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## The Color Line in Midwestern College Sports, 1890–1960

*Charles H. Martin\**

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On a cold afternoon in late November 1903, an overflow football crowd on the campus of Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana, grew restless when the end of the season contest against archrival DePauw College failed to start on time. While the spectators waited impatiently, DePauw players, university officials, and several religious leaders argued vigorously at the edge of the stadium. This disagreement centered around the presence of one African American, end Samuel S. Gordon, on the Wabash squad. Upset at the possibility of competing against a black, the DePauw players and coaches demanded that Gordon be benched for the game. When Wabash administrators defended his right to participate, the angry DePauw contingent threatened to drive home. Since DePauw was affiliated with the Methodist Episcopal Church, local Methodist leaders were part of the crowd, and several of them joined the spirited debate. Retired Gen. Lew Wallace, a Civil War hero, famed novelist, and prominent layman, strongly urged the visitors “not to disgrace a Christian college by drawing the color line” and condemned their “cowardice and barbarism.” Almost one hour after the scheduled kickoff time, the DePauw squad finally relented and took the field. Although Wabash won the argument over Gordon’s right to play, Coach Ebin “Tug” Wilson withheld him from the match, probably fearing for his safety. Gordon’s absence did not hinder his Wabash teammates, who won a 10-0 victory.

The possibility of conflict between the two schools surfaced again at the end of the 1904 season. Gordon failed to return to Wabash for the fall term, but another African American, William M. Cantrell, enrolled and joined the football squad. As the traditional November contest approached, administrators at Wabash and DePauw began to worry that several years of increasingly hostile relations between their students and Cantrell’s presence on the current Wabash roster might result in an embarrassing incident. After considerable deliberation, these officials reluctantly agreed to cancel the contest. The following year, however, when the Wabash squad did not include any

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African Americans, the two schools resumed their annual football series.<sup>1</sup>

The 1903 and 1904 incidents between Wabash and DePauw exemplified the resistance that black athletes encountered around the turn of the century when they attempted to participate in college athletics at northern universities. What contemporaries referred to as “the color line,” that is, the practice of either excluding African Americans from selected public activities or segregating them into separate programs and facilities, clearly extended to American colleges and even their sports programs. Moreover, the Wabash-DePauw controversy demonstrated that the color line in intercollegiate athletics existed not just for contests between southern white teams and northern opponents but also at times for games played between two northern squads. This essay will examine the role of predominantly white universities located in the greater midwest region in practicing, supporting, or resisting the policy of racial exclusion in college sports from about 1890 until 1960. Although this color line within the Midwest has not received much attention from scholars, it lasted in some form for nearly six decades and reflected the second-class status to which most African Americans in the area were relegated.

During the 1880s and 1890s, the new American sport of football spread from its original home in the northeastern United States to the Midwest and then the South, quickly becoming the number-one sport on most college campuses. Basketball followed in football’s footsteps some ten to twenty years later but remained a distant second in popularity until after World War II. Male students in the Midwest responded enthusiastically to the roughness and frequent violence of football and eventually formed school teams in order to test their skills against squads from other colleges. In 1879 the University of Michigan and Racine College of Wisconsin staged what most scholars consider to be the first official college football game in the region. Three years later, the University of Minnesota fielded its first school team. Other midwestern schools that soon added teams included Wabash College in 1884, Indiana University and Purdue University in 1887, Beloit College in 1889, and the University of Illinois in 1890. Also in 1890, football successfully invaded the Great Plains when the University of Kansas and the University of Nebraska formed competitive teams. After the University of Chicago opened its doors in 1892, students immediately formed a grid team. By the turn of the century, virtually every major midwestern college sponsored a

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<sup>1</sup>James Insley Osborne and Theodore Gregory Gronert, *Wabash College: The First Hundred Years* (Crawfordsville, Ind., 1932), 272; *New York Times*, November 22, 1903; *The Wabash*, XXVIII (December 1903), 215-16; *ibid.*, XXIX (December 1904), 183; Johanna Herring to author, July 22, 1997; Greencastle *DePauw*, October 22, November 12, 19, 1904; Arthur R. Ashe, Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African-American Athlete* (3 vols., New York, 1988), I, 92.

football team. During these early years, disputes over basic rules and procedures were common. In order to exercise greater control over institutional practices and reduce complaints, representatives from seven of the most important midwestern universities met in Chicago in 1895 and established the Intercollegiate Conference of Faculty Representatives, or Western Conference, which eventually became known as the Big Ten Conference. The new league soon became the most influential association in the Upper Midwest.<sup>2</sup>

At the time college football arrived in the Midwest, the small black population living there found itself mostly restricted to second-class citizenship. Although they possessed equal voting rights, black Midwesterners found themselves subjected to racial discrimination in many areas, including public accommodations, employment, and housing. Public education tended to be segregated, especially on the elementary school and junior high levels. Those dedicated black students who finished high school and enrolled at public universities before World War II discovered that discrimination on campus was commonplace. African Americans frequently found themselves excluded from university housing, dining facilities, swimming pools, and some student activities, including intercollegiate sports. Although information is sketchy for the period before 1920, it is also safe to assume that at least a few aspiring black athletes were turned away from their college teams and quietly accepted their fate without protest, leaving no public record of their personal humiliation. Although such exclusion undoubtedly happened in football, it eventually became primarily identified with basketball and even continued in the latter sport for a while after World War II.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to sometimes rejecting African Americans for their athletic teams, some midwestern colleges also attempted to draw the color line when competing against other universities within the region. Officials at these schools considered African Americans to be a socially inferior race and hence viewed competition against black players as "lowering" the status normally associated with whiteness. In the

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<sup>2</sup>Charter members of the Big Ten were Michigan, Minnesota, Illinois, Northwestern, Wisconsin, Purdue, and Chicago. Indiana and Iowa joined in 1899 and Ohio State in 1912. After Chicago dropped football in 1939 and formally withdrew in 1946, Michigan State replaced the Maroons. In 1990 conference members voted to admit Pennsylvania State University. Mervin D. Hyman and Gordon S. White, Jr., *Big Ten Football: Its Life and Times, Great Coaches, Players, and Games* (New York, 1977), 23-30; "Big Ten History," at [www.bigten.org](http://www.bigten.org).

<sup>3</sup>Clifford S. Griffin, *The University of Kansas: A History* (Lawrence, Kans., 1974), 209-10, 626-27; Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000), 8-12, 161; John Behee, *Hail to the Victors! Black Athletes at The University of Michigan* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1974), 33-34; Aram Goudsouzian, "'Ba-ad, Ba-a-ad Tigers': Crispus Attucks Basketball and Black Indianapolis in the 1950s," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XCVI (March 2000), 7-15; Randy Roberts, "But They Can't Beat Us": Oscar Robertson and the Crispus Attucks Tigers (Champaign, Ill., 1999), 38-42; Troy D. Paino, "Hoosiers in a Different Light: Forces of Change v. the Power of Nostalgia," *Journal of Sport History*, XXVIII (Spring 2001), 63-72.

mid-1890s, for example, when the University of Chicago baseball team, coached by Amos Alonzo Stagg, played several games against local amateur black teams, President William Rainey Harper privately commented that the series “has brought disgrace upon us.” This was the athletic environment which the first black college athletes in the Midwest entered.<sup>4</sup>

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, a handful of African Americans appeared on university teams in the North. Though few in number, their occasional presence proudly wearing their school’s colors on the playing fields represented an important symbol of racial equality. Moses Fleetwood Walker was probably the first black athlete in any organized team sport at a white northern college. Walker starred on the first varsity baseball team at Oberlin College in 1881 before transferring to the University of Michigan for the following season. Weldy Walker, his younger brother, also played on the 1881 Oberlin squad. The first African Americans known to have played football in the northeastern U.S. were William H. Lewis and William T. S. Jackson, both of whom joined the Amherst squad in 1889. Thomas Fisher (also known as Daniel W. Brown) began his varsity career that same year for Beloit College of Wisconsin. In 1890, George H. Jewett and William Arthur Johnson joined the football teams at the University of Michigan and Massachusetts Institute of Technology respectively. Other pioneering black football players in the Midwest include George A. Flippin at Nebraska in 1891, Preston Eagleson at Indiana in 1893, and Frank “Kinney” Holbrook of Iowa and William Washington of Oberlin, both in 1895.<sup>5</sup>

