“IT’S A PRESS VICTORY: THE AFRICAN AMERICAN PRESS’ COVERAGE OF BLACK SPORTS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL EQUALITY”

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(History)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2017

Date of final oral examination: 4/25/2017

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation is indebted to an incredible group of people who I want to thank for their generosity, support, and encouragement over the years.

I begin by thanking my fiancée, Joanna Weiss. Simply put, I wouldn't be where and who I am without you. Your compassion, patience, strength, humor, and resiliency have made this journey possible. When there seemed to be no light at the end of the tunnel, you reminded me of what could be done one day at a time and restored my confidence. You listened to my brainstorming and asked insightful questions that helped elevate and advance the work. But most importantly, you are my best friend and most vocal advocate, and your belief in me above all else gave me the resolve to complete this project. I'm forever grateful, and I love you with everything I have.

Thank you to my parents, Terry, Edward, and Maria Gale, for supporting and growing my intellectual curiosity at a young age. Whether it was buying countless sports and history books or entertaining a number of more inane conversations, you encouraged me to read voraciously, to think critically, and above all, to trust that pursuing this path was the right thing to do. Your unwavering support of me as I embarked on this journey to fulfill Grandpa Gale's philosophy that I should "be happy in my work" was so critically important.

I am privileged to have a dissertation committee comprised of brilliant and experienced scholars who were extremely generous in helping shape this work. To my advisor, Will Jones, thank you for everything you have done to help shape me into the historian I am today. You were and are an endless source of encouragement, reviewed an untold numbers of drafts, and assisted in finding funding so I could finish this project remotely while living in Chicago. I'm fortunate to have you as an advisor and friend and I am

forever in your debt for all you've done for me. To Sean Dinces, thank you for asserting that my research is relevant and that the study of sports history is an important conversation to be having. To William Reese and Cindy Cheng, thank you both for your shrewd commentary, particularly during the early stages of this work, which played an instrumental role in shaping my analysis. To Jim Danky, our brainstorming sessions at Espresso Royale were crucial in guiding me toward texts and primary sources that fundamentally steered the tone and direction of my narrative.

Beyond my committee members, I want to thank a number other UW-Madison faculty and staff members who played noteworthy roles in my academic pursuits over the last seven years. Thank you to Leslie Abadie, Christy Clark-Pujara, Christina Greene, Brenda Gayle Plummer, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, Robin Schmidt, Dolores Liamba, and Carrie Tobin for your tireless assistance.

I want to acknowledge and thank the individuals and institutions that provided me with financial support throughout my time at UW-Madison. Thank you to the Doris G. Quinn Foundation, the Mellon-Wisconsin Summer Fellowship program, the Black Metropolis Research Consortium at the University of Chicago, the Dissertator Fellowship program of the UW-Madison History Department and the Vilas Travel Grants program.

This project required a deep dive into a number of archives across the country. Thank you to the archivists at the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature at the Chicago Public Library, the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, and the Chicago History Museum. I am also indebted to the hard work and assistance of the archivists at the Wisconsin Historical Society for helping me order a number of microfiche collections, and in showing me how to properly

operate the microfilm readers. Such simple acts saved me an incredible amount of time and frustration, which was priceless.

I first developed a fierce interest in history during my undergraduate years at Occidental, and the path to a dissertation would never have begun if not for Professor David Axeen. David, thank you for encouraging me to pursue sports and African American history in your undergraduate American Studies courses and for helping me apply to graduate school so many years ago. Thank you also to Doug Smith and Jem Axelrod – your courses and guidance while at Occidental shaped my intellectual curiosity and planted the seed for what would evolve into this work.

My time in Madison would be poorer if not for my dear friends who have helped me think, laugh, and sometimes forget about the challenges of graduate life. To Nick Strohl, Kyle Steele, Marcus Bacher, Simon Balto, Naomi Williams, Matt Reiter, Francis Gourrier, Jill Slaight, Rivka Maizlish, Brad Baranowski, Dan Hummel, John Porco, Kevin Walters, and Kelly Jakes – the next beer at the Terrace is on me.

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated in memory of James Baughman. Jim, you were instrumental in this from the moment I took your journalism history seminar during my first semester of graduate school. Your humor, reassurance, and willingness to assist in any way you could were invaluable as I transformed a seminar paper from your class into a master's thesis, and into what is now a dissertation. I am sorry that you were unable to witness its completion, but I know you would have enjoyed it, even though you would argue that I didn't include enough references to the Cleveland Indians.

It takes a village to write a dissertation, and I am humbled by mine.

