

*Harold Robinson, standout center for Kansas State College, broke the color barrier in 1949.  
Courtesy of Morse Department of Special Collections, Kansas State University Libraries, Manhattan.*

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# “To Help Foster Athletic Equality Here in the Midwest”: Defeating Jim Crow in the Big Seven Conference

*by S Zebulon Baker*

In April 1949 Milton S. Eisenhower, president of Kansas State College, invited his head football coach, Ralph Graham, to his office for a friendly chat. Spring practice had just finished, and Graham had declared himself “satisfied” with his team’s prospects for the upcoming season—a surprising note of confidence given that Kansas State had yet to win against any of its Big Seven conference rivals since the end of World War II. No one expected it to be a championship contender—a win or two would be regarded as nothing short of miraculous—but this squad appeared more competitive than any Kansas State had fielded in years. Guarded optimism was the order of the day, although Graham worried about depth, especially along his offensive line, which had been bruised and battered a year earlier. Here, again, he found an unlikely bright spot in his new center, Harold Robinson, the star of Kansas State’s 1948 freshman team. “Plenty fast for his size,” this Manhattan native demonstrated more promise than any player on Graham’s depth chart. “If he continues to show the improvement he has,” the coach predicted to a local sportswriter, “there is no doubt he’ll play a lot of ball this year.”<sup>1</sup>

That was precisely the topic of conversation that Eisenhower wanted to take up with Graham. Robinson was a standout for more than his athletic ability, however; he was the only African American on Kansas State’s roster. His mere presence on the squad violated a Big Seven rule, passed unanimously by the league’s governing body of faculty representatives in 1946, that prohibited participation by black athletes on varsity teams in every sport. Eisenhower hated this bylaw—and not only because it illustrated the irrelevance of presidents in setting competitive policy in the faculty-led conference. Since assuming the presidency at Kansas State in 1943 the younger brother of General Dwight D. Eisenhower had waged a war of his own against segregation on campus, yielding modest results. Football, however,

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The author gratefully acknowledges that archival research in this article was collected, in part, with the assistance of the Friends of the Princeton University Library Research Grant; State Historical Society of Iowa Research Grant for Authors; Elmer L. Andersen Research Scholars Program Grant, from the University of Minnesota; and Dole Archive Research Fellowship, from the Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics at the University of Kansas.

1. “Manhattan Youth First Negro to Play in Big 7,” *Kansas Industrialist*, September 22, 1949, “Athletic Department—Football, History of Harold Robinson,” Morse Department of Special Collections, Kansas State University Libraries, Manhattan (hereafter cited as Morse Collections); “Full Scale Game Ends Practice,” *Kansas State Collegian*, April 26, 1949.

was a place for a potential breakthrough; in his mind, introducing a black athlete onto the varsity team would galvanize Kansas State's emerging racial tolerance. Eisenhower had already urged his coaching staff to flout the rule by allowing black students to join the freshman team, even though he acknowledged that "we cannot use them" in games against the Big Seven's segregated powerhouses, the Universities of Missouri and Oklahoma, whose faculty representatives had pressured their timid colleagues into formally drawing the color line originally. Two black students played freshman ball in 1947, but, as Eisenhower lamented, "they were not good enough to make the varsity." This setback did not slacken the pace of change (Robinson arrived the next August), nor did it weaken Eisenhower's resolve "to eliminate racial discrimination in athletics." "We are prepared here to add colored boys to our varsity," he wrote in early 1948, "just as soon as we find ones who can meet the competition."<sup>2</sup>

Now, with Robinson's talent bringing that search to a decisive end, Eisenhower and Graham met to discuss their options. "Ralph," Eisenhower asked pointedly, "how do you feel about playing Negroes?" Without missing a beat, Graham exclaimed, "I'm 100 percent for it!" It was the answer that the president wanted—and expected—from his coach, who had made a name for himself at the University of Wichita for coaching Linwood Sexton, the best halfback in the Missouri Valley Conference and one of the best-known black players of the mid-1940s. Graham was forced to leave Sexton at home whenever his team traveled south, including a loss at the University of Tulsa that cost Wichita the 1947 Missouri Valley championship. He had no desire to repeat these indignities with Robinson—or the competitive disadvantages they caused his team. Nor did Eisenhower, who listened intently as his coach warned of the hostile reception that likely awaited Robinson. It was safer to bench him, Graham advised, but that did not make it right. With that, Eisenhower's mind was made up. Graham would attend the Big Seven's spring meetings in Kansas City the following week with a message for his fellow head coaches. "I want you to

make an announcement down there," he instructed Graham, "that we plan to use colored personnel on our football team from now on." Other coaches could raise their objections, but Kansas State had made its choice. Robinson would play, Eisenhower proclaimed, "and that was the end of it."<sup>3</sup>

A few days later, sportswriter Harry E. Morrow grouched in the *Lawrence Journal-World* that Eisenhower's "flat statement" was "typical of the way . . . the school up the Kaw moves." "The Aggies make their own rules," he sneered, and tell the "rest of the conference go hang." Kansas State was not alone, however, in advocating black participation in the Big Seven but it was a relative late-comer to the quarter-century struggle to guarantee the right of black athletes to play in every league contest and venue. While faculty representatives and coaches defended the necessity of the color line, an equally unlikely alliance of administrators and student activists challenged its fairness, committing themselves, as Nebraska chancellor Reuben Gustavson wrote Eisenhower, "to do a little work to get the official attitude changed."<sup>4</sup> Theirs was an uphill battle from the start. In a postwar world that expected its institutions of higher education to embody the democratic ideals for which returning veterans believed that they had fought—tolerance, openness, and fair play—the Big Seven continued to acquiesce to the southern racial mores of Missouri and Oklahoma, a posture that its faculty leaders had deliberately assumed since the conference's founding in 1926. Black participation in league games was informally discouraged but never officially banned until passage of the 1946 rule. This extraordinary bylaw inspired a years-long public debate on equal opportunity for black athletes, a dialogue praised by the *New York Times* as one of those "straws in the wind showing that we are making progress in breaking down the barriers of racial bias." By raising their voices against "this disquieting feature" of Big Seven competition, as University of Colorado president Robert Stearns labeled this rule, both administrators and students would ultimately foster the circumstances inside the conference

2. Milton S. Eisenhower to R. G. Gustavson, January 21, 1948, folder "Intercollegiate Athletics, 1947–1948," box 3, Office of the Chancellor Records: R. G. Gustavson Series, Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, (hereafter cited as Gustavson Series). On Eisenhower's racial reforms at Kansas State, see Stephen Ambrose and Richard H. Immerman, *Milton S. Eisenhower: Educational Statesman* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), esp. 98–104.

3. Tim Bascom, "First on the Field," *K-Stater*, December 1997, 10–14; D. Scott Fritchen, "I Was There to Play Ball," *Powercat Illustrated*, October 29, 1999, 7–11; "Wildcats Drill for Clash with Strong Tulsa Hurricanes," *Kansas State Collegian*, November 16, 1949, 5. For Eisenhower's final proclamation, see Ambrose and Immerman, *Milton S. Eisenhower*, 104.

4. Harry E. Morrow, "Sports Slants," *Lawrence Journal-World*, April 13, 1949; R. G. Gustavson to Milton S. Eisenhower, January 16, 1948, Gustavson Series.

through which a member institution could defiantly introduce a black football player onto its varsity team.<sup>5</sup>

This is a study that illustrates how a policy of segregation unraveled through the practice of integration and how a conference comprised largely of universities on the Central Plains overcame a bargain with its southern members to bar athletes of color from the gridiron. The persistent defense of racial segregation in the Big Seven Conference—legalized in the South through Jim Crow laws—is indicative of how discriminatory beliefs extended well beyond the Mason-Dixon line, influencing states that otherwise would have argued that opportunity for black athletes to play in every game was an uncontested right. Keeping the southern teams in the fold was good business at the turnstiles; Oklahoma, under Bud Wilkinson, made its run to the top of the national polls, and was thus a competitive and commercial juggernaut whose membership had to be maintained at all costs. A rule banning black participation was simply a price to be paid. By the dawn of the 1950s, however, the exclusion of black athletes became too high a price for league unity, with critics believing, as an editorialist in Colorado's campus daily, the *Silver and Gold*, argued, that "the athletic field is one of the last places in which to discriminate against a man because of the color of his skin." For them, true unity was found in an association that guaranteed the right of all athletes to compete—a collaboration, as one Kansas State student observed, "to help foster athletic equality here in the Midwest."<sup>6</sup>

With its decision to play Robinson in every conference game, Kansas State claimed the prerogative to determine its own starting lineups, an act of will that upended the Big Seven's competitive culture—a culture predicated on the exclusion of African Americans. Even before the six founding institutions—Iowa State, University of Kansas, Kansas State, University of Missouri, University of Nebraska, and University of Oklahoma (Colorado joined in 1949)—withdrew from the Missouri Valley Conference in 1926, they were parties to the so-called gentlemen's



Since assuming the presidency at Kansas State in 1943, Milton S. Eisenhower, the youngest brother of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, had waged a war against segregation on campus. Experiencing only modest success, he believed football was a place for a potential breakthrough. In Eisenhower's mind, introducing a black athlete onto the varsity team would galvanize Kansas State's emerging racial tolerance.

agreements that informally sidelined black athletes in any contest involving southern teams. As Iowa State's faculty athletics chairman S. W. Beyer acknowledged in 1923, "no written rule" mandated this arrangement, only a handshake. Universities in Iowa and Nebraska, he explained, "understood for several years . . . that colored men could not be used on teams playing with schools from the states of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma."<sup>7</sup> As a result, African Americans were either left home or inexplicably benched in these intersectional series. Similar concessions to southern racism persisted in the Big Six (as the league was initially known), becoming so ingrained within its competitive culture that by the late

5. "Against Racial Bias," *New York Times*, November 21, 1947, 26; Robert L. Stearns, "Statement to Be Used by Don Shasteen in His Editorial on Race Discrimination in the Big Seven," October 20, 1949, folder 2, box 72, Central Administration Records: President's Office, Archives, CU Libraries, University of Colorado, Boulder, (hereafter cited as UCB).