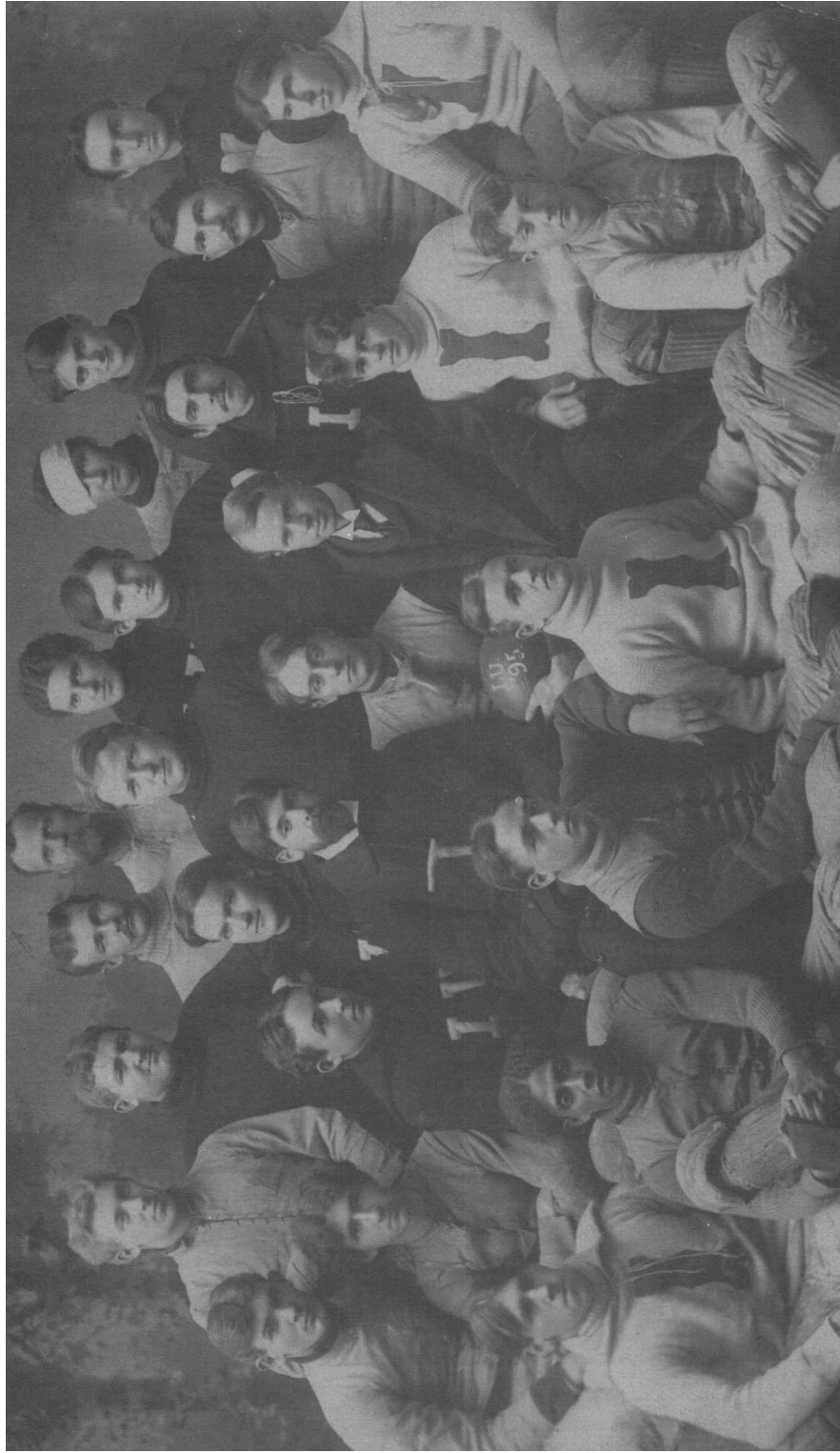
Many of these early racial pioneers in the Midwest encountered racial hostility from the stands and extra violence on the field. After his initial season at Michigan, Jewett sat out the following year but returned to the Wolverines for the 1892 campaign before transferring to Northwestern University. On several occasions while at Michigan, Jewett met vocal and physical harassment. The annual contest against Purdue provided an especially hostile atmosphere. For example, Boilermaker fans loudly chanted “Kill the coon!” and other racial epithets at Jewett during one game in West Lafayette. Opposing players also subjected Jewett to considerable rough play, some of it

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<sup>4</sup>Robin Lester, *Stagg’s University: The Rise, Decline, and Fall of Bigtime Football at Chicago* (Urbana, Ill., 1995), 40. Arthur Ashe’s three-volume study is an essential starting place for research, but the pre-1945 information contains numerous factual errors.

<sup>5</sup>William H. Lewis became the first black All-American when Walter Camp selected him for his honorary squad in 1892. Behee, *Hail to the Victors!*, 31-33, 42, 131-33; Ashe, *Hard Road to Glory*, I, 70-71, 77, 90-93, 173; Ocania Chalk, *Black College Sport* (New York, 1976), 145-46; David W. Zang, *Fleet Walker’s Divided Heart: The Life of Baseball’s First Black Major Leaguer* (Lincoln, Neb., 1995), 22-29; Cedar Rapids Gazette, June 30, 1996; Bradley D. Cook, Indianapolis, Ind., to author, August 27, 1998. Fisher’s original name was Daniel Brown. He changed it when he left the South; Fred Burwell, Beloit, Wis., to author, August 29, 2001, e-mail.





PRESTON EAGLESON, THE FIRST BLACK FOOTBALL PLAYER AT INDIANA UNIVERSITY, 1895

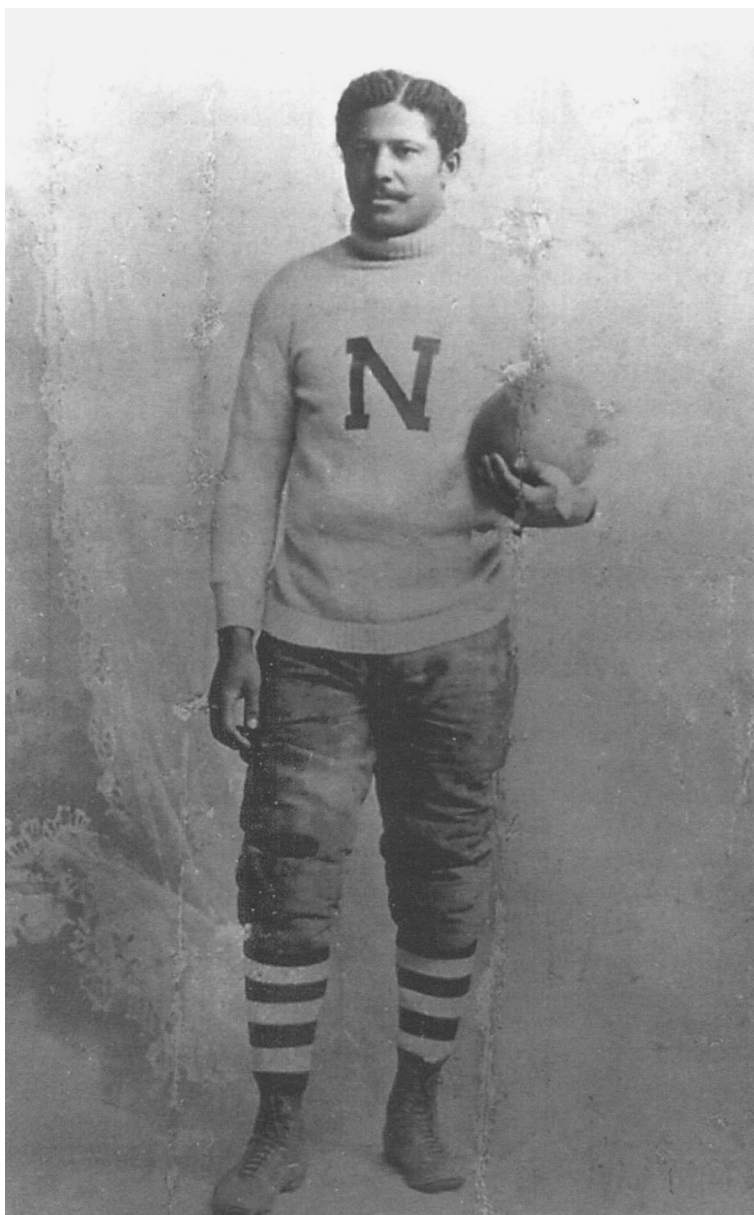
apparently because of his race. On at least two occasions, he responded to repeated foul play and late tackles by slugging a particularly dirty opponent in the face.<sup>6</sup>

Flippin and Holbrook not only endured similar rough treatment but had to survive challenges by opposing teams to their mere presence on the gridiron. The main threat to their right to compete came from the University of Missouri. Although Missouri was a midwestern state by geography and remained loyal to the Union during the Civil War, its political and legal systems protected racial slavery until the end of the Civil War. After emancipation, the state legislature adopted a constitution requiring a dual system of segregated schools at all levels. Nonetheless, in the 1890s the University of Missouri had not yet formally instituted an athletic policy of total refusal to play against an integrated team, demonstrating the somewhat fluid nature of race relations at the end of the nineteenth century.