Abstract

This dissertation investigates how black journalists' coverage of four key moments in American sports from the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s shaped the potential for achieving racial equality through athletic competition. Those four events are Joe Louis's boxing matches against German Max Schmeling in 1936 and 1938; Jesse Owens's career during and after the 1936 Olympics; the 1930s struggle to increase opportunities for black players in college football; and the battle to desegregate Major League Baseball from 1930 to 1955.

A comparative analysis of these four cases illuminates conflicting and contradictory opinions among African Americans about the proper behavior black men in interracial athletic competition. Bringing black journalists to the forefront, it showcases the debate that developed within black newspapers over how to present prominent black male athletes to a mainstream audience still uncomfortable with black participation in mainstream sports. Furthermore, journalists' tensions over how best to present a reconfigured notion of black manhood through black athletes can be fully understood only when these episodes are examined together.

By placing black sports at the center of early civil rights activism, this dissertation broadens Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's call to examine events that took place outside the South and prior to the landmark *Brown vs. the Board of Education* decision in 1954. Moreover, it widens Gail Bederman's analysis of American manhood and masculinity by arguing that black journalists from the 1920s to the 1950s attempted to refashion acceptable forms of black manhood for star black athletes in the wake of black boxer Jack Johnson's legacy in the 1910s. Thus, this study strengthens our historical understanding of black manhood and the politics of respectability by emphasizing the crucial role black athletes – and the black journalists who covered them – played in shaping public debate over acceptable forms of black manhood.

Introduction

Readers of the October 27, 1945 editions of African American newspapers throughout the country rejoiced upon discovering large banner headlines across the top of the front page that read "BASEBALL'S 'COLOR LINE' SMASHED" as "fleet-footed" Jackie Robinson signed with Major League Baseball's (MLB) Brooklyn Dodgers organization, ending the de facto segregation of America's most popular sport.[1] While white-owned publications such as *The New York Times* and *The Sporting News* briefly reported on the event, black sportswriters such as the *Pittsburgh Courier's* Wendell Smith framed the signing as a moment "that blasted the sturdy, immovable barrier against Negroes since baseball's great empire was established in 1900," and served as a crucial victory in the broader struggle for racial justice.[2]

Robinson's signing is viewed in popular memory as part of the beginning of an era of civil rights achievements marked by the activism of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and others. Black journalists, however, viewed the event as the *culmination* of a decades-long campaign to increase opportunities for African American athletes in a number of sports beyond baseball.[3] Even Robinson believed the black press had played a central role in his signing,

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[1] Wendell Smith, "Baseball 'Color Line' Smashed! Jackie Robinson Signed by Brooklyn Dodgers' Farm Club," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 27, 1945, 1.

[2] See *The Sporting News,* November 1, 1945; and "Montreal Signs Negro Shortstop: Organized Baseball Opens Its Ranks to Negro Player," *New York Times,* October 24, 1945, 17. Wendell Smith, "Baseball 'Color Line' Smashed! Jackie Robinson Signed by Brooklyn Dodgers' Farm Club."

[3] Dan Burley, "Bklyn Dodgers Hire Negro Star: Color Line in Baseball Crumbles as Shortstop Robinson Signs," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 27, 1945, 1; Michael Carter, "It's a Press Victory, Jackie Robinson tells AFRO," *Washington Afro-American,* November 3, 1945, 1; Wendell Smith, "The Sports Beat," *Pittsburgh Courier,* October 27, 1945, 8.

declaring that, "I know that my position was obtained only through the constant pressure of my people and their press. It's a press victory, you might say."[4]

This dissertation investigates the black press' efforts to utilize African American athletic achievement and black athletic institutions as weapons in the fight against racial discrimination from the late 1920s to the mid-1950s. This dissertation argues that the integration of Major League Baseball serves as a capstone to a larger, more complicated 30-year campaign. Central to that campaign was an effort by black journalists to depict African American athletic stars as icons of a new notion of black manhood and respectability. During this period, African American journalists focused predominantly on four major events in black sports: Joe Louis's rise as heavyweight boxing champion through his two matches with German boxer Max Schmeling in 1936 and 1938; Jesse Owens's career during and after the 1936 Summer Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany; the 1930s struggle to increase opportunities for black players in college football; and the battle to desegregate Major League Baseball. Collectively, their coverage of these four sports – and of star athletes in each sport – aimed to demonstrate how a new generation of black male athletes had emerged as exemplars of moral and physical fitness.

