

## Jim Crow in the Gymnasium: The Integration of College Basketball in the American South

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The game of basketball today enjoys unprecedented international stature. Once restricted primarily to the United States, the sport is now played around the world. The participation of previously excluded American professional players, especially such stars as Michael Jordan and 'Magic' Johnson, in the men's basketball competition at the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona heightened world-wide interest. The Olympic competition further demonstrated that Americans still dominate the game internationally, in large part because of the substantial contributions of African-American athletes, who also are the major force within professional and college basketball inside the United States. But just over four decades ago, the social and racial dimensions of the sport were dramatically different. At the end of the Second World War, basketball in the US was a white sport, and most blacks were either excluded or marginalized within its ranks. This was especially true in the American South, the traditional centre of the black population, where racial discrimination and rigid segregation permeated virtually every area of public life, including sports.

Southern universities were very much part of this racial status quo. At a typical southern college in 1945, the faculty was white, the students were white, and the athletic teams and virtually everything else on campus except possibly the custodial and food services were also lily-white. During the late 1940s and 1950s, as other sections of the US gradually abandoned the more blatant forms of racial discrimination, the white South firmly resisted any racial change, even in sports. The struggle to maintain segregation in college athletics was just one battle within a larger war being fought to preserve what conservative whites called 'our southern way of life'. Even after the famous 1954 United States Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared segregated public schools to be unconstitutional, many historically white southern colleges delayed as long as possible before reluctantly admitting black students. Despite the arrival of African-Americans on campus, many 'big time' athletic programmes continued to exclude them from school teams

for a decade or more. A few myopic individuals even confidently predicted that the inclusion of black athletes would add little or nothing to a team's strength. Regrettably, the basketball court and the football field remained symbols of white supremacy even after other aspects of college life were integrated.<sup>1</sup>

Ideally, of course, sport in a democratic society should offer individuals an opportunity to escape the restrictions of race and class, especially since athletic performance is extremely measurable. An editorial writer for the *New York Times* expressed the classic liberal viewpoint in 1959 when he wrote, 'Sport ... puts no artificial barriers as race or religion in the way of performance. What counts and what matters is what the given individual can do.' But an athletic meritocracy did not exist in the South, where white supremacy as expressed through segregation excluded African-Americans from the premier college programmes and relegated them to small, poorly funded programmes at all-black colleges. White and black liberals of the 1950s and 1960s urged an end to this apartheid in southern college sports. They hoped that athletic desegregation would not only open up opportunities for individual blacks but also create a highly visible model of inter-racial co-operation which could hasten integration in other areas of American life.<sup>2</sup> Eventually their hopes were fulfilled, as segregationists failed to halt the process of racial change in sports. The decision by university administrators to abandon segregation and to recruit black athletes voluntarily thus represented an important turning point in southern race relations and reflected a new white attitude which saw integration as inevitable and potentially beneficial.

This study will address several important questions concerning the lengthy process through which southern college sports were integrated: (1) What were the dynamics of potential inter-racial competition between southern and northern colleges prior to the *Brown* decision? (2) What external and internal pressures were mobilized to prevent sports integration? (3) What social and political forces encouraged the abandonment of segregation? (4) What types of schools were willing to take the lead in breaking the colour line? How important were university presidents in these decisions? (5) What were the characteristics of those athletes who served as 'racial pioneers'? (6) Were college athletic programmes in the vanguard of social change in the South, or did sports serve the conservative function of reinforcing racial values which were under attack? The geographical focus will be on the area covered by the Southeastern Conference (the states of Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Kentucky) and the Southwest Conference (Texas plus Arkansas). Major colleges with independent sports programmes in these same states will also be examined.

College basketball today enjoys enormous popularity in all areas of the United States, but several decades ago its appeal was less widespread, especially in the Deep South. The sport itself dates from the 1890s, when James Naismith originated an indoor game played with peach baskets and a ball in order to help pass the winter months between football and baseball. The sport quickly caught on, and within a decade many white colleges began fielding teams. The Southwest Conference (SWC) inaugurated organized competition in 1915 and the Southeastern Conference (SEC) in 1932. By the 1930s, the college game had attracted a wider audience. Responding to this fan interest, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) established a post-season play-off tournament in 1939. After the Second World War, basketball continued to gain in popularity, although it still lagged behind college football in public enthusiasm and media exposure.<sup>3</sup>

In 1945, both professional baseball, the number one national sport, and professional basketball remained segregated. Jackie Robinson broke the colour line for major league baseball in 1947 when he joined the Brooklyn Dodgers, demonstrating that organized sports could not escape post-war racial change. However, the National Basketball Association remained segregated until 1950, when three African-Americans, Charles 'Chuck' Cooper, Earl Lloyd, and Nat 'Sweetwater' Clifton, signed NBA contracts.<sup>4</sup> On the collegiate level a handful of black players had appeared in uniform for northern football and basketball teams prior to 1930, and a few more participated during the depression decade. Their numbers increased after the war, and by the mid-1950s most college teams outside the South had achieved a token level of integration. This change created the possibility of inter-racial play whenever southern white squads ventured north of the Mason-Dixon line.<sup>5</sup>