A football series between the University of Missouri and the University of Nebraska, as well as a second series between Missouri and the University of Iowa, drew attention to the dispute over the right of African Americans on northern teams to participate in football contests against schools from the border or ex-Confederate states. In 1892 Missouri was scheduled to host Nebraska, but the Cornhusker starting lineup featured star halfback Flippin. Upon discovering Flippin's race, Missouri demanded that Nebraska leave him behind for the game. Nebraska officials and students rejected what they considered to be an unfair request. Nebraska's student literary magazine denounced the "race prejudice" of the Missourians and declared that its school "shall play with our team made up according to our fashion, or not at all." Unmoved by these protests, Missouri administrators forfeited the match, thereby avoiding what one critic sarcastically termed "the risk of being knocked down and trampled on by a negro." Because of the cancellation, the Western University Interstate Athletic Association subsequently adopted a new rule which imposed a fifty-dollar fine on any team forfeiting a scheduled match. As a result, the Missouri squad reluctantly played against Flippin in 1893 and 1894, but at a neutral site in Kansas City. No doubt Missouri administrators were delighted when Flippin finally graduated, but the school's series with the University of Iowa soon provided even greater racial friction.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Behee, *Hail to the Victors!*, 31-33; Ashe, *Hard Road to Glory*, I, 90-92.

<sup>7</sup>When management of a hotel dining room and an opera house in Denver refused admission to Flippin during an 1892 road trip, his teammates demonstrated their support for him by walking out of both establishments. Flippin later completed medical school in Illinois and practiced in Nebraska until his death in 1929. Robert N. Manley, *Centennial History of the University of Nebraska* (Lincoln, Neb., 1969), I, 293-94; Mary K. Dains, "University of Missouri Football: The First Decade," *Missouri Historical Review*, LXX (October 1975), 28-34; University of Nebraska *Hesperian*, November 1, 1892; James Denney, Hollis Limprecht, and Howard Silber, *Go Big Red: The All-time Story of the Cornhuskers* (revd. ed.; Omaha, Neb., 1967), 18-19.



GEORGE A. FLIPPIN, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA, 1891

*University of Nebraska*

The appearance of Iowa's first black football player, Frank Holbrook, in 1895 and 1896 created further difficulties for Missouri. Holbrook had been a star high school athlete at Tipton, Iowa, where a group of local businessmen raised enough money to pay his way to the university. In 1895, his freshman year, Holbrook started at left end and accompanied the team to Columbia for its game against Missouri. Although the home team must have been shocked to discover Holbrook, the Tigers apparently played the game without protest and won by a score of 34-0. No confrontations were reported at the field, and the Missouri student newspaper reported that the Hawkeyes departed happily, "telling us that they were delighted with their treatment." Perhaps the ease with which Missouri defeated the visitors contributed to the absence of conflict.<sup>8</sup>

The 1896 contest between the two teams proved to be quite different and produced numerous complaints about racial bigotry, violent behavior, and biased officiating. At the start of the season, Iowa coaches moved Holbrook to the right halfback position, which gave him an important and highly visible role in the Hawkeye offense. In early November, when the Iowa squad arrived in Columbia, the visitors received a hostile welcome. At their hotel, several local residents repeatedly voiced disapproval of Holbrook's presence and expressed the hope that the local squad would "kill the Negro." At the football field the following day, Missouri officials demanded that the talented halfback be benched, but the Hawkeye coaches adamantly stood their ground. Despite loud and repeated demands from the stands that Holbrook be barred, the home team grudgingly agreed to play, probably in fear of sanctions from the conference. The resulting game proved to be a wild affair. Fans yelled vicious abuse at the Iowa halfback throughout the match, shouting racial epithets and incitements to violence. The physical contact between the players was extremely rough and resulted in numerous penalties. Yet Holbrook refused to be intimidated. He scored one touchdown and was described by the Missouri student newspaper as "slippery as an eel." At halftime, two agitated Missouri gridders, upset over what they felt was unfair officiating, apparently slugged the referee, who was an Iowa faculty member. Early in the second half, with the Hawkeyes leading 12-0, the disgusted Missouri team walked off the field to protest the referee's decisions.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>The Iowa student newspaper reported that Holbrook "made some good tackles but was not up to his usual form." Columbia [Mo.] *M.S.U. Independent*, November 23, 1895; Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, June 30, 1996.

<sup>9</sup>Dains, "University of Missouri Football," 41-42; Dick Lamb and Bert McGrane, *75 Years with the Fighting Hawkeyes* (Iowa City, Iowa, 1964), 11; Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, June 30, 1996; Iowa City *Daily Republican*, November 12, 1896, clipping, Board of Curators Records, Western Historical Manuscript Collection (Ellis Library, University of Missouri-Columbia); William G. Manly, "History of Athletics in the University of Missouri, 1890-1898," unpublished manuscript, *ibid.*; *University of Missouri Football Media Guide, 1995* ([Columbia, Mo.]), 188-89.

Representatives of the two universities blamed each other for the incident. At Missouri, the student newspaper conceded that the crowd's behavior "was simply ridiculous" but asserted that the referee, "a robber of the first order," had created much of the problem. The paper also emphasized that "the unpleasantness of the game grew out of the fact that Iowa has a negro on her team." However, the newspaper went on to declare,

As long as the rules of the league fail to forbid this, we should bear it gracefully. The bad feeling yesterday was engendered by the crowd's heinous remarks and the hoodlums' continuous yell of "kill the nigger." This should be stopped. Of course there are always some toughs who are out for blood, but the students and better class of citizens condemn this, and the team desires nothing but fair play and honest clean ball.

For their part, Iowa officials blamed irresponsible behavior by Missouri fans and players for the incident. Although arguments over the officiating complicated the incident, the 1896 controversy affected the racial policies in athletics at both universities. Iowa took a strong stand in favor of equal competition and suspended the annual series with Missouri for several years. Administrators at Missouri, on the other hand, remained convinced that the presence of black players on visiting teams in Columbia would only create problems and should be curtailed.<sup>10</sup>

Six years later, the two schools resumed their annual game. In 1909, after seven years of relatively peaceful competition, the problem resurfaced when the Hawkeye squad included another black player, tackle Archie A. Alexander. During the intervening years, Missouri apparently had adopted an institutional policy mandating racial exclusion for all athletic events at home. Since university officials also had decided to avoid competing against African Americans in away games, they requested that the Hawkeyes withhold Alexander from their October game in Iowa City. Iowa administrators complained about the request, but when the Missourians remained adamant, they abandoned their earlier policy and agreed to keep Alexander on the bench. Although the following year's game was scheduled for Columbia, Iowa coaches initially hoped to play Alexander in the contest, but Missouri officials absolutely refused to allow his participation. Missouri won the ensuing game 5-0. Upset by Alexander's exclusion and the allegedly unsporting conduct of Missouri players, Iowa officials canceled the annual series between the two colleges. In the final game of the 1910 season, Iowa traveled to St. Louis to play Washington University. Once more the home team requested that Alexander be withdrawn from the contest, and once again Hawkeye coaches relegated their star tackle to the bench. Thus over an eighteen-year period Missouri had shifted its racial policy from a hostile acceptance of limited interracial play in the early 1890s

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<sup>10</sup>Columbia *M.S.U. Independent*, November 9, 1896.

to an inflexible position of complete racial exclusion by 1910. During that same period Iowa modified its previous opposition to the color line in football and accepted racial exclusion, even in Iowa City.<sup>11</sup>

These universities' refusal to defend their black players consistently reflected the marginal status of African Americans on northern campuses and the widespread racism of the era. The experiences of Samuel S. Gordon at Wabash College in 1903 further illustrates the difficulties faced by pioneering black athletes. As noted earlier, the initial refusal of the DePauw squad to play against Gordon in the two colleges' end-of-the-year contest created a minor controversy and attracted media attention. But what most newspapers failed to report was that DePauw was not the first midwestern college to challenge Gordon's presence in the Wabash lineup that fall. During the first part of the 1903 season, several opponents protested his participation, perhaps because he may have been the first black player on the small-college circuit in Indiana. Upset by these complaints, Wabash students staged a campus rally to support Gordon. According to one source, Coach Wilson delivered a powerful speech to the crowd, "placing the Negro in a very favorable light and showing the latent hopes and ambitions of the colored race." Apparently, Wabash students greatly respected the West Virginia native, since the student newspaper described him as "a gentlemen in every sense of the word and one by whom all loyal Wabash men will stand." At mid-season Rose-Hulman Institute suddenly canceled its contest with Wabash. Wilson responded by withholding Gordon from the following two games, perhaps for his protection.