6. Ralph C. Arnold, letter to the editor, *Kansas State Collegian*, May 17, 1947; "Tempest in the Big Six Teapot," *Silver and Gold*, undated clipping, folder 1, box 29, Central Administration Records: President's Office, UCB.

7. S. W. Beyer to C. L. Brewer, October 10, 1923, folder 7, box 1, Jack Trice Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames, (hereafter cited as ISU).



*Coach Ralph Graham, who coached African American players at the Municipal University of Wichita (later Wichita State University) in the mid-1940s before moving to Manhattan, worked closely with KSC President Eisenhower in bringing Kansas State's first black athlete, Harold Robinson, to the football team. Graham issued Robinson his first team uniform in the fall of 1948, and the coach was eager to add the talented Manhattan native to the varsity roster in 1949. Courtesy of Morse Department of Special Collections, Kansas State University Libraries, Manhattan.*

1920s, even those member institutions where African Americans could enroll as undergraduates discouraged or banned their participation on the varsity football team, knowing that they could not be used in every game. In such a competitive climate, one Iowa State student noted, "the bulwark of prejudice was hard to reduce."<sup>8</sup>

The all-consuming scope of segregation inside the conference's ranks revealed how the price of membership was full compliance with an unwritten agreement that sacrificed the competitive rights of black athletes in favor of commercial interests so as to prevent Missouri and Oklahoma from joining a southern league such as

the Southwest Conference, where black participation was never a concern. To this end, the Big Six founders fashioned an ersatz Dixie on the Plains, where conditions in Norman and Columbia made it "impossible for a colored man to play or even appear on the field with any team," as Missouri athletics director C. L. Brewer warned, were extended to each conference venue. "This whole question" of interracial play, he averred, "is bigger than our athletics"; it was also an issue of law and custom that buttressed "the tradition that a colored man cannot come here" and compete alongside white athletes as a social equal. Under these circumstances, he maintained, there was "no alternative" but segregation, a conclusion with which successive waves of administrators and coaches at Iowa State, Kansas, Kansas State, and Nebraska agreed. In surrendering the freedom to select their own lineups so as to appease Missouri and Oklahoma, the four northern members sanctioned the transformation of varsity competition in the Big Six into a whites-only affair. As the league established its dominance in the 1930s and early 1940s, its continuing prohibition on interracial play ensured that the cultural outlook of this Midwestern conference remained decidedly southern.<sup>9</sup>

The absence of black athletes on Big Six teams—not only in football but in every sport—was so entrenched that it was not until 1943 that the first serious challenge was mounted against these restrictions. In advance of the conference's indoor track and field championships that March, thirty-seven members of Kansas's track team petitioned the Big Six's governing body of faculty

and College Football in the U.S. South, 1945–1975" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2009), esp. ch. 2; S. Zebulon Baker, "'This Affair Is about Something Bigger Than John Bright': Iowans Confront the Jim Crow South, 1946–1951," *Annals of Iowa* 72 (April 2013): 122–60; Gregory Bond, "Jim Crow at Play: Race, Manliness, and the Color Line in American Sports, 1876–1916" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2008); and Charles H. Martin, "The Color Line in Midwestern College Sports, 1890–1960," *Indiana Magazine of History* 98 (June 2002): 85–112.

9. C. L. Brewer to S. W. Beyer, October 8, 1923, folder 7, box 1, Trice Papers, ISU. On the enforcement of gentlemen's agreements among Big Six members, see Donald Spivey, "End Jim Crow in Sports: The Protest at New York University, 1940–1941," *Journal of Sport History* 15 (Winter 1998): 282–303; and John Sayle Watterson, *College Football: History, Spectacle, Controversy* (Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 310–13. On the black athlete experience at Big Six institutions between the world wars, see Baker, "'This Affair Is about Something Bigger Than John Bright,'" 129–33; Dorothy Schwieder, "The Life and Legacy of Jack Trice," *Annals of Iowa* 69 (October 2010): 379–417; and Jamie Schulze, "The Legend of Jack Trice and the Campaign for Jack Trice Stadium, 1973–1984," *Journal of Social History* 41 (Summer 2008): 997–1029. On the black athlete experience at Midwestern universities in the 1930s and early 1940s, see Martin, "The Color Line in Midwestern

8. "Jack Trice's Conception of Service," *Iowa Agriculturalist*, November 1923, 129. On gentlemen's agreements and their impacts on college football, see Samuel Zebulon Baker, "Fields of Contest: Race, Region,

representatives to allow a black runner named Roger Whitworth to compete. Soon, student activists joined them, appealing to Kansas's own faculty representative, W. W. Davis. "Negro men are good enough to pay taxes and to serve in our armed forces," they pleaded with Davis, so "it is only fair, therefore, that they should be allowed to compete in intercollegiate sports."<sup>10</sup> Davis dutifully laid their concerns before his faculty colleagues in a meeting with the league's track coaches in Kansas City, going so far as to move that "no student will be barred from competition in Big Six events because of race or color"—the first time that such a proposal was entertained by the conference's leadership. But his resolution failed for want of a second. Gwinn Henry, Kansas's head track coach and athletics director, told reporters afterward that opinion in Lawrence ran "in favor of Whitworth," but because of league rules he could not second Davis's motion, being only a coach. It was unlikely that any of his fellow coaches would have spoken up on Whitworth's behalf, if given the opportunity. "All the other coaches remained silent," he lamented, "so it was lost."<sup>11</sup>

The issue was resurrected three years later, in April 1946, at the annual Kansas Relays. Only days before runners converged on Lawrence, Henry's successor as athletics director, E. C. Quigley, announced that the gentlemen's agreement between Big Six members would prevent another black sprinter, Wesley Elliott, from entering the meet. Outrage from the student body was overwhelming. More than 1,000 students signed a petition in support of allowing Elliott—who had recently won the 220- and 440-yard dashes at an intramural field day—to compete freely. The campus's Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) defended Elliott's right to participate in the face of "racial exclusion." The All-Student Council pushed for swift approval of a rule that permitted "the participation of all races in Big Six competition." But these appeals fell on deaf ears,

the *Lawrence Journal-World* explained, since Oklahoma "repeatedly" reminded the faculty representatives that it "would withdraw from the conference" if ever "any other member in the Big Six . . . admitted Negroes to athletic competition." Acquainted with this threat, Quigley promised to give the question of Elliott's participation "as just consideration as we feel able to do as a Big Six school," which was to say not much at all. As a result, Elliott was disqualified.<sup>12</sup>

Just three weeks after the Kansas Relays, the faculty representatives convened in Lincoln, Nebraska, for their spring meetings. Oklahoma's delegate, Walter W. Kraft, informed President George Cross that there was "intense interest of some of the Big Six Schools in the negro question."<sup>13</sup> Under considerable pressure from their student governments—all of whom passed resolutions that favored putting an end to the gentlemen's agreements—representatives from Iowa State, Kansas, Kansas State, and Nebraska sought a rule that gave them the freedom to use athletes of color in Big Six games played on their home fields. So strong was the sentiment on these campuses for this rule change that Nebraska's Student Council urged its faculty representative, Earl Fullbrook, to "withdraw from the Big Six" if his colleagues failed to adopt such a provision for black participation in these meetings. The stakes were just as high for Kraft, who dangled Oklahoma's own withdrawal, leaving these faculty leaders to contemplate a future without the league's most preeminent member. He suspected that this push for integration on the track prefigured the fight to come on the gridiron, which would summon the full range of his university's influence to forestall—assuming that it could stem the political tide buoying the progressive impulses of its league brethren. Seeing little advantage for Oklahoma's interests in an internecine struggle over what the *Daily Oklahoman* labeled "the hot potato of Negroes in athletics," he would favor a written rule as well, provided it was crafted in such a way that its enforcement shielded

College Sports," 95–101; David R. McMahon, "Remembering the Black and Gold: African Americans, Sport Memory, and the University of Iowa," *Culture, Sport, and Society* 4 (May 2001): 63–98; and Jamie Schulze, "'A Wager Concerning a Diplomatic Pig': A Crooked Reading of the Floyd of Rosedale Narrative," *Journal of Sport History* 32 (Spring 2005): 1–21.

10. Kristine M. McCusker, "'The Forgotten Years' of America's Civil Rights Movement: Wartime Protests at the University of Kansas, 1939–1945," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 17 (Spring 1994): 35.

11. "Big Six Continues Ban against Colored Athletes," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 13, 1943, 23.

12. "Kansas Students Advocate Negroes in Big Six Sports," *Daily Oklahoman*, April 12, 1946, 51; "Want Negroes to Compete in Big 6," *Lawrence Journal-World*, April 17, 1946; "Kansas Negro Athlete Barred from Relays," *Daily Oklahoman*, April 20, 1946, 23; Kristine M. McCusker, "Interracial Communities and Civil Rights Activism in Lawrence, Kansas, 1945–1948," *The Historian* 61 (October 1999): 783–800, esp. 793.