The idea of playing against an integrated team was a disturbing thought for white southerners growing up in a rigidly segregated world. Traditionally, southern whites had avoided such situations either by not scheduling northern teams or by insisting in advance that their opponents refrain from using their black player(s). Most northern schools quietly accepted these so-called gentlemen's agreements in both basketball and football. In December 1945, for example, basketball coach Clair Bee withheld the two black players on his Long Island University team from a game against the University of Tennessee, in deference to the visitors' racial sensitivities. An argument between football coaches from Georgia Tech and the University of Michigan produced the most bizarre application of this policy in 1934 at Ann Arbor, Michigan. Each team withheld one player from competition in order to prevent Tech's southern whites from having to play against the Wolverines' outstanding end, Willis Ward, who was an African-American.<sup>6</sup>

During the Second World War, the racial attitudes of northern whites began to change. After 1945, the small but growing presence of black students on northern campuses and the continuing spread of more liberal racial attitudes among white students created a different atmosphere on campus. By 1950, most northern schools refused to withhold a black athlete when playing at home against a southern team. Moreover, these colleges were increasingly reluctant to leave behind their black athletes during southern travel, as had been previously customary. This growing sensitivity had clearly evidenced itself by 1956, when several midwestern schools including Indiana University announced that they would no longer schedule games in the South if their black players were barred.<sup>7</sup>

From the start, southern universities reacted coolly to the changing racial patterns in post-war college sports. The first of many recurring incidents took place in December 1946, when the visiting University of Tennessee squad refused to take the floor for a scheduled basketball game against Duquesne University in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. The Volunteers demanded assurances that Charles Cooper, an African-American and the top scorer for the home team, would not play. Although the Duquesne coach offered to withhold his black star unless the game were close at the end, this gesture was not sufficient to appease the visitors, and the game was cancelled even though 2,600 fans had already assembled. A week earlier, Cooper had been permitted to play in an away game against Morehead State Teachers College at Louisville, Kentucky, possibly becoming the first black cager to play against an all-white southern college team inside the South. Appropriately enough, he scored the winning basket.<sup>8</sup>

Once southern colleges adjusted to the fact that northern teams might include African-Americans, they sought to dodge such encounters through careful scheduling. This technique usually proved successful, but at the cost of avoiding intersectional play. Since basketball was not the premier campus sport, except at the University of Kentucky, a perennial national power, southern administrators received few complaints over these adjustments to regular season schedules.

NCAA basketball play-offs presented a more difficult problem, however, because a southern white school could not select its opponents in the post-season championship tournament. Teams representing the Southwest Conference were not overly disturbed about the possibility of such inter-racial play, reflecting a cultural break with the Deep South on selected racial issues. But for SEC members from the Lower South, inter-racial tournament play remained highly controversial. The University of Kentucky helped prevent other southern teams from having to face that dilemma, however, for the highly successful Wildcats of coach Adolph

Rupp regularly won the SEC title and represented the conference in the NCAA play-offs. In fact, during the period 1948–58, Kentucky won the national championship four times. Although Rupp was at best a paternalist in race relations, he and the university viewed the scheduling of an occasional inter-racial game as the price of success. In the late 1940s, the University of Kentucky began playing integrated teams on northern trips, and in December 1951 the university even played a home game in Lexington against a St. John's team which included one black player.<sup>9</sup>

Federal court rulings further undermined segregation at southern colleges and placed new pressures on their athletic programmes. Through a series of rulings in the 1940s and early 1950s, the courts had already established that segregation in graduate and professional education was unconstitutional. When the United States Supreme Court issued its famous *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in May 1954, segregated undergraduate education also became illegal. Although a few southern schools had already desegregated their graduate programmes, the potential integration of undergraduate studies would be far more significant to college athletics, since it created the possibility that black students might attempt to participate in their colleges' athletic programmes (restricted to undergraduates only). Even in the relatively liberal atmosphere of the University of Texas at Austin, such a thought was heretical. Although UT admitted five black undergraduates shortly after the *Brown* ruling, it quickly reversed course and expelled them when 'one of them expressed interest in playing college football'.<sup>10</sup>

In subsequent years, southern white colleges, once legally desegregated, faced a major decision over whether to integrate their athletic programmes. Their response followed a pattern demonstrated by the Big Six Conference (now the Big Eight) and the Missouri Valley Conference in the late 1940s. The last major non-southern conferences to desegregate, the two mid-western leagues were heavily influenced by members from the southern-most state in the region – Oklahoma – where a transplanted southern heritage delayed integration of public universities. As a result of strong pressure from the Oklahoma schools (Tulsa and Oklahoma A & M in the Missouri Valley, the University of Oklahoma in the Big Six), both conferences established informal 'gentlemen's agreements' whereby member schools promised not to recruit black athletes. In December 1947, however, the Missouri Valley Conference voted to end such racial discrimination by September 1950.<sup>11</sup>