When the season finale against archrival DePauw arrived, however, Wilson apparently decided he would no longer allow opposing teams to dictate his team's lineup. Wabash officials may also not have fully anticipated a protest from DePauw, since the church-related school had previously enrolled at least four African Americans. The ensuing challenge to Gordon's participation by the DePauw squad did not necessarily reflect campus opinion at the Greencastle school. In fact, the student newspaper roundly criticized the football squad for attempting to draw the color line and defended Gordon. The newspaper declared that the "colored man was exactly like every man on the DePauw team except in that his skin was dark and his hair curly—and every whit as good." Wabash's refusal to back down represented a new determination on the part of the college, which carried over to the next year. During the 1904 season, except for the

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<sup>11</sup>Ironically, the coach of the Washington University team was an American Indian. Lamb and McGrane, *75 Years with the Fighting Hawkeyes*, 45; Raymond A. Smith, Jr., "He Opened Holes Like Mountain Tunnels," *Palimpsest*, LXVI (May/June 1985), 87, 97-100; 1995 Football Media Guide, University of Missouri, 188-89; Earl M. Rogers, Iowa City, Iowa, to author, August 5, 1997.

mutual cancellation of the DePauw game, none of Wabash's opponents dared to challenge the participation of William Cantrell. Thus it appears that the novelty of Gordon's appearance for Wabash influenced the 1903 complaints and that such opposition soon evaporated when met with firmness by Wabash. Growing familiarity with integrated football competition across the region during the next ten years appears to have reduced the opposition at other schools in the region as well, with the major exception of the University of Missouri.<sup>12</sup>

By World War I, as a few more black athletes appeared on midwestern football teams, this intraregional resistance to African Americans' participation seems to have disappeared. Instead, a new source of conflict over the color line involved midwestern football games against major southern universities, all of whom were racially segregated. These North-South contests in football during the fall (and in baseball during the spring) were rather limited before the 1920s. From the first, however, southern schools vigorously protested the occasional inclusion of African Americans on northern squads. At the start of a new century, when southern legislatures were constructing an intricate web of Jim Crow laws segregating black and white southerners in almost every area of public life, equal competition on the gridiron violated the basic principles of white supremacy. In order to avoid friction and the possibility of last-minute cancellations, participants in interregional play gradually reached an informal compromise in the early twentieth century, commonly referred to as the "gentlemen's agreement." According to this unwritten understanding, northern universities were expected to withhold any black player from their roster when competing against a southern squad in order to avoid embarrassing the southerners. This rule applied even when the athletic event was held in the North. The gentlemen's agreement attracted little attention in the Midwest during the 1920s, due to the tiny number of black players, the indifference of university administrators, and the limited number of major interregional contests. In the early 1930s, though, the number of black players and the frequency of these contests both increased, touching off several incidents which clearly exposed the color line.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Osborne and Gronert, *Wabash College*, 272; *The Wabash*, XXVIII (December 1903), 215-16; *ibid.*, XXIX (December 1904), 183; Johanna Herring to author, July 22, 1997, Wabash Collection, Crawfordsville, Ind.; Greencastle *DePauw*, October 22, November 12, 19, 1904; Ashe, *Hard Road to Glory*, I, 92; *New York Times*, November 22, 1903. Gordon later became the superintendent of the West Virginia Industrial School for Colored Boys.

<sup>13</sup>Many white sports fans in the Northeast first learned about the gentlemen's agreement in the fall of 1929, when the black press and liberal white journalists exposed a decision by New York University to bench its one black starter, David Myers, for a home game against the University of Georgia. Charles H. Martin, "Racial Change and 'Big-Time' College Football in Georgia: The Age of Segregation, 1892-1957," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, LXXX (Fall 1996), 537-44.

At least five Big Ten universities, including Ohio State, Minnesota, Indiana, Iowa, and Michigan, as well as several other mid-western colleges, all honored the gentlemen's agreement during the first half of the 1930s. At Ohio State, tackle William Bell, the first black player to join the Buckeyes, earned three varsity letters from 1929 to 1931. Despite his outstanding ability, Bell found himself benched because of his race in 1930 against the United States Naval Academy and in 1931 against Vanderbilt. In early November 1930, rumors circulated in Columbus that Ohio State would leave Bell at home when the Buckeyes departed for a November contest against the Naval Academy in Baltimore. Upon learning about Bell's possible benching, Walter White of the NAACP quickly wired President George W. Rightmire, urging him not to "yield to racial prejudice" and "violate canons of good sportsmanship." Rightmire responded by denying that Ohio State planned to discriminate against the junior lineman. Instead he cleverly explained that the university was actually protecting Bell "from [the] unpleasant experience of probable race discrimination manifested in a southern city." Rightmire also told several other correspondents that Bell agreed with the school's decision. Nonetheless, Bell's absence from the match irritated many Buckeye fans, and several Ohio newspapers criticized the university for giving in to race prejudice. When Navy traveled to Columbus the following year, Academy officials did not demand that Bell be benched. The outstanding tackle led the Buckeyes to 20-0 victory and received considerable praise from the Navy players.<sup>14</sup>

The major incident during the 1931 season involved Ohio State's home game against Vanderbilt on October 10. Although some Buckeye supporters and black sports fans worried that Bell would be benched again, Ohio State Coach Sam Willaman denied that any special concessions had been made to the southerners. Yet at the opening kickoff Bell stood watching from the sidelines. As the visiting Commodores repeatedly broke through Ohio State's porous defensive line en route to a 26-21 victory, fans clamored for the powerful tackle to enter the contest. In every previous game Willaman had brought Bell off the bench as his first substitution. This time, though, despite the inability of the Ohio State defensive line to contain the

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<sup>14</sup>Michigan State University provides another example of the marginalization of black athletes. During the 1930s, the athletic department regularly took two different photographs of the football team—one which included black players and another which excluded them. Walter White to George Brightmire [*sic*], November 3, 1930, George W. Rightmire Papers, RG 3/f/6/2 (University Archives, Ohio State University Library, Columbus, Ohio); George W. Rightmire to White, November 5, 1930, *ibid.*; Rightmire to L. W. St. John, November 5, 1930, *ibid.*; Perry Jackson to Rightmire, November 9, 1930, *ibid.*; Rightmire to Jackson, November 12, 1930, *ibid.*; unsigned to L. E. Judd, November 17, 1930, *ibid.*; Ellsworth G. Harris to Samuel Willaman, November 17, 1930, *ibid.*; Paulette Martis, East Lansing, Mich., to author, April 20, 1999, e-mail; Edwin Bancroft Henderson, *The Negro in Sports* (rev. ed., Washington, D.C., 1949), 113.



Vanderbilt rushing game, Willaman ignored complaints from the crowd and kept Bell on the sideline for the entire match. Afterwards, one disgusted sports writer reported that "rabid Buckeye fans . . . think that Bell was shelved for the Rebels; that Ohio has joined the Confederacy." Bell returned to regular play the following week and concluded an outstanding season by winning All-Big Ten honors. Ohio State's decision to bench him for the Vanderbilt game thus demonstrated that northern schools were even willing to place themselves at a competitive disadvantage by honoring the gentlemen's agreement at home in order to schedule prominent southern teams for high-profile interregional matches.<sup>15</sup>

Minnesota, Indiana, Iowa, and Michigan also embraced the gentlemen's agreement in order to schedule southern teams. Like the action by Ohio State, many of these incidents of racial exclusion took place at home games in the Midwest. In 1931 the University of Minnesota, a football powerhouse, withheld Ellsworth H. Harpole from a home game against Oklahoma State. The following year, Harpole stayed on the bench when the Ole Miss Rebels came to Minneapolis. In 1935 the Gophers continued to draw the color line by benching Dwight Reed when they hosted Tulane University. One year later, Minnesota again surrendered to southern demands when it withdrew Reed and teammate Horace Bell from a home game against the University of Texas. Since the Gophers easily defeated the Longhorns 47-19 and substituted generously, the absence of Reed and Bell was particularly conspicuous. In 1932 Indiana Coach Earle Hayes kept Fitzhugh Lyons on the bench when the Hoosiers hosted Mississippi State. That same fall the University of Iowa team, known earlier for its strong defense of black Hawkeyes, surprisingly left behind its two black members when traveling to the District of Columbia to play George Washington University. Although neither player was a starter, both had seen limited action in most of team's games earlier that year.<sup>16</sup>

The most unusual example of racial exclusion came in the fall of 1934, when Michigan hosted Georgia Tech. At the start of the year, Tech Coach W. A. Alexander informed Michigan officials that his school would have to cancel the game unless the Wolverines agreed to bench senior end Willis Ward. "Public sentiment in the southeastern states simply demands that no team in this section play against a Negro athlete," Alexander explained. Ward, who doubled

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<sup>15</sup>Three years later, Ohio State Athletic Director L. W. St. John privately admitted that Ohio State had always intended to withhold Bell from the Vanderbilt game. *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 17, November 7, 1931; *Chicago Defender*, October 17, 1931; Behee, *Hail to the Victors!*, 27.

