Racial Integration in the Field of Sports

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Chapter III

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Should the ghost of the presumably "late" Adolf Hitler decide to visit these United States in the summer of 1954, and should this spirit wish to look in on an exhibition of the great American sport, baseball, as it is played by the top-ranking teams of the nation —the sixteen members of the two major leagues—and should it decide to remain at the scene of any single game, it would assuredly have a most uneasy afternoon.

The victories of Jesse Owens in the Olympic games at Berlin in 1936 possibly, as much as anything else, made the Nazi leader reveal the depth and the pettiness of his superior racist theories. Time after time, when the great Negro American athlete finished an event at the head of the field, Hitler is reported either to have turned his back or to have left the stadium. The record shows that in spite of the fact that Owens received three gold first-place medals, not one of these was presented to him by Der Fuhrer and not once was he escorted to Der Fuhrer's box to receive the customary handshake and acknowledgement which the chief Nazi accorded to the other first-place winners in the games.

In contrast to this behavior one has simply to glance at the way in which Negro contestants and participants in virtually all kinds of athletic events receive normal treatment on the playing fields of these United States in the summer of 1954. The cynic will correctly say that eighteen years had elapsed between the 1936 games and the 1954 period of American acceptance of Negro athletes. True enough the passing of the years has brought major advances, but the years alone have not been responsible for the present state of things. The very fact that there were many Negroes on the official American Olympic team in 1936, that there had been Negroes on the teams before that date and that there have been Negroes on the teams since then, indicates that the American attitude toward integration in the field of sports even in 1936 was far and away in advance of the Nazi attitude characterized by Adolf Hitler.

Acceptance of Negroes as fully qualified to participate in sports right along with their white competitors has not been thrust upon us nor has it come with any great degree of suddenness. The social historian would probably have a difficult time if he attempted to pin down with any degree of exactitude the date, the place, the event in which for the first time an American Negro competed as an individual in an organized or amateur sport against white athletes or played as a member of an interracially mixed team.

If one will agree to consider horse racing as an American sport within the limits of the subject under discussion, it will be discovered that in the second Kentucky Derby, run on May 15, 1876, there was at least one Negro jockey among the eleven men who rode the horses in the race on that date. (In-

cidentally, the records for the first Derby, runs in 1875, are incomplete in that they do not list the riders of any except the winning horse.) The third Kentucky Derby, run on May 22, 1877, was won by a horse named Baden-Baden, and the winning jockey was a Negro, Billy Walker. In the history of this great American turf event another Negro, Ike Murphy, in the early years came to be known as the best jockey of his period, establishing a record for wins which was only recently broken by the presently great horseman Eddie Arcaro. There were many other very good, some famous, Negro jockeys on the American racetracks in the late nineteenth century.

Another field in which the Negro was early accepted as a participant was boxing. As early as 1890 there were American Negroes who were recognized as world champions in their divisions. Included in this group was George Dixon, who held the 118-pound bantam-weight championship in 1890. The turn of the century ushered in the period in which Joe Gans held the light-weight championship, Joe Walcott the welter-weight, and Jack Johnson the heavyweight world's championship. In truth, the number of Negro professional boxers has been so large over the last fifty years that an entire article might well be devoted to this group alone. Though all of them were not popular champions, members of the Negro group who held world championships in the field of boxing in the twentieth century have been legion. Fortunately for race relations, most of these men have been individuals who were not only superior athletes but who were acceptable as fellow-countrymen to the great majority of American sports fans. Race relations in America were undoubtedly advanced by the fact that a courageous, gallant, skillful, yet withal humble Joe Louis won the admiration of the American sporting public and never let the plaudits of his followers lure or inveigle him into ungentlemanly activities. We should never forget that one of Joe Louis's great contributions was to make the American people forget the selfish life of another great Negro prize fighter.

