The Color Line in Midwestern College Sports, 1890–1960

Charles H. Martin*

On a cold afternoon in late November 1963, an overflow football crowd on the campus of Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana, grew restive when the end of the season contest against archrival DePauw College failed to start on time. While the spectators waited impatiently, DePauw players, university officials, and several religious leaders argued vigorously at the edge of the stadium. This disagreement centered around the presence of one African American, and Samuel S. Gordon, on the Wabash squad. Upset at the possibility of competing against a black, the DePauw players and roosters demanded that Gordon be banished from the game. When Wabash administrators defended his right to participate, the angry DePauw contingent threatened to drive home. Since DePauw was affiliated with the Methodist Episcopal Church, local Methodist leaders were part of the crowd, and several of them joined the spirited debate. Retired Gen. Lew Wallace, a Civil War hero, famed novelist, and prominent layman, strongly urged the visitors "not to disgrace a Christian college by drawing the color line" and condemned their "rationalize and harbrases." Almost one hour after the scheduled kickoff time, the DePauw squad finally retreated and took the field. Although Wabash won the argument over Gordon's right to play, Coach Elroy "Tug" Wilson withheld him from the match, probably fearing for his safety. Gordon's absence did not hinder his Wabash teammates, who won a 19-0 victory.

The possibility of conflict between the two schools surfaced again at the end of the 1964 season. Gordon failed to return to Wabash for the fall term, but another African American, William M. Castelle, enrolled and joined the football squad. As the traditional November contest approached, administrators at Wabash and DePauw began to worry that several years of increasingly hostile relations between their students and Castelle's presence on the current Wabash roster might result in an embarrassing incident. After considerable deliberation, these officials reluctantly agreed to cancel the contest. The following year, however, when the Wabash squad did not include any

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

At the time college football arrived in the Midwest, the small black population living there found itself mostly restricted to second-class status. Although they possessed a long history within the region, had not received much attention from scholars, it lasted in some form for nearly sixty years and reflected the second-class status to which most African Americans in the area were relegated.

During the 1890s and 1880s, the new American sport of football spread from its original home in the northeastern United States to the Midwest. As the South, quickly becoming the number-one sport on most college campuses. Basketball followed in football's footsteps some ten to twenty years later but remained a distant second in popularity until after World War II. Male students in the Midwest responded enthusiastically to the roughness and frequent violence of football and eventually formed school teams in order to test their skills against squads from other colleges. In 1879 the University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin staged what was considered to be the first official college football game in the region. Three years later, the University of Minnesota fielded its first school team. Other midwestern schools that soon added teams included the University of Illinois in 1889, its University in 1889, and the University of Illinois in 1889. Also in 1880, football was introduced on the Great Plains when the University of Kansas and the University of Nebraska formed competitive teams. After the University of Chicago opened its doors in 1892, students immediately formed a gridiron team. By the turn of the century, virtually every major midwestern college sponsored a
mid-1890s, for example, when the University of Chicago baseball team, coached by Amos Alonzo Stagg, played several games against local amateur black teams, President William Rainey Harper privately commented that the series "has brought disgrace upon us." This was the athletic environment in which the first black college athletes in the Midwest entered.

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, a handful of African Americans appeared on university teams in the North. Though few in number, their occasional presence primed wearing their school's colors on the playing fields represented an important symbol of racial equality. Moses Fleetwood Walker was probably the first black athlete to play organized baseball at a white northern college. Walker starred on the first varsity baseball team at Oberlin College in 1883 before transferring to the University of Michigan for the following season. Weldy Walker, his younger brother, also played on the 1881 Oberlin squad. The first African Americans known to have played football in the northeastern U.S. were William H. Lewis and William T. S. Jackson, both of whom joined the Amherst squad in 1883. Thomas Fisher (also known as Daniel W. Brown) began his varsity career that same year for Beloit College of Wisconsin. In 1890, George H. Jewett and William Arthur Johnson joined the football teams at the University of Michigan and Massachusetts Institute of Technology respectively. Other pioneering black football players in the Midwest include George A. Flippin at Nebraska in 1891, Preston Faggerson at Indiana in 1893, and Frank "King" Holbrook of Iowa and William Washington of Oberlin, both in 1895.