The Big Six moved more slowly. In April 1946, student councils at the University of Nebraska and the University of Kansas launched a campaign against the 'gentlemen's agreement'. In May, conference representatives replaced the unwritten policy with a written guideline

which now explicitly authorized a member institution playing at home to bar the use of black athletes by opponents. This evasive action did not fool critics, who continued to crusade for the rule's repeal. Finally in 1950, the conference relented and dropped the policy. Another racial barrier in the Midwest fell in 1948, when the National Association of Intercollegiate Basketball (later known as the NAIA) dropped its ban against the participation of black players in its post-season tournament for smaller colleges held annually in Kansas City. The NAIB acted in response to a threatened boycott by several eastern Catholic schools.<sup>12</sup>

During the 1950s, with most formal barriers outside the South removed, black athletes began to make their presence felt in football and especially basketball. Skilful players, such as Bill Russell and K.C. Jones of the University of San Francisco, Walter Dukes of Seton Hall, Si Gren of Duquesne, and Wilt Chamberlain of Kansas, won considerable acclaim. The growing black presence was dramatically symbolized by the All America selections of 1958. In the spring of that year four African-American college stars – Wilt Chamberlain, Oscar Robertson, Elgin Baylor, and Guy Rodgers – were named to both the Associated Press and United Press honorary teams. This was particularly startling since previously in the AP and UP polls no more than two black players had been selected in the same year. More surprisingly yet, the National Basketball Coaches Association chose the same four plus Kansas State's Bob Boozer for its honorary squad, thereby creating the first all-black All America team.<sup>13</sup>

The continuing recruitment of black players by northern colleges and the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling put pressure on Deep South colleges to modify their policies. Yet at the same time, political demagogues and public opinion inside their states vehemently demanded that they maintain athletic segregation. In the wake of the *Brown* decision, 'massive resistance' to federally mandated desegregation spread across the Deep South, as recalcitrant state and local officials solemnly promised to block all racial change. 'The South stands at Armageddon', Governor Marvin Griffin of Georgia dramatically proclaimed in 1956. 'The battle is joined. There is no more difference in compromising the integrity of race on the playing field than in doing so in the classroom.' Constructing a domino theory of integration, Griffin ominously warned, 'One break in the dike and the relentless seas will rush in and destroy us.' Because of the strength of such segregationist pressure, university officials really had no alternative but to maintain the existing colour line in college sports. In fact, several states and municipalities even adopted laws (if they did not already have them) prohibiting inter-racial sporting events, as part of a larger effort to maintain segregation in such recreational facilities as parks, swimming pools, and athletic fields.<sup>14</sup>

In the early summer of 1956, the Louisiana legislature took the lead in the sports world's 'massive resistance' when it passed a bill making it illegal for black and white players to compete against each other in the same 'athletic training, games, sports, or contests'. The bill's passage upset civic leaders in New Orleans, where the Mid-Winter Sports Association sponsored the Sugar Bowl football game on New Year's Day and the Sugar Bowl basketball tournament. Business leaders and New Orleans legislators attempted to gain an exemption from the law for the city, but their efforts were soundly rejected. They next appealed to Governor Earl K. Long to veto the bill. But Long eventually signed the act, commenting that his mail had been running four to one in favour of the legislation. As a result of the new law, three northern teams promptly withdrew from the Sugar Bowl Basketball Tournament.<sup>15</sup>

The state law also interfered with scheduling by those white Louisiana colleges who were willing to play integrated teams. Loyola University of New Orleans, a Jesuit institute, had dropped its opposition to playing against black athletes after the *Brown* decision and had hosted the first integrated collegiate basketball game in the state in December 1954. The new law forced Loyola and also Centenary College to cancel games with northern squads during the upcoming season because their opponents refused to withhold their black players. Harvard University even got into the controversy during the fall of 1956 by announcing that it had cancelled a four-game southern tour in order to protest at such athletic segregation laws, even though the Massachusetts college did not have an African-American on its 1956–57 basketball squad.<sup>16</sup>

Universities in the state of Mississippi had an even heavier burden to bear. White sentiment there was intensely and sometimes violently anti-integration, and most state officials were extreme segregationists. On 29 December 1956, administrators at Mississippi State University withdrew their basketball team from the championship game of the Evansville, Indiana, Invitational Tournament after Mississippi newspapers revealed that MSU had played against an unexpectedly integrated University of Denver squad in the opening round and that its opponent in the finals, the host Evansville College team, also included black players. The following day, the University of Mississippi (commonly known as Ole Miss) Rebels forfeited the consolation match in the All American Basketball Tournament in Owensboro, Kentucky, rather than play Iona College of New York, which had one black player. Ironically, Kentucky Wesleyan, the local, church-related small college which hosted the tournament, played Iona in the opening round without any interference from Kentucky officials.<sup>17</sup>