African American journalists' emphasis on these athletes' upstanding moral character stemmed – both explicitly and implicitly – from the legacy of African American boxer Jack Johnson. As heavyweight champion during the first two decades of the twentieth century, Johnson terrorized and often humiliated white opponents in the ring. But it was his open defiance of the established racial hierarchy outside the ring – particularly his interracial relationships with white women – that infuriated whites seeking to maintain notions of white racial superiority. Johnson's actions resulted in white sports officials decreasing opportunities for black athletes in boxing and other major professional and collegiate sports in the decades following his career.

[4] Carter, "It's a Press Victory, Jackie Robinson tells AFRO."

Johnson's actions compelled many black journalists and political leaders to more strictly police the boundaries for acceptable, masculine behavior for its sports stars in the decades following his career.[5] Some of this stemmed from concerns over how white attitudes toward African American athletes had been colored by their experience with how Johnson's actions both on and off the field of play threatened to upend notions of white racial superiority. African American journalists rarely invoked Johnson directly when describing why athletes like Owens, Robinson, and others were upstanding gentlemen.[6] Yet the repercussions of Johnson's subversion of the racial order in the early twentieth century subtly influenced how black journalists attempted to sell star black athletes to white audiences from the mid-1920s to the 1950s. Given the lack of archival material explaining the editorial decisions pertaining to each newspaper's sports coverage, it is difficult to declare definitively why black journalists attempted to present black athletes as upstanding gentlemen. Yet, the damage Johnson caused regarding how whites viewed black athletes led many black journalists and political leaders to promote an image of black athletes that was devoid of the controversial behavior that marred Johnson's legacy.

In redefining notions of black manhood and respectability, black journalists believed African American male athletes needed to be winners on the field of play who competed against and outperformed white opponents. In order to become the best athlete in their sport, African

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[5] This dissertation differentiates between the terms manhood and manliness, and masculinity. As gender historian Gail Bederman notes in her study of Jack Johnson, race, and manhood, in the late nineteenth century, notions of manhood and manliness were utilized to draw lines based on class and race. The manliest men, thus, were upstanding middle- and upper-class men. However, at the turn of the century, the term masculinity was used "to convey the new attributes of powerful manhood which middle-class men were working to synthesize. These attributes, by the 1930s, included "aggressiveness, physical force, and sexuality." This dissertation utilizes Bederman's distinction between the two terms and argues that black journalists constructed a new notion of black manhood, in which certain masculine features were desired – and others were rejected – in order to create a more desirable image of "manly" black men. Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 17-20.

[6] African American journalists most often explicitly invoked Jack Johnson when analyzing Joe Louis's career.

American journalists believed black athletes would best demonstrate their manhood by dedicating themselves to develop their athletic skills, seeking out the strongest opponents, and fighting for their rightful opportunity to play against integrated competition. Furthermore, African American journalists expected black athletes to win while exhibiting poise and good sportsmanship; Johnson's in-ring histrionics where he humiliated white opponents, consequently, was deemed inappropriate for this new generation of black athletes.

Secondly, they expected black athletes to project an image of respectability and responsible economic independence off the field. Specifically, the ideal black male athlete was a devoted husband and father who fulfilled his manly duty as the breadwinner by financially supporting his family. To achieve this goal, African American journalists encouraged athletes to cash in on their fame to help support their family; however, pursuing financial opportunities that risked sullying an athlete's or an athletic institution's reputation was deemed inappropriate. Protecting their image, moreover, overlapped with another central component of the black press' definition of respectability: avoiding controversy. African American journalists wanted star black athletes to avoid becoming entangled in controversial issues and challenging white authority in a manner that might reflect poorly on the broader African American community. Finally, given their rare opportunity to compete against whites in a popular arena, black journalists expected black athletes to utilize their notoriety to contribute to the broader campaign to eradicate racial inequality in sports and society at large.

In selling a redefined notion of respectability and black manhood, African American journalists attempted to constrain black athletes' – and Negro League officials who nurtured black baseball players – actions in order to highlight these attributes. Yet the manner in which African American journalists covered black athletes and sports officials in the four cases studied

in this dissertation reveals that they held each to different sets of standards regarding how they could best demonstrate these attributes. These differences stemmed from the specific characteristics of each of the four sports studied in this dissertation and resulted in the complicated construction of ideal African American manhood and respectability across black sports during this era. Efforts to profit off of one's athleticism, for example, were tolerated or encouraged in professional boxing and baseball, while it was criticized to a much greater degree in amateur endeavors such as track and field and college football. Similarly, athletes like Owens and Louis in individual sports such as track and field and boxing were expected to carry a tremendous burden as the sole representatives of black moral and physical character while competing. Moreover, Owens and Louis's ability to compete against whites to a much greater extent than college football players and baseball players in the segregated Negro Leagues compelled many black sportswriters to argue that Owens and Louis should stay silent when confronted with contentious political or racial issues in order to avoid sparking unnecessary controversy that might damage their image and diminish opportunities for integrated competition in the future. However, in attempting to eradicate college football's culture of racial discrimination, African American players on integrated college football teams were often encouraged to do the opposite and openly challenge white college football officials who kept them off the field of play. Negro League officials were similarly expected to improve the quality of black baseball in order to pressure MLB officials to desegregate the league. For athletes and officials in both sports, actively challenging whites to desegregate was an essential component of embodying an ideal black man.

