so that ‘if, at the end of the week he doesn’t

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<sup>6</sup> Oriard, King Football, 301.

turn in his uniform, then I know I've got a great player.'”<sup>7</sup> Many white players were not willing to accept black players, especially ones they were competing against for playing time. White players would go out of their way to hit a black teammate or attempt to injure him. Coaches, if they didn't openly encourage it as Kipke did, would frequently turn a blind eye to such actions. If they were able to overcome the internal struggle, they then had to deal with hostile opposing players. Football was inherently a more violent and dangerous game at the time. “The equipment was still cloth padding; leather helmets did little to protect against head injuries; and strategy formations invited mayhem.”<sup>8</sup> Death and serious injuries were not uncommon. There was no telling what could be done if an entire team focused their aggression on one player. Many black players faced such aggression, but a large part of it was due to the fact that just by virtue of making it as far as they had, they were a star of the team.

Oze Simmons, a star from Texas who decided to go to Iowa to play big time football, was perhaps the best example of this pattern of discrimination. In 1934, after a stellar opening game in his sophomore season, expectations for Simmons were sky high. He became the darling of the black media. Although he continued to show flashes of brilliance, his overall performance did not live up to those expectations over his first season. Simmons was clearly the target of his opponent's attacks, whether because of race or because he was the best player on the field it cannot be known. Simmons regained his stellar form for the opening of the 1935 season and once again became a favorite in the presses both black and white. One sports historian maintains that during this season he began to represent the hope of black athletics. “Iowa's games in 1935 became

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas Owen Baldwin, Sport in North America: A Documentary History: Volume 8, Academic International Press: Gulf Breeze Florida, 1992, 163.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Ashe Jr., A Hard Road to Glory – Football, Penguin USA: New York, 1993, 4.

pilgrimages for black America.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps because of the attention he received, many of his teammates seemed to direct animosity towards him. At the end of 1935, Iowa took the unprecedented move of not electing a captain, “aimed obviously at Oze Simmons, the only real candidate for the position.”<sup>10</sup> This was the beginning of a series of events that would taint the legacy and memory of Oze Simmons at Iowa. Despite showing promise again in the 1936 season, his overall performance was down. The white *Chicago Tribune* even noted that: “his own teammates failed to block or to interfere or to produce the holes through which he might have sped.”<sup>11</sup> Was it possible that his teammates were refusing to back up Simmons? Following a 52-0 thumping at the hands of rival Minnesota, Simmons could take no more. He confronted coach Ossie Solem and, after he was told to shut up, walked out of the locker room and off the team. A resolution was reached and Simmons played in the final two games, but his reputation had been tainted.

Oze Simmons had stood up for himself, but he was a rare exception. For the most part there was very little that black athletes could do. Coming mainly from poor families, most black athletes were just happy to have the opportunity to get an education, often with a scholarship provided from the university. Many of them were the first members of their families to attend an institute of higher learning and they frequently had families of their own to support. Attempting to stand up for their rights was a risk most were not willing to take. They were clearly considered expendable for one game, so they must have figured they were expendable to the university. Standing up to the coaches and administration could potentially lead to a loss of scholarship or expulsion, something very few players could risk.

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<sup>9</sup> Oriard, *King Football*, 305.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>11</sup> *Chicago Tribune* from Oriard, *King Football*, 306.

Even if they were fortunate enough to make a team and have their presence felt on the national level, it was unlikely that they would receive recognition for it. Most white papers did not report black successes and struggles. Football journalist pioneer Walter Camp released his All-American list yearly from 1892 until his death in 1925, but named only two blacks to his All-American first team: Lewis and Robeson. After his death, Tennessean Grantland Rice took over the All-American selections in 1925 and proved to be more likely to slight black athletes. He did not name a black player for his first 11 years, and named only two between 1937 and 1952 leaving off such consensus stars as Oze Simmons, Wilmeth Sidat-Singh, and arguably the best player of the decade, Kenny Washington of UCLA. The *Crisis*, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was outraged over the 1939 exclusion of Washington and chided Rice for his decision: “By every test Kenny Washington earned one of these berths. There was only one thing wrong with him: he was several shades too dark.”<sup>12</sup> In fact, the only place black athletes could expect coverage were monthly black journals such as the *Crisis* and weekly black papers which featured weekly summaries of every black player at a white college.

While the discrimination black athletes faced continued throughout the 1930s, the Jim Crow practice began to show signs of progress. The 1936 Olympics served as a powerful statement of black athleticism and equality. Jesse Owens won four gold medals in front of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi, Aryan regime forcing many whites in the United States to question their beliefs of black inferiority. By this time, football had become a huge money generator and some games featured up to 80,000 spectators. Aside from the approximately \$5 million the spectators spent on tickets, another \$6 million was pumped

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<sup>12</sup> “Wrong Color,” *The Crisis*, (January 1940), 17.

into local economies through hotels, food, liquor, entertainment, and travel. Between 1933 and 1936 four new bowl games were added to the already existing Rose Bowl: the Orange Bowl in Miami, the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans, the Sun Bowl in El Paso, and the Cotton Bowl in Dallas.<sup>13</sup> These new bowl games, along with the introduction of the Associated Press ranking system in 1931, provided schools another chance for profit and national recognition. As Patrick Miller, noted historian of the subject, points out, “it was increasingly apparent that coaches and journalists who rated and ranked teams throughout the season noted the difficulty of a school’s schedule when making their tabulations. This greatly influenced the selection process for the lucrative and prestigious bowl games. To play a team whose star performer was forced to the bench because of the Jim Crow clause or a ‘Gentleman’s Agreement’ could be for the southern squad an impediment to a high ranking at season’s end. Thus a great deal was at stake in the playing out of intersectional rivalries.”<sup>14</sup> These changes marked the beginning of a slow progression in Jim Crow practices. Even if their motives were suspect, some southern schools began to agree to play on northern terms while in the North.

The first example of this came in a game between the University of North Carolina and New York University in 1936. UNC was undefeated and in position to earn a lucrative bowl bid. UNC realized that enforcing their Jim Crow clause by forcing NYU to bench its star running back Ed Williams could hurt its standing in the polls and thus affect their bowl chances. With this in mind, University of North Carolina president Frank Porter Graham, who would soon forge a reputation as a liberal southerner, approached the NYU administration to offer a concession. Williams would be allowed to

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<sup>13</sup> Baldwin, *Sport in North America*, 162.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick B. Miller “Slouching Toward a New Expediency: College Football and the Color Line During the 1930s,” *Journal of Sport History*, (1996), 94.

play in the game. While no mention of this was made in the *New York Times*, the black papers of the time saw it as a step forward no matter what the university's reasoning. *The Pittsburgh Courier* proudly declared on their front page: "N.Y.U. Star Plays Against North Carolina."<sup>15</sup> North Carolina barely survived the full strength NYU squad, but did win 14-13 to keep their perfect season in tact. Williams was injured in the final period, but it was not the result of foul play as it came when he made a touchdown saving tackle. As Roy Wilkins, then editor of the *Crisis* proudly declared, "There were no boos and in my section of the stand I heard 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 in on the gridiron appears to any worse off for having spent an afternoon competing against a negro player."<sup>16</sup>

Although the motives behind these initial southern deferrals may have been less than pure, the actions of the University of North Carolina represented an unofficial change in the execution of the Jim Crow clause. For the most part, the policy changed to respect the beliefs of the home team. Over the next few years more blacks were allowed to play on their home turf against southern schools that in the past would have never allowed it. However, it was certainly not the end of the practice, nor the end of the discrimination. In the years to come, a number of black football players faced circumstances that undermined the sense of progress given by the UNC compromise. Three incidents show the depths of southern intolerance and northern submission, and demonstrate how deeply Jim Crow permeated society in both the North and South. Wilmeth Sidat-Singh excelled at Syracuse and was set to break the color barrier in the

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<sup>15</sup> "N.Y.U. Star Plays Against North Carolina," *Pittsburgh Courier*, (Saturday October 24, 1936), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Roy Wilkins, "That Old Southern Accent," from David Wiggins and Patrick Miller, *The Unlevel Playing Field*, 192-193.

South in 1937 until it was revealed that he was not a Hindu, but rather an adopted black. In the 1939 and 1940 seasons Lou Montgomery of Boston College represented the low point of the Jim Crow clause as he was benched a total of six times, including for two bowl games and three games taking place in Boston. Finally, in 1940 students began taking a stand to support their athletes as a group of students at New York University took to the streets to protest the benching of Len Bates against Missouri. This thesis will explore these three incidents from the perspectives of the press, the administrations, the students, and most importantly that of the segregated black player.

## Chapter Two

### IT DON'T MEAN A THING IF IT AIN'T GOT THAT SINGH

With North Carolina breaking boundaries and allowing Ed Williams to play in the North, there was a sense of hope within the black community that it would only be a matter of time before a black player could finally participate in the South. In October, 1937 that groundbreaking event almost came sooner than most could have ever imagined. Wilmeth Sidat-Singh, a member of the Syracuse football team, headed south with his team to compete against Maryland. However, his trip was made under a false pretense. In the days before he left on the trip a story began circulating that despite his last name, Sidat-Singh was in fact black and not Hindu, as the general public had been led to believe. Singh suited up on game day and prepared as he normally did, but less than an hour before the game his coach, Ossie Solem, sat the team down and informed them that Maryland was protesting Singh's appearance in the game. Rather than break the southern color barrier, Singh had become another victim of it.

Wilmeth Webb was born in Washington D.C. in 1917 to Pauline and Elias Webb. When he was still young, his father died unexpectedly of a stroke leaving Wil fatherless and his mother a widow. After a short period of time living with Elias' family, Pauline remarried to a respected Indian physician named Samuel Sidat-Singh. Wil then moved with his mother to Harlem and took the name of his adopted father.<sup>17</sup> While growing up his talent was easily recognizable among his peers. He initially made a name for himself in basketball at DeWitt Clinton High, but he also competed in football, baseball, and tennis. After leading his team to the New York Public High School basketball

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<sup>17</sup> Sean Kirst, "SU star Sidat-Singh began as a Webb," *The Syracuse Post-Standard*, (February 27, 2005)



championship in 1934 he was named to the All-City team in 1935 and committed to Syracuse University to play basketball for the following season.

Yet somehow during his youth an uncertainty had emerged about his true heritage. His schoolyard friends and the black press understood all through high school that Singh was in fact African-American. The white press, however, assumed that his dark complexion was easily explained by his Indian last name. “When Sidat-Singh earned a basketball scholarship to Syracuse, the white city newspapers that followed his exploits referred to him as Hindu, though everyone in Harlem knew he was African-American.”<sup>18</sup> The true extent of the New York City media’s knowledge of his background is uncertain. Nevertheless, the black community was willing to let him be passed off as Hindu if it improved his chances for success in the future. Syracuse University was also willing to let his heritage be hidden if it could further their athletic prestige. Understanding that he offered a greater benefit to their basketball team as a Hindu than a black, they continued the ruse. They presented him as a Hindu and even asked him to wear East Indian attire, a suggestion he rejected.<sup>19</sup> In many ways he was treated as a black, however, as he was not allowed to live in the dorms with white students and would quickly find out he could not expect to receive equality in other areas either.

Although he only intended to play basketball at Syracuse, that plan would quickly change. Shortly after his arrival, assistant football coach Roy Simmons caught a glimpse of Sidat-Singh playing in an intramural football game. Simmons quickly recruited him to join the team and the next year he was on the varsity squad. That year Syracuse brought

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<sup>18</sup> Luke Cyphers, “The Lost Hero,” *New York Daily News*, (July 31, 2002)

<sup>19</sup> Sam Lacy, *Fighting For Fairness*, Tidewater Publishers: Maryland 1998, 35.

in a new football coach. Ossie Solem was the same coach black great Oz Simmons had struggled with the previous year at Iowa. Now he had a new black superstar under his belt.