<sup>16</sup>Lori Mardock, Minneapolis, Minn., to author, n.d., e-mail; Penelope Krosch, Minneapolis, Minn., to author, October 5, 1998, e-mail; "Player Minutes Sheet, 1932," (Office of Athletic Media Relations, Indiana University); *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 5, 1932, November 21, 1936.

as a Big Ten track star, was only the second African American to play football at Michigan. The university's unwillingness to recruit black prospects dated from 1901, when Fielding H. Yost became head coach for the Wolverines. Sometime during the summer, Michigan officials discreetly informed Georgia Tech that they would withhold Ward from the match. But as the October 20 game drew near, several newspapers exposed the secret agreement, inspiring complaints from black leaders and journalists, liberal and radical white students at the university, and the *Michigan Daily*. Alarmed by protest rallies and calls for a student boycott of the game, a Michigan delegation quickly huddled with Alexander upon his squad's arrival in Ann Arbor. Eventually officials from the two schools reached a bizarre compromise whereby Michigan kept its promise to bench Ward while Georgia Tech agreed to withhold its star end, Hoot Gibson, as compensation for the loss of Ward. This unusual arrangement permitted the southerners to preserve racial purity without placing the Wolverines at a competitive disadvantage. Although the Ward-Gibson trade-off allowed the color line to be maintained, the unexpected protests against racial exclusion served as a warning to coaches on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line that such discriminatory policies might not be enforceable in the future.<sup>17</sup>

While southern colleges tolerated considerable racial discrimination in football before World War II, college basketball became even more discriminatory during those same years. In the worst example, most members of the Big Ten conference completely excluded African Americans from their basketball teams until the early 1950s. The sport dates from 1891, when a physical education instructor in Springfield, Connecticut, James Naismith, invented a new indoor game to keep his students active during the winter months. The game quickly won enthusiastic converts at urban YMCA programs around the country and then spread to college campuses. In February 1895, the Minnesota State School of Agriculture defeated Hamline College in what some scholars consider to be the first collegiate contest. The first game in the Midwest to use five-man teams may have been the January 1896 match between the University of Chicago and the University of Iowa. By 1905 most colleges in the region were engaged in intercollegiate competition. Only a few black athletes played on these midwestern teams before World War I. Apparently the first black player at a white university in the region was Samuel Ransom of Beloit College, who was an outstanding competitor for the Wisconsin school during the 1905

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<sup>17</sup>Both Willis Ward and Hoot Gibson remained bitter about their school's actions. W. A. Alexander to Fielding H. Yost, January 3, 1934, Alexander and A. H. Armstrong to Yost, March 17, 1934, in Board in Control of Athletics Papers, Michigan Historical Collections (Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan); Behee, *Hail to the Victors!*, 13, 18-33; *New York Age*, October 26, 1934; Martin, "Racial Change and 'Big-Time' College Football in Georgia," 544-48.

and 1906 seasons. Other black pioneers on midwestern courts include Wilbur Woods of Nebraska in 1908 and Sol Butler at Dubuque College of Iowa in 1914.<sup>18</sup>

Most Big Ten coaches denied that the color line existed in their league, but the continued absence of black players made the ban obvious by the 1930s. In 1934 first-year student Franklin Let attempted to join the Michigan freshman squad but was turned away by Coach Franklin Cappon. The Michigan coach explained to a reporter that there was “a mutual agreement between the coaches not to use a colored boy in basketball.” Cappon added that the policy was based on an “unwritten ‘agreement’” Why integrated basketball competition posed a greater threat to racial etiquette than football, especially in the Big Ten, is not completely clear, especially since football involved considerable violent contact between players. Of course, basketball did include some physical contact, and it was normally played indoors, in smaller and more intimate settings. Furthermore, basketball players wore much briefer uniforms which exposed more of their bodies than did their counterparts on the gridiron. According to one black tennis player at Michigan during the 1930s, black students there speculated that the basketball ban existed because whites were frightened at the thought that their exposed skin might actually have contact with a black player’s skin. In a somewhat similar vein, journalist John Gunther wrote in 1947 that the Big Ten color line sprang from strong social taboos in the region “against contact between half-clad, perspiring bodies” from different races.<sup>19</sup>

A 1934 incident involving the University of Notre Dame sheds further light on white midwestern attitudes about interracial basketball competition. Apparently because of its small-town location and interest in recruiting white students from the South, the Catholic school refused to admit African Americans until the 1940s. Although the Fighting Irish were willing to play against integrated football teams, the school tried to draw the color line for basketball. In February 1934, the University of Detroit, also a Catholic institution, hosted the Irish team. A few hours before the game, Notre Dame Coach George Keogan was shocked to discover that the home team included Laurence Bleach, “the sensational negro sophomore.” Keogan immediately protested about this violation of racial etiquette but reluctantly

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<sup>18</sup>Neil D. Isaacs, *All the Moves: A History of College Basketball* (rev. ed., New York, 1984), 19-22; Benjamin G. Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports* (2nd ed., Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1990), 217-19; Ashe, *Hard Road to Glory*, I, 175; Fred Burwell, Beloit, Wis., to author, August 20, 2001, e-mail.

<sup>19</sup>In his 1963 book on black sports heroes, “Doc” Young noted this “strange quirk” concerning Big Ten basketball but could offer no specific explanation beyond racial prejudice. *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 13, 27, 1934; *Chicago Defender*, December 15, 1951; Behee, *Hail to the Victors!*, 39-41; A.S. “Doc” Young, *Negro Firsts in Sports* (Chicago, 1963), 78-79; memo by Don Bryant, Lincoln, Neb., June 1999, in author’s possession; John Gunther, *Inside U.S.A.* (New York, 1947), 285.

allowed his team to play the game, which the Irish won 36-17. The Detroit athletic director, Gus Dorais, a former Notre Dame quarterback, promptly wrote Father John O'Hara, acting president of Notre Dame, to apologize for the incident. Dorais pleaded that he "knew nothing of this 'gentlemen's agreement' among coaches—not to use colored boys—which George says actually exists" and was "mighty sorry" that the problem had arisen. However, Dorais confessed that he could not see the logic or justice of such a policy, since whites regularly competed against African Americans in football and track and field. Notre Dame officials were also initially puzzled by the incident. But after further investigation, Father O'Hara replied: "At first, I could see no objection to your using a negro on your team, but George [Keogan] pointed out to me that there is a difference in a game where there is such close physical contact between players scantily clad and perspiring at every pore." Yet it should be noted that other white coaches and school officials in the upper Midwest apparently did not share these fears and accepted integrated basketball competition.<sup>20</sup>

During the late 1920s and 1930s, members of the newly formed Big Six conference (eventually known as the Big Eight) went even further than the Big Ten and implemented a policy of total exclusion of African Americans from all sports. The conference was formed in 1928 by midwestern public universities—Nebraska, Iowa State, Kansas, Kansas State, Missouri, and Oklahoma—with starkly different traditions concerning black athletes. Several African Americans had played football and basketball at Nebraska before the mid-1920s. In 1923 Jack Trice started several games for Iowa State before being fatally injured in a contest against Minnesota. Holoway Smith also played at Iowa State in 1926 and 1927. Nonetheless, because of fierce opposition to the use of black athletes from Missouri and Oklahoma, the new league established an unofficial policy barring black players from all athletic teams. This action by the Big Six provides an example of how the exclusion of African Americans in American sports actually increased during the 1930s. In a similar action in 1934, the National Football League reversed its earlier practice and quietly imposed a new policy which completely excluded black players from its ranks. And, of course, major league baseball and its affiliated minor leagues continued to enforce a rigid color line, as they had done since the late nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

In the late 1930s, Big Ten athletic programs finally began to resist demands to honor the gentlemen's agreement. An increase in the number of black athletes on their squads and growing pressure

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<sup>20</sup>Murray Sperber, *Shake Down the Thunder: The Creation of Notre Dame Football* (New York, 1993), 368-69; University of Detroit *Varsity News*, January 10, 17, February 7, 14, 1934; Christine Yancy, Detroit, Mich., to author, May 20, 1999, e-mail.

<sup>21</sup>Griffin, *University of Kansas*, 661; Charles K. Ross, *Outside the Lines: African Americans and the Integration of the National Football League* (New York, 1999), 44-50.

from students seem to have influenced this decision. The first signs came in the spring of 1939, when the University of Missouri attempted to host a three-team track meet with Wisconsin and Notre Dame. Since the Badgers' top hurdler, Ed Smith, was an African American, Missouri officials barred him from the competition. On the Wisconsin campus, students protested the action, while the faculty resolution urged the school to refuse to participate in an athletic contest from which one of its athletes was barred because of his race. Wisconsin administrators subsequently withdrew their squad from the competition, and Notre Dame followed suit. That fall, the Missouri football team traveled to Columbus to challenge Ohio State. Reflecting a new, grudging acceptance of interracial competition away from home, the Tigers did not challenge the presence in the Ohio State lineup of halfback Charles Anderson, who scored a touchdown for the Buckeyes. That same month, Oklahoma visited Northwestern in Evanston, and although the Sooners accepted the inclusion of end Jimmy Smith on the Northwestern squad, a contingent of unhappy Oklahoma fans greeted Smith's entry into the contest with a loud round of boos and catcalls. This game was reportedly the first that the Sooners had ever played against a black opponent.<sup>22</sup>

This new stand against racial exclusion on the gridiron by Big Ten schools did not affect the status quo in the gymnasium, however, since conference basketball teams remained all-white. Northwestern University proves an excellent illustration of the differences in racial policies between football and basketball. From 1893 through 1941, sixteen African Americans played at least one season of football for Northwestern, but during the same period no black athlete competed for their basketball team, or any other Big Ten squad. Furthermore, the willingness of schools from the lower Midwest like Missouri and Oklahoma to drop their demands for racial exclusion while on the road did not mean that they had abandoned the color line at home. In the fall of 1940, Missouri and New York University were scheduled to meet in a November football match in Columbia. The 1940 NYU squad included an African American, fullback Leonard Bates, and school officials quietly agreed to omit him from the traveling squad. When several dissatisfied football players leaked news of this arrangement to their classmates in October, the NYU campus, one of the most radical in the country, erupted in protest. Outraged students circulated stacks of petitions, staged several large protest rallies, one of which attracted a crowd of two thousand, and organized a "Bates Must Play" movement. Despite this pressure, university administrators refused to change their minds, and the Violets departed for Missouri without their starting fullback. A few months later the university also withheld one basketball player and several track