Finally, although black journalists believed that African American athletes would best demonstrate their manhood by winning on the field of play, they occasionally wanted some black

athletes to potentially sacrifice their opportunity to compete in order to pressure white sports officials to eradicate racial discrimination in sports. In demanding that Owens boycott participating in the Olympics, black college football players threaten to quit their teams if they did not compete against all-white teams, and Negro League officials sacrifice the financial well-being of the Negro Leagues to help integrate MLB, African American journalists prioritized the symbolic value these contributions would have toward the broader struggle for racial equality ahead of the athletes and officials' personal needs and interests.

Examining the differences that emerged in how black journalists celebrated black athletes as exemplars of new notions of manhood and respectability highlight the difficulty they had in articulating how best to demonstrate these characteristics within each sport. Thus, investigating the black press' treatment of black male athletes across the four cases examined in this dissertation deepens our historical understanding of the obstacles African Americans encountered in negotiating selling idealized notions of black manhood and respectability against the challenges these athletes faced. In Chapter 1, the black press' central focus in covering Joe Louis's matches against German boxer Max Schmeling in 1936 and 1938 was on winning. Black journalists felt that Louis would best demonstrate his respectable manhood to a white audience by defeating his white opponent. Yet, Louis's stunning loss to Schmeling in 1936 threatened to eradicate this image because of Louis's lackluster effort in preparing for the fight. African American journalists' emphasis on how Louis redoubled his commitment to his craft to become a dedicated, disciplined fighting champion illuminate how black journalists' attitudes about black manhood were rooted in the expectation that all African American athletes had an obligation to relentlessly develop their skills in order to outperform their white counterparts.

Chapter 2's investigation of the black press' coverage of Jesse Owens during and immediately following the 1936 Summer Olympic Games in Berlin highlights the challenges black athletes – particularly those in amateur sports – faced in navigating the financial side of being a respectable black athlete. Consequently, it highlights how the black press – in attempting to construct an image of ideal black manhood – often placed constraints on a black athlete's public image in a manner that conflicted with their personal needs. During the Games, black journalists hailed Owens's achievements as a means to expose and criticize the immense shortcomings of a supposed American democratic ideal of egalitarianism and equal opportunity that politicians sought to showcase to an international audience. However, shortly after the conclusion of the Olympics, many African American journalists criticized Owens for attempting to capitalize on his fame. Their frustration stemmed from *how* Owens aimed to profit from his celebrity by endorsing Republican candidate Alf Landon during the 1936 Presidential election. The dramatic shift in the black press' treatment of Owens illustrates the tensions among black journalists over what constituted acceptable, respectable gentlemanly behavior for prominent African American athletes of the era. Moreover, it reveals how Owens struggled to navigate being a star black athlete and a symbol of black success while attempting to satisfy his personal need to attain economic security.

Chapter 3 explores how the black press' expectations for black athletes to serve as exemplars of upstanding citizenship often burdened individual black athletes with the expectation that they contribute to a larger battle over racial discrimination in sports. In attempting to overturn college football's Gentlemen's Agreement, an unofficial policy in which all-white Southern schools refused to play integrated teams unless they sat their black players, African American journalists often believed that individual black players should sacrifice their

careers for their greater cause of eradicating the policy. Unlike the wholly segregated MLB, college football was never strictly segregated during this era. Some teams outside of the South added African Americans to their rosters beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, unlike the integration of Major League Baseball in 1947, college football lacked a singular "Jackie Robinson moment" where one individual broke the sport's color barrier and sparked widespread acceptance of blacks within the sport. The sport's integration, therefore, occurred on a smaller, more localized, school-by-school basis.[7] As a result, many African American journalists expected black players on integrated teams to play a central role in eradicating the policy. Yet their coverage of incidents where integrated teams acquiesced to the Gentleman's Agreement during the 1930s did not follow a uniform path. The black press' criticism of different individuals responsible for keeping black players off the field – ranging from college football officials at both integrated and all-white universities, white students at integrated schools, and the black players at the center of the conflict – varied dramatically. This chapter's examination of how black journalists fought to eradicate this policy throughout the 1930s, therefore, illustrates the debates that developed between journalists over how black players would best contribute to achieving this goal.