Early on it appeared the ruse was working. Sidat-Singh began a pre-med major and was a good student. He was well liked among his peers, especially by his teammates, all of whom were well aware he was black. Another star on the team was Marty Glickman, a speedster who had also been forced to deal with racism. One of the fastest sprinters in the country at the time, Glickman was on the 1936 Olympic Track Team ready to head to Berlin to compete. However, at the last minute he and another teammate were pulled off the team and prevented from competing in Nazi Germany due to their Jewish background. In his autobiography, Glickman recalls the story surrounding Sidat-Singh: “People thought he was Hindu, but we knew he was black. So what!”<sup>20</sup>

The cover-up would come crashing down in October of 1937. Syracuse was scheduled to play the University of Maryland on October 23<sup>rd</sup> in Baltimore. Sidat-Singh had been penciled in to make his first start at right-halfback due to an injury to first stringer Jack Hinkle. However, in the days leading up to the game rumors began to circulate that Sidat-Singh was in fact black. On the day of the game, black sportswriter Sam Lacy finally revealed the truth in the weekly black paper the *Washington Tribune*. “Negro To Play U. of Maryland: Boy Called Hindu By Papers” Lacy’s headline read.<sup>21</sup> Now everybody was aware of Sidat-Singh’s secret. With only minimal time before the game, the University of Maryland was forced into quick action to determine their response. Perhaps out of sincere racial fear, or perhaps seizing on an opportunity to bench

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<sup>20</sup> Glickman, Marty, *The Fastest Kid on the Block*, Syracuse University Press: New York 1996, 50.

<sup>21</sup> Lacy, *Fighting for Fairness*, 35.

the opposing team's star player, Maryland demanded that Sidat-Singh not play. Lacy reported that after deliberation with Maryland officials, "Syracuse coach Ossie Solem broke the news to Sidat-Singh and his teammates, after the youngster had already dressed for the game. Teammates first sought to protest then tried to console their black teammate."<sup>22</sup> In his autobiography, Marty Glickman recalls Solem entering the locker room along with Syracuse athletic director Lew Andreas and announcing, "Fellows, I've got some bad news. A Baltimore newspaper broke the story that Sidat-Singh is not an Indian but a black man. We were told by the authorities that it would be dangerous for him to go out on the field. So Singh will not play."<sup>23</sup>

The team lost 13-0 in a lackluster performance that ruined their perfect season and their chances at a bowl bid. In the next issue of the *Washington Tribune* Lacy wrote "An unsullied football record went by the boards here today as racial bigotry substituted for sportsmanship and resulted in the removal of the spark-plug from the machine which was Syracuse University's football team."<sup>24</sup> The players were disheartened and disagreed with the decision, but nobody made any effort to stand up to the demands. While they were disappointed by the decision, it seems the players were more resigned than enraged. As the *Baltimore Afro-American* observed, "That the boys of Syracuse were sore to the breaking point is attested by observers and reporters who visited Ossie Solem's bench. Few people know that many of the Syracuse team left for home rather than accept the hospitality of the Maryland University."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>23</sup> Glickman, *The Fastest Kid on the Block*, 51.

<sup>24</sup> Lacy, *Fighting for Fairness*, 37.

<sup>25</sup> Art Carter, "From the Bench," *Baltimore Afro-American*, (November 13, 1937), 17.

While the benching alone provided plenty of scandal for the black press, after the game a bigger story began emerging. All parties involved were pointing fingers in any direction but back at themselves. Nobody at Maryland was willing to admit to knowledge of a clause or decision that would keep Sidat-Singh out. Frank Dobson, the Maryland coach, told the *Washington Afro-American*, “I know nothing of any reported agreement to keep Sidat-Singh out of the game. I had my hands too full looking after my own team to be bothered about what the other team was to do.” The *Afro-American* erroneously told Ossie Solem that the University of Maryland officials placed the blame on him, a claim Solem did not take well. He lashed out declaring, “Why, the dirty so-and-so’s! They know good and well that they are responsible for my keeping him on the bench.” Maryland athletic director George Epley would eventually take responsibility for the benching. Epley admitted to the *Afro-American* that an “agreement” had been reached after the Syracuse team arrived in Baltimore. He refused to give any details on the pact other than to say that it had been agreed to with Lew Andreas as well.<sup>26</sup>

As was typical of such events, nobody in the press gave any thought to the effects on Sidat-Singh. Sidat-Singh’s aunt Adelaide Webb Henley recalled in a recent interview that upon hearing he would be benched, “Wilmeth was just sitting there, with his head down, so embarrassed and humiliated.”<sup>27</sup> Glickman still regrets his decision to stand idly by. In his biography he recalls thinking in the locker room, “If Wil doesn’t play, I don’t play. Get up and say it, you’re the star of the club, one of the leaders. ‘If Wil doesn’t play, I don’t play.’ Say it.” However, after the stir he created the previous year by being removed from the Olympic team, he didn’t want to be considered a trouble maker. “This

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<sup>26</sup> “Why, the Dirty So-And-So’s,” *Washington Afro-American*, (October 30, 1937), 1.

<sup>27</sup> Cyphers, “The Lost Hero,” *New York Daily News*, (July 31, 2002).

is one of the things in my life I'm most sorry for. All the things I have done or haven't done aren't terribly important. This one hurts me because I could have done something about it and didn't. I didn't say a word because I didn't want to stir up trouble as a Jew.”<sup>28</sup>

The media response to the incident was varied. While the black press responded with the expected outrage, it went unmentioned in the white press. The *New York Times* made no mention of Sidat-Singh's absence in their two page game summary. One paper that did not report on the incident was the one closest to home. The *Syracuse Daily Orange*, the University's student newspaper, did not make any comments directly addressing Sidat-Singh's status or benching. Although he was mentioned before the game as a key to the team's success, after October 23<sup>rd</sup> he was barely mentioned. The *Daily Orange* did question Maryland's sportsmanship in the first paper after the game stating, “This ‘southern hospitality’ that all the bards sing about, what is it? From what we gather by that Saturday football encounter with the famed Terps of Maryland, it seems to be ‘I, Maryland’ with the rest of the world going to places unmentionable.”<sup>29</sup> However, the paper went on to explain that their outrage was over the fact that Maryland had left the field slick and muddy after a rainstorm in order to slow down the speedy Glickman. Whether or not the paper was attempting to take a more subtle jab at southern hospitality we can't be certain. While there was no mention of the benching of Sidat-Singh, the *Daily Orange* might have been afraid to do anything more than imply it. One Syracuse student wrote to the *Afro-American* implying that the paper might have bit their tongue about Maryland's racism because they themselves had been a part of the ruse to keep

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<sup>28</sup> Glickman, *The Fastest Kid on the Block*, 51.

<sup>29</sup> Mulling it Over with Muller,” *Syracuse Daily Orange*, (October 26, 1937), 3.

Sidat-Singh's true history under wraps. The students also might have been afraid of disciplinary action for questioning the university.<sup>30</sup>

Although the exact facts remained uncertain, it was clear that most in the black community were well aware that Wilmeth Sidat-Singh was not a Hindu. Calling him "Wilmeth Sidat Webb Singh," *Pittsburgh Courier* writer Randy Dixon called the supposed new information, "A fact that every Negro sportswriter in the land has known for lo, these many years, but which the paleface faction purposely avoided in the name of Singh, the Hindu."<sup>31</sup> To the black sportswriters who felt they had been protecting Sidat-Singh for so long, the question became why Sam Lacy would seemingly set progress back by revealing before the game that Sidat-Singh was in fact black. Lacy believed his intentions were just because in his mind progress was not worth obtaining if it had to be done under false pretenses. Attempting to trick the South would only lead to further resentment and set progress back.

Many in the black community disagreed with Lacy's opinion and questioned his decision to reveal the truth. They already knew of Sidat-Singh's ethnicity and the Maryland game offered the opportunity for a black to play in the South for the first time. To them, Lacy ruined what could have been a major step forward in race relations, and at the very least would have been a cruel joke played on the southern way of life. Lacy strongly disagreed with these dissenters. In his column he rebutted: "This department has what it, in its humble estimation, considers an iron-clad defense against charges that the act of publishing the true story of Sidat-Singh's racial connection was premature. This writer does not concur in the opinion that waiting until after the boy had played would

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<sup>30</sup> Art Carter, "From the Bench," *Baltimore Afro-American*, (November 13, 1937), 17

<sup>31</sup> Randy Dixon, "The Sports Bugle," *Pittsburgh Courier* (October 22, 1937), 17.

have been a better ‘joke’ on Maryland University. To me such a contention seems only to be a weak-livered admission that we are willing to see our boys progress under any kind of masquerade; that we agree with the Nordic observation that ANYTHING BUT A NEGRO is okay [emphasis in original].”<sup>32</sup> Both Lacy and his critics were seeking the same ends, they just disagreed about the means. For many, Sidat-Singh playing in the South to oblivious southerners would prove that blacks were in fact equal and that the world would not come to an end if such actions were taken in the future. But to Lacy, trying to end segregation in that manner would likely lead to a bigger backlash and in fact was sending the wrong message for the equal rights movement. Lacy was unwilling to separate the means from the end, even if it meant sacrificing a young man who just wanted to play football.

In the weeks that followed, the story continued to get coverage in the black press, although it received relatively little attention from the white papers. For the recap of the following week’s game against Penn State, the *New York Times* still described Sidat-Singh as “Syracuse’s Hindu halfback.”<sup>33</sup> In fact nearly a year later the *Times* was still reporting that Sidat-Singh was described “in one newspaper account as a Negro. Yet the name sounds authentically Indian.”<sup>34</sup> As was typical, any blame placed by the white press was put on the shoulders of the southern schools and their backwards tradition. The black press, however, saw the issue in a much different way. To them the schools that benched black players were guiltier by giving in to southern demands they knew to be backward. The *Baltimore Afro-American* summed up this thought process: “Why Maryland remains an Old Line institution in a section of the inherited traditional hatreds of race is beyond

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<sup>32</sup> Lacy, *Fighting for Fairness*, 37.

<sup>33</sup> “Syracuse Rallies to Top Penn State,” *New York Times*, (October 31, 1937) 76.

<sup>34</sup> “Topics of the Times,” *New York Times*, (October 18, 1938)

understanding. If Syracuse was a party to the so-called ‘gentleman’s agreement,’ it justly deserved the beating...and Sidat Singh should quit the sport and the university for one where ‘agreements’ are not made.” This does not mean that the black papers let the southern schools off completely, however. Later in the article it is said, “If Maryland prefers to play foreigners to native Americans, it ought to substitute some other flag than that of the State of the United States. This is the type of intolerance that makes one wonder about the breadth and social vision and of the non-educators who administratively head these universities.”<sup>35</sup>

After spending the spring leading the Syracuse basketball squad to a successful season, Wilmeth Sidat-Singh returned to the football field in the fall as the star of the team. With the lingering memories of his benching the year before, he couldn’t be sure how the 1938 season would play out. Although the games were to be played at home, Syracuse had two southern squads on the schedule: Maryland in the second game of the season and Duke in the next to last. Without much fanfare, Maryland came north and agreed to play Syracuse at full strength. Perhaps to send a message, Syracuse ran Maryland out of the stadium by a final score of 55-17. Many in the black community saw this as payback. The *Crisis*, the monthly publication of the NAACP, put a picture of a passing Sidat-Singh on the cover with the headline, “He got revenge on Maryland.”<sup>36</sup> However, for many it didn’t cover up the scars from the year before. Marty Glickman summed it up best in his autobiography: “We got even, but it really wasn’t getting even. That was not like standing up and saying, ‘If Wil doesn’t play, I don’t play.’”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Carter, “From the Bench,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, (November 13, 1937), 17.

<sup>36</sup> *The Crisis*, (November 1938), cover.

<sup>37</sup> Glickman, *The Fastest Kid on the Block*, 52.