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<sup>22</sup>Pittsburgh *Courier*, April 15, October 14, 1939; New York *Times*, April 5, 9, 1939; Chicago *Defender*, October 28, 1939; *Missouri Alumnus*, (April 1939), 10.

athletes from southern trips. When a group of student activists persisted in their protest campaign, the NYU administration suspended the so-called "Bates Seven" from school. Although this student activism failed to change NYU athletic policy during the 1940–1941 school year, it represented the strongest attack on the color line in college sports to that date and clearly exposed the complicity of northern colleges in maintaining the policy.<sup>23</sup>

World War II proved to be a watershed for race relations in college sports. The democratic values for which the war was fought clearly contradicted the principles of white supremacy and black exclusion on which the color line was based. In the immediate post-war years the gentlemen's agreement was discarded for games played in the North and even became endangered for competition held in the South. The University of Cincinnati, which aspired to become a national football power, was one of the last colleges to honor the color line in the North. Early in the fall season of 1946, Cincinnati benched senior end Willard Stargel, a World War II veteran, for a home football game against the University of Kentucky, which belonged to the Southeastern conference and played by "southern rules." Several weeks later, the Bearcats left Stargel behind for a road game against the University of Tulsa. After Cincinnati finished the season with a solid 8-2 record, the Sun Bowl in El Paso, Texas, invited the team to participate in its New Year's Day game, but the offer did not include Stargel. Many students and Cincinnati residents voiced opposition to accepting the invitation under these terms, and President Raymond Walters actually recommended against the trip. However, the athletic staff strongly favored accepting the opportunity, arguing that nothing less than the future of Cincinnati football was at stake. Torn between idealism and self-interest, the Board of Trustees narrowly voted 4-3 to authorize the university's first trip to a bowl game.<sup>24</sup>

Despite Cincinnati's willingness to accept racial exclusion immediately after the war, most Big Ten and other midwestern colleges had abandoned support for the color line in football by 1950. If southern universities still felt that they could not play an integrated game,

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<sup>23</sup>As a concession to NYU, Missouri agreed to compete against Bates when it played a return match in New York City in the fall of 1941. "Northwestern University African-American Football Players, 1893–1941," (official university list included with Patrick McQuinn, Evanston, Ill., to author, August 1, 1997); Donald Spivey, "End Jim Crow in Sports': The Protest at New York University, 1940–1941," *Journal of Sport History*, XV (Winter 1988), 285-303; New York *Times*, October 19, November 1, 1940, May 4, 2001; New York *Age*, April 14, November 9, 1940, April 4, 1941; Pittsburgh *Courier*, October 26, November 2, 9, 1941.

<sup>24</sup>Minutes, Board of Directors, University of Cincinnati, December 9, 1946 (University Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio); Kevin Grace, "The Stargel Story: One Measure of Progress," *UC Currents*, October 23, 1992, pp. 1-2; El Paso *Herald-Post*, December 6, 7, 1946.

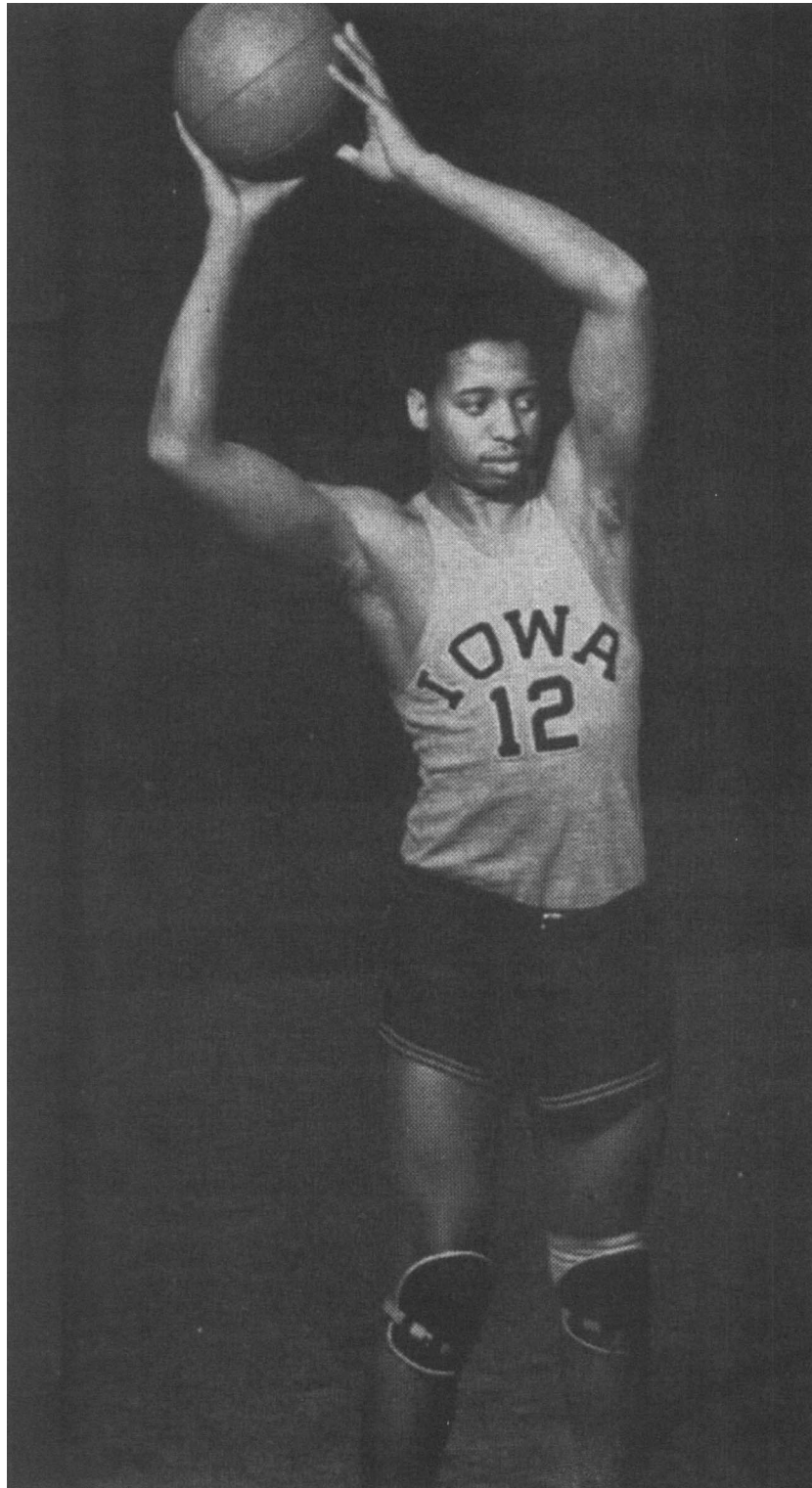
they were forced to find a northern opponent with an all-white team or abandon the national attention and considerable revenue that high-profile interregional contests produced. Moreover, northern colleges began to challenge the policy of racial exclusion for athletic events staged in the South. In the late 1940s, Harvard and Penn State played pioneering roles in challenging and breaking the color line on southern ground. The University of Iowa forced a breakthrough in 1950 when it refused to withhold its five black players from a contest at the University of Miami. Because of Iowa's persistence, Miami and the local city government backed down, permitting the first integrated football game ever held in the Orange Bowl. Bradley University likewise defended its three black players the following season when the Illinois school was scheduled to play Florida State in Tallahassee. When the governing board for Florida's public universities refused to abandon its requirement that the color line be maintained for all athletic competition inside the state, Bradley canceled the game.<sup>25</sup>

The growing trend against discrimination in college sports eventually forced Big Ten members to drop their color bar in basketball and pushed Big Six schools to abandon their more comprehensive restrictions for all varsity sports. In the 1944–1945 season, the University of Iowa became the first Big Ten school to field an integrated basketball team. Joining the Hawkeyes that year was Richard T. Culberson, who transferred from Virginia Union University. A graduate of Iowa City's public high school, the 6'-3" center was well known to local basketball fans. Coach Lawrence "Pops" Harrison never expressed to Culberson any fears about the reactions of rival coaches, and opposing players treated the center like other competitors. Harrison exercised considerable care in planning the team's road trips; consequently, Culberson normally shared meals and accommodations with his teammates. The main exception came in Indianapolis, where a local athletic club refused to allow him to stay with the rest of the team. Culberson averaged just under three points per game and saw regular action as a substitute on the Hawkeyes' 1945 championship squad. He returned for his senior year but remained in a supporting role. Apparently because Culberson never became a starter and wartime conditions produced a scramble to find healthy young men, most Big Ten basketball coaches viewed his participation as a temporary aberration and did not immediately change their recruitment policies. Curiously, most written accounts of Big Ten sports eventually forgot about his appearance for Iowa altogether.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Pittsburgh *Courier*, November 25, 1950, January 20, October 20, 1951; New York *Times*, October 18, 1951.