American Negroes in track and field events were close behind the Negro boxers in the first half of this century both in numbers and in the high quality of their performances. Howard Drew represented the United States in the 1912 Olympic games in Stockholm. Six years before that, John B. Taylor participated as a member of the American team at Athens. Following Taylor and Drew came Sol Butler, Earl Johnson, DeHart Hubbard, Ned Gourdin as stellar performers in the various outdoor events. Beginning with the 1932 Olympiad held in Los Angeles, California, the American Negro athlete came to be recognized as an outstanding performer for his team and nation. There were probably half a dozen Negroes on the 1932 team, outstanding among whom were Ralph Metcalfe, Eddie Toland, Edward Gordon, Cornelius Johnson, and James Johnson. At the 1936 games mentioned above there were so many men and women of color who held membership on the American teams that Adolf Hitler is reported derisively to have labeled them as America's African allies.

Time will not permit nor is it necessary for us to go into great detail, listing a year-by-year, name-by-name

account of the participation of American Negro athletes in public sporting events in these United States. Before we move closer to the present time, however, we must make note of several other great athletes of color whose outstanding performances were acclaimed in their own day and whose performances and personalities contributed to the acceptance generally accorded Negro athletes in America today.

In the early part of the twentieth century there were a few Negroes who were able to compete on even terms with others as members of varsity teams in eastern colleges. William Lewis was a renowned center on the Harvard football team. Mr. Lewis not only played a great game of football for "dear old Harvard", but after his college days became an eminent lawyer, and by his appointment by President Taft to the post of Assistant U. S. Attorney General, he goes down in history as the first of his race to be appointed to a high sub-Cabinet position in these United States. Fritz Pollard, at Brown University, a few years later, was recognized as the outstanding half back of his day, being chosen on every all-American team of the period. Shortly thereafter there appeared a great group of outstanding Negro football players in midwestern colleges. This group included Duke Slater of Iowa, now a municipal court judge in Chicago; the late William Young, lineman at the University of Illinois; Sam Peyton, now a Chicago physician, half back at Northwestern; and the farwestern star tackle, Brice Taylor, at the University of Southern California. During the twenties and the thirties and the forties, Negro football players in the nonsegregated colleges of the nation came to be accepted, praised, and/or criticized on the basis of their individual merits and their performances. By the middle of the century it was no longer an oddity to see a Negro athlete trotting out on the gridiron, being cheered, second-guessed, booed, criticized, hoisted upon shoulders, just as any other athlete of the period was treated. Nonsegregated high schools of the nation also began to field teams which were interracial. And the professional football teams of the middle and far-west began to hire Negro players.

The first achievement in the field of interracial sports was to have Negroes accepted as members of the competing teams or accepted as individuals to compete against other individuals in athletic events. By the 1930's this situation was not only firmly established, but met with general approval in all those sections of the country where there were no laws dealing with segregation of the races on the statute books of the states in which the events took place.

The second step in integration in the field of sports now had to be made. It had been established that Negro athletes could be good and they could be gentlemen. What would happen when they, either as individuals or as team members, might be expected to compete with teams coming from below the Mason-Dixon Line where Negroes had not been accepted in the same manner or where the Northern teams moved South across the Line in intersectional contests? On a number of occasions southern teams went north and played against local teams which had Negroes as members of them. This

was particularly true in the field of college football and in track and field events. In truth, in these latter events individual white boys from the South had for many years been competing against Negroes in the national AAU championships, the Penn Relays, and at other times when regional and national champions were being chosen. There were a few memorable clashes. Washington and Jefferson College in Washington, Pennsylvania, had to cancel a football game with a Southern opponent rather than bench a regular half back who happened to be a Negro. On another occasion, Harvard refused to send a team into the South when it was requested that it leave behind one of the team members, a Negro. (Be it here stated to the credit of the University of Virginia that at a subsequent date Harvard brought a Negro lineman down to Charlottesville, where he played in the football game against the University of Virginia and from all accounts was treated as just another member of the Harvard team.)