As the Duke game approached, the uncertainty about Sidat-Singh's status increased. At first it was assumed that Duke would choose to exercise their Jim Crow clause. In anticipation of this action, Gene Ward of the *New York Daily News* struck in advance: "It seems the Duke game was scheduled three years ago – before anybody at Syracuse knew there was a 175 pound, 5-foot 10-inch colored boy who moved like a cat on his feet and threw passes on a dime. And all Duke athletic contracts carry a clause against the use of colored players by opponents....How does this make Wil feel? At first he was 'mad' clean through: then hurt and puzzled....Here in the North we find the South's attitude hard to understand."<sup>38</sup>

As it turned out, when the time came for Duke to play Syracuse they were in a similar position as UNC had been against NYU in 1936. As historian Patrick B. Miller has noted, it was vital for Duke to play Syracuse at full strength to increase their bowl chances. "Duke had been rising up the rankings throughout the season and had its eye on a Rose Bowl invitation; Syracuse was formidable opponent with Sidat-Singh and much less impressive without him." With this in mind, Duke head coach Wallace Wade met with the President and Vice-President of Duke who both agreed to allow Wade to waive the Jim Crow clause.<sup>39</sup> Making a major step for the time, Wade stated: "We don't want to penalize Syracuse by forbidding them to use Sidat-Singh."<sup>40</sup> Wade's intentions also went beyond his team's success, however. He was a Tennessee born southern progressive in the vein of Frank Porter Graham of the University of North Carolina who had permitted Ed Williams to play in 1936. Having played with black football icon Fritz Pollard at Brown in 1916, Wade was well aware of the worthiness of black athletes. Duke's famous

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<sup>38</sup> Gene Ward, *New York Daily News*, as reprinted in *Baltimore Afro-American*, (October 29, 1938), 23.

<sup>39</sup> Miller, "Slouching Toward a New Expediency" 94.

<sup>40</sup> "Sidat-Singh to Face Duke," *New York Times*, (October 22, 1938), 11.

“Iron Duke” defense had not given up a point all year and was able to continue the streak by containing Sidat-Singh and earning a 21-0 victory. Their decision to play against Sidat-Singh would benefit them as they were invited to the Rose Bowl, where they suffered a crushing 7-3 defeat to the University of Southern California by giving up their only touchdown of the year.

Just as they were quick to condemn racist actions by the South, many in the black press were also willing to compliment southern schools for their progressive actions. Calling the Duke decision, “another step forward in sensible and sportsmanlike race relations in athletics,” the *Crisis* applauded Duke and the University of North Carolina for waiving their Jim Crow clauses. They continued, “For years students of race relations have been saying that the state of North Carolina would be most likely of all the southern states to take the lead in throwing overboard outdated and unintelligent traditions....Now, the football teams of its two leading universities refuse to dictate to their northern hosts what players they shall lose.”<sup>41</sup>

Other than the loss, the Duke game went without incident for Sidat-Singh. The *Baltimore Afro-American* reported the following week that “Contrary to general belief, Wilmeth confided that members of Duke University’s team displayed exceptional sportsmanship in the southerners’ game against the Orange. In no other contest did he receive as many pats on the back from opposing players, Wilmeth stated.”<sup>42</sup>

After graduation everybody agreed that Wilmeth Sidat-Singh had big things ahead of him. Unfortunately due to an unofficial color ban in the NFL and NBA he was forced to play for the New York Renaissance, a highly regarded professional black basketball

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<sup>41</sup> “Duke Joins Up,” *The Crisis*, (November, 1938), 361.

<sup>42</sup> “Dr. Sidat Says Syracuse Flash,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, (December 3, 1938), 21.

team. After World War II broke out, Sidat-Singh moved back to Washington D.C. to join the police force. By 1943 he had joined the military and was a pioneer member of the now-famous Tuskegee Airmen. By May of that year he had completed the majority of the training and earned his wings. He seemed set to break the color barrier in another field as one of the first black pilots. Unfortunately, it was not meant to be. During a routine training mission over Lake Huron his plane sputtered out. He evacuated the plane and parachuted to the water, but didn't release his parachute before he hit the surface. He drowned in the chilly waters entangled in his parachute ropes. His body was recovered six weeks later.<sup>43</sup>

This is also a story of redemption, however. In February of 2005, Syracuse University retired Wilmeth Sidat-Singh's number in the rafters of the Carrier Dome during a basketball game. His aunt Adelaide Webb Henley attended the game and had trouble controlling her emotions as Syracuse basketball coach Jim Boeheim delayed the celebration of his 700<sup>th</sup> victory to rush over and tell her how honored he was. It was a chance for a university to come to grips with its past and for a family to move on. The ceremony was not about reflecting on the past, but about embracing the future.

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<sup>43</sup> Cyphers, "The Lost Hero," *New York Daily News*, (July 31, 2002)

## Chapter Three

### THE DEPTHS OF JIM CROW

On the day after Christmas in 1939, more than 5,000 Boston College students, alumni, and well-wishers crowded into Boston's South Station to bid farewell to their football team. For the first time in school history, the gridiron squad was bowl-bound. Dallas, Texas was the destination for the fourth annual Cotton Bowl against the Clemson Tigers on New Year's Day. Despite the presence of such BC legends as Gene Goodreault and "Chuckin' Charlie" O'Rourke, the loudest cheers came for the smallest member of the team. Lou Montgomery, a five foot-seven inch, 150 pound halfback from Brockton, Massachusetts received a "thundering ovation, which was by far the largest accorded any individual."<sup>44</sup> However, the cheers were not meant to inspire Montgomery on his way to victory, but rather in appreciation for what he had already accomplished, because "Lightnin' Lou" would not be joining his teammates on their trip down South.

Montgomery was a standout athlete at Brockton High School and as team captain in his senior year, he was named to the state All-Scholastic team. Massachusetts' sportswriters voted him the outstanding performer in the state. His speed and shifty moves drew him national attention, but despite being recruited by traditional powerhouses such as Ohio State, UCLA, and USC, Montgomery had made a pact with the other All-Scholastic members to play football at Boston College. Montgomery arrived with his fellow All-Scholastics as a part of the best incoming freshman squad in BC history, and excitement abounded for the team's prospects in the coming years. However, Montgomery also arrived as the first black football player in BC history, a distinction that, while unimportant to him, would greatly influence his experience as a member of

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<sup>44</sup> Hy Hurwitz. "B.C. Squad Heads South" *Boston Globe*, 26 December 1939. 1

the Boston College football squad.<sup>45</sup> At the time, freshman weren't allowed to play on the varsity team and instead played on the freshman squad. In 1937, Montgomery and his fellow Eaglets inspired hope in Chestnut Hill. Sub Turri, the student yearbook described it as "the greatest freshman team that ever played at the Heights."<sup>46</sup> The following year Montgomery, like most sophomores at the time, saw very little playing time on the varsity field. After the 1938 season, Boston College hired the now-legendary Frank Leahy to replace Gil Dobie as the head coach of the varsity squad. Leahy instituted an open-field offense that fit in perfectly with Montgomery's running style.

Going into the 1939 football season things were looking up for Lou Montgomery and the Boston College Eagles. With his quick feet and flashy moves he was already a crowd favorite on the Heights and was set to be the starter at right halfback. However, because of the racial tensions of the time, Montgomery's season faced setback after setback as he competed for playing time not against his teammates, but against the racial segregation of the period. When southern schools refused to play a Boston College squad with a black member, the Jesuit Administration at BC did not stand up for Lou Montgomery, but rather pursued increased visibility and monetary gain at the expense of their most cherished values. Most importantly, they missed a golden opportunity to challenge the accepted segregation of the period.

In the opening game of the season, Lou Montgomery and the Eagles didn't disappoint. Starting against Lebanon Valley he ran for two touchdowns and thrilled the crowd with his shifty moves. The next week Montgomery was once again in the starting lineup against St. Joseph's of Philadelphia. The first ever night game at Alumni Field

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<sup>45</sup> Glenn Stout. "Jim Crow, Halfback" *Boston Magazine*, (December 1987), 124.

<sup>46</sup> *Sub Turri*, 1941. Volume 29.

produced a record crowd of 23,685. BC won easily and was showing all the signs of a program on the rise.

The next game was to be played the following week against southern power Florida in Fenway Park where the Administration hoped they would eventually draw larger crowds and thus larger revenues. As he prepared for the game with the team Montgomery received the bad news: Florida would be exercising their Jim Crow clause and he would not be permitted to play against them on Saturday. Florida was not in position for a bowl bid and had little motivation to go out of their way to allow their opponents best player to play whether he was black or not. In fact, some papers such as the *Pittsburgh Courier* accused southern schools of “bamboozling Boston College into benching Montgomery...not because they objected to his color, but because it was an opportunity to eliminate a star player.”<sup>47</sup>

The only initial outrage came from the black papers throughout the country. The *Boston Chronicle* responded powerfully on the headline of their sports page: “Lou Montgomery is Made Jim Crow Victim.”<sup>48</sup> The *Boston Globe* and *Boston Herald* simply added a note in their daily roundup stating that Montgomery would be replaced by Frank Maznicki in the starting lineup, but did not give any reason why. It seemed the white media didn’t see a problem with Montgomery’s benching or the university’s submission. Bob Dunbar of the *Herald* stated that “In these enlightened days it seems a shame that such a step must be taken, but it probably is best for all concerned.”<sup>49</sup> The *Chronicle* pressed BC for a comment and was told that they were only looking out for Montgomery. “We do this for the sake of Lou,” BC faculty director of athletics Reverend Patrick H.

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<sup>47</sup> “Boston College Bows Once Again to Dixie Tradition,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, (December 23, 1939), 16.

<sup>48</sup> “Lou Montgomery is Made Jim Crow Victim,” *Boston Chronicle* (October 14, 1939), 7.

<sup>49</sup> Bob Dunbar, “Bob Dunbar’s Comment,” *Boston Herald*, (October 9, 1939), 16.

Collins told the *Chronicle* <sup>50</sup> The Administration claimed to be worried that due to the rough nature of the game Montgomery might be injured and cause “misunderstandings as a result.” However if the Administration felt that this was in the best interest of Montgomery, they didn’t approach him to discuss it. He didn’t find out until Coach Leahy informed him after the local papers had already reported the news. In a 1987 interview with Glenn Stout of *Boston Magazine*, Montgomery recalled being unsurprised by their stance: “That didn’t faze me because I had heard that before – not because of the black thing, but because when they key the running around you, if they can put you out of the game they’ll do it.”<sup>51</sup> Although the administration and white press seemed to think he was in danger simply by being on the field, in Montgomery’s mind race wasn’t even an issue. He had always been the target whenever he was on the field; he didn’t see why it should be any different just because the team was from the South.

According to the *Chronicle*, “No one hinted at Boston College bowing down before southern intolerance – it was too obvious to discuss.”<sup>52</sup> However, it didn’t seem that this was the reason nobody had discussed it. Even the Boston College student newspaper *The Heights* did not mention the situation other than to inform readers that Montgomery would not be playing. Neither the white media nor the student body was willing to question the actions of the administration or the Jesuit ideals behind sitting a player for racial purposes. As far as they were concerned, the South was to blame for their backwards tradition. The campus was too caught up in the excitement of its new

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>51</sup> Stout, “Jim Crow, Halfback,” 128.

<sup>52</sup> “Lou Montgomery is Made Jim Crow Victim,” *Boston Chronicle* (October 14, 1939), 7.

powerhouse football team to risk a memorable season by taking a stand for one of their fellow students. The *Chronicle* described the atmosphere at BC as “victory -mad.”<sup>53</sup>

Lou Montgomery, however, understood the real reasoning behind the Administration’s decision as he told Stout: “I understood myself that money was the big reason. They didn’t want to lose the money, and they had made headway and were going to the top.”<sup>54</sup> The day before they announced Montgomery would not be playing against Florida, the *Boston Globe* ran an article about the previous game against St. Joseph’s which had set the all time record for attendance at Alumni Field. “The Eagle A.A. (Athletic Association) authorities are quite pleased over the financial returns realized the other night....With seven more home games carded, B.C. will probably enjoy an excellent financial season.”<sup>55</sup> With the growing excitement over the football program, the game against Florida was certain to draw a large crowd and lucrative gate returns. Standing up to Florida could cause to them to pull out of the game which would lead to immediate financial losses and would damage the team’s ability to schedule southern squads in the future.

The only group that did take a stand was the rest of the BC football squad. Montgomery told Stout, “Some of the guys didn’t take it well. They talked about striking, or going up to the game and at the last minute saying ‘If he don’t play, we don’t play.’”<sup>56</sup> However, similar to Glickman, none of the players actually stepped forward. It was Montgomery’s nature to put the team first and he encouraged the team to play hard without him. “The team was all for one, all for the other. We didn’t think color or

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<sup>53</sup> *Boston Chronicle* (November 11, 1939), 7.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>55</sup> “Eagle Authorities Pleased,” *Boston Globe* (October 9, 1939), 10.