The symbolic value of black athletic participation in the struggle to eradicate racial inequality in sports was most evident in the black press' efforts to integrate Major League Baseball in the 1930s and 1940s. In order to eliminate MLB's color barrier, African American journalists framed the black-only Negro Leagues as a respectable black institution that would

[7] The black press' contentious relationship with the Negro Leagues in the years before and after MLB's integration differed markedly from its treatment of football programs at all-black colleges and universities. Additionally, the black press rarely criticized the ongoing presence of all-black college football programs as it sought to eradicate the Gentleman's Agreement at major college football programs. For more information about the history of college football at Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), see Michael Hurd, *Black College Football, 1892-1992: One Hundred Years of History, Education, and Pride,* (Virginia Beach, Virginia: The Donning Co. Pub., 1993).

compel white MLB team owners to integrate their teams. However, once Jackie Robinson broke MLB's color barrier by playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, the black press' attitudes toward the Negro Leagues and its value as a symbol of black respectability changed. Chapter 4 investigates the black press' contentious relationship with the Negro Leagues from 1930 to 1955. The deterioration in the relationship between the two institutions and the rapid demise of the Negro Leagues shortly after MLB integrated demonstrates the tremendous costs the African American community incurred in the process of integrating white-owned institutions. This ideological fracture between Negro League officials and many black journalists, moreover, illustrates how many African Americans remained divided between supporting strategies of liberal integrationism and economic nationalism. The tension between the two institutions – and between different black sportswriters – underscores many African American journalists' difficulties in negotiating presenting black sports institutions as respectable while attempting to eradicate racial segregation in mainstream sports. Moreover, it highlights the broader theme of this dissertation: in constructing a new archetype for black athletes, and the institutions that developed their talent, African American journalists engaged in a continually evolving and often conflicting process in which they failed to adopt a uniform strategy about how best to achieve their goals.

In examining the 30-year campaign to fashion a new, ideal black male athlete archetype, this dissertation highlights an overlooked moment in African American history, wherein debates among civil rights leaders over the politics of respectability and black manhood that developed in the Jim Crow era of the 1910s and 1920s evolved in the sporting world in the 1930s and 1940s. This dissertation utilizes historian Evelyn Higginbotham, Kevin Gaines, and Victoria Wolcott's conceptions of the politics of respectability as a framework for understanding the black press'

attitudes toward African American athletes and black manhood.[8] Yet their arguments that in a segregated environment in the 1910s and 1920s, many African Americans believed that embodying a morally refined character to serve as a testament to black people's deservedness for equality, fails to apply for black athletes in the 1930s and 1940s because African American athletes and their advocates placed a premium on competing against whites. Thus, this dissertation's analysis of a new black male athlete archetype broadens our understanding of the evolution of the politics of respectability by situating it in an environment that necessitated confronting the realities and difficulties of pushing toward racial integration in sports. Moreover, it challenges scholars to incorporate popular sports when examining the relationship between black manhood and civil rights activism across the long civil rights movement. Furthermore, it refutes the historical tendency to focus predominantly on the integration of Major League Baseball as the central – and often only – significant event in the history of black sports in the mid-twentieth century. Instead, this dissertation compels scholars to understand the critical relevance of efforts in African American sports *prior to* the integration of MLB that shaped black athletes, and notions of black manhood throughout the twentieth century.[9]

The tensions that developed among African American journalists, civil rights leaders, and black athletes in redefining black manhood, underscore the need to examine this fertile period in the history of African American journalism and sports. In doing so, this dissertation helps us better understand the challenging social, racial, and gendered dynamics at play throughout the

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[8] See Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920,* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994); Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century,* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit,* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

[9] Kimberly Stanley's recent dissertation represents one of the first works examining how the black press articulated notions of black manhood in sports outside of baseball during this period. Kimberly M. Stanley, "Pulling Down the House and Tearing Up the Yard: Constructing, Policing, and Containing Black Masculinity, 1920-1960," (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2015).

long civil rights movement. By asserting that black journalists constructed new standards of acceptable behavior for black athletes *on their own terms,* rather than according to white definitions of respectability, this dissertation challenges scholars to reconsider how notions of black manhood were developed during this period, the role African American athletes played in this redefinition, and the conflicts and tensions that emerged concerning these characteristics.