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

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*Robin Leader, Stagg's University: The Rise, Decline, and Fall of Bison Football of Chicago (Urbana, IL, 1991), 40. Arthur Ashe's three-volume study in an essential starting place for readers, but the pre-1945 information contains numerous inaccuracies.

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

A football series between the University of Missouri and the University of Nebraska, as well as a second series between Missouri and the University of Iowa, drew attention to the dispute over the right of African Americans on northern teams to participate in football contests against schools from the border or ex-Confederate states. In 1892 Missouri was scheduled to host Nebraska, but the Cornhusker starting lineup featured star halfback Flippin. Upon discovering Flippin’s race, Missouri demanded that Nebraska leave him behind for the game. Nebraska officials and students rejected what they considered to be an unfair request. Nebraska’s student literary magazine denounced the “race prejudice” of the Missourians and declared that its school “shall play with our team made up according to our fashion, or not at all.” Unconvinced by these protests, Missouri administrators forbade the match, thereby avoiding what one critic sarcastically termed “the risk of being knocked down and trampled on by a negro.”

Because of the cancellation, the Western University Intercollegiate Athletic Association subsequently adopted a new rule which required a fifty-dollar fine on any team forfiting a scheduled match. As a result, the Missouri squad reluctantly played against Flippin in 1889 and 1894, but at a neutral site in Kansas City. No doubt Missouri administrators were delighted when Flippin finally graduated, but the school’s respect with the University of Iowa never provided even greater racial friction.

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Flippin, Eulisl in Illinois, 64-65;足 [足] and Iowa, 1, 48-49.
The appearance of Iowa's first black football player, Frank Holbroek, in 1895 and 1896 created further difficulties for Missouri. Holbroek had been a star high school athlete at Tipton, Iowa, where a group of Iowa businessmen raised enough money to pay his way to the university. In 1896, his freshman year, Holbroek started at left end and accompanied the team to Columbia for its game against Missouri. Although the home team must have been shocked to discover Holbroek, the Tigers apparently played the game without protest and won by a score of 34-0. No confrontations were reported at the field, and the Missouri student newspaper reported that the Hawkeyes departed happily, "telling us that they were delighted with their treatment." Perhaps the ease with which Missouri defeated the visitors contributed to the absence of conflict.

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

Representatives of the two universities blamed each other for the incident. At Missouri, the student newspaper conceded that the crowd's behavior "was simply ridiculous" but asserted that the referee, "a robber of the first order," had created much of the problem. The paper also emphasized that "the unpleasantness of the game grew out of the fact that Iowa has a negro on her team." However, the newspaper went on to declare, "As long as the rules of the league fail to forbid this, we shall hear more and more of the same sort of thing." The bad feeling subsequently engendered by the crowd's behavior resulted in the Hawkeye's continued poll of "kill the nigger." This should be stopped. Of course there are always some thugs who are on for fights, but the student and better class of citizens condones this, and the team deserves nothing but fair play and honest clean ball.