<sup>56</sup> Stout, “Jim Crow, Halfback,” 128



anything else. We just tried to win the game. That's the way I approach it: Hell, whether I play or not, win the damn game anyhow."<sup>57</sup> As it turned out, the team might as well have not showed up for the game. They lost 7-0 and were never able to get any kind of momentum behind their vaunted offense.

All Montgomery could do at this point was move on and hope the rest of the season went without incident. Montgomery returned the next week against heavily favored Temple and led the team to a victory with a 98-yard interception return thus helping their bowl chances. However the next week against St. Anselm he did not start and played only ten minutes. Montgomery was aware of the reasons behind this. The following week the team was set to play Auburn, another school from the South with a Jim Crow clause in their contract. Leahy knew that Montgomery would not be able to play and was likely trying various combinations of other players to see what would work best in Montgomery's absence. In his interview with Stout, Montgomery recalled that Leahy "prepared for those games I couldn't play. I don't feel I ever lost my starting place when I was allowed to play."<sup>58</sup>

Before the Auburn game the Boston College weekly, *The Heights*, finally printed an editorial regarding the Lou Montgomery situation. However, the tone of the article was one of sympathy and resignation rather than anger or progressivism. Montgomery's fellow student Art Cullen declared the Jim Crow clause the result of a "foolish, and time worn bias" and declared that "there should some provisions made by which southern teams can come up to play us without restricting the use of any players."<sup>59</sup> As could be expected, Cullen made no attempt to question the administration, either out of a sincere

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>58</sup> Stout, "Jim Crow, Halfback," 133.

<sup>59</sup> Art Cullen, "Tabloid," *The Heights*, (November 3, 1939), 2.

belief that they were not in the wrong, or to protect himself against potential punishment. Neither *The Heights* nor the students were willing to question the Christian values behind such an action or press the administration for more answers.

On the field the Auburn game was not much different than the Florida game as the Eagles offense never gained any momentum, but was still able to eek out a 13-7 victory with a late fourth quarter rally. Once again Montgomery's presence was missed, but thanks to the win, nobody seemed to notice. The city had gone crazy over the success of the team and did not want anything to ruin the moment. Well's Twombly, Frank Leahy's biographer said of Leahy's first season as a head coach, "Now the city of Boston, which long ago decided that it wouldn't be impressed with much of anything, had lost its sanity over a precious football team. Students crowded the practice field, cheering almost witlessly at mere dummy drills. Pep rallies which had sunk to the excitement level of reading the dictionary, were wildly popular again."<sup>60</sup>

In a letter to the *Chronicle*, Boston College remained adamant that it had not gone astray from its founding principles with its decision to bench Montgomery. Father Collins stated that "at Boston College, Christian ideals have not been neglected when the question of race or creed arise, and it is to be regretted that we are misunderstood and are judged of being unjust in our dealings with the Negro boy." Father Collins continued to state that "no contract at Boston College will show recorded the exclusion of Lou Montgomery from any contest." However, what made the situation worse to Lou Montgomery and the black press was that despite these claims, the University was actively pursuing games with southern schools for the future. The *Chronicle* was quick to

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<sup>60</sup> Wells Twombly, *Shake Down the Thunder!: The Official Biography of Notre Dame's Frank Leahy* (Radnor, PA: Chilton Book Company, 1974), 189.

notice the contradictory behavior of the university: “After the game, B.C. representatives were unusually cordial toward the southern team and spoke of further cementing their relations. There was talk of B.C. entering Dixie ‘bowl’ classics in the future. Furthermore, as we go to press, the news releases imply that Auburn will return to Boston next fall for another game with B.C.”<sup>61</sup>

The Eagles soared into the last game of the regular season against Holy Cross. The Boston College-Holy Cross game had become one of the most competitive rivalries in the nation. The two prominent Catholic schools in the Northeast had battled back and forth for years and since 1920 each team had closed out its season in a hard fought battle against the other. This year would be no different as the Eagles, despite their 8-1 record, entered the game underdogs to the #10 ranked Crusaders. The game held even more importance as the winner would likely earn a bid to one of the coveted New Year’s Bowls while the loser would go home empty handed. As Twombly pointed out: “All they needed to do was defeat Holy Cross, in a game that had all the lack of emotion of say a game between Texas and Oklahoma, California and Stanford, Auburn and Alabama, Israel and Egypt or Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants.”<sup>62</sup>

As a further sign of his reduced playing time, Montgomery did not start the game and did not enter the game until the end of the first period. The game was a draw through the first three quarters as neither team could put points on the board. When the Eagles scored on the first play of the fourth quarter and then added another touchdown on a blocked kick, the excitement was palpable. As the game came to a close, the fans began counting down the seconds and chanting “We want a bowl game!” The fans were well

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<sup>61</sup> “B.C. Says No Discrimination Against Montgomery,” *Boston Chronicle* (November 4, 1939), 7.

<sup>62</sup> Twombly, Frank Leahy, 190.

aware their resume was worthy of a bid and the speculation began as to which bowl it would be. Perhaps they would head all the way out west for the Rose Bowl or down South for the Sugar Bowl. The team and the city of Boston waited in anticipation

With the regular season completed the Eagles had but one blemish on their otherwise perfect record. It did not take long for sportswriters to notice that the one loss came in the Florida game in which Montgomery was not permitted to play. It was only now that the rage over Montgomery's benching began in the white press. The Orange Bowl had made a verbal promise to invite BC, but reneged on it stating that Boston College had already lost to a weak Florida team and therefore couldn't be that good. Then came word from the Sugar Bowl that "The committee did not feel that Boston College was that good a team because it had lost to a Florida bunch that wasn't worth thinking about. The Rose Bowl crowd heard all the talk from New Orleans and decided essentially the same thing."<sup>63</sup> Upon hearing that Boston College could lose a bowl bid because of a game they lost without Montgomery, the rage from the white press intensified. Dave Egan, "The Colonel," of the *Boston Record* was infuriated. Egan lashed out at the southern bowls that did not want BC because of their Florida loss: "You hire northerners to play on your football teams, and then refuse to permit them to play against Negroes either at home or abroad. You are as wolfish in gaining a slight percentage edge as a professional wolf, or bookmaker, and you are throwing loaded dice into a friendly game."<sup>64</sup> However, this uproar wasn't present from "the Colonel" or the rest of the media when Montgomery was initially benched for the Florida game. The benching only became a problem to them when it directly affected BC's bowl chances. The white press

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<sup>63</sup> Towmbley, Frank Leahy, 194.

<sup>64</sup> Dave Egan, "The Colonel," *The Record*, (December 8, 1939), 57.

still showed no willingness to question the Administration for their decision to bench Montgomery in the first place.

While the team waited for a bowl bid, the administration once again gave mixed signals about what had happened and how the situation would be approached in the future. Despite having said earlier that no contract would explicitly show Montgomery's exclusion, Father Collins later made it seem as though the exclusion was implied when he told the *Baltimore Afro-American*: "I want the world to know that when the contract was made with Florida we had no colored players on our squad, now that more colored lads are attending Boston College and will play on our teams, they shall no longer be humiliated."<sup>65</sup> From this Collins also seems to imply that Boston College will no longer put itself in compromising positions by either not submitting to Jim Crow demands or not scheduling games with Jim Crow schools.

Fortunately for the Boston College football team and Administration, the Eagles did earn a bowl bid. On December 9<sup>th</sup> they received an offer from the newly formed Cotton Bowl Committee in Dallas, Texas to play on New Year's Day. Their likely opponent was Duquesne University of Pittsburgh, but the Boston College Administration was skeptical about the interest level of a game between two northern Catholic Universities in the Baptist South. According to Twombly, "The people at Boston College suggested that it might be better to invite a southern school with a strong Protestant education."<sup>66</sup> Clemson University of South Carolina was selected to be their opponent instead. While it was possible Duquesne would have allowed Montgomery to play, BC had pursued a more attractive opponent that might increase the payout, but

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<sup>65</sup> Lydia T. Brown, "Orange Bowl Snubs B.C. Because of Lou Montgomery," *Baltimore Afro-American*, (December 16, 1939), 21.

<sup>66</sup> Towmbly, Frank Leahy, 195.

would surely not give Montgomery a chance to play. Despite Father Collins' recent claim that the school would never put its black athletes in a compromising position, they had accepted a situation that made that an inevitability.

When the Cotton Bowl invitation was accepted, it was met with great excitement all around Boston and especially on the Heights. It was the first time in years that a New England school would be playing in a Bowl game. Despite the fact that the game was to take place in the South against a southern school, nobody seemed to question whether or not Montgomery would be allowed to participate. In fact, it seemed many people naively assumed he would play and even more were too caught up in the excitement to care. On December 14<sup>th</sup> the *Globe* listed Montgomery as one of six players that had been excused from practice but was still expected to play in Texas. However the very next day, without any kind of fanfare or explanation, they announced that he was not expected to play. The reasoning was not given until two days later when the *New York Times* reported that Curtis Sanford, founder and president of the Cotton Bowl announced that "In view of the general attitude towards Negroes in Texas, it was advisable that Montgomery refrain from playing. We conferred with Boston College officials and Montgomery will come to Texas with the team, but will not play."<sup>67</sup>

Montgomery's status would quickly change once again. On December 19<sup>th</sup> Montgomery released a statement printed on the front page of the *Boston Post* expressing his decision not to travel with the team to Dallas. He claimed he was worried about "running into some embarrassing situations." He continued, "If I could play in the game and be free to be myself I would love to go. To go down there under restrictions would be

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<sup>67</sup> "Negro Out of Bowl Game," *New York Times*, (December 17, 1939), 85.

plain silly.”<sup>68</sup> The white press took this declaration at face value and assumed Montgomery truly had no desire to travel south. Only the *Chronicle* realized that the true issue was not whether Montgomery had personally decided not to attend or had been persuaded to do so. The issue lay in the fact that he was given no alternate options or assistance from those who had the power to do so. “Even if Montgomery ‘voluntarily’ refused, it was purely on the grounds that he could expect no help from his coaches and officials if humiliated. Their conduct in barring him themselves from two games this season proves that Montgomery could expect little besides hostility from them.”<sup>69</sup>

Rather than question the Administration and Bowl Committee, the majority of the white media supported Montgomery’s decision to stay home. Victor O. Jones, sportswriter for the *Boston Globe* stated that he had “done the wise and sporting thing in not accompanying the team to Dallas.” His justification was a monetary one: “All college football players whether they are conscious of it or not, are helping their alma maters to make money – money which is used for praiseworthy objects. Boston College currently needs football gate receipts more than a lot of other colleges and on that basis can defend what would otherwise be an untenable position – of having accepted an invitation which it knew one of its bona fide members would not be able to accept.”<sup>70</sup> Could a Jesuit institute really support, and actively seek out a situation which would support discrimination? A school that was founded on principles of equality and poverty was promoting inequality for the sake of profit.

The black media did not let them off as easily. The *Pittsburgh Chronicle* did not hold anything back in declaring, “Of all the spineless, mealy-mouthed, weak-kneed,

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<sup>68</sup> *Boston Post*, (December 19, 1939), from Stout, “Jim Crow, Halfback,” 133.

<sup>69</sup> “Want Probe at B.C.,” *Boston Chronicle*, (December 30, 1939), 1.