These political pressures even affected one black Mississippi university. In the spring of 1957, Jackson State College was forced to withdraw its

basketball team from the NCAA small college tournament because it would have competed against mixed or all-white teams. The state's college board instructed Jackson State President Jacob L. Reddix that it was official policy 'that state institutions of higher learning shall not participate in national athletic tournaments under the present conditions'. As additional intimidation, one Mississippi legislator introduced a bill in the state legislature which would suspend state funds to any institution which sanctioned an integrated game.<sup>18</sup>

In Georgia, the legislature began debating in early 1957 a series of measures which would have tightened the state's segregation system, including a proposal to prohibit integrated athletic contests. The bill's main sponsor, Sen. Leon Butts, emphasized that inter-racial sporting events would set a dangerous example, because 'when Negroes and whites meet on the athletic fields on a basis of complete equality, it is only natural that this sense of equality carries into the daily living of these people'. The bill passed the senate by a unanimous vote. But in the house, a small band of legislators, worried that such a law would destroy minor league baseball in Georgia, blocked its passage, although in a related action, the Georgia Board of Regents subsequently reaffirmed its prohibition against state schools playing home games against integrated teams.<sup>19</sup>

The federal courts eventually halted these attempts to ban inter-racial athletic events through state law. Louisiana's Jim Crow system had included a longstanding ban on boxing matches between black and white fighters, as well as the new 1956 law. On 25 May 1959, the Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling and declared the Louisiana boxing ban to be unconstitutional, thereby also nullifying the 1956 law restricting mixed competition in other sports. Loyola University then announced that it would resume playing northern basketball teams, and Sugar Bowl officials regained flexibility in team selection.<sup>20</sup>

Members of the Southwest Conference did not experience the same kind of scheduling pressures as did Southeastern Conference schools in the states of Mississippi, Georgia, Louisiana, and Alabama. Although Texas historically had been part of the Deep South, by 1955 the state was culturally diverse enough to be considered part of the Border South. Texas Governor Allan Shivers did launch a modest effort at 'massive resistance' against the integration of elementary and secondary schools, but he and segregationists from East Texas (where most black Texans lived) achieved only limited success before his term of office expired in early 1957. 'Race ceased being a statewide factor' in Texas politics thereafter, historian George N. Green observed, 'and by failing to embrace the South's tactics of massive resistance, Texas drifted further away from southern moorings'.<sup>21</sup>

But the continuing integration crisis adversely affected several Deep

South colleges, who found their hopes of competing in the NCAA Tournament in the late 1950s and early 1960s dashed by 'massive resistance'. In 1956, the University of Alabama basketball team won the SEC championship but declined to participate in the tournament. In 1959, Mississippi State University captured the league crown but similarly refused to compete in the play-offs despite an outstanding 24–1 season record. Auburn University in 1960 and Mississippi State again in 1961 continued to decline NCAA Tournament invitations. In 1962, during the height of the state's school integration crisis, MSU again went 24–1 and shared the championship with Kentucky. Once more school officials reluctantly bowed to political pressure from segregationists and skipped the play-offs.<sup>22</sup>

By the early 1960s, most SEC universities had escaped administrative restrictions on inter-racial play, at least outside their home states, as southern resistance to integration eased somewhat. But Ole Miss and Mississippi State continued their intransigence and still refused to schedule games against integrated teams at home or away. In the 1962–63 season, the MSU basketball team enjoyed yet another highly successful year, going 21–5, winning the SEC title, and finishing sixth in the final AP national poll. Determined to give Coach Babe McCarthy's squad a chance to display their talent, university officials finally decided to challenge Governor Ross Barnett and the state's die-hard segregationists. In early March 1963, Dr Dean W. Colvard, a North Carolina native, courageously announced that he would permit the team to participate in the NCAA tournament unless 'vetoed by competent authority'. Colvard's action came just one semester after the admission to Ole Miss of its first black student, James Meredith, had touched off a violent riot on campus that caused two deaths and required national guard troops to suppress. His bold decision was politically risky, and he understandably feared that he might lose his job.<sup>23</sup>

Governor Barnett promptly denounced Colvard's decision, and several segregationists in the state legislature threatened to cut off the school's appropriations. The Jackson *Clarion Ledger*, a leading champion of white supremacy, warned that the MSU action was a dangerous one, explaining that playing against a black athlete in the North was just as bad as doing so at home. And if a school would stoop that low, then 'why not recruit a Negro of special basketball ability to play on the Mississippi State team? This is the road we seem to be traveling.' Encouraged by petitions from MSU alumni and students, the State Board of Institutions of Higher Learning voted 8–3 to abandon its unwritten policy of prohibiting inter-racial athletic competition.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the vote, die-hard segregationists did not give up quite yet. A local judge granted a temporary injunction barring the squad from

leaving the state, but Justice Robert Gillespie of the state supreme court dissolved it. Yet on Thursday morning, 14 March, MSU players still feared that state or county officials might prevent their departure. As a precaution, only the reserve players initially showed up at the Starkville airport for their flight to East Lansing, Michigan. Then at departure time, when everything seemed safe, the starters suddenly appeared and hastily boarded the chartered plane. The flight made an intermediate stop in Nashville, Tennessee, where Coach McCarthy joined them, having sneaked out of the state during the previous evening as an additional precaution.