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

Six years later, the two schools resumed their annual game. In 1902, after seven years of relatively peaceful competition, the problem resurfaced when the Hawkeye squad included another black player, tackle Archie A. Alexander. During the intervening years, Missouri apparently had adopted an institutional policy mandating racial exclusion for all athletic events at home. Since university officials also had decided to avoid competing against African Americans in away games, they requested that the Hawkeyes withhold Alexander from their October game in Iowa City. Iowa administrators complained about the request, but when the Missourians remained adamant, they abandoned their earlier policy and agreed to keep Alexander on the bench. Although the following year's game was scheduled for Columbia, Iowa coaches initially hoped to play Alexander in the contest, but Missouri officials absolutely refused to allow his participation. Missouri won the ensuing game 5-0. Upset by Alexander's exclusion and the allegedly unseemly conduct of Missouri players, Iowa officials canceled the annual series between the two colleges. In the final game of the 1910 season, Iowa traveled to St. Louis to play Washington University. Once more the home team requested that Alexander be withdrawn from the contest, and once again Hawkeye coaches relegated their star tackle to the bench. Thus over an eighteen-year period Missouri had shifted its racial policy from a hostile acceptance of limited interscholastic play in the early 1890s...
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mutual cancellation of the DePaul game, none of Washington's opponents dared to challenge the participation of William Carroll. Thus it appears that the novelty of Gordon's appearance for Washington, inspired the 1903 complaints and that such opposition soon evaporated when met with firmness by Washington. Growing familiarity with integrated football competition across the region during the next ten years appears to have reduced the opposition at other schools in the region as well, with the major exception of the University of Missouri.21

By World War I, a few more black athletes appeared on midwestern football teams; this intraregional resistance to African Americans' participation seems to have disappeared. Instead, a new source of conflict over the color line involved midwestern football games against major southern universities, all of whom were racially segregated. These North-South contests in football during the fall (and in baseball during the spring) were rather limited before the 1920s. From the start, however, southern schools vigorously protested the occasional inclusion of African Americans on northern squads. At the start of a new century, when southern legislatures were constructing an intrinsic web of Jim Crow laws segregating black and white southerners in almost every area of public life, equal competition on the gridiron violated the basic principles of white supremacy. In order to avoid friction and the possibility of last-minute cancellations, participants in interregional play gradually relaxed an informal compromise in the early twentieth century, commonly referred to as the "gentlemen's agreement." According to the unwritten understanding, northern universities were expected to withhold any black player from their roster when competing against a southern squad in order to avoid embarrassing the southerners. This rule applied even when the athletic event was held in the North. The gentlemen's agreement attracted little attention in the Midwest during the 1920s, due to the tiny number of black players, the indifference of university administrators, and the limited number of major interregional contests. In the early 1930s, though, the number of black players and the frequency of these contests both increased, touching off several incidents which clearly exposed the color line.22


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

The major incident during the 1933 season involved Ohio State's home game against Vanderbilt on October 10. Although some Buckeye supporters and black sports fans worried that Bell would be benched again, Ohio State Coach Sam Willaman denied that any special concessions had been made to the southerners. Yet at the coin toss kickoff Bell stood watching from the sidelines. As the visiting Commodores repeatedly broke through Ohio State's porous defensive line on route to a 26-21 victory, fans clamored for the powerful tackle to enter the contest. In every previous game Willaman had brought Bell off the bench as his first substitution. This time, though, despite the inability of the Ohio State defensive line to contain the...
as a Big Ten track star, was only the second African American to play football at Michigan. The university's unwillingness to recruit black prospects dated from 1903, when Fielding Y. Yost became head coach for the Wolverines. Sometime during the summer, Michigan officials discreetly informed Georgia Tech that they would withhold Ward from the match. But as the October 20 game drew near, several newspapers exposed the secret agreement, inspiring complaints from black leaders and journalists, liberal and radical white students at the university, and the Michigan Daily. Against all protest, the two schools played a game that Michigan bossyly promised to be a fair and square one. Ward, in the end, had to face a colored boy in basketball. Given the rule that the policy was based on "racial" agreement, why integrated basketball competition posed a greater threat to racial etiquette than football, especially in the Big Ten, is not completely clear, especially since football involved considerable violent contact between players. Of course, basketball did include some physical contact, and it was normally played indoors, in smaller and more intimate settings. Furthermore, basketball players were much less of a monolithic uniform which exposed more of their bodies than did their counterparts on the gridiron. According to one black tennis player at Michigan during the 1920s, black students there speculated that the basketball ban existed because whites were frightened at the thought that their exposed skin might actually have contact with a black player's skin. In a somewhat similar vein, journalist John Gunther wrote in 1947 that the Big Ten color line sprang from strong social taboos in the region against contact between hallowed, preserving bodies from different races.