13. Walter W. Kraft to George Lynn Cross, May 20, 1946, folder "Athletics," box 13, George Lynn Cross Presidential Papers, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, University of Oklahoma, Norman, (hereafter cited as Cross Papers).



When University of Oklahoma head football coach, Bud Wilkinson, brought his undefeated Sooners to Manhattan during the fall 1949 season, Kansas State officials steeled themselves for a fight. To their amazement, however, Wilkinson raised no objections to facing Robinson on the field of play. Oklahoma football was segregated, but Wilkinson, who had black teammates in his playing days at the University of Minnesota, personally saw little justification for excluding Robinson now and was impressed with his toughness and skill, praising the style of his play to sportswriters. The legendary coach is picture here in 1952 with Buck McPhail, left, and Billy Vessels, right. Courtesy of Sooner Shots Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman.

the southern members from this trend toward interracial play.<sup>14</sup>

To accomplish this feat, Kraft proffered what qualified as a compromise on this issue. "The personnel of athletic squads," he proposed in a draft resolution, "shall be determined in accordance with the laws of the sovereign state," with "personnel of visiting squads . . . selected as to conform with any restrictions imposed on a host institution by the sovereign authority." In other words,

Kansas could use a black player in games at home in Lawrence but not in Norman, where segregation persisted due to a state legislature that was hell bent on preventing integration. Kraft knew the southern members would gladly exchange the possibility of interracial play on the road for an assurance of segregation at home. This required little sacrifice, as no member had black athletes and—perhaps more importantly—would not recruit them if they could not suit up in every game, regardless

14. "Want Negroes to Compete in Big 6," 2; Baker, "Fields of Contest," 43–49; Hal Middlesworth, "On the Level," *Daily Oklahoman*, May 17, 1946, 19. For one of these student government resolutions advocating an

end to the Big Six's gentlemen's agreements, see, for instance, Minutes of the Regular Meeting of the Student Council, April 23, 1946, Roll No. 3 (1946–1947), Series 95c, KSU Presidential Papers, Morse Collections.

of venue. He knew northern members could not return to their campuses with anything less than the promise of black participation in future league games, just as he and his Mizzou counterpart, Sam Shirky, could hardly return home if they accepted conference-wide integration. The only solution was site-specific segregation.<sup>15</sup>

Knowing the score, “we all agreed” to the compromise, Kraft noted, dispensing with the age-old gentlemen’s agreements in favor of a new bylaw, buried deep in the Big Six’s rule book. Now there was an enforceable rule, he crowed, codifying “who may be on the athletic squads of the institutions and under what circumstances the personnel may play on the grounds of host institutions.” In truth, this provision simply placed “the gentlemen’s agreement in writing,” as one observer put it, placating Mizzou and Oklahoma.<sup>16</sup> With the right to stipulate segregated lineups, southern members had extracted all the concessions needed to perpetuate a white-only competitive agenda that had benefited them over the previous two decades. Moving forward, athletes of color would remain, in the words of one Iowa State student, “alone and apart.”<sup>17</sup>

“Although the Big Six Conference has put into writing what it has been practicing all along as a ‘gentlemen’s agreement,’” Hal Middlesworth warned his *Daily Oklahoman* readers the morning after this meeting adjourned, “you probably haven’t heard the last of the matter.” While Kraft staved off “attempts to bring Negroes to Missouri or Oklahoma” for the time being, Middlesworth was less persuaded about the long term. There was, in his thinking, an inevitability to the “unrestricted use of Negroes in Big Six games” that was rooted in admissions, not athletics. “Agreements, gentlemen’s or written, don’t supersede state laws,” he conceded. When “four of the circuit’s schools are required to admit Negro students,” the southern members—who were fighting attempts by black applicants to enroll in their graduate programs—faced unfavorable odds. The presence of African Americans on Central Plains campuses

was reshaping the attitudes of their predominantly white student communities, now filled with veterans who had returned from war with a steadfast conviction that they had fought to preserve democracy at home as well as abroad. In this context, Middlesworth observed, the continued denial of democratic values inherent in the new rule was unfathomable, leading them “to continue to demand that their schools use Negroes.” Neither Mizzou nor Oklahoma had any way to combat this activism except threatening to leave the conference. But even that tactic had a shelf life. “If the students keep up their demands,” Middlesworth ventured, “their schools are going to have to accede.”<sup>18</sup>

Middlesworth’s predictions came true nearly a year later, in April 1947, when the faculty representatives considered the admission of Colorado and Oklahoma A&M to the conference. Worried that a third southern member would increase support for segregation, student activists at Kansas circulated a petition that opposed A&M’s entry “on the ground that the school discriminates against Negroes in intercollegiate athletics.”<sup>19</sup> Their protest gained popular attention in papers across the Central Plains, which embarrassed the faculty leaders into solely inviting Colorado. While “the color question had no bearing on our decision” to vote down A&M’s admission, Kansas representative W. W. Davis explained, most of his colleagues believed that “we should go slow in expanding all over the map”—especially if that meant stretching the conference’s borders any deeper into the segregated South.<sup>20</sup>

The defeat of A&M’s invitation to the newly renamed Big Seven emboldened the league’s student activists to take aim at the new bylaw. This round of protest originated at Iowa State, where in November 1947 the student government “reopened the question of discrimination,” reported the *Daily Nebraskan*, “by passing a resolution . . . favoring equal opportunity for individuals, regardless of

18. Hal Middlesworth, “On the Level,” *Daily Oklahoman*, May 22, 1946, 32.

19. “Big Six Delays Action on Bid by Cowboys,” *Daily Oklahoman*, March 30, 1947, 53.

20. “Kansas Throws Block at Aggies” and Middlesworth, “On the Level,” 17; Robert L. Stearns to Deane W. Malott, March 4, 1947, folder “Athletic Office, 1946–47,” box 1, Series 2/10/5, Chancellor’s Office Records, University Archives, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kans.; McCusker, “Interracial Communities,” 793–94. On the issue of segregation at Oklahoma A&M, see, generally, Baker, “This Affair Is about Something Bigger Than John Bright,” esp. 147–52. The University of Colorado was not blameless on this front, either. See, generally, David M. Hays, “A Quiet Campaign of Education: Equal Rights at the University of Colorado, 1930–1941,” in

15. Draft, Policy Regarding Personnel of Athletic Squads, undated [May 1946], folder “Athletics,” box 13, Cross Papers.

16. Kraft to Cross, May 20, 1946; H. D. Bergman to Don Delahunt, November 7, 1947, folder 31, box 9, Charles Edwin Friley Papers, ISU; “Writes Rule on Negroes,” *New York Times*, May 19, 1946, S2.

17. “Jack Trice’s Conception of Service,” 129. Upon its adoption, this bylaw was found in Article III, Section 5 of the conference’s rule book. See *Rules and Regulations Governing Athletics and All Participation of the Missouri Valley Intercollegiate Athletic Association*, 1948, folder “Athletics (#2),” box 38, Cross Papers.



race, color, or creed to participate in the [league's] athletic contests." In Lincoln, Harold Mozer, Nebraska's student body president, watched what his counterparts in Ames did with admiration. A year earlier, he had pressed for Nebraska's resignation from the conference if a rule was not passed that allowed for black participation in home games. Now he took up the cause anew. As one of the few Jewish students in Lincoln, Mozer knew the sting of injustice, making this matter personal for him. He was also tired of losing on the issue. Success would come, he contended, by "actually eliminating the current practices rather than merely pass[ing] resolutions year after year." To this end, he called a summit of the Big Seven's student body presidents in Lincoln for the last weekend in November to "work out the controversial issue."<sup>21</sup> Mozer's crusade had wide support on campus; a *Daily Nebraskan* poll found that 90 percent of students "generally favor" black participation, and it was noted that "there is a great deal of sentiment on the football team against the current discriminatory practices." Even Nebraska's faculty representative, Earl Fullbrook, was persuaded. "I would like to see the whole thing worked out," he declared, "to see that there is no discrimination against any student."<sup>22</sup>

Ten days before his summit began, Mozer upped the ante. By a vote of 17–5, he shepherded a resolution through his student government that once again advocated Nebraska's withdrawal from the Big Seven "unless the clause which prohibits a visiting team playing Negroes at southern fields is removed from conference regulations." *At southern fields*: with this phrase, Mozer divided the Big Seven between those members who favored integration and those who did not. Never did he intend for Nebraska to abandon the Big Seven; rather, he hoped to bring an end to "the barring of Negroes from varsity athletics at Missouri and Oklahoma."<sup>23</sup> By the time these student

leaders gathered, Oklahoma—whose student body president did not attend—stood alone. Missouri's student government cast its lot with integration supporters, calling for its university's governing Board of Curators to permit "any student in good standing" at Big Seven colleges "to participate in competitive athletic events at the University of Missouri." Despite the existing segregation on their own campus, these representatives from Columbia even endorsed the principal resolution of the summit, which urged the league to dispense with this ban altogether. The editors of the *Daily Nebraskan*, who had once expressed skepticism that Mozer might cause Missouri delegates to experience a change of heart, cheered the meeting for having "achieved its goal." Missouri's actions were "a big step in the right direction," isolating Oklahoma to the delight of the editors as "the only school . . . which remains silent on the racial question."<sup>24</sup>

That silence did not last long. Perennially irritated by "complete misstatements" in the media about the intent of this ban, Kraft brayed in an Associated Press interview that Mozer's actions were "unfair" to the southern members. As "the only schools that do not allow Negroes to play on their athletic teams," Missouri and Oklahoma, he reasoned, were limited in their ability to accommodate black participation since segregation laws took the issue "out of the hands of both schools' officials."<sup>25</sup> This sounded like excuse making to Nebraska chancellor Reuben Gustavson, who predicted that it was "quite possible" that faculty leaders "might vote to drop Oklahoma" if Kraft did not "go along with the expressed opinion of the other member institutions in abolishing all rules which bar Negroes from participation in athletic events." Before Fullbrook departed for the league's winter meetings, Gustavson instructed him to capitalize on Mozer's summit by offering a resolution to "change the conference rule" for good. But Fullbrook's colleagues were not filled with this spirit of reform; their reactions signaled that they had no interest in challenging Kraft. "Negro students should be permitted to play the same as any other qualified students," stated H. H. King of Kansas State, "except against the Universities of Missouri

*Enduring Legacies: Ethnic Histories and Cultures of Colorado*, ed. Arturo J. Aldama with Elisa Facio, Daryl Maeda, and Reiland Rabaka (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2011), 159–74.