Ironically, MSU's opponent in Michigan was Loyola University of Chicago, which started four black players. Tournament officials took extensive security precautions for the contest, and the ceremonial 'pregame handshake was as much a media event as the game itself'. The game was a hard-played, clean contest with no incidents. State took the early lead, but Loyola finally broke the game open in the closing minutes and rolled to a 61–51 win. The Ramblers eventually advanced to the NCAA finals, where they upset the University of Cincinnati for the national championship. The *New York Times* heralded Mississippi State's participation in the tournament as an important breakthrough in southern race relations. Noting the existence of excellent black athletes in the South and the potential benefits both in winning and in racial adjustment which might follow their utilization, the newspaper pondered 'what tremendous champions might come out of the Southeast, with such recruits to build upon, and what quiet miracles might be worked in better race relations?'<sup>25</sup>

Mississippi State's participation in the NCAA Tournament closed one phase in race relations for southern college sports and opened another. Now that inter-racial games were politically acceptable, presidents from several universities in the Border South began to consider the next logical step – the actual integration of a southern white team. In the Southeastern Conference, the University of Kentucky initially took the lead. Campus opinion strongly supported the recruitment of black athletes, and the student newspaper called for the integration of the school's athletic programmes just after the Mississippi State incident. In May 1963, the university's athletic board unexpectedly announced that its programmes would immediately 'be open to any student, regardless of race'. President Frank G. Dickey apparently pushed for the change, and his successor, John Oswald, continued the process. The impact of the Kentucky announcement was tempered by the fact that the school had already given out its scholarships for the following year. Moreover, the athletic board stressed that the new policy would be carried out within the context of the college's SEC obligations.<sup>26</sup>

Similar forces were developing in the western portion of the South.

Texas colleges had desegregated their undergraduate studies several years earlier than schools in the Deep South and had been less opposed to playing integrated northern teams. Still, in 1960, six years after the *Brown* decision, Southwest Conference basketball and football teams remained segregated, and no immediate change was planned. At the University of Texas in Austin, students began campaigning in the spring of 1961 for the recruitment of black athletes. During the fall, student government presidents of seven Southwest Conference schools jointly issued a resolution urging that 'capable athletes of all races' be admitted to members' athletic programmes. But university officials ignored the demands and remained silent on the issue.<sup>27</sup>

The inaction of administrators at Southwest Conference schools is understandable. Coaches at these colleges presided over athletic programmes with high public prestige and therefore saw little need for change. On the other hand, coaches at major independents and small colleges, both of which suffered from lower status, opportunistically realized that integrating their teams would attract better athletes and help win more games. In the South, a university's public standing was often influenced more by its athletic accomplishments than its academic reputation, so a successful sports programme was crucial to improving a school's status. Thus it is not surprising that the first major success in breaking the colour line in major college sports in Dixie took place at an ambitious but relatively unknown university located in the Border South.

In 1956, Texas Western College took that giant step. TWC was located in the city of El Paso, in the far western end of the state on the border with Mexico and New Mexico. Now known as the University of Texas at El Paso, Texas Western was in the mid-1950s an institution with a lacklustre athletic tradition but ambitious dreams for the future. In El Paso, Afro-Americans made up only about 3 per cent of the population, which was split almost evenly between Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans. Although racism and segregation existed in El Paso, the city's mixed population and its western orientation diluted traditional southern white attitudes. Acknowledging the city's unique location, the UT Board of Regents in 1950 gave Texas Western a special dispensation from its policy banning interracial athletic contests, so that TWC could host integrated teams from the states of Arizona, New Mexico, and California. In September 1955, the college officially admitted twelve black undergraduates, becoming the first four-year Texas school to do so.<sup>28</sup>

In September 1956, the first two black basketball players to play for a historically white southern university quietly enrolled at TWC. Charles Brown and his nephew Cecil Brown, transfers from Amarillo Junior College, were politely received by students but were forced to live their

first year off-campus because campus dormitories remained segregated. Charles Brown, the more successful of the two, attracted considerable attention in the Southwest. During his three-year career, the 'Amarillo whiz' led the Miners to two Border Conference titles and three times earned all-conference honours. The hiring of new head coach Don Haskins in 1961 guaranteed that more black players would be recruited, for Haskins ignored political considerations and recruited the best available athletes, regardless of race.<sup>29</sup>