A 1954 incident involving the University of Notre Dame shed further light on midwestern attitudes toward interracial basketball competition. Apparently because of its small-town location and interest in recruiting white students from the South, the Catholic school refused to admit African Americans until the 1960s. Although the Fighting Irish were willing to play against integrated football teams, the school tried to draw the color line for basketball. In February 1954, the University of Detroit, also a Catholic institution, hosted the Irish team. A few hours before the game, Notre Dame Coach George Keenan was shocked to discover that the home team included Lawrence Blows, "the sensational negro sophomore." Keenan immediately protested against this violation of athletic etiquette but reluctantly accepted the game...
allowed his team to play the game, which the Irish won 36–17. The Detroit athletic director, Gus Dorais, a former Notre Dame quarterback, promptly wrote Father John O'Hara, acting president of Notre Dame, to apologize for the incident. Dorais pleaded that he "knew nothing of this gentlemen's agreement" among coaches—not to use colored boys—"which George says actually exists" and was "mighty sorry" that the problem had arisen. However, Dorais confessed that he could not see the logic or justice of such a policy, since whites regularly competed against African Americans in football and track and field. Notre Dame officials were also initially puzzled by the incident. But after further investigation, Father O'Hara replied: "At first, I could see no objection to your using a negro on your team, but George (Reagan) pointed out to me that there is a difference in a game where there is such close physical contact between players sharply and perjurying at every pore. Yet it should be noted that other white coaches and school officials in the upper Midwest apparently did not share these fears and accepted integrated basketball competition."

During the late 1920s and 1930s, members of the newly formed Big Six conference (eventually known as the Big Eight) went even further than the Big Ten and implemented a policy of racial exclusion of African Americans from all sports. The conference was formed in 1928 by midwestern public universities—Nebraska, Iowa State, Kansas, Kansas State, Missouri, and Oklahoma—with starkly different traditions concerning black athletes. Several African Americans had played football and basketball at Nebraska before the mid-1920s. In 1923 Jack Trice started several games for Iowa State before being fatally injured in a contest against Minnesota. Halway Smith also played at Iowa State in 1925 and 1927. Nonetheless, because of fierce opposition to the use of black athletes from Missouri and Oklahoma, the new league established an unofficial policy barring black players from all athletic teams. This action by the Big Six provides an example of how the exclusion of African Americans in American sports actually increased during the 1930s. In a similar action in 1934, the National Football League reversed its earlier practice and quickly imposed a new policy which completely excluded black players from its ranks. And, of course, major league baseball and its affiliated minor leagues continued to enforce a rigid color line, as they had done since the late nineteenth century."

In the late 1930s, Big Ten athletic programs finally began to resist demands to honor the gentlemen's agreement. An increase in the number of black athletes on their squad and growing pressure from students seem to have influenced this decision. The first signs came in the spring of 1939, when the University of Missouri attempted to host a three-team track meet with Wisconsin and Notre Dame. Since the Badgers' top hurdlers, Ed Smith, was an African American, Missouri officials barred him from the competition. On the Wisconsin campus, students protested the action, while the faculty resolution urged the school to "refuse to participate in an athletic contest from which one of its athletes was barred because of his race. Wisconsin administrators subsequently withdrew their squad from the competition, and Notre Dame followed suit. That fall, the Missouri football team traveled to Columbus to challenge Ohio State. Reflecting a new, growing acceptance of interracial competition away from home, the Tigers did not challenge the presence in the Ohio State lineup of halfback Charles Anderson, who scored a touchdown for the Buckeyes. That same month, Oklahoma visited Northwestern in Evanston, and although the Sooners accepted the inclusion of end Jimmy Smith on the Northwestern squad, a contingent of unhappy Oklahoma fans greeted Smith's entry into the contest with a loud round of boos and catcalls. This game was reportedly the first that the Sooners had ever played against a black opponent."