<sup>70</sup> Victor O. Jones, “Cotton Bowl’s Only Sour Note,” *Boston Globe*, (December 22, 1939), 8.

craven bits of business in the whole history of college football, this takes the cake!” As far as they were concerned, if Lou was good enough to play in some games, he was good enough to play in all the games. Unlike the white media who blamed the decision on a backwards southern tradition, the black media went after Boston College. “I blame the Boston College authorities more than I do the Cotton Bowl folks. If the Dallas officials don’t want to have Negroes playing in their games, that’s their business. But when the Cotton Bowl officials made this outrageous proposal that young Montgomery be benched because the pigmentation of his skin didn’t quite comply with Texas standards, the Boston College people should have said: ‘Sorry gentlemen, but you’d better ask somebody else to your party! This boy, Montgomery, is one of our own – and if he’s good enough for us, he’s good enough for anybody else.’”<sup>71</sup>

Outside of the black media, the only criticism of the Boston College administration came from concerned letter writers to the media outlets. In a letter to *Boston Record* a writer called out “The Colonel” for his position on the Montgomery issue. “An impartial columnist would pat the back of one deserving of praise, but he would not hesitate to slap the face of that same person when he has done wrong,” Des Wadsworth wrote. “I have reference to your consistent praise for the football team of Boston College and your hesitation to actually condemn them for permitting the southern colleges to dictate terms of football contracts which exclude Negro players.” Unlike most others, Wadsworth understood that “There is more to the playing of the game than spreading the name of the college across the nation’s headlines, and replenishing the

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<sup>71</sup> Chester L. Washington, “Montgomery Tells Why He Spurned Cotton Bowl,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, (December 30, 1939), 16.



treasury.”<sup>72</sup> In a letter to the *New York Times*, Frederick B. Suss calls the benching of Lou Montgomery an “out-and-out cowardice and an utter disregard of scruples on the part of the Boston College authorities...Can any judgment be made other than that the Boston College authorities are out for all the mercenary gain that playing in a Bowl game means, entirely disregarding the feelings of Montgomery and the other players on the team?”<sup>73</sup> The entire city of Boston was so caught up in the hype surrounding their new favorite sons that they gave little regard to Montgomery or his situation. They were more than willing to sacrifice one man because of his race in order to take over the nation’s headlines and replenish the treasury.

So it was that Montgomery stood on the platform in South Station as the rest of the team boarded the train headed for Dallas. As was his nature he tried to keep a low profile and wish the team good luck, but the crowd would have none of that. They yelled words of encouragement and called for a speech. Putting the team first as always, Montgomery could only quietly mumble “I hope the fellows win.”<sup>74</sup> With that he stepped away from the crowd and watched the train pull away, and as the *Boston Record* witnessed, “once that Cotton Bowl special started chugging toward the Southwest he was once again alone among the crowd.”<sup>75</sup> The fans that had forgotten him for the other southern games would forget him for this one too.

Only one man took the time to see how Montgomery was responding to the situation. Murray Kramer of the *Boston Record* went to interview Montgomery at his home in Brockton. He and a friend were making spaghetti and meatballs for two dates

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<sup>72</sup> Dave Egan, “The Colonel,” *Boston Record*, (December 26, 1939), 27.

<sup>73</sup> Frederick B Suss, “Boston College Criticized,” *New York Times*, (December 23, 1939), 20.

<sup>74</sup> Hy Hurwitz, “B.C. Squad Heads South,” *Boston Globe*, (December 26, 1939), 1.

<sup>75</sup> *Boston Record*, (December 27, 1939), 23.

before they headed out to the movies. “This is a grand guy,” said Kramer. He’s taking adversity with a grin. This could easily be the story of a man who is upset because he can’t play in his team’s biggest game. But he’s too big for that.”<sup>76</sup> On New Year’s Day Montgomery made a trip down to Philadelphia to be closer to the game while he was listening. He sent the team a telegram wishing them the best. Before his trip Montgomery had told Kramer, “Don’t kid yourself. Boston College doesn’t need a climax runner to win this football game....Boston College is a cinch to win.”<sup>77</sup> As it turns out, he was wrong. The Eagles sorely missed his open field running ability and once again couldn’t find their offensive attack, suffering a 6-3 defeat. The *Chronicle* was quick to point out the tragedy of Montgomery’s absence. “As Charlie O’Rourke threw prayer-passes and looked bewilderedly at a broken-down Boston College team offensive...one just had to feel sorry for a team of well meaning young men who had been badly deceived and exploited by certain older gentlemen who professed to be like their leaders.”<sup>78</sup> When the team returned from Dallas Montgomery met them at South Station. Leahy approached him and simply said, “Louis, if they had let us bring you along we wouldn’t have lost.” Montgomery responded, “I’m always going to believe that coach.” But he didn’t need Leahy to tell him, he knew that all along.<sup>79</sup>

The following year Lou Montgomery faced the same problems and hypocrisies. Despite their claimed intention to not schedule anymore games which would prohibit Lou from playing, the Athletic Association scheduled Tulane of New Orleans for the second game of the season. Despite some optimism that he would be permitted to play, he was

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<sup>76</sup> Murray Kramer, Boston Daily Record, from Twombly, Frank Leahy, 196.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>78</sup> Mabe Kountze, “The Chronicle Sports Review,” *Boston Chronicle*, (January 6 1940), 7.

<sup>79</sup> Twombly, Frank Leahy, 198.

officially told the week before that he would be benched. This time however he accompanied the team to New Orleans although he left his uniform at home. After the game he told the *Pittsburgh Courier* that if it was up to him he would have played, but “when the question arose no real attitude was expressed in his behalf by anyone. He said that the officials had agreed that he was not to play.” Even more damaging to the Administration was that Lou also stated “that he had been promised that he would play in all home games this year, no matter where the visiting team is from.”<sup>80</sup> However Montgomery was once again benched when Auburn traveled north to play at Fenway Park.

The 1940 squad would prove to be even more successful than the 1939 team. The team proved it could win games without Montgomery, providing the white press with no reason to be upset about his benching. The team went undefeated and once again waited in anticipation for a bowl bid, this time for a chance to play for a national championship. When the team was offered the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans, the administration jumped at the chance, raising eyebrows among the black press. According to Sam Lacy, “It was even money that Boston College would have been invited to the Rose Bowl...B.C. officials, however, refused to take the chance and accepted the invitation...Had they not been so hasty, it is likely Lou Montgomery...would have gotten a chance to break loose at Pasadena.”<sup>81</sup> New Orleans offered no such hope. Shortly after the announcement, the University revealed that once again Montgomery would not be able to play in a bowl game, although he could travel with the team. The news was only made worse by the fact that Montgomery’s uncle, who he had grown up living with, had passed away just before

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<sup>80</sup> O.C.W. Taylor, “Boston Benches Negro Star,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, (October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1940), 7.

<sup>81</sup> Sam Lacy, “Looking ‘Em Over,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, (December 14, 1940), 19.

the beginning of the season finale. Montgomery did agree to accompany the team and actually received special treatment. He was paid to play in a black all-star game and was able to stay in New Orleans while the team was forced to commute from over an hour away. Boston College would go on to defeat Tennessee 19-13 and earn a share of the national championship, an achievement that must have been bittersweet for Lou Montgomery.

Although in his later years he didn't look fondly on the way Boston College treated him, he was able to take some valuable lessons from his struggle. "By the time I finished college, I had a pretty damn good interracial lesson. There were a lot of things about black and white in business that I wasn't aware of until these things happened, and then, all of a sudden, I was aware of them." In his 1987 interview with Stout, Montgomery stated, "I'm glad I went to school. If I had to do it over again, I don't think I'd have gone to Boston College." In the years after Boston College he also became a more devout Catholic and consequently became more frustrated about his treatment at BC. He told Stout: "it began to hit me as to what happened, what principles were involved, what principles had been bent a little. And then I began to get a little more belligerent about the whole damn thing. I may have done things that were the easiest on the players and the school, but it wasn't necessarily the best thing that should have been done." Montgomery's biggest regret was that he had not stood up for himself and what he knew was right. "If I had raised hell, I might have gotten myself burned, but I think something would have happened sooner than it did."<sup>82</sup>

Throughout the whole ordeal the administration continued to make excuses and justifications for their contradictory actions. They professed to be concerned about

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<sup>82</sup> Stout, "Jim Crow, Halfback," 134.

Montgomery's safety even though the southern teams they played weren't made up of more actual southerners than most of the northern teams. They even permitted him to play against some southern schools such as Centre College of Kentucky and Kansas State. Despite claiming they didn't want him to be embarrassed, they continued to put him in embarrassing situations by pursuing bowls and contracts with southern schools. Most outside of the black community seemed willing to let them off because they agreed it was in the best interest of Lou Montgomery and the school. Some claimed he Montgomery should have been benched because "All football players whether they are conscious of it or not, are helping their alma maters to make money – money which is used for wholly praiseworthy objects."<sup>83</sup> When disagreement was expressed, it was at the southern schools for their backward ways rather than towards Boston College for their willingness to be held hostage by those backward ways. However, the black media did not agree with these justifications and spoke out against them. The *Pittsburgh Courier* declared that, "Dollars and cents, rather than the democratic ideals for which the institution is supposed to stand is said to have influenced the Boston officials to submit to the unreasonable demand." They continued, "those fighting for Montgomery point out that Boston College is a Catholic school and is not supposed to submit to such un-Christian demands."<sup>84</sup> The black media was the only group to question the morality of such actions. The white media seemed content to imply that any injustice was acceptable as long as it contributed to the treasury and prestige of the school. Boston College had six golden opportunities to put their beliefs and their students ahead of the treasury in the

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<sup>83</sup> Victor O. Jones, "What about it?," *Boston Globe*, (December 22, 1939) 8.

<sup>84</sup> "Boston College Bows Once Again To Dixie Tradition," *Pittsburgh Courier*, (December 23, 1939) 16.

name of progress. Each time they chose to humiliate Lou Montgomery under the guise of his protection.

In December 1939, as the Boston College team was preparing for its Cotton Bowl game, *The Crisis*, the monthly journal of the NAACP, was released. It spoke optimistically of a resolution passed by the National Catholic Alumni Federation that Catholic Colleges, ‘extend, without exception, full educational opportunities to young colored men and women.’ The NAACP viewed this as progress, but also saw it as something that should have been expected of Catholic schools from the start. As far as they were concerned, “There was never any excuse for this treatment of Negroes and colored people have been forced to turn a deaf ear to Catholic protestations of love and brotherhood as long as Catholic schools remain in the Jim Crow pattern. Statements from the highest Catholic sources are only words; the slammed door...is a deed which speaks louder than any pastoral letter.” As this issue was being read, Boston College, a Catholic institution, declared their love for Lou Montgomery and their concern for his safety, all the while deferring to the discriminatory practices of the South. *The Crisis* ended the article skeptically by stating cautiously, “It remains to be seen what good will come of it.”<sup>85</sup> For Lou Montgomery, no good came of it.

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<sup>85</sup> “The Catholics Speak,” *The Crisis*, (December 1939), 369.

## Chapter Four

### NO MISSOURI COMPROMISE

Another reason the Lou Montgomery issue received much less attention in the 1940 season was the emergence of bigger story to steal the headlines. New York University had agreed to bench its black star, Leonard Bates, for a trip to the South to face Missouri, leading to the first ever mass protest by student groups regarding Jim Crow in college football. Similar to today, New York University was considered one of the most progressive universities in the nation. Its students had built a reputation for fighting for progress and the administration was generally seen as supportive of these actions. However, in the fall of 1940, the administration stood defiantly behind their position that Bates not be permitted to play.

Leonard Bates had been born and raised in New York City. He dropped out of high school for five years before earning his diploma and looking towards a college education. A former coach was working with the NYU football team and convinced the school to give him a full scholarship to play football, and in 1939 he entered the University.<sup>86</sup> Upon entering, he was told by NYU that a game had already been scheduled for the following season at Missouri and that he would not be allowed to participate. Bates complied with their request, and perhaps due to pressure, stated that he would not like to be a part of any games in the South.

The NYU case represented the first time the student body of any school participated in active public discourse to stand up to Jim Crow on the gridiron. Long thought of as a liberal and progressive institution, NYU had a great deal of experience with Jim Crow clauses. The *Pittsburgh Courier* spoke of its “odiferous Jim Crow record”

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<sup>86</sup> Donald Spivey, “End Jim Crow in Sports,” *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 15, No. 3, (Winter 1988) 295.

referring to a 1929 incident with another black NYU star, David Myers. When it was learned that Myers would be held out of an upcoming game against Georgia due to Jim Crow, a small outcry emerged that he either play or the game be cancelled. This response was more progressive than many that would follow in the next decade, as students appealed to the administration to reconsider and black papers called for Myers to quit the team. The administration and coaches tried to minimize the issue by downgrading Myers' importance to the team and declaring that his safety would be threatened by playing against a southern team. As pressure mounted the administration began to suggest that it was a possibility the game would be cancelled after all. However, when game day finally came, Myers came down with a mysterious injury that most were aware was little more than an invented excuse.<sup>87</sup> Although NYU had also been involved in the breakthrough of Ed Williams playing against North Carolina in 1936, many still dwelled on the inability to act progressively for David Myers.