Gradually Southern teams which scheduled events with Northern opponents recognized the right of the opponent to place on the field as its representative any man who met the athletic and scholastic standards of the institution. Today there is probably not a single Southern college team in the country which, having scheduled a game with a Northern opponent on the latter's home grounds, would raise a question of race with respect to the men who would represent the host team.

As I have indicated above, the third step is now being taken, though it is as yet not a very big step: some southern colleges and universities will permit northern colleges to bring into the south whomever they desire as qualified representatives of their institutions when they engage in athletic events. The colleges in Texas have been particularly noteworthy in this respect. But it is also true that institutions located in the upper-tier of the Southern states—Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri, Oklahoma—have without bitterness and without undue publicity—engaged in athletic contests at home against racially-mixed teams. If memory and the records do not fail me, the University of North Carolina should be placed with this liberal group of institutions located in the South.

It is a bit too early to know what the attitude of the Southern colleges will be toward permitting Negro athletes to represent them, since at the present time most of the Negro students who are enrolled in Southern institutions generally recognized as institutions for white persons are registered in the graduate and professional schools and are therefore not eligible for intercollegiate athletic competition. However, it has recently come to my attention that one Southern institution which has enrolled Negroes in its undergraduate college of liberal arts is interested in bringing Negro athletes to its campus and is expecting to have these men represent the institution. In this connection I can not forego relating an account of a conversation this writer recently had with an alumnus of the University of South Carolina. We were discussing the prodigious feats of J. C. Caroline, Negro star half back on the 1953 University of Illinois football team. Caroline's home town is Columbia, South Carolina; he was graduated from a Negro high school in that city, but he wound up as a star performer

on a great football team hundreds and hundreds of miles away. This alumnus was bemoaning the fact that the University of Illinois was receiving the acclaim and the publicity which resulted from Caroline's great performances on the gridiron, when his Alma Mater might well have benefited from a hometown boy's activities.

The last great citadel of lily-whiteism in American sports was organized baseball. This was also probably the hardest to conquer.

Many years ago there must have been Negroes who played in organized baseball who were light or brown enough to "pass" as American white men or as foreigners. The late Richard B. Harrison, De Lawd of The Green Pastures, told me that under a fictitious name he played first base in organized baseball as a member of the Buffalo, New York team. He assured me that there were others who did as he.

Once many years ago when I was coaching the baseball team at Livingstone College, we played the team from Johnson C. Smith University at Wearn Field, Charlotte, North Carolina, on an Easter Monday. One of the big-league teams was playing the local Charlotte white baseball team the next afternoon. Players and officials of the big-league team were in the stands during part of the Livingstone-Smith game. The Negro short stop of the Livingstone team was approached by an assistant manager with the proposition that if he would decide to change his name and claim Cuban ancestry and nationality, his team would be glad to give the youngster a tryout. The young man, William Evans of Louisville, Kentucky, refused the offer—for the simple reason that he preferred to get an education.

For a number of years before Negroes were openly admitted into organized baseball there were barn-storming, end-of-the-season tours with scheduled games between groups of star white baseball players on one team and outstanding Negro players on the other. Lyman Yokeley, star Negro pitcher of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, one-time student at Livingstone College and later mainstay of the Baltimore Black Sox baseball team, was for several years a member of the Negro team recruited to play against the big leaguers. Competition between the two groups was keen. In one season in the late 1920's Yokeley pitched against and shut out the white All-Stars in three games. On one occasion he struck out the National League home run king, Hack Wilson of the Chicago Cubs, four times in succession. At the end of the game Wilson good-naturedly gave his bat to Yokeley—who promptly painted it black and blue, the colors of his school team, Livingstone, and sent it back to the campus as a trophy.

In such ways as this did the American public first begin to notice the calibre of some Negro baseball players and at the same time accept the idea of seeing them compete against white Americans. Meanwhile the color-bar persisted.