21. "Iowa State for Big Six Rule Change," 2; H. D. Bergman to Charles E. Friley, November 13, 1947, folder 31, box 9, Friley Papers, ISU; Minutes of the Meeting of the Faculty Representatives of the Missouri Valley Intercollegiate Athletic Association (MVIAA), December 12, 1947, folder "Big 6—Admission of Colorado Univ.," box 1, William H. Baughn Papers, UCB; Baker, "'This Affair Is about Something Bigger Than John Bright,'" 135.

22. "Big 6 Leaders to Confer on Racial Discrimination," *Daily Nebraskan*, November 16, 1947, 1, 2; "Students Support Council's Stand on Discrimination," *Daily Nebraskan*, November 23, 1947, 1.

23. "Council Adopts Resolution on Racial Discrimination," *Daily Nebraskan*, November 20, 1947, 1; "Racial Issue Irks Husker Students," *Daily Oklahoman*, November 22, 1947, 22.

24. Jack Hill, "End of Jim Crow?," *Daily Nebraskan*, November 26, 1947, 2; Resolutions Adopted at Missouri Valley Intercollegiate Athletic Association Conference on Discrimination, November 29, 1947, folder 31, box 9, Friley Papers, ISU; "Missouri Supports Stand of Council," *Daily Nebraskan*, November 25, 1947, 1; "SGA Will Poll Racial Question," *Missouri Student*, December 17, 1947, 1.

25. Kraft to Cross, May 20, 1946; "Kraft Comes to Sooners Defense," *Daily Oklahoman*, November 21, 1947, 26.



*Although segregation was pervasive at the University of Kansas until World War II, Kansas nonetheless challenged discrimination in intercollegiate sports throughout the 1940s and 1950s by allowing African American student-athletes to play at Memorial Stadium, pictured here in the 1950s. While playing on the road, Kansas, like other Big Six and later Big Seven schools, generally complied with their southern opponents' ban on black college athletes.*

and Oklahoma on their home grounds." Those who had supported past student action, like Iowa State's H. D. Bergman, demurred. "These are matters," he parried, "for discussion in executive session of the faculty representatives." Colorado's Walter Franklin would not tip his hand before that university became a voting member on December 1. The issue, he wrote, "involves a policy in which the U of C will make no comment except in a conference faculty meeting." When he did speak in this meeting, he found that he was a lonely voice of support for Fullbrook's proposal. The others voted with Kraft. Still further, they decided, by this 5–2 margin, to permanently table all future discussions concerning the rule.<sup>26</sup>

When he reviewed the minutes of this meeting in January 1948, Colorado president Robert Stearns was

dismayed by its outcome. Reaching out to Gustavson—who had served as his vice president before taking the Nebraska chancellorship in 1946—he ruefully observed that "the only two men favoring such a resolution were your representative and mine," causing him concern about his university's newfound affiliation with this conference. "I think you feel as strongly as I do," he told Gustavson, that "the present rule" must be repealed "before next fall," when Colorado entered as a full-fledged member, as it would play annually in Columbia and Norman. He conceded that "it ill becomes the youngest member of the Conference to initiate action which might disturb the present alignment," but because erasing the color line was so important to him and his students, he would risk it. If the faculty representatives would not act, then perhaps it fell to them and their fellow administrators "to do some persuading that will permit a change in official attitude." For his part, Gustavson was equally anxious "to do everything that we can to get the rest of the boys to go along with us." If they could enlist the help of Kansas State president Milton Eisenhower and Kansas chancellor Deane Malott, he was confident that "all we need to do

26. "Athletic Board to Meet Tonight," *Daily Nebraskan*, December 9, 1947, 1; "Big Six Faculty Delegates Decline to State Race Policy," *Daily Nebraskan*, 1; Walter Franklin to *Daily Nebraskan* staff, telegram, November 20, 1947, folder "Big 6—Admission of Colorado Univ.," box 1, Baughn Papers, UCB; Minutes of Meeting of Faculty Representatives of MVIAA, December 12, 1947.



*While faculty representatives and coaches defended the necessity of the color line within a league that included southern schools, an unlikely alliance of administrators and student activists challenged its fairness. University of Colorado President Robert Stearns, pictured here, provided some of the leadership that sought to bring an end to racial discrimination in conference football programs. Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, University of Colorado Boulder Libraries.*

is put a little pressure" on Mizzou chancellor Frederick Middlebush "and we will get there" in finally killing this rule.<sup>27</sup>

Stearns thus invited Middlebush, Malott, and Eisenhower to meet him and Gustavson in Lawrence that March to "discuss matters of common concern" facing their conference. (Iowa State president Charles Friley was invited but could not attend.) He did not extend his hand to George Cross, by contrast, worrying Franklin that an invitation might make Oklahoma's president "much less apt to resent a meeting called for the consideration of this important and touchy problem."<sup>28</sup> Unlike Kraft, Cross was no segregationist. His support for equal opportunity sprang from his own football career in the 1920s at South Dakota State, where he had a black teammate. "I don't remember anyone ever suggesting that it was undesirable to have a Negro on the squad," he wrote in 1975. As president of the University of Oklahoma, Cross would have admitted all qualified black applicants, having

no wish, as he advised the state's attorney general, "to curtail possible services to citizens in this State merely on the grounds of prejudice." But he had to respect state laws. "For some time," he apprised a colleague, "those in authority at the University of Oklahoma have been walking a 'tight rope' in an effort to get the problem solved in a manner that would be just and at the same time legal."<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, these laws caused Stearns to assume that Cross had no interest in erasing the color line, which he might have, if asked. With or without him, these leaders drafted a new resolution—supported, as Gustavson predicted, by Middlebush—that let "each institution determine for itself what players are qualified . . . irrespective of the place of competition." When this proposal was sent to the faculty representatives for a vote that May, they tabled it with the usual haste. Gustavson complained afterward that Fullbrook reported that "a number of the representatives [principally those from Kansas and Kansas State] indicated that this was the first time that they had heard anything about the problem." "This amazes me," he wrote Malott. "Who's kidding who?"<sup>30</sup>

The inability of these administrators to achieve any progress further illustrated Jim Crow's influence over their faculty representatives; since rule changes went through them, the prospect for a meaningful revision looked hopeless. Desperate to act, a few members entertained the idea of using black players where they could play. "If we

29. George Lynn Cross, *Blacks in White Colleges: Oklahoma's Landmark Cases* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), 5; George Lynn Cross to Mac Q. Williamson, February 11, 1946, and George Lynn Cross to Fred McCuiston, October 19, 1950, folder "Negroes," box 16, Cross Papers.

30. Robert L. Stearns to Milton S. Eisenhower et al., March 8, 1948, and R. G. Gustavson to Robert L. Stearns, May 29, 1948, folder 2, box 72, Central Administration Records: President's Office, UCB; R. G. Gustavson to Deane W. Malott, May 29, 1948, Gustavson Series. Cross's personal opposition to segregation was well known among black leaders in Oklahoma City, who sought the admission of black applicants to the university after World War II. The first of those applicants was Ada Lois Sipuel, whose application Cross calculatingly denied in January 1946, even writing the rejection letter in a manner that assisted Sipuel's legal case. She was helped in her effort by Roscoe Dunjee, editor of Oklahoma City's black newspaper *The Black Dispatch*, who forwarded Cross's rejection letter to Thurgood Marshall, then special counsel to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). For Dunjee, there was no doubt on which side of the issue Cross stood. "The truth," he informed Marshall, "is that [Cross] wishes us to have a case, and exprest [sic] the hope that we would win. You of course cannot quote him on this but that is the reason why he let down the bars and gave us an open and shut case." Roscoe Dunjee to Thurgood Marshall, January 17, 1946, Papers of the NAACP, Part 3, Series B, Reel 13, Frame 345 (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1986).

27. Robert L. Stearns to R. G. Gustavson, January 12, 1948, and R. G. Gustavson to Robert L. Stearns, January 15, 1948, folder 2, box 72, Central Administration Records: President's Office, UCB.