In the spirit of progress, the students at New York University fought discrimination and what they considered to be anti-democratic actions whenever they could. Because of this, many of them had already grown an aversion to Missouri due to its actions a year earlier. In 1939 a track meet was to be held between Missouri, Notre Dame, and Wisconsin. Missouri requested that Wisconsin hold out their black athletes which prompted Wisconsin to withdraw from the meet in protest. Notre Dame, considered at the time to be one of the most conservative schools in the North, joined Wisconsin in the protest.<sup>88</sup> Thus, when the NYU students realized Missouri had been scheduled for the following football season, a small uproar emerged giving signs of what

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*



was to come. The *Washington Square Bulletin*, the major student newspaper, proposed at the time that NYU sever all ties with Missouri. The students received nothing but silence from the administration who continued to insist that the football game was scheduled before the track meet incident. However, the students were not swayed by this point. To them the problem seemed obvious: How could NYU claim to be a liberal institution while still allowing such blatant discrimination? As the game approached, the *Washington Square Bulletin* bluntly stated, “New York University can no longer pose as a liberal institution and still cooperate with the Jim Crow schools of the country.”<sup>89</sup> Acting on this basis premise, the students began a campaign demanding strongly that Bates must play.

Unlike most other cases in which the benchings occurred shortly before the game and received only minor amounts of attention, the concerns over Bates’ eligibility for the Missouri game emerged early. On October 4<sup>th</sup>, almost a full month before the November 2<sup>nd</sup> game, the *New York Times* reported that Bates was not likely to play at Missouri. “When the game was listed there was no negro on the N.Y.U. squad and the Violet consented to play both 1940 and 1941 games at Columbia, Mo. But when Bates arrived on the scene frantic efforts were made...to transfer both games to New York. This arrangement was made for next year, but it was impossible for the switch to be made this season. Missouri, as yet, has said nothing about permitting Bates to play, and although no specific request has come that he stay home, the implication is there.”<sup>90</sup> This supported

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<sup>89</sup> “Break Sports Relations With Intolerant Jim Crow Colleges,” *Washington Square Bulletin*, (October 21, 1940)

<sup>90</sup> Arthur J. Daley, “Coach Puzzled by N.Y.U. Failure to Make Its Aerial Attack Click,” *New York Times*, (October 4, 1940) 32.

the administration's stance that the games had been scheduled before Bates was a member of the team, but it was not enough to justify that argument to the students.

The student newspapers began making their case for Bates' inclusion long before the game as well. The *Washington Square Bulletin* quickly jumped on the administration. The *Bulletin* was upset that their calls to cancel the game after the 1939 track meet had fallen on deaf ears leading to the current situation. "Evidently [the administration] felt that they need not concern themselves with the situation until it directly affected the University. Now that time has come and the University officials are in a dither. Two years ago they were willing to continue athletic relations with Missouri. They are still willing today. But they must save face, and so they try to bring the Missouri contest to New York. That stand is hypocritical."<sup>91</sup> Unlike the students and administrations at Boston College and Syracuse who barely commented on the segregation, the students at NYU seemed to understand what the black papers had been promoting all along: that more than anything these situations presented golden opportunities to attack Jim Crow. They joined the black papers in questioning their own school more for bowing to Jim Crow than the southern schools who requested it. As Larry Gordon declared in the *Washington Square Bulletin*, "This University can set an example for the whole nation to follow by calling off its game with Missouri. Such an action would stand as a symbol for the freedom of our Universities – Universities free from bias."<sup>92</sup>

The black papers supported the activist students and also demanded that NYU cancel the game. Art Carter, writing in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, commended the efforts of the committees while attacking both Missouri and NYU: "The Dixie brethren

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<sup>91</sup> Larry Gordon, "Violet Buds," *Washington Square Bulletin*, (October 9, 1940).

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*

have been allowed to get away this sort of stuff long enough, and it is gratifying to see the stand the NYU students have taken in the matter.” For Carter, this would be another missed chance at making a breakthrough. “NYU had a chance to show its true colors in the matter when Missouri requested the “gentlemen’s agreement” two years ago at the time the game was scheduled, and nothing the school does now to rectify the harm can erase the stain of bigotry that has been smeared across the institution’s fair name.” Echoing the arguments black sportswriters had been progressing for years, Carter continued, “If Bates is good enough to risk life and limb from whistle to whistle against NYU’s foes in New York, he is GOOD enough to play in ALL the games, including the Missouri contest. The same holds true with ANY COLORED PLAYER [emphasis in original].”<sup>93</sup> The black papers were eager to seize on another case of blatant segregation, especially one in which they were supported by a vocal group of white dissenters. They continually portrayed the administration as manipulative by having forced Bates into declaring he did not want to play and then using that comment against him.

Meanwhile, the New York Times consistently painted a different picture. The protests rarely received more than minor blurbs in the daily NYU football update. They often downplayed the scope of the committees’ meetings and portrayed Bates as “the unwitting cause of student protest.”<sup>94</sup> Their reports supported the administration by reiterating their claims that Bates himself had requested to be benched for the game and never made an effort to reach Bates for his version, although it is unlikely he would have threatened his status by providing them with a different story.

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<sup>93</sup> Art Carter, “From the Bench,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, (October 26, 1940) 21.

<sup>94</sup> “Steens Goes Rival One Better In Worry Over N.Y.U. Reserves, *New York Times*, (October 19, 1940) 18.

The students, however, were not content to accept the administration's side of things. As the student papers continued blasting the administration a series of protests began, culminating with the October 18<sup>th</sup> picketing of the NYU administration building.<sup>95</sup> From this protest emerged the All-University Committee on "Bates Must Play." Chaired by Argyle (Guy) A. Stoute, the committee held meetings, staged protests, and circulated a petition in order to state their demands. In their first meeting they agreed upon four resolutions: that Bates be released from the gentleman's agreement and make his own decision to play or not; that NYU never enter a contract with a Jim Crow school; that the administration make a statement regarding its views on the situation; and that if any of these demands were not met that the remaining home games be boycotted.<sup>96</sup> In a release, Stoute stated, "It is a sad commentary that a campaign such as this is necessary to insure the participation of a colored athlete in the NYU-Missouri game. The very essence of sport is fair play."<sup>97</sup> More than 2,500 students eventually signed the Bates Must Play petition.

However, not everybody who disagreed with the decision to bench Bates agreed with the Bates Must Play Committee. While the *Washington Square Bulletin* did support the severing of ties with Missouri and all Jim Crow schools, they did not think letting him play would be an advisable action. They argued that "The Committee is acting with a purely idealistic view point. They believe that if Bates plays, the entire problem will be settled. But this will not solve the problem. Similar incidents will arise in the future as they have in the past. The University must either sanction Jim Crow by continuing its present policy or repudiate it by severing relations with all schools whose athletic

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<sup>95</sup> Spivey, "End Jim Crow in Sports," 285.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>97</sup> "NYU Students Protest Ban on Bates," *Baltimore Afro-American*, (October 26, 1940), 20.

doctrines are discriminatory. There must not be any compromise.” They were also worried about Bates’ safety and declared that letting him play would be “the first instance of legalized lynching.” For them, Bates’ agreement to sit out meant that “Bates realizes that his participation in the game is not the solution to the problem.”<sup>98</sup>

The administration also continued to chime in with arguments in their defense. School Chancellor Harry Woodburn Chase even went so far as to write a letter to the *Washington Square Bulletin*. In it Chase stated that although he agreed with the student’s plight and wanted to help the cause, “there are occasions when one has to be careful not to hurt a cause which he is anxious to help by taking the wrong procedure.” He further explained this by declaring that the time had not arrived when southern institutions could be asked to allow Negro players to play on southern campuses. In his mind attempting to change things too soon would in fact make things worse. He attempted to make himself seem like the true progressive by stating: “I should be false to my own deepest convictions if I allowed myself knowingly to do anything that would retard or injure it.” Chase then explained why he disagreed with the demand to break off ties with Jim Crow schools: “Nor do I feel that because racial tolerance in the South has not reached a point where certain things are possible we should break off relations with southern institutions. That would not be an act of tolerance. It would be an act of sectionalism, and New York University is not a sectional institution.”<sup>99</sup> Chase also drew upon his experience as an administrator in southern schools to convince the students that he was more knowledgeable in dealing with southern Universities. Ironically, however, Chase had previously been President of the University of North Carolina who only four years earlier

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<sup>98</sup> “Break Sports Relations With Intolerant Jim Crow Colleges,” *Washington Square Bulletin*, (October 21, 1940)

<sup>99</sup> Letter from Harry Woodburn Chase printed in *Washington Square Bulletin*, (November 4, 1940)

had made the progressive effort to reach an agreement to allow NYU's black star Ed Williams to play in New York.

While Chase's letter presented an interesting perspective in a well-written manner, the students were not sold on its validity. Later the *Washington Square Bulletin* disputed his argument on a point by point basis. While the argument over whether canceling the game would be progressive or regressive for equality could obviously not be settled, the paper did declare, "Nor do we think that this would in any way retard the growth of interracial understanding in the South, which *might* as a matter of fact be aided by it." However, the *Bulletin's* major problem came with Chase's attempt to portray the students as fanning the sectional flame. They responded strongly, "We are not trying to impose our views on other institutions by insisting that they permit colored athletes the right to play. We favor instead the breaking of relations with such schools, so that we will not be forced to compromise our ideals. BY CONTINUING TO PLAY THEM ON THEIR TERMS, WE DO NOTHING BUT SANCTION AND GIVE TACIT APPROVAL TO INTOLERANCE AND BIGOTRY [emphasis in original]...This is not, as Dr. Chase implies, a sectional matter....We believe in applying our democratic criteria to all teams everywhere, whether they be way down south, way up north, or way over in Brooklyn. Intolerance is certainly not a distinctively southern matter. We are opposed to it wherever it occurs and favor breaking off relations with all schools that have discriminatory athletic policies."<sup>100</sup> They never received a response from Chancellor Chase.

Throughout the ordeal, Leonard Bates was put in a very sticky situation. As with Lou Montgomery and Wilmeth Sidat-Singh, getting an education remained the most

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<sup>100</sup> "Stop Approving Bigotry," *Washington Square Bulletin*, (December 14, 1940)

important thing for Bates. He didn't want to cause any controversy or make a scene if it would threaten his scholarship and education. With this in mind he agreed to NYU's demand to bench him when he accepted his scholarship. Now, however, NYU had begun using that agreement to show that Bates didn't actually want to play and the students were going against his wishes by protesting on his behalf. The black press was furious about this ploy. The *Pittsburgh Courier* stated that NYU "instead of viewing the situation from a racial angle and as an injustice in sports, is using Bates' supposed declaration as an alibi for not playing him against Missouri, and at the same time is making of Bates one of the smelliest 'goats' who has ever taken a rap."<sup>101</sup> Bates could not verbally support the protestors or chide the administration because it would put his scholarship and education at risk. However, by not stating his desire to play or standing up to Jim Crow, he was turning his back on the black community. Trying to protect his scholarship, Bates sent a letter to the student groups protesting on his behalf proclaiming that he had agreed to be kept out of the game and didn't want to play in the South.