Examining the process through which African American journalists constructed new standards for acceptable behavior for black athletes illuminates the conflicting and contradictory opinions journalists held about how black athletes and sports officials should act when breaking down each sport's racial barriers. These tensions often reflected an ideological divide between the ideals of racial integration, economic nationalism, and intra-racial solidarity as African Americans fought for political, cultural, and economic equality.[10] Their scrutiny of black athletes' behavior, furthermore, highlights an internal debate among African American journalists, intellectuals, and politicians over how best to appease a white audience still uncomfortable with black participation in mainstream spots. Indeed, since Reconstruction, according to historian David K. Wiggins, African American athletes have continually wrestled with the issue of "double-consciousness," a philosophy first posited by black intellectual leader W.E.B. Du Bois in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk,* wherein African Americans have struggled to present themselves as both black and American. Placing African American journalists at the center of the debate over how black athletes should best exhibit this "double-

[10] Because black journalists rarely kept archival material relating to the editorial decisions made in covering black athletes, it is difficult to discern definitively why their coverage of black athletes differed. Some archival material from prominent black journalists exists and will be analyzed in this dissertation. See the Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago Public Library, Chicago, Illinois; the Art Carter Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.; the Claude A. Barnett Papers, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois; the Percival Leroy Prattis Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.; the Wendell Smith Papers, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, New York; and the Manley Private Business Papers, Newark Public Library, Newark, New Jersey.

consciousness" illustrates how black journalists' development of a new definition of black manhood attempted to thread the needle and present African American athletes in a manner that championed respectability and racial pride while appeasing whites who remained leery of black athletic participation in mainstream sports.[11] Furthermore, the back press' coverage needed to both celebrate black athletic achievement *and* highlight how black athletes were testaments to the deservedness of all African Americans for full citizenship. This dissertation argues that the difficulty black journalists experienced in achieving this goal across the four cases examined in this study underscores the broader challenges African Americans faced in eradicating notions of racial inferiority in American society.

Jack Johnson & the History of African American Sports

A comparative analysis of these four moments in African American sports highlights tensions among black journalists over how best to present black male athleticism to a white audience that have been overlooked when historians have studied these events individually.[12]

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[11] In the sports world, this tension, according to Wiggins, forced African Americans "to live split existences. On the one hand, black athletes were proud of their race for its forbearance and ability to survive, and fought against the negative images of black inferiority. At the same time, black athletes aspired to success in American sport which necessitated that they adhere to values upheld in the dominant society." As a result, "black athletes moved in and out of their respective roles as blacks, athletes, and Americans with a high degree of regularity in an attempt to foster a positive self-image and realize success in one of this country's most prominent institutions." David K. Wiggins, "The Notion of Double-Consciousness and the Involvement of Black Athletes in American Sport," in *Ethnicity and Sport in North American History and Culture,* ed. George Eisen and David K. Wiggins, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), 133-134.

[12] Since the publication of Jules Tygiel's *Baseball's Great Experiment* – the seminal investigation of Jackie Robinson's breaking MLB's color barrier – in 1983, many scholars have addressed how star black athletes and major moments in African American sports since the 1930s have contributed to a broader fight for racial justice. See Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Brian Carroll, *When To Stop the Cheering: The Black Press, the Black Community & the Integration of Professional Baseball* (New York City: Routledge, 2006); Brian Carroll, '"There Couldn't be any Other Way': The Great Dilemma for the Black Press and Negro League Baseball," *Black Ball: A Negro Leagues Journal* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 5-23; Brian Carroll, "To Pittsburgh from Chicago: A Changing of the Guard in Black Baseball and in the Black Press During the 1930s," *Black Ball: A Negro Leagues Journal* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 86-105; Brian Carroll, "The Black Press and the Integration of Professional Baseball: A content analysis of shifts in coverage, 1945-1948," *Journal of Sports Media* 3, No. 2 (Fall 2008): 61-88; Chris Lamb, *A Conspiracy of Silence: Sportswriters and the*

Biographers of Robinson, Louis, and Owens, for example, often frame their stories as individual triumphs over tremendous racial, social, political, and economic obstacles to gain entry into segregated athletic competition.[13] Similarly, scholarship examining the challenges African American athletes and sports officials faced in eradicating *institutional* limitations in sports such as Major League Baseball and major college football programs frequently takes an episodic approach that narrowly analyzes the specific challenges present in each sport.[14]

While these narratives rightly highlight how black athletes' successes helped inspire future civil rights initiatives, they often overlook the tensions that existed among African Americans – particularly black journalists – over how these athletes should act in order to win over a white audience. These events and athletes' careers did not occur in isolation. The manner in which these athletes carried themselves as upstanding black role models was shaped in part by

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Long Campaign to Desegregate Baseball, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012); Michael E. Lomax, "Black Entrepreneurship in the National Pastime," *Journal of Sport History* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 43-64; Roberta J. Newman and Joel Nathan Rosen, *Black Baseball, Black Business: Race Enterprise and the Fate of the Segregated Dollar,* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2014); Michael E. Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860-1901: Operating By Any Means Necessary,* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003); Michael E. Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902-1930: the Negro National and Eastern Colored Leagues,* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014); Neil Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); and William D. Rubenstein, "Jackie Robinson and the Integration of Major League Baseball," *History Today* 53, no. 9 (Sept. 2003): 20-25.