28. Robert L. Stearns to Walter Franklin, February 19, 1948, and Walter Franklin to Robert L. Stearns, February 18, 1948, folder 2, box 72, Central Administration Records: President's Office, UCB.

have any Negro boys come out, and they're good enough, we'll play them," said Iowa State athletics director Louis Menze, "but not at Missouri or Oklahoma."<sup>31</sup> Even signs of progress at Oklahoma came to nothing. Spurred to action by the Lincoln summit, Oklahoma's student government resolved in January that "Negro athletes on other teams be allowed to compete against OU teams" in Norman. The University Senate followed suit in May, requesting that the Board of Regents remove "any restrictions due to race in the participation of athletics at the University of Oklahoma." A supportive Cross raised the issue with the Regents, but they "took no action." They did not want to touch the issue any more than the faculty representatives did. Indeed, Fullbrook broached the topic again with his colleagues in their winter meetings in December 1948 only to encounter a predictable reaction: "no action was taken." Segregation, it appeared, was here to stay.<sup>32</sup>

Shortly before he traveled to Lawrence to confer with Stearns, Gustavson, Malott, and Middlebush in March 1948, Milton Eisenhower offered his brother some timely advice. Dwight D. Eisenhower had recently announced that he was leaving active military service to become Columbia University's next president. For once, it was Milton whose record outshone that of his brother—already a national hero—and he was quick to share his views on how Ike could use his new post as a platform to advocate for reforms aligned with the pluralistic spirit of the Allied victory. In his membership on President Truman's Commission on Higher Education, Milton was scandalized by the persistent prejudice against African Americans at Eastern institutions, with Columbia distinguishing itself as "one of the worst offenders in the business of discrimination." His brother's leadership in reversing these trends could make a difference, Milton counseled, since "steady, positive progress against un-American practices is imperative"—and, for liberal-minded Milton, nothing was so un-American as racism. Nonetheless, he cautioned Ike against hastily reforming campus life at Columbia. Gradual change achieved over time was "the only sensible way to deal with the

problem." After all, Milton spoke from experience. "At Kansas State," he reminded his brother, "I have moved very gradually against discriminatory practices and now, at the end of five years, I have got rid of most of them." Even so, he conceded, "a few still exist."<sup>33</sup>

In those five years, Milton Eisenhower operated as if "evolution was better than revolution," patiently collaborating with college officials and community leaders so as to foster the circumstances whereby Kansas State's black students could live in dormitories, dine in cafeterias and local restaurants, enjoy the campus swimming pool, sit among white patrons in movie theaters, attend dances and other social functions, and regularly benefit from academic opportunities. Yet the ability of African Americans to compete on Kansas State's football team eluded him—a regret that was foremost in his mind when writing his brother. Six weeks earlier, Eisenhower had pledged "complete cooperation" with Gustavson "to work for the improvement of athletics, including the elimination of discrimination," eagerly encouraging efforts on campus to that end, to no avail. Events that spring, however, would bolster his crusade.<sup>34</sup> At the Kansas Relays in April, record-breaking performances from two black athletes—Charles Fonville, who would shatter the world record for shot put at the meet, and Harrison Dillard, who won Olympic gold later that summer—were proof aplenty, in the view of one *Kansas State Collegian* sportswriter, "why Negro athletes should be allowed to compete in the Big Seven." Dillard and Fonville's feats served as an impetus to the national office of the Blue Key Honor Society. Resolutions were not working, so they resolved to incentivize integration by announcing that their fraternity would fund athletic scholarships for black men at all seven member institutions,

31. "Students Poll Big Seven on Racial Ban," *Chicago Defender*, March 20, 1948, 10.

32. "Lifting of Negro Ban to Aid Sooner Teams, Drake Asserts," *Daily Oklahoman*, January 10, 1948, 31; E. E. Hatfield to George Lynn Cross, May 17, 1948, folder, "Negroes," box 34, Cross Papers; George Lynn Cross to E. E. Hatfield, May 28, 1948, folder "Senate, University," box 36, Cross Papers; Minutes of Meeting of Faculty Representatives of MVIAA, December 3–4, 1948, folder "Big 8 Minutes, 1948–1960," box 1, Baughn Papers, UCB.

33. Milton S. Eisenhower to Dwight D. Eisenhower, March 1, 1948, folder "Correspondence, 1948," box 14, Milton S. Eisenhower Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas. Given his strong views on racism, it is ironic that Milton Eisenhower would have directed the War Relocation Authority, the federal agency that oversaw the relocation of Japanese Americans during World War II. It was an appointment that he accepted out of duty to his commander-in-chief, Franklin D. Roosevelt, not out of any special feeling of support for the endeavor. "I feel most deeply that when the war is over," he wrote to Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard in April 1942, "we as Americans are going to regret the avoidable injustices that may have been done" to those Japanese Americans who were interned in relocation camps. See Ambrose and Immerman, *Milton S. Eisenhower*, 61.

34. Ambrose and Immerman, *Milton S. Eisenhower*, 100; Eisenhower to Gustavson, January 21, 1948, folder "Intercollegiate Athletics, 1947–1948," box 3, Gustavson Series.



*Nebraska Chancellor Reuben Gustavson served as Colorado President Robert Stearns' vice president before moving to the University of Nebraska in 1946. Gustavson was a strong ally of Stearns in the quest to eliminate segregation from the Big Seven Conference. As early as January 1948 he was writing Eisenhower regarding his desire "to do a little work to get the official attitude changed." Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, University of Colorado Boulder Libraries.*

a move hailed by Eisenhower and his students. "Blue Key has pointed the way to greater racial understanding in Big Seven schools," one sophomore cheered in a letter to the *Collegian* editors, "as well as a possible shot in the arm to Kansas State athletics."<sup>35</sup>

The organization's promise resulted in Harold Robinson becoming the first recipient of the Blue Key scholarship at Kansas State. Recruited by coaches at smaller colleges across Kansas—including Ralph Graham at the University of Wichita, where he had originally committed—Robinson was initially ignored by Kansas State's coaching staff since he was black, even though he was a decorated lineman at local Manhattan High. Such adherence to segregation was nothing new to him after growing up in Manhattan. "I was born and raised in it," he recollected in a 1999 interview, "and always knew how to handle myself." His application for the

Blue Key scholarship was made without any confidence that Kansas State coaches would agree to it, and, as he insisted, without any sort of cultural agenda. "It was my ambition to play at Kansas State," he explained. "No politics involved." In fact, "I wasn't even thinking that no other black athlete had ever played here at K-State" when he applied. To his astonishment, the scholarship was offered, and he accepted. This shock distracted him from noticing that Graham had been named head coach, hired away from Wichita to lift Kansas State's moribund football fortunes from the Big Seven's cellar. Familiar with Robinson's talent and ability, Graham swiftly moved to ensure that this hometown star found a place on the squad. After Graham issued Robinson his uniform at the opening of fall practice in 1948, Robinson and his cousin Bill Baker, who joined the team at the same time, were in disbelief, given Kansas State's recent history. "Well," Baker quipped, "they gave us uniforms. Wonder how far it will go before they tell us to give them back?"<sup>36</sup>

It was a fair question. Although the cousins marveled at Graham's support for their presence in his program, they could also sense his uncertainty about how much time and effort his staff should invest in a pair of athletes who could ultimately be disqualified on account of their race. The coach had no assurances from Eisenhower that he would flout the Big Seven ban if Robinson proved worthy. But Robinson did prove worthy, flourishing at center on the freshman team. When spring practices began in March 1949 he was the clear favorite to win the starting role on the varsity—if, somehow, he could play. More than mere skill, however, propelled the university's push for his participation that autumn. He was the vehicle through which both Eisenhower and Graham could realize their individual ambitions—the cause of virtue could be advanced by the chance at victory. In this way, their choice to violate league rules married principle with pragmatism: Robinson was a great athlete who also happened to be black, meaning they could score better football through racial progress. While a guaranteed right to compete for black athletes was a stand for equality of opportunity, it also originated in interests that were hardly high-minded. Using the best players gave Kansas State better odds for winning; thus, Robinson's participation in each Big Seven game was a priority beyond simply his institution doing right by him. Perhaps his recognition of this cold, competitive calculus explains his muted

35. Norv Gish, "Chalk Talk," *Kansas State Collegian*, April 30, 1948, 4; "A Right Step," *Kansas State Collegian*, May 18, 1948, 2; Arnold, letter to the editor, 2.

36. Robinson quotations in Fritchen, "'I Was There to Play Ball,'" 9; Bascom, "First on the Field," 11.

response when Graham excitedly informed him that Kansas State would violate the color line on his behalf. “I didn’t care nothing about nothing,” he admitted, “as long as they let me play ball.”<sup>37</sup>

And play he did. The first four games on the 1949 schedule presented no real issues for his participation. After back-to-back wins over Fort Hays State and Colorado to open the season—just the second and third victories that Kansas State had tallied since the end of World War II and, in defeating Colorado, its first conference victory in five years—Robinson and his teammates dropped heartbreaking losses to Nebraska and Iowa State by a combined margin of only eleven points. Then came Kansas State’s trip to Memphis State, whose coaches told Graham, as Robinson recalled, “not to even bring me there because I wouldn’t even be allowed in the stadium.” Black community leaders in Manhattan criticized Graham for toeing the color line—and for even playing in the South, given his team’s newly integrated profile—but Robinson kept quiet. “I felt low,” he remembered. “Really low. But I couldn’t do anything about it and couldn’t argue the issue.” He stayed behind with an injured teammate and listened to the game on the radio, as a shorthanded Kansas State lost 21–14, “an admittedly surprising defeat,” as one *Collegian* sportswriter put it, exacted as much by Jim Crow as by Memphis State itself. Graham struggled to explain himself in the press during the following week. “We missed Robby a lot on Saturday,” the coach confessed, conceding that his absence was “really noticeable.” To Robinson, he offered no apology. “It was probably a good thing you didn’t go down there,” he reassured Robinson. “You would have been killed.” Frustrated by his exclusion, Robinson disagreed. “No, I wouldn’t have been killed,” he responded. “One of them would have been killed.”<sup>38</sup>