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, a few additional southern schools also became bolder. In particular, small colleges saw the recruitment of black prep stars as one means of upgrading their programmes and winning championships, since they would not have to recruit against the 'big name' universities for such athletes. In 1957, St. Mary's College in San Antonio, Texas, recruited its first black player, centre Maurice Harris of College Station, where SWC member Texas A&M College was located. In his first varsity game, Harris led St. Mary's to a shocking 69–56 upset of the A&M team. Pan American College in Edinburg, located in far South Texas, began recruiting black basketball players in 1959. In the spring of 1963, the Broncs captured the NAIA championship in Kansas City behind towering centre Lucious Jackson. Ironically, no major university in the state had bothered to offer Jackson a scholarship when he finished high school three years earlier.<sup>30</sup>

Three additional major colleges abandoned athletic segregation during this period. North Texas State College in Denton, 40 miles north of Fort Worth, belonged to the Missouri Valley Conference, in which it competed against integrated teams from the Midwest. North Texas integrated its varsity football team in the fall of 1958 and its varsity basketball team during the 1960–61 season. The University of Louisville, an independent about to join the Missouri Valley Conference, broke the colour line in the Upper South. In November 1964, three black sophomores – Wade Houston, Stan Smith, and Eddie Whitehead – made their varsity basketball debuts for the Cardinals. Western Kentucky University also fielded an integrated team that same month.<sup>31</sup>

The Atlantic Coast Conference likewise abandoned segregation in its athletic programmes at this time. Composed of major colleges in Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, the ACC had traditionally been somewhat more flexible on race than the SEC. During the 1930s and 1940s, for example, several members had played against integrated northern teams. Moreover, Maryland technically was not a southern state, and the geographical proximity and cultural interaction of the Mid-Atlantic area with the Northeast made change appear less frightening. Still, it was not until 1963 that the University of Maryland, the northernmost

school in the conference, broke the ACC colour line by granting an athletic scholarship to a black football player. The following year the university successfully recruited a black basketball player, Billy Jones, of Towson, Maryland. Wake Forest College, a North Carolina Baptist school, also integrated its athletic programme in 1964.<sup>32</sup>

Against the background of such change, the growing success of the Texas Western College basketball programme called further attention to the potential benefits of recruiting black athletes. Coach Don Haskins' 1965–66 squad enjoyed the school's most successful season ever, losing only one regular season game and finishing third in both wire service polls. Ahead of Texas Western in the final rankings were traditional southern powerhouses Kentucky (number one) and Duke (number two). Both the Wildcats and the Blue Devils fielded all-white teams, but the racial composition of the Miners was quite different. The Texas Western squad consisted of seven African-Americans, four Anglo-Americans, and one Mexican-American. Although Haskins utilized all of his players during the regular season, the seven African-Americans, all starters or top reserves, attracted the most attention. Surviving several close games, the Miners advanced to the finals of the NCAA tournament in College Park, Maryland, where the University of Kentucky Wildcats, the SEC champion, awaited them.

Viewers who turned on their television sets on 19 March 1966, witnessed a game literally played in black and white – both on the TV screen and on the actual floor of Cole Field House. For the first time ever in an NCAA final, five black starters played against five white starters. With guard Bobby Joe Hill harassing the Wildcat ball-handlers and intimidating centre David Lattin controlling the backboards, the Miners took control of the game midway through the first half and never relinquished the lead, winning 72–65. Texas Western's stunning win shocked many white coaches and infuriated white segregationists. Haskins received an avalanche of 'hate mail' denouncing him for using black players. But to black sports fans the game was a major milestone, as the pride of southern white basketball went down to an embarrassing defeat before an all-black line-up. Although one should not exaggerate the influence of one game, it was quite clear after March 1966 that southern basketball teams would have to change or become increasingly non-competitive nationally. For the black athlete, then, the Texas Western victory was the 'emancipation proclamation' of southern college basketball.<sup>33</sup>

The first breakthrough in Southeastern Conference basketball took place just two months after the Miners' victory. At Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Chancellor Alexander Heard had been quietly working to liberalize race relations on campus. In May 1966, with Heard's support,

basketball coach Roy Skinner signed Perry Wallace, a widely recruited local prep star and high school valedictorian, to an athletic scholarship. Despite speculation by the press that further change was just around the corner, no other SEC school initially followed Vanderbilt's example. Wallace officially broke the SEC's colour line for varsity play in November 1967, but not until two years later did Henry Harris of Auburn join him. The only two African-Americans among 120 SEC basketball players during that 1969–70 season, Wallace and Harris were often subjected to vicious racial epithets from rival fans and rough play by opposing teams.<sup>34</sup>

The black press and several white sportswriters regularly criticized this slow pace of integration, embarrassing the conference. In 1969, three additional SEC members finally awarded basketball scholarships to African-Americans. One of them, Wendell Hudson, was the first black athlete ever to receive an athletic scholarship at the University of Alabama. In the late fall of 1970, Hudson began his SEC varsity career, as did Ronnie Hogue at the University of Georgia and seven-foot centre Tom Payne at the University of Kentucky. These players' appearance in their school's uniform indicated that recruiting habits in the conference had changed at last. In 1972, Mississippi State, the league's last hold-out, fielded its first integrated varsity squad. Segregation in the SEC had finally ended. Over the ensuing years, the number of African-Americans awarded basketball scholarships grew rapidly. By the 1975–76 season, black athletes comprised 45 per cent of all SEC varsity players. During the 1980s, two-thirds or more of conference basketball players were African-Americans, a remarkable change from Perry Wallace's first lonely season back in 1966–67.<sup>35</sup>