This new stand against racial exclusion on the gridiron by Big Ten schools did not affect the status quo in the gymnastics, however, since conference basketball teams remained all-white. Northwestern University proves an excellent illustration of the difference in racial policies between football and basketball. From 1920 through 1941, sixteen African Americans played at least one season of football for Northwestern, but during the same period no black athlete competed for their basketball team, or any other Big Ten squad. Furthermore, the willingness of schools from the lower Midwest like Missouri and Oklahoma to drop their de facto rules for racial exclusion while on the road did not mean that they had abandoned the color line at home. In the fall of 1940, Missouri and New York University were scheduled to meet in a November football match in Columbia. The 1940 NYU squad included an African American, halfback Leonard Rase, and school officials quietly agreed to omit him from the traveling squad. When several dissatisfied football players learned of this arrangement to their classmates in October, the NYU campus, one of the most radical in the country, erupted in protest. Outraged students circulated stacks of petitions, staged several large protest rallies, one of which attracted a crowd of two thousand, and organized a "States Must Play" movement. Despite this pressure, university administrators refused to change their minds, and the Violetts departed for Missouri without their starting fullback. A few months later the university also withheld one basketball player and several track


27Arthur, University of Kansas, 461; Charles K. Rose, African Americans and the Integration of the National Football League (New York, 1999), 44-50.

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

The growing trend against discrimination in college sports eventually forced Big Ten members to drop their color bar in basketball and permit Big Six schools to abandon their more comprehensive restrictions for all varsity sports. In the 1944-1945 season, the University of Iowa became the first Big Ten school to field an integrated basketball team. Joining the Hawkeyes that year was Richard T. Colburn, who transferred from Virginia Union University. A graduate of Iowa City's public high school, the 6'-3" center was well known to local basketball fans. Coach Lawrence "Pop" Harrison never expressed to Colburn any fears about the reactions of rival coaches, and opposing players credited the center with the competitive edge the Hawkeyes needed to win. Harrison exercised considerable care in planning the team's recruiting and games; consequently, Colburn normally traveled with the team and was not present for all games. But he returned for his senior year and reasserted his role in the team's success. Apparently because Colburn's "performance was a starter and wartime conditions produced a scramble to find healthy young men, the Big Ten basketball coaches reined in his participation as a temporary aberration and did not immediately change their recruitment policies. Curiously, most written accounts of Big Ten sports eventually forgot about his appearance for Iowa altogether.\(^{23}\)

\(^{23}\)"The Hawkeyes are a new team," Bradley officials said in 1950, "and we are not going to have it.

\(^{24}\)The University of Iowa," The Daily Iowan, November 12, 1944.

\(^{25}\)"The Hawkeyes are a new team," Bradley officials said in 1950, "and we are not going to have it.\(^{23}\)

\(^{26}\)"The Hawkeyes are a new team," Bradley officials said in 1950, "and we are not going to have it.\(^{23}\)
Indiana University became the next Big Ten member to drop the color line for basketball. In the summer of 1947, Coach Branch McCracken signed Bill Garrett to a scholarship agreement. A 6’2” center, Garrett had led Shelbyville High School to the Indiana state basketball championship several months earlier. Despite Garrett’s obvious talent, not a single Big Ten college initially offered him a scholarship. Eventually several black alumni from Indiana University contacted President Herman B Wells about Garrett. After Wells and McCracken discussed the issue, the two agreed to recruit Garrett, even though they worried that some opponents might drop IU from their schedules. These fears proved false, but on road trips across the Midwest the Hoosiers did occasionally experience difficulty in finding hotels and restaurants that would accept an integrated team. Nonetheless, the university was well rewarded for its policy. The first black star in the Big Ten, Garrett led Indiana in both scoring and rebounding during all three of his varsity seasons and eventually earned All-Conference first team and All-America second team honors.20