The second half of the schedule was no easier for Robinson.<sup>39</sup> In each of its last five contests, Kansas State faced opponents who would seemingly test the limits of his right to compete. After the Memphis State debacle came the annual showdown with Kansas, whose players made certain everyone was acquainted with their game plan: “We’re going to kill Harold Robinson.” Graham again worried for his center’s personal safety, offering to leave him at home for a second consecutive week, but



*Recruited by coaches at smaller colleges across Kansas, Robinson was initially ignored by Kansas State’s coaching staff since he was black—even though he was a celebrated lineman at Manhattan High. Robinson became the first recipient of the Blue Key scholarship at Kansas State, created by the Blue Key Honor Society as a means to incentivize integration in Big Seven schools. Courtesy of Morse Department of Special Collections, Kansas State University Libraries, Manhattan.*

Robinson demanded to play, braving one cheap shot after another from Kansas’s defensive line. The next Saturday Bud Wilkinson brought his undefeated Sooners to Manhattan for a game that, on paper, should have caused Kansas State the greatest problems regarding Robinson’s participation. University officials steeled themselves for a fight, but, to their amazement, Wilkinson raised no objections. Oklahoma’s coach, like President Cross, had had black teammates in his playing days at the University of Minnesota in the mid-1930s. They had been benched in intersectional games, an experience that predisposed him to see little justification for excluding Robinson now. Studying him during the game—which Oklahoma won, 39–0—Wilkinson was impressed with his toughness and skill, praising the style of his play to sportswriters afterward. “If I can find black players of the calibre of Harold Robinson,” he pledged, “I will play them.”<sup>40</sup>

37. Fritchen, “I Was There to Play Ball,” 10.

38. *Ibid.*, 10; V. L. Nicholson, “Backs Shifted for KU Game Oct. 29,” *Kansas State Collegian*, October 25, 1949, 5. Kansas State lost to Nebraska, 13–6, and to Iowa State, 25–21.

39. Fritchen, “I Was There to Play Ball,” 11.

40. Bascom, “First on the Field.” On October 19, 1935, Dwight Reed, who was a starting end on Minnesota’s varsity team, was benched in

Wilkinson's statements were a not-so-subtle marker for his own fans that the world of college football was changing, even at home in Oklahoma. A year and a half earlier, the state's other major programs—Oklahoma A&M and University of Tulsa—agreed to what one observer called “far-reaching changes in rules governing athletic competition” in the Missouri Valley Conference (in which they held membership) allowing black athletes to play in all league games. As Oklahoma's athletics director, Wilkinson was well aware that some leaders in the Big Seven—like Robert Stearns—regarded this new Missouri Valley rule as a template for their own conference, with segregated and integrated members arriving at “such modifications in its rules” through negotiated compromise. Both A&M and Tulsa followed Oklahoma on Kansas State's schedule, offering a telling glimpse into a future where squaring off against southern teams brought no political battles over the right of every athlete to play. Indeed, Robinson's participation in the 26–14 losing effort against A&M—Kansas State's final home game of the year—went unremarked, with the visitors engaging in an act of social conscience calculated for effect, demonstrating to Big Seven skeptics how a southern team could tolerate interracial play. A similar indifference accompanied his appearance at Tulsa a week later; the *Collegian* merely noted that since “Tulsa has dropped the ban against Negroes,” Robinson started as usual. With A&M and Tulsa both yielding to change, Stearns predicted, “it might be much easier for us to convince the University of Missouri and the University of Oklahoma of the desirability of change.”<sup>41</sup>

a game with Tulane, played not in New Orleans but in Minneapolis. Student protests arose on campus to advocate for Reed's participation, with a group of civil rights activists pressing Minnesota's head football coach and athletics director, Bernie Bierman, to abandon his “noncommittal” position and definitively defend Reed's right to play. Similarly, NAACP president Walter White wired Minnesota president Lotus D. Coffman to “urge cancellation of [the] game as [a] rebuke to [the] unsportsmanlike and prejudiced attitude of Tulane.” “Cancellation of the game,” White insisted, “would set [a] high moral standard for other northern institutions in similar situations and would give a growing number of fair-minded southern students encouragement in their efforts toward fair play.” Despite these appeals, Reed was prohibited from participating in this game. A year later, he and his teammate Horace Bell were again held out in a game against the University of Texas, also played in Minneapolis. On that team, Wilkinson, in his senior season, was the starting quarterback. See “Tulane's Attitude on Reed Sought,” *Minnesota Daily*, October 15, 1935, clipping found in folder “Negro, 1921–1936,” and Walter White to Lotus D. Coffman, telegram, October 14, 1935, box 22, Office of the President Records, University Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

41. Baker, “This Affair Is about Something Bigger Than John Bright,” 137; Ronald E. Marcello, “The Integration of Intercollegiate Athletics in Texas: North Texas State College as a Test Case, 1956,” *Journal of Sport*

By the close of the 1949 season, it was not the desirability of change that was open for debate so much as the durability of the change that Robinson represented, with many Big Seven institutions wondering whether this foray into interracial play would hold once the color line was directly tested. Stearns could boast, as he did to his students that October, that both Cross and Middlebush “are quite in sympathy with our position and have been able to report real progress.” Personal sympathies aside, however, their institutions had done little to smooth the way for interracial play.<sup>42</sup> If anything, Oklahoma's visit to Kansas State reinforced the existing bylaw in that it guaranteed black participation in games in Manhattan but not in Norman or Columbia. Otherwise, the state of affairs in the Big Seven remained static, as Missouri's Board of Curators had long held that black athletes could not play on its field since “the policy of the people of the State of Missouri . . . is, and has been, to separate the white and negro races for the purposes of higher education.” The Curators “cannot undertake to apply this basic policy partially to University activities,” making exceptions to the law impossible, particularly for a football program that one vice president characterized as the public's “chief common interest.” Middlebush might now agree with black participation in principle, but he had sought its prevention as a matter of practice from the moment that the bylaw was implemented, authoring a resolution endorsed by the Curators ensuring that “no negroes shall be played on athletic teams in Columbia.” To that end,

*History* 14 (Winter 1987): 286–316, esp. 309; Stearns to Gustavson, January 12, 1948, folder 2, box 72, Central Administration Records: President's Office, UCB (second and fourth quotations); “Wildcats Drill for Clash with Strong Tulsa Hurricanes,” 5 (third quotation). Tulsa had allowed black players from the University of Nevada to appear on its home field in October 1948, and Oklahoma A&M had permitted Drake's black players to compete in Stillwater earlier in the 1949 season. A&M officials likely permitted black participation earlier than the Missouri Valley rules allowed since they were attempting to impress Big Seven members in their quest to join the conference. Indeed, four months before the start of the 1949 season, the Big Seven faculty representatives voted 5–2, once again, to reject A&M's expansion bid (“by secret ballot,” the minutes read, but it was clear where the two votes in favor came from), stating that “it is not practicable or feasible to admit them to membership.” The issue of segregation doubtless sank A&M's application, which forced its leaders to recalibrate their cultural values for the sake of winning the ultimate prize—entry into the Big Seven—rather than any particular support for black participation. See Minutes of Meeting of Faculty Representatives of MVIAA, May 19–21, 1949, Director of Athletics Administrative Papers, University Archives, University of Missouri, Columbia, (hereafter cited as MU).

42. Stearns, “Statement to Be Used by Don Shasteen in His Editorial on Race Discrimination in the Big Seven,” October 20, 1949, folder 2, box 72, Central Administration Records: President's Office, UCB.





*During the 1958 football game between Kansas State and Colorado, Max Falk, halfback for the Kansas State football team, escapes being tackled by Jerry Steffen, University of Colorado. Though Kansas State and Colorado had introduced black athletes to their teams in 1949 and 1956, respectively, the Big Seven Conference became officially integrated with the breaking of the color barrier at Missouri in 1958.*

he and others felt that “the problem of the participation of negroes in these activities on the campuses of the University” was settled, and to their advantage.<sup>43</sup>

By the time that Robinson and his Kansas State teammates arrived in Columbia on Thanksgiving Day for their season finale, however, the political circumstances in the state of Missouri were shifting. State legislators were debating a measure known as House Bill 182, which would permit African Americans to enroll at the University of Missouri in major fields of study unavailable at the all-black Lincoln University. An earlier

version of the bill—which passed the House by a 100–8 margin—would have admitted black students to all of the state’s public universities. “It would be a fine thing,” American Civil Liberties Union founder Roger Baldwin told one lawmaker, “if Missouri would make such a move.”<sup>44</sup> Yet the Curators and their supporters in the legislature, especially the state Senate, moved instead to kill the measure. They successfully stalled the bill in the House Education Committee, forcing a legal battle over black admission to Missouri that the state lost in June. The seemingly imminent prospect of black enrollment, however, stopped Middlebush from invoking the conference bylaw to bar Robinson’s participation in the

43. “Draft Resolution of the University of Missouri Board of Curators,” January 9, 1948, folder 15, box 2, Frank C. Mann Papers, MU; Thomas H. Brady to Frederick A. Middlebush, memorandum, February 25, 1949, folder 3, box 1, Thomas H. Brady Papers, MU; Frederick A. Middlebush to Frank C. Mann, December 12, 1947, and “Draft Statement of the University of Missouri Board of Curators,” undated [ca. January 1948], folder 15, box 2, Mann Papers, MU.

44. Roger N. Baldwin to Michael Kinney, November 28, 1949, folder 17, box 1100, Records of the American Civil Liberties Union, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J. (hereafter cited as Mudd Library); Durward W. Gilmore, interview by Niel M. Johnson, January 20, 1989, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, MO.