The black papers did not let Bates off the hook for standing idly by, however. Art Carter was lenient on Bates for his inaction, but did not condone it. "It is hard to deal too harshly with Bates, although the time must come when our athletes should insist on fair play and equal opportunity. He is a youngster of average means like thousands of other boys in college, and refusal of NYU's mutual agreement would have meant no college education....Bates did what any other boy in his circumstances probably would have done....His action by no means was the proper thing to do nor the strong way to handle

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<sup>101</sup> Morgen S. Jensen, "NYU Bows to Dixie, Will Force Bates to Stay Home," *Pittsburgh Courier*, (November 2, 1940) 17.

the problem. It was the compromising thing, which is what is wrong with the manner in which most of our racial problems are settled.”<sup>102</sup>

The question of whether or not Bates actually made the decision himself and wanted to play continued to linger. It was the common thought among the students and black press that he was actually forced into the decision in order to protect his education. After the game, the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported about a letter Bates had written before the game in which he stated, “It is my unquestionable right to participate in the N.Y.U.-Missouri game Saturday.”<sup>103</sup> Bates found himself caught between of contradictory forces. While he wanted to play, protecting his scholarship and education was the most important thing. He could not support the student groups without putting his standing with the administration in jeopardy. At the same time, the administration continued to use Bates’ own forced admission against him to claim that the decision to not play against Missouri was all his. In a 1988 interview with historian Donald Spivey, Bates stated his desire to play: “I remember the bogus way the athletic department tried to put my letter. They made it sound like I did not want to play. I very much wanted to play Missouri.”<sup>104</sup>

Voices began to emerge from elsewhere echoing support for Bates. In a letter to the New York Times, Bernard Gerstner, a 1938 NYU graduate commented, “It is interesting to note that where discrimination against Negroes occurs, it is not among the sports fans, the players or the students. Rather it is among the controlling officials, the university stewards, who still walk along a road of vicious racial inequality, an

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<sup>102</sup> Art Carter, “From the Bench,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, (October 26, 1940) 21.

<sup>103</sup> “Bates Wanted to Play Against Missouri,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, (November 9, 1940), 17.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Leonard Bates from Spivey, “End Jim Crow in Sports,” 294.



anachronistic heritage of pre-Civil War days.”<sup>105</sup> Interestingly, the sentiment out of Missouri seemed to agree with this opinion. In a letter to the *Washington Square Bulletin*, Louis Budrewicz, a Missouri student, provided a southern perspective. According to Budrewicz, “There is very much sentiment here for allowing Bates to play. The American Student Union on the campus unanimously passed a resolution demanding that Bates play or the game be cancelled. The rule against Negroes here on the campus is a usage – it cannot claim to the dignity of a tradition – which is still on the rule books like many obsolete laws. Most students to whom we have spoken believe that Bates should play. They heartily approve of all the actions taken by student groups at New York University in favoring a cancellation, and hope the administration will see fit to do so, if the University of Missouri persists in its course.”<sup>106</sup> Other voices from the South seemed to echo the student’s belief that this presented the opportunity to change the tide of Jim Crow Laws. Reporting on a student who had transferred from Missouri for the spring semester, the *Bulletin* presented an image of a society that was open to change if somebody had brought them the opportunity. “These Missouri boys implied that they themselves would act toward Negroes as they would to any white man *if everyone else did...But there was no one to take the initiative.* [Emphasis in original]”<sup>107</sup>

As the game approached, a number of student groups made their final effort to take that initiative. The Bates Must Play Committee held another mass meeting to voice their demands. The Student Council of the University met to vote on a resolution that Bates be permitted to play. The resolution passed by a vote of six to one, with the lone

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<sup>105</sup> Bernard A Gerstner, “Bar Against Bates in Missouri is Hit by N.Y.U. Graduate, *New York Times*, (November 2, 1940) 23.

<sup>106</sup> Letters to the Editor, *Washington Square Bulletin*, (October 31, 1940)

<sup>107</sup> “Missouri Youth Speaks on Race Relations,” *Washington Square Bulletin*, (March 10, 1941).

dissent coming from the one faculty member on the Council who opposed it on the grounds that “it would only make for ill feeling.”<sup>108</sup> Students also showed up at the train station as the team departed holding signs and protesting for Bates. However, by that time the argument had become moot. To the dismay of the students and the black community, nobody with the power was willing to take the initiative. Bates was predictably benched and was not even allowed to travel South with the team. Bates would not have been able to help the team much as the Violets were battered 33-0 by the Tigers. Supported by a report by the *New York Times* that “the student campaign of petitions and demonstrations...seems to have abated,” the administration wrongly believed that the protest movements and opposition would burn out after the game.<sup>109</sup> The exact opposite proved to be true as the students used the Bates example to build steam for a battle against Jim Crow in other NYU sports as well.

The attacks from the black papers did not stop either. In the *Pittsburgh Courier* Wendell Smith attacked NYU for its disregard of its liberal history. “NYU kicked democracy smack in the face when it submitted to the demands of the rebel University of Missouri. Perhaps President Chase and Coach Stevens thought they were winning the favor of Missouri by keeping Leonard Bates at home. But Missouri probably thinks less of NYU now than it did before. At least Missouri is frank enough to admit that Negroes are not wanted there and should keep away. But NYU operates under a cloak of deceit and superficial sincerity. NYU will accept Negroes, then lynch them and flay them with a democratic rope and whip.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> “NYU to Play Wide Open Football Against Missouri State,” *New York Times*, (October 31, 1940) 33.

<sup>109</sup> “N.Y.U. Hopes Rest on Feil and Frank,” *New York Times*, (October 29, 1940)

<sup>110</sup> Wendell Smith, “Smitty’s Sports Spurts,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, (November 9, 1940) 17.

The students, however, were not about to let the issue die just because they had been unsuccessful in their first attempt. Two days after the game they showed the administration they would not go away lightly. On November 4<sup>th</sup> the students held public forums to discuss Jim Crow in college athletics. The All-University Committee on Bates Must Play evolved into the Council for Student Equality. The Council continued the previous actions by organizing rallies and forums and distributing fliers and petitions, all the while chiding the administration. They discovered that NYU also had Jim Crow clauses for its basketball and track teams. When Jim Coward, a black basketball player, was deemed ineligible for academic reasons in December of 1940, they refused to believe that that was the only reason. The issue came to a head when the Council for Student Equality discovered that the University had agreed to participate in a track meet in which blacks would be excluded. As the protests intensified, the administration grew more defensive. On March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1941 the Council attempted to circulate a petition at the student center. The administration demanded that the protest stop immediately, and when the students failed to do so, they were brought in for disciplinary action. Guy Stoute and six others were suspended for circulating a petition without permission and spreading false information about the University.<sup>111</sup> The Bates Seven, as they came to be known, received a great outpouring of support from the student body and newspapers, but the administration would not listen to any pleas to overturn the decision. The students remained suspended for three months before returning to finish their education. The issue went unresolved until 2001 when NYU finally held a dinner to hold a tribute for the

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<sup>111</sup> Spivey, "End Jim Crow in Sports," 298-299.

Bates Seven. The University never officially apologized, but it did bring a sense of closure to the students who were punished for doing what they felt was right.<sup>112</sup>

While the reactions and fanfare surrounding the Bates case were different than in previous instances, the results were ultimately the same. The students were up in arms about the administration's decision to turn their back on its liberal history. They declared that "the Board of Athletic Control ignored student opinion. New York University, the liberal institution, failed to take any action against Jim Crowism, while Notre Dame, the conservative school, thought enough of democratic principles to break relations with Missouri."<sup>113</sup> The students understood that as one of the nation's most liberal institutions, NYU had to set the standard that all would eventually follow. If other universities saw that even NYU was not yet ready to fight against Jim Crow, it was unlikely that they would be eager to start that fight. Thus when Chancellor Chase came out saying that it wasn't yet time to battle the South, the students understood the reality: that NYU was the institution that had the responsibility of forcing the time for change rather than complying until that time came.

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<sup>112</sup> Edward Wong, NYU Honors Protesters It Punished in '41," *New York Times*, (May 4, 2001) A1.

<sup>113</sup> "Break Sports Relations with Intolerant Jim Crow Colleges, *Washington Square Bulletin*, (October 21, 1940)

## Chapter Five

### CONCLUSION

The systematic benching of black players serves as an example of how deep Jim Crow segregation ran, not just in the South, but throughout the nation. The voices for change were frequently in the air, but were ignored in favor of expediency, monetary gain, and a misguided sense of respected tradition. Northern institutions concerned themselves with protecting relations with their southern counterparts rather than considering whether they should have relations with schools whose values were so very different in the first place. The opportunity to be the torchbearer for desegregation in college athletics was passed up numerous times in favor of the easy way out which Patrick Miller calls, “slouching toward a new expediency.”<sup>114</sup>

When these opportunities went by the wayside, along with them went the dignity of exceptional black men who had broken out of societal standards to become successful in both athletics and academics. A 1939 article by Ed Nance in the National Urban League’s monthly journal *Opportunity* summarized the participation of black players in white college football from Paul Robeson to Kenny Washington: “When Negroes are on big time college teams, you just know that they’re good; they have to be. Other players may get on through fraternity policies, but a colored star must qualify through sheer ability.”<sup>115</sup> Because it took so much both academically and athletically just to enter a university and make the squad, there was rarely a black player benched who was not also the star of the team. This might have hurt chances for desegregation as southern schools were willing to take the opportunity granted to them to remove the other team’s best

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<sup>114</sup> Miller, “Slouching Toward a New Expediency,” 93.

<sup>115</sup> Ed Nance, “Negro Grid Stars Past and Present,” *Opportunity*, (September 1939) 273.

player. However, it also shows just how willing the northern schools were to bow to the southern demands. Boston College, Syracuse, and NYU were all willing to decrease their chances of victory rather than stand up to southern customs. Perhaps there is something to be said for not making winning the first priority, but it seems to provide very little consolation in these cases.

Events such as North Carolina agreeing to play Ed Williams in the North gave the black community great optimism that the tides of change were beginning to shift in their favor. However, as soon as it seemed that the trends were advancing towards progress, another event such as Maryland refusing to play against Wilmeth Sidat-Singh showed just how far they still had to go. For every Ed Williams there was a Lou Montgomery who was denied the right to play even on his home turf. More often than not these players received little to no support from the people who had the power to provide it. Coaches stood idly by while administrators willingly submitted to the demands upon them. Students rarely put up much of a protest either because they were scared of the administration or because they were too caught up in the excitement of the season to worry about one player, as important as he may have been. In this sense the case of Leonard Bates is groundbreaking not only because it serves as the first example of a mass protest movement against Jim Crow segregation in college football, but also because it represents the last major example of this segregation in the pre-World War II era.

World War II served as a definitive moment for Jim Crow relations. The emergence of black military units such as the Tuskegee Airmen, which Wilmeth Sidat-Singh was a member of, served to elevate the status of blacks in the minds of many and allowed them to prove their worth in what was traditionally considered a white activity.

While the South still remained resistant to change, the forces of progress were now against them as people were no longer willing bow to their racist demands. Against the threat of Hitler's Aryan race and the emerging Cold War, it was difficult to present the United States as the paragon of equality and democratic opportunity while marginalizing one of the most prominent minorities. As Charles Martin states, "As a result of the wartime campaign against Nazi doctrines of Aryan supremacy, liberal attitudes favoring equal opportunity in sports became commonplace on northern campuses. Consequently, northern teams stopped the custom of benching African American players for inter-sectional games at home, and some of these colleges also began to challenge this policy of racial exclusion for games played in Dixie."<sup>116</sup> The changes came not because southerners developed a willingness change their customs, but because new liberal movements would not let them continue unchanged. It was no longer acceptable to treat southern customs as an inevitable evil of a backwards society. Discrimination would have to be squashed everywhere it lingered.

Thus after the end of World War II, the plight of blacks in the field of athletics began a period of dramatic progress. Most important was the signing of Jackie Robinson in 1945 as the first black player in Major League Baseball. The following year Kenny Washington and Woodrow Wilson Strode, Robinson's former teammates at UCLA, were signed by the Los Angeles Rams breaking the unofficial color ban in the National Football League that had existed since 1933.

Riding this wave of progress, 1946 saw a few universities defiantly stand against Jim Crow. First was the University of Nevada which cancelled a game with Mississippi

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<sup>116</sup> Charles H. Martin, "Integrating New Years Day," *Journal of Sport History*, (Vol. 23, Num. 23, Fall 1997), 362.