Despite a less conservative racial climate in Texas, actual integration of Southwest Conference basketball teams proceeded 'at a snail's pace'. Although two black runners joined the University of Texas freshman track team in 1963, UT did not integrate its basketball or football programmes at that time. Other SWC schools cited this inaction by the UT athletic programme, the most prestigious in the state, as an excuse for their own inaction. In late 1963, UT, Texas A & M, and Texas Tech did announce that their athletic programmes would henceforth be open to student athletes of any colour. Other SWC colleges soon issued the same statement, but none of them actually recruited a black player during the remainder of the school year, leaving the seriousness of their commitment in doubt.<sup>36</sup>

At this time, another major independent college in Texas broke ranks and began recruiting African-Americans. The University of Houston, which launched an aggressive drive for athletic respectability in the early 1960s, soon upstaged its more prestigious SWC rivals. In 1964, Houston

basketball coach Guy V. Lewis successfully recruited black stars Elvin Hayes and Don Chaney, whose three varsity seasons from 1965 to 1968 built Houston into a major national power. Lewis's extensive recruitment of African-Americans and the Cougars' continued success rankled SWC coaches and put additional pressure on them to follow suit.<sup>37</sup>

The first Southwest Conference member to abandon the colour line in basketball was Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, which was affiliated with the Disciples of Christ Church. At the urging of President M. E. Sadler, coach Buster Brannon signed local star James Cash to an athletic scholarship in the spring of 1965. A few months earlier, Southern Methodist University of Dallas had awarded the first SWC football scholarship to an African-American – Jerry Levias of Beaumont, Texas. The signing of these two prep stars, each of which made his varsity debut in the fall of 1966, 'broke the ice' and encouraged others to follow suit. Unlike their counterparts in the SEC, SWC coaches quickly imitated TCU's example. During the 1967–68 season, Tommy Bowman of Baylor University, a Baptist institution, and Thomas Johnson of the University of Arkansas joined Cash in SWC varsity play. The remaining schools then intensified their efforts, and integration in the conference was almost complete before more than two SEC schools had put black basketball players in uniform.<sup>38</sup>

While the Southwest Conferences eventually moved more rapidly on integration than did the more conservative SEC, major southern independents acted even faster yet. Loyola University of New Orleans, a Catholic university, signed Charles Powell of Baton Rouge to a basketball scholarship in 1965. In December 1966, in one of his first varsity games, Powell led Loyola to an 87–86 upset win over the all-white team from Louisiana State University, an SEC member. Florida State University in Tallahassee and Memphis State University in Memphis, Tennessee, also fielded integrated varsity squads in the fall of 1966. In 1967, Miami University of Florida followed suit. Tulane University (an ex-SEC member) and the University of Southern Mississippi integrated their varsity teams in the fall of 1969. Thus it seems clear that the absence of a conference affiliation was an asset which permitted ambitious independents to pursue athletic success without excessive concern for traditional racial politics.<sup>39</sup>

But what of the pioneering athletes themselves? The individuals selected to break the colour line were usually young men possessing exceptional athletic talent and often considerable academic ability as well. Coaches also looked for evidence of good character and mental toughness. Such characteristics were essential, because, in addition to the academic and social adjustments these players faced on campus, rival fans often subjected them to racial taunts, opposing players to rough play, and referees to quick whistles.

Most of these pioneers performed quite well on the basketball court, especially considering the pressures they had to face, and several went on to establish successful careers after their playing days were over. James Cash of TCU was named to the all conference second team his senior year. A diligent student, he later earned a doctorate from Purdue University and today is a professor in the Harvard Business School. Vanderbilt's Perry Wallace, also an all conference second team selection, eventually earned a law degree at Columbia University and is today a law school professor. Charles Brown of Texas Western moved to California after graduation and is currently a senior administrator in the San Francisco Unified School District. Wade Houston of the University of Louisville now serves as the head basketball coach at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, where he could not play upon graduation from a nearby high school because of his race. On the other hand, Henry Harris of Auburn was frustrated by injuries and never achieved his potential on the court. Suffering from severe personal problems after failing to gain a spot in the NBA, he committed suicide in 1974. Most of the other 'pioneers' went on to lead relatively normal and productive lives. Regardless of later developments, each of them was a talented athlete recruited to help his team win, not to further a social experiment. None the less, their presence in the college gymnasium further undermined the white South's defence of segregation and helped hasten its demise.<sup>40</sup>