*Desegregation in college athletics reached beyond the Big Seven in the 1940s and 1950s. William A. Smith is featured here with football players from Washburn Municipal University of Topeka (later simply Washburn University). The photograph identifies, from left to right: LeRoy Harmon, William A. Smith, and Art Fletcher. Smith, a justice of the Kansas Supreme Court (1930-1956), assisted young athletes with their continuing education by providing job opportunities in the private and public sectors. Fletcher, a future GOP advisor and forthcoming leader of affirmative action, more than likely would have chosen to attend Kansas or Kansas State had their teams not been segregated. Instead, Fletcher attended Washburn, graduating with a bachelor's degree in 1950.*

Thanksgiving Day game, thus finally granting an exception to the Curators' long-standing ban on interracial play in Columbia. Like the realization that Cross felt was stirring in "the minds of Oklahomans" around this time, Missouri officials appreciated that "the state would need to adjust to the idea of having Negroes in previously all-white colleges and universities." The same held true for their athletic conference. The dubious battle that Middlebush and the Curators waged against the enrollment of African Americans was no longer joined in their participation on Big Seven teams, permitting Robinson to become "the first man of his race"—as sportswriters pointed out—to face Missouri on its home field. More than that, the racial apartheid that had undergirded the conference's existence since its founding was assaulted in the most fundamental way: a black athlete suited up and playing for the visiting team.<sup>45</sup>

45. Homer V. Bishop to Roger N. Baldwin, November 28, 1949, Mudd Library; Eugene H. Buder to Herbert M. Levy, May 15, 1950, folder 3, box 1101, Mudd Library; Cross, *Blacks in White Colleges*, 108; "Tiger Muzzles Wildcat, 34-27; Atkins Is Star," *Daily Oklahoman*, November 25, 1949, 41.

The Big Seven brethren had arrived at a crossroads. Without incident, their conference closed its first season of interracial play, revealing that black participation did not shake league unity, as the faculty representatives had always predicted. If not entirely at ease, Missouri and Oklahoma remained members, with the latter eschewing appeals from its supporters to bolt for the Southwest Conference, where the pigskin, as well as the politics, was far more to their liking. In June 1950, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *McLaurin v. Oklahoma* that African Americans possessed a constitutional right to attend the University of Oklahoma and have equal access to its educational facilities, the bylaw no longer possessed any legal justification. In response to the high court's decision, Wilkinson declared that any black student who wanted to play football would be treated "just like any other student." "If they are admitted to the school, then they have a right to try out for sports," he told an Associated Press reporter. "If they're good enough to make the team, we'll use them."<sup>46</sup> Missouri officials followed his lead a month later. As the Curators readied for the admission of African Americans to undergraduate programs, they issued a resolution stating that these new students would "receive at the hands of the University the same treatment as do students of other races," even in "participation . . . in athletics." These decisions, for one black sportswriter, were a sign that "jimcrow walls are generally tumbling."<sup>47</sup>

Inside the league, a similar feeling prevailed, particularly between those administrators and student activists who had opposed the existence of the bylaw in the first place. "The new athletic policy," argued Kansas chancellor Deane Malott, ". . . should give further opportunity for able Negro athletes within the conference." Although faculty representatives maintained their refusal to discuss the matter—the minutes of their meetings in 1950 reveal that they never formally repealed the rule—segregation as policy was voided by integration in practice, and when the 1950 edition of the rule book was sent to the printers, they discreetly deleted the bylaw as if it had never been there.<sup>48</sup> Black participation would now

46. "Oklahoma Coach to Welcome Negro Athletes to Team," *Chicago Defender*, June 17, 1950, 16; "An Oklahoma Ruling," *Lawrence Journal-World*, June 8, 1950, 2; "Oklahoma University Would Use Negro Players—If," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 15, 1950, B8; Baker, "Fields of Contest," 61-79.

47. Minutes of the Meeting of the University of Missouri Board of Curators, September 8, 1950, Roll #3, Board of Curators Permanent Records, 1/14/1949-4/8-9/1954, MU; Marion E. Jackson, "Deep South Athletic Policies Affected by U. S. Court Rulings," *Atlanta Daily World*, June 11, 1950, 7.

48. Deane W. Malott, "Statement for *Journal-World*," June 6, 1950,

be a regular, incontestable aspect of Big Seven games, a point underscored in October when Kansas State visited Norman. Now a junior, Robinson was “the first of his race” to play at Owen Field, joined in Kansas State’s lineup by sophomore Hoyt Givens, the league’s second black athlete. Neither man was any help to his team; Oklahoma amassed 555 offensive yards en route to a 58–0 victory, with sportswriters declaring the day “nothing more than a good scrimmage for Bud Wilkinson’s fearsome warriors.” Little did they know they had also watched a dress rehearsal for the Big Seven’s future.<sup>49</sup>

Black athletes now had a right to play in every Big Seven game—if they were recruited. The absence of a discriminatory policy did not end discrimination, with most of the conference’s teams staying as white as ever. Although administrators and student activists were, in the judgment of Nebraska chancellor Reuben Gustavson, “earnest about having this discrimination practice eliminated” from the rule book, they did not actively demand that their coaches follow Kansas State’s lead and recruit black players. When Robinson joined the army in August 1951 all of the conference’s black varsity players were found in Kansas State’s locker room. In addition to Givens, the team included a sophomore phenom named Veryl Switzer, whose play at halfback and safety foreshadowed his All-America honors across the next two seasons. As a senior in 1953 he led Kansas State to its first winning record since 1936, prompting sportswriters to conclude that he was “the greatest colored player ever developed in the Big Seven”—faint praise, indeed, considering the sample size. In three varsity seasons, Switzer had faced just four other black players in Big Seven contests.<sup>50</sup>

Kansas State’s success with Switzer helped convince coaches around the league to finally recruit black players. As Table A indicates, most of the Big Seven’s varsity teams were not integrated until Switzer graduated in May 1954,

Member Institution	Athlete Name(s)	First Varsity Season
Kansas State	Harold Robinson	1949
Nebraska	Charles Bryant	1952
Iowa State	Al Stevenson	1952
Kansas	John Francisco John Traylor	1955
Oklahoma	Prentice Gautt	1956
Colorado	Frank Clark John Wooten	1956
Missouri	Norris Stevenson Mel West	1958

Note: Oklahoma State (née A&M) joined the conference as its eighth member in 1960, two years after its first black athlete, Chester Pittman, earned a spot on its varsity football team.

an action that coincided with the social change promised by the Supreme Court’s decision one month later in *Brown v. Board of Education*. In this climate, attested Dowdal H. Davis, president of Kansas City’s black newspaper the *Call*, black participation in college sports could be leveraged “to break the color line in this area.” When he learned that Kansas was aggressively recruiting Wilt Chamberlain to its basketball program, Davis lobbied the college’s new chancellor, Franklin D. Murphy, stating that there was “no more effective way of breaking down the residuum of prejudice in our part of the country than through the device of a sensationally effective Negro athlete.”<sup>51</sup>

A similar idea percolated in Oklahoma when its Board of Regents began admitting black undergraduates in June 1955. While one politician cracked that the best way to soothe white anxieties would be for Wilkinson to “recruit a good Negro fullback,” black leaders had already set this process in motion. Four recently admitted black students

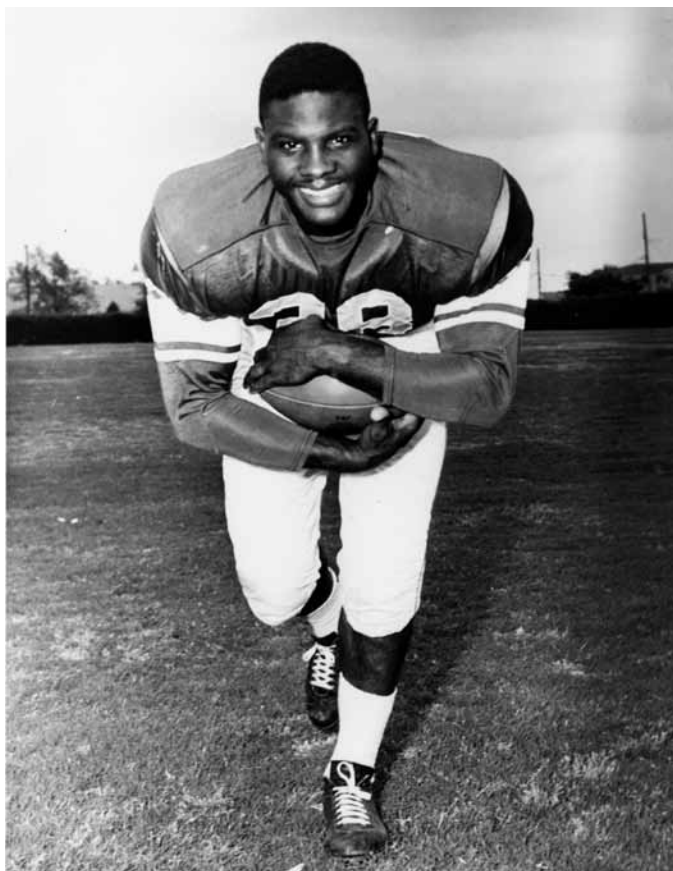
folder “Athletic Office, 1949–50,” box 1, Series 2/10/5, Chancellor’s Office Records, University of Kansas Libraries.

49. “Underdog Kansas State Invades Norman Today,” *Daily Oklahoman*, October 21, 1950, 9; Jack Murphy, “Sooner Juggernaut Routes Hapless Wildcats,” *Daily Oklahoman*, October 22, 1950, 29.