When Jack Roosevelt (better known as Jackie) Robinson was signed to play with the Montreal, Brooklyn Dodger Farm, team in 1946, the first open, actual dropping of the racial barrier in professional baseball occurred. The rest of Robinson's phenomenal career in organized baseball to date is well known to almost every baseball fan,

white or Negro, South or North, in America. After the first year at Montreal, in which he led the International League in batting with an average of .348, stole forty bases, led the second basemen of the League in fielding with a .985 percentage, and tied for League-leading scoring honors with 113 runs, Jackie was signed in 1947 with the parent Brooklyn Dodgers team. He soon became not only the first Negro in the major Leagues, but he was named Rookie of the Year in the National League for 1947. From there he went on to win many other well-deserved honors.

His contribution to race relations can not be praised too highly. Mr. Robinson was a college-trained man, having attended Pasadena Junior College and the University of California at Los Angeles. He was a great college athlete, earning twenty-four varsity letters in his collegiate days. He had played professional football with the Los Angeles Bulldogs. He had taught and coached at a college for Negroes, Sam Huston, in Austin, Texas; and during World War II he had served overseas as a lieutenant in our armed forces. He entered organized baseball directly from a Negro professional team, the Kansas City Monarchs. His bearing, culture, intelligence, deportment and demeanor, and his pleasant personality buttressed his great athletic ability and made of him an individual who could be accepted by people of all racial groups. To Branch Rickey, General Manager of the Brooklyn Dodger baseball empire, must always go the credit for his courage, intelligence and foresight in picking a man like Robinson to spearhead the effort to get Negro players accepted in the Great American Sport. Mr. Robinson himself must always receive the credit for making good as a pioneer in a very difficult situation.

It is well in this day, when the Governor of the State of Georgia is saying what he and the people of Georgia will not permit to take place in that state, to remember an event which occurred in April, 1947. The Brooklyn Dodgers were scheduled to play a three-game series with the Atlanta Crackers baseball team in Atlanta. By this time, every one knew that Jackie Robinson had been signed by Brooklyn and would be expected to play in the inter-League game as the Brooklyn team moved from Florida Northward following its spring training season. Dire predictions had been made as to what would happen in Atlanta should the Dodgers presume to field a team which included Robinson. Efforts were made to get the state legislature to outlaw interracial sporting events. The Ku Klux Klan is reported to have threatened to break up the game if the Negro was in the lineup of the Brooklyn team. The legislature, however, never passed upon the proposed resolution because it never was reported out of committee. The owners and management of the Atlanta Crackers stated that they had no control over the team which Brooklyn would decide to send onto the field.

The fateful day arrived. More than 25,000 people—Negro and white—jammed the Atlanta Crackers' baseball park, the largest crowd up to the present ever to attend a baseball game in Atlanta. Robinson went through batting practice and the fielding warmup period with the rest of his team-mates. Finally the game began and his time

at bat occurred. Quietly and calmly he went to the plate. Immediately there were scattered boos to be heard coming from the crowd. But then, as if by magic, it appeared as though every person in the entire grandstand stood, and great cheers began to mount for Robinson—cheers a thousand times more thunderous than the scattered boos. If fifty men booed, at least 25,000 others cheered. The baseball fans of Atlanta and surrounding towns in Georgia had answered the question as to whether a Negro would be accepted in organized baseball. (By way of footnote it would be added that not a single overt incident took place during the three-game series and, further, that Jackie gave the crowd one of its greatest thrills when he stole home to score a run in the second game.)

At the beginning of the training season in 1954, thirteen of the sixteen Major League teams had Negroes in their baseball training camps, which were scattered from Florida to California. Only the Boston Red Sox and the Detroit Tigers of the American League, and the Philadelphia Phillies of the National League did not have one or more Negro players in their spring training camps. More than forty Negroes were scattered among the other thirteen clubs. This is being written as the Major League baseball season is under way. Many of these forty Negroes have been kept; others have been farmed out or sold to minor league affiliates.