Two years after Garrett appeared in his first varsity game for the Hoosiers, Michigan State became the third Big Ten school to field an integrated basketball team. In the summer of 1950 the university awarded a scholarship to Recker Ayala, a 5’6” guard from New York City, who started for the Spartans during the 1951 season. At the University of Michigan John Codwell, Jr., and Donald Eaddy both joined the varsity for the 1952 season. The remaining Big Ten schools gradually began to recruit black players during the decade, and by 1960 the color line on the basketball court had finally disappeared. Notre Dame, the most prominent independent school in the Midwest, admitted its first black students in the mid-1940s, and athletic integration began a few years later. Joe Bertrod and Pat Shann became the first black varsity basketball players for the Irish during the 1952 season, while Dick Washington and Wayne Edmonds joined the football team for the 1953 season. Another Catholic college, Marquette University, fielded its first integrated football and basketball teams during the 1951-1952 school year.21

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


21Lansing State Journal, February 19, 1946; Pittsburgh Courier, December 8, 1951; September 20, 1952; Baltimore Afro-American, October 13, November 26, 1951, Indianapolis Recorder, October 9, 1948; Boston, “All Bets are Off,” 46-47.
March 31, 1936

President Indiana U.

Dear President White:

It has been the intention of the Indiana University Chapter of the NAACP for some time to express our concern about a situation that has developed in our university. On March 28th, a group of students organized a sit-in at the Dining Hall, demanding the release of a student who had been arrested for participating in a demonstration against racism.

In light of this situation, I would like to inform you that the NAACP chapter at Indiana University is preparing a statement in support of the student's release. We believe that the university should take action to support the rights of all students, regardless of their political or social views.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

IN THE COURT OF THE NAACP PROTESTED PLANS TO LEAVE WHITEHEAD BEHIND WHEN THE HOOVERERS WENT ON A SOUTHERN ROAD TRIP IN 1936

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uled a series of two games each against Florida State, Florida, and Georgia State Teachers' College for late March. Several weeks before the trip, Hoeveer officials learned that regulations established by the governing boards of the three southern colleges prohibited integrated competition, consequently denying I.U. catcher Eddie Whitehead of Muncie, Indiana, the right to play. As the team's departure approached, several organizations including the campus chapter of the NAACP and the IU student senate urged university administrators to resist racial discrimination and cancel the tour if necessary. Wells declined to keep the baseball squad at issue explaining that it was "impossible to change the team's spring schedule in time for them to get some practice before the regular season." However, Wells did issue a statement declaring that in the future Indiana would not schedule opponents who refused to play against black athletes. Purdue, Notre Dame, and Butler promptly announced that they too would follow a similar policy in scheduling southern opponents. Wells's statement prompted several hostile letters, including one note from the "K.K. Klan," which labeled him a "cheap negro loving son of a bitch" and urged him to "keep your teams out of [the] South." The public outcry over the Whitehead incident forced many midwestern colleges to take a strong public stand against honoring the color line in those few Deep South states where legislatures or boards of regents still maintained Jim Crow on the playing fields.20

Beginning in the late 1940s, members of the Big Seven conference (later known as the Big Eight) slowly moved to integrate their football and basketball teams. In 1946, following inquiries about the continued exclusion of African Americans in sports, the conference unanimously adopted a policy that was only slightly less restrictive than the previous unwritten understanding. The new regulations stipulated that "the personnel of visiting squads shall be so selected as to conform with any restrictions imposed upon a host institution" by its regents or state government. This meant that any Big Seven school hosting a conference game had the right to bar black players on the visiting team. If there was a state or university policy against inter-racial competition. Small wonder then that one observer dismissed the new statement as merely "the genteelism of agreement in writing."21

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20Whitehead accompanied the Hoosiers on its spring trip to Arkansas. He was forced to stay in separate accommodations from those of his white teammates in Florida and Georgia, and while in Tallahassee he practiced with the Florida A & M team, Times-Union, March 27, 28, 1945; Louisville Times, March 28, 1945; News-Times, March 22, 1946; Miami News, March 22, 1946; Indiana Courier, March 22, 1946; Daily Tribune, March 22, 1946.