50. Gustavson to Stearns, January 15, 1948; Harold Keith, “K-State Tussle at Norman Pits Crack Safeties,” *Daily Oklahoman*, October 25, 1952, 23. Charles Bryant earned a spot on Nebraska’s varsity as a walk-on in 1952 before being joined by Sylvester Harris and Jon McWilliams, who were on scholarship, a year later. At Iowa State, Al Stevenson was a second-stringer on the 1952 varsity team but left at

season’s end. He was followed by Henry Philmon in 1953 and Harold Potts in 1954, the first black athletes to play sustained seasons at Iowa State since Holloway Smith had done so in 1926 and 1927. Even Mizzou welcomed Robert Graham, a transfer from Chaffin University in South Carolina, in September 1954. The papers hailed him as “the first Negro football player in University of Missouri history,” yet he never played a competitive down, quietly dropping from the roster by midseason. See “First Negro Joins Missouri Practice,” *Daily Oklahoman*, September 15, 1954, 33.

51. Roy A. Edwards to Franklin D. Murphy, March 16, 1959, and Franklin D. Murphy to Walter Byers, March 19, 1959, folder “Athletic Office—NCAA, Chamberlain, 1958–59,” box 1, Series 2/11/5, Chancellor’s Office Records, University of Kansas Libraries. On Wilt Chamberlain’s personal and competitive impact on the University of Kansas, see Aram Goudsouzian, “Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?: The Kansas Years of Wilt the Stilt,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 28 (Autumn 2005): 150–73.



*Prentice Gautt, a standout halfback from Douglass High School in Oklahoma City, joined Oklahoma's football squad in the fall of 1956 on a full-fledged football scholarship. Gautt played in a back-up role in 1957 for OU before a series of breakout games in 1958. Courtesy of Sooner Shots Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman.*

tried out for the freshman squad prior to the 1955 season, but they were not offered places on the team. In early 1956, then, a group of black physicians from Oklahoma City approached Wilkinson about establishing a scholarship with their own money to pay for a black student of exceptional academic and athletic abilities to integrate his team. Wilkinson eagerly agreed, asking if they had a prospect in mind. They did: Prentice Gautt, the standout halfback from Douglass High in Oklahoma City, who had scored three touchdowns in the recent state all-star game. Wilkinson welcomed Gautt into his program that August and was so impressed that by October he returned the doctors' money, placing Gautt on a full-fledged football scholarship.<sup>52</sup>

52. "Oklahoma Gives Formula for Easy School Segregation," *Chicago Defender*, June 11, 1955, 1; Baker, "Fields of Contest," 79–82; "Four

After serving as a backup in 1957, Gautt came into his own in 1958. He played against the University of Oregon in the second game of the season, and his defensive action on a single play inspired a curious breakthrough. In the third quarter, with the ball at Oregon's 11-yard line, Willie West—the visitors' own black star—broke into the clear, racing 53 yards before Gautt, in hot pursuit, caught him deep in Oklahoma territory. As fans watched West slip out into the open, groans of horror in the stands gave way to stark silence as they struggled to comprehend Gautt's speed. Suddenly one spectator cried, "Look at our colored boy catch that Oregon nigger from behind." A few mutters of agreement evolved into a hearty cheer that swept the stands. Gautt recalled how he "enjoyed the remark," accepting it as a show of respect. Thereafter, Cross noted, "his ability and performance had something to do with the fact that there was little or no murmuring of disappointment" about a black man being on the team.<sup>53</sup>

With Gautt in its lineup, Oklahoma by the late 1950s represented something unthinkable a decade earlier—a model for integration. For advocates of interracial play, Gautt symbolized its benefits. A University of Texas alumnus pointed to this "outstanding Negro backfield man" as the harbinger of a changing world, in which "our teams . . . will increasingly in the future compete, in all forms of athletics, with teams having Negro players."<sup>54</sup> Yet Wilkinson's decision to open his program to black players—first Gautt, then Wallace Johnson in 1959, and Ed McQuarters in 1962—coincided with a dramatic downturn in his team's fortunes. "Many people said allowing me to play football," Gautt wistfully acknowledged, ". . . was the beginning of the downfall." After winning 47 straight games between 1953 and 1957, a three-loss season in 1959 was a shocker. A 3–6–1 record in 1960, Cross wrote, "was something of a nightmare." A 5–5 mark in 1961 was little better. In the South Wilkinson was regarded as having pulled the temple down on his head with integration. Having "completely abandoned its historic policy of segregation," warned one member

Negroes Report for OU Freshman Team," *Daily Oklahoman*, September 13, 1955, 36; Harold Keith, *Forty-Seven Straight: The Wilkinson Era at Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 217–18; Jay C. Upchurch, "Uncommon Courage," *Sooner Magazine* Volume 27 (Spring 2007): 12–17.

53. Keith, *Forty-Seven Straight*, 246; George Lynn Cross to Harry Ransom, October 26, 1961, folder "Desegregation, 9/1/60–8/31/62," box 85, UT Chancellor's Office Records, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin, (hereafter cited as UT)

54. Sterling Holloway to Logan Wilson, September 13, 1958, folder "Desegregation," box 85, UT Chancellor's Office Records, UT.

of the Board of Supervisors at Louisiana State University (LSU) in late 1961, Oklahoma “has, since that time, fallen from the ranks of greatness and become a second rate football power.” Meanwhile, “the football teams of LSU achieved their greatest glory under a policy of strict segregation,” including a national title in 1958. Winning this championship with an integrated team, he asserted, would have been “a questionable honor.”<sup>55</sup>

More than anything, the integration of Oklahoma football signified to those in Dixie that the Big Seven was no longer a conference willing to toe the color line, thus abandoning its southern values. Southeastern Conference (SEC) commissioner Bernie Moore impressed this fact on his members across the late 1950s. “The Big Seven institutions are already integrated,” he warned in 1956, so “competition is limited there for the Southeastern Conference.” Three years later, as the Big Seven became the Big Eight with the long-anticipated admission of Oklahoma State (née A&M), Orange Bowl organizers proposed an annual matchup between that conference’s champion and an opponent from the SEC. Moore counseled his athletics directors against agreeing to this idea. “As we all know,” he reminded them, “the racial question may possibly keep some of our teams out of the Orange Bowl.”<sup>56</sup> The SEC could no longer count on the Big Eight to be a conference that respected the South’s racial customs. Yet most of the SEC’s dozen members simply ignored his advice, grudgingly accepting that a pursuit of the national championship meant competing against teams from around the country on their terms, including the unquestioned participation of black athletes in every game. As LSU traveled to Miami to meet Colorado on New Year’s Day 1962, its Board of Supervisors conceded

that interracial play was “inevitable . . . if a strong athletic program is to be maintained.” Indeed, six of the ten Orange Bowl games played between 1960 and 1970 pitted the Big Eight’s title winner against an all-white team from the SEC, each happening without any objections being raised about black participation.<sup>57</sup>

In that decade, the SEC, as well as the South’s other conferences, found itself standing at the same intersection of race and competition as had the Big Eight members in the late 1940s and 1950s. It was a crossroads that forced these institutions to determine whether they would embrace a traditional notion of competitive sport: the willingness to take on all comers. For the Big Eight, the adoption of a more democratic notion of competition—that a black player could compete in a game held in any venue—placed its members within a national mainstream that accepted the color-blind access of all athletes to the gridiron. While questions of equal opportunity for African Americans endured in the Big Eight, those debates originated in this uncontested right. The challenge that faced the league’s membership in the 1960s and early 1970s was translating the right of their black athletes to participate on the field into a right to participate equally in every other area of campus life, according them treatment similar to that of their white teammates in their lives beyond football. To do so, noted the report of a faculty investigation into discrimination against black football players at Colorado in 1968, required a change in how institutions interacted with athletes of color, understanding them as something other than a burden, a threat, or a cause. It meant that, finally, these universities would have “to accept the Negro as himself.”<sup>58</sup> [KH]

55. Jim Dent, *The Undefeated: The Oklahoma Sooners and the Greatest Winning Streak in College Football* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books / St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 279; George Lynn Cross, *Presidents Can’t Punt* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 322; W. M. Shaw to John Doles, November 27, 1961, folder 4, box 28, Board of Supervisors Records, Special Collections and University Archives, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

56. Bernie Moore to Richard O. Baumbach, June 20, 1956, folder “Southeastern Conference, 1956–1960,” box 13, Rufus Carrollton Harris Papers, University Archives, Tulane University, New Orleans, La.; Minutes of Annual Meeting of Southeastern Conference, January 16, 1959, folder “Southeastern Conference, 1959,” box 23, Ralph Brown Draughon Presidential Papers, Special Collections and University

Archives, Ralph Brown Draughon Library, Auburn University, Auburn, AL.; Baker, “Fields of Contest,” 86–88, 124–26.

57. “LSU Clears Way for All Bowl Bids,” *New York Times*, November 19, 1961, S7; Kurt Edward Kemper, *College Football and American Culture in the Cold War Era* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009), esp. ch. 3. An examination of Orange Bowl matchups in the 1960s reveals a Mizzou-Georgia pairing in 1960, Colorado-LSU in 1962, Oklahoma-Alabama in 1963, Nebraska-Auburn in 1964, Nebraska-Alabama in 1966, and Oklahoma-Tennessee in 1968.

58. University of Colorado President’s Committee on Discrimination, Report I: Investigation of Charges of Discrimination within the Athletic Department, September 26, 1968, folder 3, box 290, Central Administration Records: President’s Office, UCB; Baker, “This Affair Is about Something Bigger Than John Bright,” 157–60.