<sup>26</sup>Richard T. Culberson, Cleveland, Ohio, telephone interview with author, July 23, 2001; *University of Iowa Basketball Media Guide, 1944–1945* ([Iowa City, Iowa]; *University of Iowa Basketball Media Guide, 1945–1946* ([Iowa City, Iowa]).



RICHARD T. "DICK" CULBERSON, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, 1944–1945

University of Iowa Archives



Indiana University became the next Big Ten member to drop the color line for basketball. In the summer of 1947, Coach Branch McCracken signed Bill Garrett to a scholarship agreement. A 6'-2" center, Garrett had led Shelbyville High School to the Indiana state basketball championship several months earlier. Despite Garrett's obvious talent, not a single Big Ten college initially offered him a scholarship. Eventually several black alumni from Indiana University contacted President Herman B Wells about Garrett. After Wells and McCracken discussed the issue, the two agreed to recruit Garrett, even though they worried that some opponents might drop IU from their schedules. These fears proved false, but on road trips across the Midwest the Hoosiers did occasionally experience difficulty in finding hotels and restaurants that would accept an integrated team. Nonetheless, the university was well rewarded for its policy. The first black star in the Big Ten, Garrett led Indiana in both scoring and rebounding during all three of his varsity seasons and eventually earned all-conference first team and All-America second team honors.<sup>27</sup>

Two years after Garrett appeared in his first varsity game for the Hoosiers, Michigan State became the third Big Ten school to field an integrated basketball team. In the summer of 1950 the university awarded a scholarship to Rickey Ayala, a 5'-5" guard from New York City, who started for the Spartans during the 1951 season. At the University of Michigan John Codwell, Jr., and Donald Eaddy both joined the varsity for the 1952 season. The remaining Big Ten schools gradually began to recruit black players during the decade, and by 1960 the color line on the basketball court had finally disappeared. Notre Dame, the most prominent independent school in the Midwest, admitted its first black students in the mid-1940s, and athletic integration began a few years later. Joe Bertrand and Ente Shine became the first black varsity basketball players for the Irish during the 1952 season, while Dick Washington and Wayne Edmonds joined the football team for the 1953 season. Another Catholic college, Marquette University, fielded its first integrated football and basketball teams during the 1951-1952 school year.<sup>28</sup>

In the spring of 1956, the exclusion of a black baseball player on the Indiana squad from six games during a southern trip focused attention on the continuing existence of the color line in the lower South. Seeking warm weather for early season play, Indiana sched-

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<sup>27</sup>Herman B Wells, *Being Lucky: Reminiscences and Reflections* (Bloomington, Ind., 1980), 217-18; Bloomington, Ind. *Indiana Daily Student*, April 17, 1997; "Black History Month Feature: IU's Bill Garrett First Black Basketball Player in Big Ten," news release, Indiana University News Bureau, February 24, 1986; *Indianapolis Recorder*, December 11, 25, 1948; *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 11, 1947.

<sup>28</sup>*Lansing State Journal*, February 16, 1988; *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 8, 1951, September 26, 1953; *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 13, November 24, 1951; *Indianapolis Recorder*, October 9, 1948; Behee, *Hail to the Victors!*, 40-41.

22 March 1956

President Herman B Wells  
Administration Building  
Indiana University

Dear President Wells:

It has come to the attention of the Indiana University Chapter of the National Association For the Advancement of Colored People that a conscious act of discrimination involving Indiana University will be committed this Saturday. On that day the baseball team begins its spring tour of the South, leaving behind its two Negro players during six contests in Florida and Georgia. In response to the situation the I.U. Chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. unanimously passed the following resolution at its meeting of March 21, 1956:

Be it resolved that the Indiana University Chapter of the National Association For the Advancement of Colored People strongly urge this University to refuse to engage in any athletic contests in which discrimination is practiced, and

That this Chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. communicate with the Student Senate, Faculty Council, Administration, and Board of Trustees, to request them to urge the Athletic Department to cancel the baseball contests scheduled in Florida and Georgia.

In accordance with this resolution, and because of the urgency of its content, I respectfully request the Administration of the University to consider this resolution at its earliest convenience.

Respectfully submitted,

*Harry Bash*

Harry Bash, President  
I.U. Chapter, N.A.A.C.P.

RECEIVED  
MAR 23 1956  
ADMINISTRATIVE  
BUILDING  
INDIANA UNIVERSITY

RECEIVED  
MAR 23 1956  
ADMINISTRATIVE  
BUILDING  
INDIANA UNIVERSITY

THE INDIANA UNIVERSITY CHAPTER OF THE NAACP PROTESTED  
PLANS TO LEAVE WHITEHEAD BEHIND WHEN THE HOOSIERS  
WENT ON A SOUTHERN ROAD TRIP IN 1956

Indiana University Archives

March 22, 1956

Coach Ernie Andres  
Men's Gymnasium 202  
Indiana University  
Bloomington, Indiana

Dear Sir:

The following is a copy of the resolution passed by the Student Senate on Thursday, March 22, 1956:

Whereas: The Student Senate has made a clear stand in the past against discrimination, and,

Whereas: The Student Senate wishes to prevent any discriminatory practice against Indiana University students,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE INDIANA UNIVERSITY STUDENT SENATE:

Section I: That the University be strongly urged to refuse to play any athletic contest in which discrimination is practiced.

Section II: That the University be strongly urged to cancel the baseball contests scheduled in Florida and Georgia at this time.

Sincerely,

*Jerry Strauss*  
Jerry Strauss  
President of the Student Body

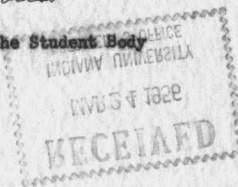
JS:jw

cc: President Wells  
Dean Shaffer  
Mr. Frank Allen  
Mr. Fenwick Reed

RECEIVED  
MAR 23 1956  
INDIANA UNIVERSITY

RECEIVED  
MAR 23 1956  
INDIANA UNIVERSITY

*Refer to Resolution Sat, 3/24/56*



THE INDIANA UNIVERSITY STUDENT SENATE ALSO OPPOSED THE  
RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WHITEHEAD

Indiana University Archives

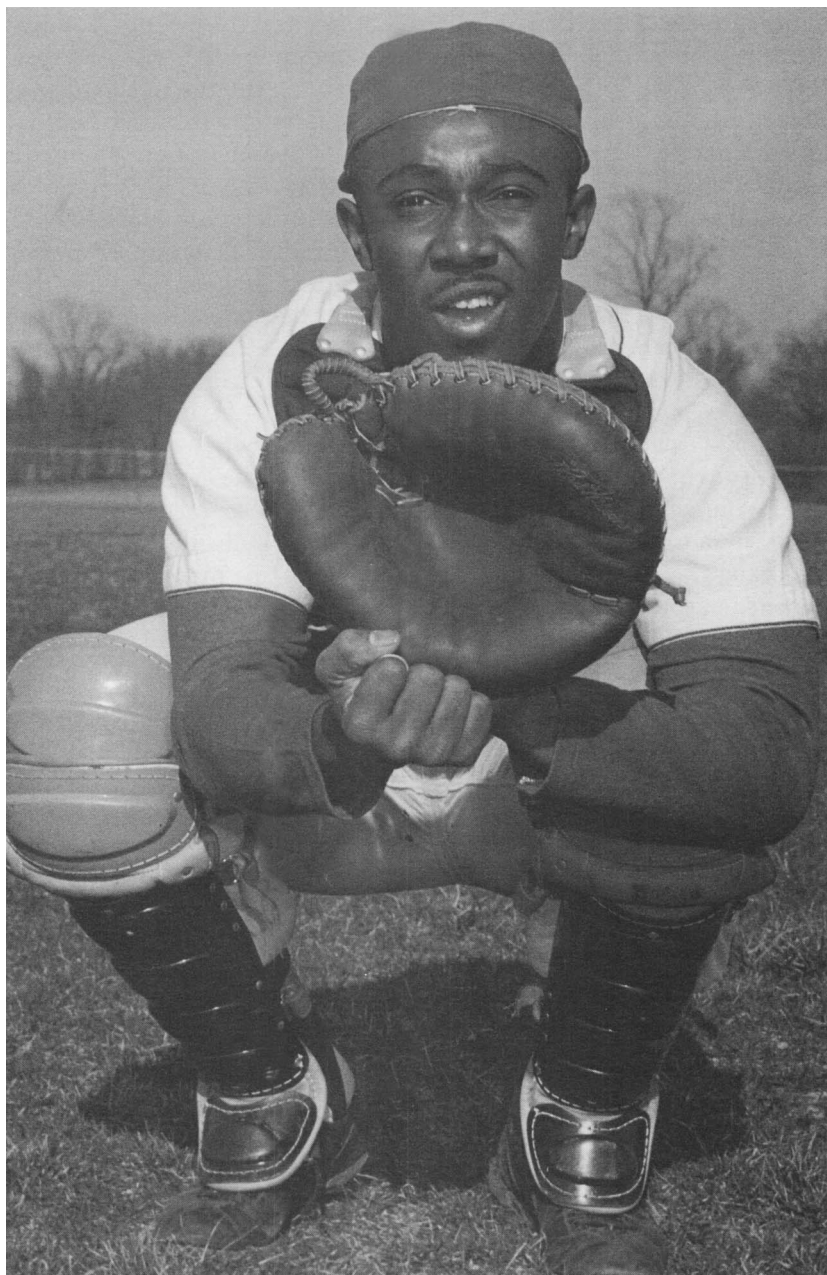
uled a series of two games each against Florida State, Florida, and Georgia State Teachers College for late March. Several weeks before the trip, Hoosier officials learned that regulations established by the governing boards of the three southern colleges prohibited integrated competition, consequently denying I.U. catcher Eddie Whitehead of Madison, Indiana, the right to play. As the team's departure approached, several organizations including the campus chapter of the NAACP and the IU student senate urged university administrators to resist racial discrimination and cancel the tour if necessary. Wells declined to keep the baseball squad at home, explaining that it was "impossible to change the team's spring schedule in time for them to get some practice before the regular season." However, Wells did issue a statement declaring that in the future Indiana would not schedule opponents who refused to play against black athletes. Purdue, Notre Dame, and Butler promptly announced that they too would follow a similar policy in scheduling southern opponents. Wells's statement prompted several hostile letters, including one note from the "K K Klan," which labeled him a "cheap negro loving son of a bitch" and urged him to "keep your teams out of [the] South." The public outcry over the Whitehead incident forced many midwestern colleges to take a strong public stand against honoring the color line in those few Deep South states where legislatures or boards of regents still maintained Jim Crow on the playing fields.<sup>29</sup>