State rather than leave their black player at home. Later that year Penn State attempted to negotiate a compromise with Miami who would not allow two black stars, Wallace Triplett and Dennis Hoggard, to participate in a game in the Orange Bowl. After two weeks of negotiation proved fruitless, Penn State cancelled the game declaring, “It is the policy of the college to compete only under circumstances which will permit the playing of any or all members of its athletic teams.”<sup>117</sup>

The summer of 1947 saw Jackie Robinson take the National League by storm earning the Rookie of the Year Award and leading the Brooklyn Dodgers to within a game of a World Series championship. With this success opening the eyes of the nation, 1947 proved to be a very progressive year for blacks in athletics. Ten years after Wilmet Sidat-Singh almost accidentally became the first black football player to compete in the South, Chester Pierce of Harvard actually completed the feat in a game against Virginia. In the weeks leading up to the game, discussion emerged about whether Pierce would be permitted to play. Eventually the Virginia officials decided to put the issue to a student vote. With a potential breakthrough on the table, the Virginia students gave a resounding approval to allowing Pierce to play.<sup>118</sup> This echoed the sentiment of the Missouri student who told the *Washington Square Bulletin* during the Leonard Bates protest that if somebody would take the initiative, the students would follow. The first major step towards total desegregation had been taken.

The southern bowl color barrier also came crashing down in 1947. The Cotton Bowl, the same game which just eight years earlier had denied Lou Montgomery the chance to compete with his team, agreed to let Penn State and its two black stars compete

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<sup>117</sup> Martin, “Integrating New Years Day,” 362.

<sup>118</sup> Arthur Ashe Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory*, 37.



against Southern Methodist University. Given their liberal actions against Miami the previous year and their formal statement declaring their unwillingness to bench black players, the Cotton Bowl committee must have been aware Penn State would not bow to southern traditions when they extended their invitation. On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1948, Triplett and Hoggard became the first black players to compete in a southern bowl game. Cotton Bowl officials worked to provide separate accommodations for Triplett and Hoggard, and even went so far as to allow them to attend the postgame awards banquet thus violating segregation customs.<sup>119</sup> While the 1947 games went off without a hitch or injury, the fans from the South were not thrilled by the progress. They protested and shouted insults while waving Confederate flags. Nevertheless, the first step had been taken and the wheels of change were in motion. The following year Lafayette College in Pennsylvania rejected a bid to the Sun Bowl in El Paso, Texas because they were told their black player would not be permitted to play. Then in 1951 the University of San Francisco, a Jesuit School like Boston College, was passed up by all the major bowls despite its undefeated record. They later revealed that they had turned down a number of bowl bids because they had been contingent on USF keeping their two black players at home. Without the bowl game payout, USF announced following the 1951 season that they would not be able to continue operating a big time football program.<sup>120</sup>

This is not to say that progress continued without setbacks. 1951 saw the in-game mugging of Johnny Bright, a black standout at Drake University of Iowa. During a game against Oklahoma A&M, Wilbanks Smith, an A&M lineman, hit Bright on every play whether he had the ball or not. The cheap shots went unpenalized and would have

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<sup>119</sup> Martin, "Integrating New Years Day," 362.

<sup>120</sup> John D. Lukacs, "Waiting for the perfect ending," *USA Today*, (June 23, 2003).

remained largely unpublicized were it not for a picture taken of Smith blatantly punching Bright in the face. The play in the picture turned out to be Bright's last as he left the game unconscious with a broken jaw.<sup>121</sup> While these actions were not totally uncommon, even against white stars, the picture was published in newspapers across the nation bringing further attention to the atrocities committed against black athletes. A less physical form of resistance would take place in 1955, a year after the Supreme Court passed *Brown v. Board* theoretically ending "separate but equal" ideology. Georgia governor Marvin Griffin banned Georgia Tech from competing in the Sugar Bowl because their opponent, the University of Pittsburgh, boasted the talents of black star Bobby Grier. Far from being pleased with Griffin's decision, Georgia Tech students, as the Virginia students did in 1947, showed the vast generational divide in ideology by protesting at the state capital. In a surprising statement, a large number of Georgia citizens also came to the students' defense and eventually the Georgia Tech Board of Regents agreed to play the game.<sup>122</sup> Although they made a statement that they would still not permit desegregation in home games, the progressive action of southerners and their concession to the North rather than the other way around showed just how much things had changed.

Nevertheless, all these changes had to call into question how much more could have been accomplished if somebody had been willing to take the initiative sooner. While it can't be said that the prewar South was ripe for change, the possibilities can be seen from the few instances of southern submission. The South was not going to advocate the change on their own, but there was no precedent for what would happen if a northern school attempted to take the initiative. As the Missouri student told NYU's *Washington*

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<sup>121</sup> Ashe Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory*, 42.

<sup>122</sup> Gilbert Caldwell, "Sugar Bowl 1956: A Southern Armageddon," *American Renaissance*, Vol. 12 No. 12, (December 2001), accessed at: <http://www.amren.com/0112issue/0112issue.htm> (April 11, 2005).

*Square Tribune*, most southern students were not opposed to change if somebody gave them the opportunity. This proved to be true when the Virginia students overwhelmingly voted to allow Chester Pierce to play in 1947 no matter what southern tradition told them to do. While pleased with the progress, many in the black community must have wondered if things would have changed a lot sooner if somebody had just made the effort years earlier.

The pre-World War II Jim Crow policies were characterized by inconsistencies and contradictions. While Ed Williams in 1936 and Wilmett Sidat-Singh in 1938 did serve to change the accepted standard in some cases, the practice of benching black players still did not stop across the North. Most schools avoided making a decision on the situation until they were forced into it. Even then, the decisions met inherent contradictions. Why did Boston College acquiesce to southern demands to bench a black player at home when a number of other prominent universities had already moved past this stage? Even more puzzling is how Boston College claimed they were benching Montgomery for protection against certain southern schools, but allowed him to play against others. Perhaps the only reasonable conclusion is that each university made whatever decision was easiest and most beneficial for it in each particular situation.

Without a doubt the administration of the universities, both North and South, had the most direct culpability for the events that unfolded. The administrators had a responsibility to act in the manner that they felt benefited their university most. However, beyond supporting the treasury, maintaining good standing with southern schools, and avoiding conflict, it is difficult to determine what benefits they felt they were achieving by benching their black stars. While this was enough to appease many alumni and

members of the white press, the dissenters were only able to see a university putting the treasury ahead of values, progress, and the respect of their black students. The claim by each institution that they were simply protecting their black players does hold some credence in the fact that those players would likely be targeted. However, if they were targeted it was most likely because in order to overcome the prejudice and play for a white squad, they were the best. For the most part they were not in any more danger than a white star in a similar situation. Despite reports from players such as Ed Williams and Wilmeth Sidat-Singh that they were treated by southern schools as well or better than northern teams, the administrators continued to insist that their intentions were just.

The letter from Chancellor Chase at NYU gives a great insight into the mentality of northern administrators. In their minds it did not matter whether or not they personally agreed with the policies of the South because it was not their responsibility to question years of southern tradition. This is harder to excuse in the cases of Boston College and New York University, which agreed to demands that seemed to directly challenge the values on which they were founded. While NYU was able to declare that they were only following the customs of the location where the game was being played, BC had no such excuse in acquiescing to a tradition that most accepted had been overturned by Ed Williams in 1936. Chase speaks of some nebulous time when it will be the right moment to make a change rather than forcing the issue when given a golden opportunity to do so.

Most disconcerting through all these examples is the lack of accountability of the administrators from all schools. The southern schools typically declared that they had no knowledge of a Jim Crow clause while the northern schools stated that they were only following tradition. Sometimes the coach would be blamed, and he in turn would say he

was given a direct order from the administration. It is difficult to ascertain where exactly the ultimate decision lay, but it is easy to tell that nobody with the power made any significant efforts to question or change the accepted standards.

While the students at New York University did all they could to achieve a change in the policies and mindsets of both the southern schools and northern administrations, they were in the minority. Most students overlooked the problem altogether and the dissenters were a quickly silenced minority. The students had no leverage with which to operate against the administration. As is evidenced by the suspension of the Bates Seven at NYU, they also faced the possibility of strict punishment for dissention.

More often than not, the white press blindly agreed with the actions and statements of the administration rather than try to get the entire story. They did not publicize the benchings as big news. They either briefly stated that a player would be held out, or said nothing at all. In the case of Leonard Bates, the *New York Times* took Bates' statement that he did not want to play at face value rather than considering the external forces that might have influenced him and the benefits that the administration received from it. Because of this they consistently portrayed the student activists as a rogue, vocal minority operating for their own benefit and against Bates' desires.

In stark contrast, the black press was very vocal in their disagreement with the Jim Crow clauses. Black sportswriters of the time were pioneers, and they understood that they were facing an uphill battle to win over the hearts of those who could actually make a difference. Many in the black press, including Sam Lacy who broke the Wilmet Sidat-Singh story, were the leading voices in breaking the color barrier in baseball. The 20 years of painstaking campaigning for this achievement by these pioneers often goes

unmentioned. The same can be said of their actions in combating Jim Crow clauses in college football. The black papers spent years promoting the successes of black athletes while reporting on nearly every example of segregation in athletics. While demanding the same thing time and again must have been repetitive, they understood it was the only way to make the issue known, no matter how long it might take. At times they were confrontational, paranoid, and manipulative. They often exaggerated the events that occurred and made unrealistic demands of the universities, students, white press, and even black players involved in the segregation. Nevertheless, this extreme degree had to be seen as necessary in order to achieve even a minimal amount of progress.

Perhaps most frustrating to the black press was the fact that in their minds each Jim Crow benching represented a missed opportunity. They were aware it would not be easy to overcome southern tradition, but knew that nothing could be achieved if nobody made the effort. All it took was one team standing up to southern tradition, as Harvard did in 1947, to prove that there were forces in the air for change. Just as frustrating to them was that all it took was one southern team to agree to take the first step of allowing a player on their home turf to show the nation how backwards the southern tradition was. While even the most optimistic of sports writers could not have expected immediate desegregation and equality, the constant unwillingness of any northern school to take that first step must have weighed heavily on them.

It is also important to remember that while the opinions expressed by black papers were loud in their rhetoric, they were relatively quiet in their scope. Black papers were released only once a week and thus had to pick and choose which issues would receive the most attention. Furthermore, they were accessible to a limited number of blacks. Thus

while the voices seem too loud to ignore, in reality they reached only a limited number of people and were largely unknown to whites.

Lost in nearly all of these perspectives was the effect it had on the players who directly faced the segregation. Each player had to struggle with the demands placed upon him to try to find a happy median. For the black athletes of the period education remained the most important thing. They were likely the first from their family to attend college and were given the incredible opportunity of having their education paid for by the university. It was a different time, and most blacks that had gained admittance to a white university had long understood that the only chance they had for success in the white world was to keep to themselves and not create too much of a stir. There was no way they could have questioned the administration or stood up to the powers that be without directly threatening their scholarship and thus their standing at the university. The black papers continually advocated that each player who faced segregation turn in his uniform and quit the school for some place that wouldn't hold such undemocratic values. However, this idealistic suggestion did not take into consideration that many other schools would not provide them with a free education in exchange for a few football games. The admissions of Lou Montgomery and Leonard Bates in the late 1980s that they wanted to play and that they regretted their inaction must be viewed with the perspective of 50 years of progress. For them to have done so at the time would have likely led to a minimum of a loss of their education and a branding as a troublemaker that would follow them for years. Because of this, Leonard Bates could not rally for his participation with his fellow students or back away from his statement without putting his status as a student in jeopardy. The black players felt pressure from all angles and were

placed in a no-win situation. Doing nothing could alienate them from the black community who counted on them to stand up for their rights. On the other hand demanding change would probably do little other than put their education at risk.

These three incidents represent just how deeply Jim Crow segregation permeated society. The prejudice and segregation was created by the South, but supported and continued just as much by the northern unwillingness to stand up to backwards demands. The South continued to take advantage of the North by demanding that their opponent's best player be benched. The North, either out of respect for southern traditions or fear of backlash willingly acquiesced to such demands. Even in the rare case that students protested, as they did at NYU in 1940, the administration and white community was not willing to come to their support. Perhaps the only redeeming factor of these tragedies is that they serve as reminders of just how deeply discrimination had spread. Fortunately, these universities have finally embraced their past rather than hiding from it. Wilmet Sidat-Singh had his number retired, Lou Montgomery was inducted into the Boston College hall of fame, and the Bates Seven were finally recognized for their actions. While these remembrances are too little, too late to overcome the scars of the injustices, they can serve as reminders of just how far we've come.



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