[13] For biographies on Robinson Roger Kahn, *Rickey & Robinson: The True, Untold Story of the Integration of Baseball,* (New York: Rodale, 2014); and Jonathan Eig, *Opening Day: The Story of Jackie Robinson's Fist Season,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007). For scholarship on Owens, see William Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life,* (New York: Free Press, 1986); and Jeremy Schaap, *Triumph: The Untold Story of Jesse Owens and Hitler's Olympics,* (Boston Houghton Mifflin, 2007). For works on Louis, see Randy Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man,* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2010); Gerald Astor, *"And a Credit to His Race:" The Hard Life and Times of Joseph Louis Barrow, a.k.a. Joe Louis,* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1974); Richard Bak, *Joe Louis: The Great Black Hope*, (Dallas: Taylor Publishers, 1996); and Lew Freedman, *Joe Louis: The Life of a Heavyweight,* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Inc. Publishers, 2013).

[14] For scholarship on the breaking of MLB's color barrier, see Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment;* Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*; Robert Kuhn McGregor, *A Calculus of Color: The Integration of Baseball's American League,* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015); and Lamb, *Conspiracy of Silence and the Long Campaign to Desegregate Baseball*. For works on the efforts in increase opportunities for African Americans in college football, see Lane Demas, *Integrating the Gridiron: Black Civil Rights and American College Football,* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2011); Charles H. Martin, *Benching Jim Crow: The Rise and Fall of the Color Line in Southern College Sports, 1890-1980,* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2010); and James Roland Coates, Jr., "Gentlemen's Agreement: The 1937 Maryland-Syracuse Football Controversy," (Master's Thesis, University of Maryland, 1982).

each other's actions – and the public's response to their behavior. This dissertation, therefore, challenges scholars to consider the more complicated story regarding African American journalists' struggles to develop and disseminate a notion of ideal, upstanding black manhood for its prominent athletes.

Analyzing African American perceptions of black athletes collectively reveals how Jack Johnson's legacy shaped notions of black manhood for African American athletes throughout the first half of the twentieth century in all sports, not just in boxing. Historians have predominantly discussed Johnson's influence in the boxing world, particularly with regards to Louis.[15] Although African American intellectuals and journalists explicitly mentioned Johnson when discussing Louis's career, the shadow cast by Johnson's actions shaped African American athletes across all sports during the first half of the twentieth century. As a result, Johnson's legacy was the connective tissue binding these different moments and athletes together. The construction of a new black male athlete archetype – and the conflicts and disagreements that stemmed from its development – resulted from African American journalists' concerns over the impact Johnson's actions had on white fears of black athleticism.

Therefore, in order to understand how Louis, Owens, Robinson, and others attempted to embody the ideal black male athlete, one must first comprehend "the unforgivable blackness" of Jack Johnson.[16] Critical race theorists Eric Anderson and Mark McCormack argue that, since the end of the Civil War, men in the United States have used sports as a venue to shape

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[15] Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 51, 71. See also Brian D. Bunk, "Harry Wills and the Image of the Black Boxer From Jack Johnson to Joe Louis," *Journal of Sport History* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2012); 63-80; Frederic Cople Jaher, "White America Views Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali," in *Sport in America: New Historical Perspectives,* ed. Donald Spivey, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1985): 145-192; Joseph Dorinson, "Black Heroes in Sport: From Jack Johnson to Muhammad Ali," *Journal of Popular Culture* 31, no. 3 (Winter 1997): 115-135; and William H. Wiggins Jr., Boxing's Sambo Twins: Racial Stereotypes in Jack Johnson and Joe Louis Newspaper Cartoons, 1908 to 1938," *Journal of Sport History* 15, no.3 (Winter 1988): 242-254.

[16] See Geoffrey C. Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson,* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2004).

contemporary notions of manhood. This modern American sporting culture, they contend, compelled boys and men to "desire to be associated with masculine dominance by partaking in sports that sculpt their bodies and construct their identities to align with dominant perspectives of masculinist embodiment and expression."[17] The ability to run faster, jump higher, punch harder, and hit a ball farther than one's opponents, therefore, served to quantify where one stood on the hierarchal ladder of American manhood.