The extent of Negro participation in organized baseball is also a matter of note. Negroes have been accepted not only in the major leagues but in virtually all of the minor leagues also, including the International, the American Association, the Pacific Coast, the Texas, the South Atlantic, the Georgia-Florida, and the Southern Association. The city of Birmingham, Alabama rescinded an ordinance which had made it illegal for a racially-mixed team to play in that city, largely because the Atlanta Crackers had decided to give a Negro (Nat Peeples, outfielder) a chance to make the team. Peeples appeared as a member of the Atlanta team during the spring training season and a few times as the regular schedule got under way in the Southern Association, but he was not able to win a place on the Atlanta team and at this writing he has been sent to a lower league. He is now a member of the Jacksonville, Florida, baseball team.

The football season of 1953 deserves some mention. The professional teams again included many Negroes on their rosters. Outstanding performers like Marion Motley and Len Ford of the Cleveland Browns, Buddy Young of the Baltimore Colts, Dan Towler of the Los Angeles Rams, and Joe Perry of the San Francisco Forty-Niners continued to be acclaimed by football fans across the nation for their stellar play. Among the colleges the participation of Negroes was taken for granted. In addition to J. C. Caroline mentioned in the earlier part of this article, the University of Illinois had two or three other prominently mentioned Negro players. Michigan State College presented Leroy Bolden, and even Notre Dame appeared with two Negro players —Dick Washington, and Wayne Edmonds. These two men played with the Notre Dame team when it engaged the University of North Carolina at

Chapel Hill. Two Negroes on the University of Pittsburgh football team —Henry Ford and Bobby Epps—were on the team that played against the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. Not only had the Negro now been accepted as a member of the team, but there were no longer objections to his playing against Southern teams even when the games were scheduled in the South.

At the annual Rose Bowl game, generally acknowledged to be the outstanding post-season football classic, when—on January 1, 1954—, the University of California at Los Angeles was host to the Michigan State College team in the Pasadena Bowl, by actual count there were seventeen Negro members of the combined squads.

Negro players have also been accepted in collegiate and professional basketball, and have just been able to participate in the more social atmosphere of amateur tennis. Dr. Reginald Weir of New York City has, for the last several years, played in tournaments in and around New York; and Miss Althea Gibson, product of one of the southern Negro colleges, has finally made the grade in big-time amateur tennis. Miss Gibson is the first of her racial group ever to be included in a national ranking. For the season of 1953 she was ranked seventh among all of the women players in America. She has also done what no other American Negro has ever accomplished—appeared on the center court as a participant in the famous Wimbledon tournament in England.

A few Negroes have played in open golf events. The All-American Championship Tournament annually held on the Tam-O-Shanter Links in Chicago has permitted Negroes to enter. Most famous of the Negro golfers—though not the best of those who have participated—is Joe Louis. Flint, Michigan also has permitted Negroes to play in the annual Michigan open tournament staged in that city. All across the Northern and Western sections of America Negroes play on public links, and time without end have been accepted in interracial matches.

There are a few dark spots remaining in the picture. One situation immediately comes to mind. Each year a committee picks the outstanding amateur athlete to receive the Sullivan Award. No Negro has ever received this trophy. During the season of 1953 Mal Whitfield, Olympic champion and world's record holder, was generally recognized by the public and by sports writers as a logical contender for the Sullivan Award. When the final announcement of the choice was made, it was found that Whitfield's outstanding records had been ignored. Over and against this, however, one can find some satisfaction in the fact that when Roy Campanella, catcher for the Brooklyn Dodgers, was named Most Valuable Player in the National League for 1953, this marked the fifth year in a row that a Negro had achieved this distinction.

Looking generally at the activities going on in the field of sports in the United States of America in 1954, the ghost of Hitler would be completely disheartened. Certainly it appeared that in this area few in America accepted the Nazi doctrine of the superior race; thousands of tan and brown and black boys and girls with bats and

balls and gloves and spiked shoes and racquets and headguards were just American youth who were being paid to entertain their more sedate fellow country men or just young people enjoying the outdoor sports with their friendly rivals.