Beginning in the late 1940s, members of the Big Seven conference (later known as the Big Eight) slowly moved to integrate their football and basketball teams. In 1946, following inquiries about the continued exclusion of African Americans in sports, the conference unanimously adopted a policy that was only slightly less restrictive than the previous unwritten understanding. The new regulation stated that "the personnel of *visiting* squads shall be so selected as to conform with any restrictions imposed upon a *host* institution" by its regents or state government. This meant that any Big Seven school hosting a conference game had the right to bar black players on the visiting team, if there was a state or university policy against interracial competition. Small wonder then that one observer dismissed the new statement as merely "the gentlemen's agreement in writing."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Whitehead accompanied the Hoosier squad on its southern trip as an observer. He was forced to stay in separate accommodations from those of his white teammates in Florida and Georgia, and while in Tallahassee he practiced with the Florida A & M team. *Indianapolis Times*, March 27, 28, 1956; *Louisville Times*, March 28, 1956; *New York Times*, March 24, 1956; *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 31, 1956; Jerry Strauss to Ernie Andres, March 22, 1956, Harry Bash to Herman B Wells, March 22, 1956 (University Archives, Indiana University).

<sup>30</sup>Technically the 1946 rule did not prohibit a Big Eight school from including an African American on its team and using the player in games against nonconference foes or an agreeable league rival. However, these limitations made it impractical to recruit black athletes. "Minutes of the Meeting of the Faculty Representatives of the M.V.I.A.A., May 17 and 18, 1946," typescript, courtesy of Prentice Gautt, Kansas City, Mo., 2-3; *New York Times*, May 19, 1946; Griffin, *University of Kansas*, 661, 767.



EDDIE WHITEHEAD, INDIANA UNIVERSITY, 1956

Indiana University Archives

The decision to adopt a formal exclusion policy upset many students at Nebraska, Kansas, Kansas State, and Iowa State. Student governments at Nebraska and Kansas had previously adopted resolutions endorsing the participation of black athletes in the league. Resistance to the official policy was especially strong on the Nebraska campus. In November 1947, the student council there adopted a resolution urging university officials to work to have the Big Seven repeal its racial ban and to consider withdrawing from the league "if the action is not taken." The *Daily Nebraskan* strongly supported the student government's position and published a poll showing that 58 percent of students questioned favored their school's dropping out of the conference unless the color line was eliminated. At a late November meeting of student representatives from five league schools in Lincoln, participants adopted a resolution urging the Big Seven to replace its exclusion clause with one which guaranteed that "any eligible student of a member institution shall be allowed to participate in all competitive athletic events at any member institution." In a surprise move, the student government at the University of Missouri endorsed the meeting's resolution. The following month, the athletic board of the University of Nebraska formally called upon the conference to delete the controversial clause. But at the end of 1947 the council of Big Seven faculty representatives tabled the Nebraska request.<sup>31</sup>

Kansas State then took the lead in challenging the Big Eight's color line. During the summer of 1948, the football coaching staff urged local star Harold Robinson of Manhattan High School to join the university team. Despite not receiving a scholarship, Robinson nonetheless enrolled at the university and started on the freshman team, paying for his expenses by washing dishes and mopping floors. After a coaching change at the end of the season, new head coach Ralph Graham decided to grant Robinson a scholarship. Graham then sent a letter to the next Big Seven meeting, boldly announcing his intention to use Robinson during the fall season of 1949. "Since there is no ruling against the use of Negro players," he explained, "we plan to use Harold except at universities where there is a definite rule that decrees otherwise." When the league did not respond, Graham continued with his plans, and Robinson started at the center position during his sophomore and junior seasons. During these two years he experienced rough play and racial taunts in several games, and on trips to Oklahoma and Missouri he was forced to stay in separate lodging from his teammates. Just before the start of his senior season in 1951, Robinson was drafted into military service and left school. That fall sophomore Veryl Switzer, an outstanding

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<sup>31</sup>New York *Times*, April 18, 1946, November 20, 23, 30, December 11, 14, 1947; R. McLaran Sawyer, *Centennial History of the University of Nebraska* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1973), II, 48, 150.



PRENTICE GAUTT WHEN HE  
WAS HONORED BY OKLAHOMA  
UNIVERSITY IN 1999. IN THE  
1950S, HE PLAYED FOOTBALL  
FOR OKLAHOMA.

Oklahoma University

player from Nicodemus, an all-black Kansas town, became the second African American to compete for the Wildcats. Since both young men had been high school stars inside the state, Kansas whites were probably more willing to accept their presence than that of outsiders.<sup>32</sup>

At the University of Kansas, many students supported the recruitment of African Americans, but university coaches were slower to act than their counterparts at Kansas State. After World War II, black and liberal white students at the university established a local civil rights movement, which challenged discrimination in housing, movie theaters, restaurants, and eventually athletics. Perhaps influenced by this campus activism, Kansas Chancellor Deane W. Malott decided in May 1947 to drop the school's Jim Crow policy for sports. Malott announced that "any regularly enrolled student at KU

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<sup>32</sup>During the 1949 season the Kansas State coaching staff left Robinson behind for a road game at Memphis State, because they feared he might be in danger if they directly challenged exclusion in a southern city. Kansas *Industrialist*, September 22, 1949; Manhattan [Kans.] *Mercury*, November 20, 1991; Kansas State University *Wildcat Weekly*, February 18, 1995; Tim Fitzgerald, *Kansas State Wildcat Handbook* (Wichita, Kans., 1996), 54-57; and miscellaneous clippings, University Archives (Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kans.)

may try out for intercollegiate athletics," provided he met conference eligibility requirements. But Phog Allen, the highly successful basketball coach of the Jayhawks, publicly denied that there had been any change in policy for his teams and instead recommended that African Americans participate in track and field, because that sport "didn't require as much body contact as basketball." Despite the liberal student atmosphere in Lawrence and the support of administrators, neither the football nor the basketball program at KU successfully recruited black players for their varsity teams until the mid-1950s. Several other Big Eight members also were slow to desegregate their football and basketball teams. A key breakthrough came in 1956 when Coach Charles "Bud" Wilkinson of Oklahoma University awarded a football scholarship to freshman Prentice Gautt only one year after the school admitted its first black undergraduates. By 1960, every conference school had fielded integrated teams, finally ending the era of segregation in the Big Eight.<sup>33</sup>

Reflecting on the period from 1890 to 1960, it is clear that the color line played an important role in intercollegiate and interregional sports. During the 1890s and early 1900s, the color line existed in the Midwest, since some universities in the region denied black athletes the opportunity to compete. By 1920, such Jim Crow policies appeared primarily in competition against college teams from southern and border states. Yet exclusion continued on a reduced level inside the Midwest, especially in Big Ten basketball and from 1928 onward in both football and basketball in the Big Six. After World War II, however, racial exclusion came under widespread attack outside the South. During the 1950s, midwestern universities gradually integrated their athletic programs and eventually helped force the abandonment of racial discrimination in interregional contests. The slowness with which some of these universities acted against Jim Crow should remind us that before 1960 the color line in big-time college sports was not exclusively a southern phenomenon but in reality an American phenomenon.

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<sup>33</sup>One critic of Phog Allen sarcastically commented that the veteran coach "would rather lose every game on the schedule than allow a Negro to play on his team." *New York Times*, March 30, 1947; Kristine M. McCusker, "The Forgotten Years' of America's Civil Rights Movement: The University of Kansas, 1939-1961" (Master's thesis, University of Kansas, 1987), 101-102, 107-10; Mike Fisher, *Deaner: Fifty Years of University of Kansas Athletics* (Kansas City, Mo., 1986), 204-206, 269-71; Diane Boucher Ayotte, Columbia, Mo., to author, August 18, 1994.