### Conclusions

College sports in the twentieth-century American South did not exist in a social and cultural vacuum; the region's pervasive system of racial segregation controlled university admissions as well as athletic policy. During the 1950s and 1960s, conservative southern whites adamantly and sometimes violently resisted federal efforts to eliminate discrimination in such areas as voting rights, employment, and public accommodations. Higher education, including college athletics, served as one of the major battlefields in this protracted conflict. The struggle to integrate southern college sports lasted for approximately 27 years, from 1945 until 1972. At the start of this period, most historically white universities simply refused to play against integrated teams, even in the North, and none permitted black students to enroll. The *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954 led to the eventual desegregation of undergraduate education, but most southern universities initially continued to maintain lily-white athletic programmes. Changing student and faculty attitudes, complaints from the small but growing numbers of African-American students on campus, pressure from non-southern colleges, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and especially the desire to win more games ultimately



combined to convince university administrators to abandon the colour line in college sports.

Those schools which first accepted desegregation of their basketball programmes tended to be relatively obscure and/or independent colleges with high ambitions but whose current athletic programmes generally lacked the status that went with membership in the prestigious Southwest or Southeastern Conferences. The University of Houston, once derisively known as 'Cougar High' to locals, built up a powerful athletic programme and won a prized admission to the Southwest Conference, in large part because of its successful recruitment of black athletes from the Texas-Louisiana region. A Border South location usually made desegregation easier. Two of the leaders in basketball integration – Texas Western College and the University of Louisville – were located literally at the edge of Dixie and interplayed extensively with non-southern teams. Church-related schools also seemed to move more quickly than their secular brethren. For example, Texas Christian University first broke the Southwest Conference colour line in basketball. The experiences of TCU and Vanderbilt University in the Southeastern Conference also illustrate the key leadership role that a university president could play in accelerating racial change.

It is no great surprise that those schools which doggedly resisted integration were located in areas of the Deep South where the black population was relatively large and where conservative whites were fanatically committed to racial segregation. Also, schools with the most prestigious athletic programmes generally displayed limited interest in altering the colour of their recruits. For example, highly successful coach Adolph Rupp of the University of Kentucky disdained any significant changes in his recruiting habits and prevented UK from becoming a trendsetter.

The black pioneers who broke the colour line in southern college basketball were exceptional individuals selected because of their special talents on and off the court. Their success fulfilled the *New York Times*' prophecy of the 'tremendous champions' that might appear after the inclusion of southern black athletes. And there were a few 'quiet miracles' as well. The presence of African-Americans on successful biracial teams eventually helped legitimize integration within southern communities. To most college students, many sports fans, and racial liberals, integrated squads ultimately became symbols of a 'New South' on campus and a source of regional pride. Although athletic programmes did not initially march in the vanguard of racial change in the region, they eventually came to play a significant role in the racial reconciliation of the 1970s. Integrated teams helped to heal partially the painful scars incurred during the racial crises of the 1950s and 1960s by providing badly needed unifying

symbols around which both black and white southerners could attempt to forge a new regional identity free from the racism of the past.

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#### NOTES

1. Black colleges in the South began offering limited athletic programmes around the turn of the century but were restricted to competition against each other. For information on their programmes, see Arthur R. Ashe, Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African-American Athlete* (3 vols.: New York, 1988). Most historically white southern colleges did not sponsor advanced, competitive athletic programmes for women until the mid-1970s.
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3. Neil D. Isaacs, *All the Moves: A History of College Basketball* (Revd. Ed.; New York, 1984), pp. 19–22.
4. Nelson George, *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 95–102; Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York, 1983), *passim*.
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8. *Lexington Herald*, 24 Dec. 1946; *Knoxville News Sentinel*, 24 Dec. 1946; *New York Times*, 10 Jan. 1947, p. 26.
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12. *New York Times*, 18 April 1946, 32; 19 May 1946, V, 2; 30 Nov. 1947, V, 2; 11 Dec. 1947, 50; 14 Dec. 1947, V, 3; 9 June 1955, 31; *Christian Science Monitor*, 8 March 1948.
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15. *Newsweek*, 30 July 1956, 79; *New York Times*, 15 July 1956, I, 51; 17 July 1956, 13; 29 July 1956, V, 4; 1 Sept. 1956, 6; 14 Sept. 1956, 12; 16 Oct. 1956, 14; 22 Feb. 1959, 2.
16. *New York Times*, 26 Nov. 1954, 18; 31 July 1956, 11; 5 Oct. 1956, 1; 6 Oct. 1956, 20; 16 Oct. 1956, 14; 13 Dec. 1957, 31.
17. *Jackson Daily News*, 29, 31 Dec. 1956; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 1 Feb. 1956; *New York Times*, 31 Dec. 1956, 13.
18. *New York Times*, 19 Jan. 1957, 22; 6 March 1957, 25.
19. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 1 Feb. 1956; *New York Times*, 5 Oct. 1956, 1; *Atlanta Constitution*, 15, 21–3 Feb. 1957.

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