21Technically the 1946 rule did not prohibit a Big Eight school from prohibiting an All-Black intercollegiate team from using the playing facilities at a game as was case here or at an agreement college. However, these limitations were not reflected in recent black arithmetic. "Minutes of the Meeting of the Faculty Representative of the M.V.I.A.A., May 17 and 18, 1946" typewritten, courtesy of Peabody Grant, Kansas City, Mo., 1/13, New York Times, May 19, 1946; Griffin, University of Kansas, 164, 385.
The decision to adopt a formal exclusion policy upset many students at Nebraska, Kansas, Kansas State, and Iowa State. Student governments at Nebraska and Kansas had previously adopted resolutions endorsing the participation of black athletes in the league. Resistance to the official policy was especially strong on the Nebraska campus. In November 1947, the student council there adopted a resolution urging university officials to work to have the Big Seven repeal its racial ban and to consider withdrawing from the league if the action is not taken. The Daily Nebastrian strongly supported the student government’s position and published a poll showing that 56 percent of students questioned favored their school’s dropping out of the conference unless the color line was eliminated. At a late November meeting of student representatives from five league schools in Lincoln, participants adopted a resolution urging the Big Seven to replace its exclusion clause with one which guaranteed that “any eligible student of a member institution shall be allowed to participate in all competitive athletic events at any member institution.” In a surprise move, the students government at the University of Missouri endorsed the meeting’s resolution. The following month, the athletic board of the University of Nebraska formally called upon the conference to delete the controversial clause. But at the end of 1947 the council of Big Seven faculty representatives tabled the Nebraska request.

Kansas State then took the lead in challenging the Big Eight’s color line. During the summer of 1948, the football coaching staff urged local star Harold Robinson of Manhattan High School to join the university team. Despite not receiving a scholarship, Robinson nonetheless enrolled at the university and started on the freshman team, paying for his expenses by washing dishes and mopping floors. After a coaching change at the end of the season, new head coach Ralph Graham decided to post Robinson a scholarship. Graham then sent a letter to the next Big Seven meeting, boldly announcing his intention to use Robinson during the fall season of 1949. “Since there is no ruling against the use of Negro players,” he explained, “we plan to use Harold except at universities where there is a definite rule that decrees otherwise.” When the league did not respond, Graham continued with his plan, and Robinson started at the center position during his sophomore and junior seasons. During those two years, he experienced rough play and racial taunts in several games, and on trips to Oklahoma and Missouri, he was forced to stay in separate lodging from his teammates. Just before the start of his senior season in 1951, Robinson was drafted into military service and left school. That fall sophomore Veryl Switzer, an outstanding player from Ninemile, an all-black Kansas town, became the second African American to compete for the Wildcats. Since both young men had been high school stars inside the state, Kansas whites were probably more willing to accept their presence than that of outsiders.

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

may try out for intercollegiate athletics," provided he met conference eligibility requirements. But Phog Allen, the highly successful basketball coach of the Jayhawks, publicly denied that there had been any change in policy for his teams and instead recommended that African Americans participate in track and field, because that sport "didn't require as much body contact as basketball." Despite the liberal student atmosphere in Lawrence and the support of administrators, neither the football nor the basketball program at KU successfully recruited black players for their varsity teams until the mid-1950s. Several other Big Eight members also were slow to desegregate their football and basketball teams. A key breakthrough came in 1964 when Coach Charles "Bud" Wilkinson of Oklahoma University awarded a football scholarship to freshman Prentice Gauts only one year after the school admitted its first black undergraduate. By 1969, every conference school had fielded integrated teams, finally ending the era of segregation in the Big Eight.26

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

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