This exhibition of physical dominance, while theoretically available to all men, was utilized primarily by middle- and upper-class white men as a means to draw distinctions based on class and race that reasserted notions of elite, white racial superiority.[18] Those elite men believed, as scholar Gail Bederman states in *Manliness and Civilization,* that "the most advanced races were the ones who had evolved the most perfect manliness."[19] Consequently, Bederman contends that,

> Civilization thus constructed manliness as simultaneously cultural and racial. White men were able to achieve perfect manliness because they had inherited that capacity from their racial forebears. Black men, in contrast, might struggle as hard as they could to be truly manly without success. They were primitives who could never achieve true civilized manliness because their racial ancestors had never evolved that capacity.[20]

Given those constraints, when poor, immigrant, and black male athletes competed against whites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, according to Michael Messner, "the

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[17] Eric Anderson and Mark McCormack, "Intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, and American Sporting Oppression: Examining Black and Gay Male Athletes," *Journal of Homosexuality* 57, no. 8 (Fall 2010), 953.

[18] See Michael Messner, *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity,* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 11; Anderson and McCormack, "Intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, and American Sporting Oppression," 957; and John Hoberman, "The Price of 'Black Dominance,'" *Society* 37, no. 3 (March/April 2000), 49.

[19] Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 27-28.

[20] Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization,* 29.

extension of sports to workers and blacks was viewed by elites as a means of control."[21] African Americans refused to fully accept these edicts and used sports as an arena to contest this power dynamic "to redefine, negotiate, or even reject, the ruling group's rules, values, and meanings."[22] Yet opportunities to gain entry in mainstream sports competitions for black athletes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were few and far between.

At the turn of the twentieth century, ideological battles over American manhood were fought most prominently in the boxing ring. In particular, according to historians Randy Roberts and Ben Carrington, the heavyweight championship symbolized the ultimate prize for who was the manliest, toughest, and most virile man in the nation.[23] Staking such significance to the heavyweight title, therefore, meant that most white boxing officials wanted to keep the title out of black hands for fear that it would eradicate the racial order. As a result, boxing officials, led by champion John L. Sullivan, refused to let African American boxers fight for the heavyweight title throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This exclusion, however, did not last forever; in December 1908, Jack Johnson rocked the boxing world and mainstream white society more broadly by defeating Tommy Burns in Sydney, Australia for the heavyweight championship. Johnson's victory compelled boxing officials to introduce a litany of white boxers – many of whom were dubbed the "Great White Hope" by white journalists – to fight Johnson in hopes of reclaiming the title. Yet, for years, Johnson handily defeated these contenders, further enraging whites. After defeating former champion Jim Jefferies in 1910, for example, many whites feared that the victory would

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[21] Messner, *Power at Play,* 11.

[22] Messner, *Power at Play,* 12.

[23] Roberts, *Joe Louis*, 37; and Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics,* 2. See also, Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 8.

encourage African Americans across the nation to defy the established racial hierarchy. When the fight ended, many violently attacked African Americans celebrating Johnson's victory in hopes of reasserting notions of white racial dominance.[24] While the rioting concerned many African American journalists, William F. Pickens, in a *Chicago Defender* article published shortly after the fight's conclusion, argued that, "it was a good deal better for Johnson to win and a few Negroes to be killed in body for it, than for Johnson to have lost and all Negroes to be killed in spirit for the pronouncements of inferiority from the whole white press."[25]

Yet Johnson's demeanor both in and out of the ring ultimately overshadowed the symbolic value his reign as champion held for many within the African American community. As boxing historian Geoffrey C. Ward notes, boxers in the early twentieth century acted in a gentlemanly manner, emphasizing good sportsmanship and fair play in their matches. Johnson, on the other hand, frequently taunted and humiliated his opponents, making a mockery of the sport's traditions.[26] These actions angered many whites who viewed Johnson's in-ring behavior as an active attempt to subvert the established racial hierarchy and diminish his opponent's manhood.[27]

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[24] See Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 47; and Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness,* 216-218.

[25] In Ethan Michaeli, *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America From the Age of the Pullman Porters to the Age of Obama,* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 34-35.

[26] As Ward states, when boxing Tommy Burns for the heavyweight championship in 1908, Johnson repeatedly mocked and humiliated Burns throughout the match. When Burns threw his best body punches at Johnson, Ward notes, Johnson humiliated Burns by stating, "You punch like a woman Tommy, who taught you how to fight, your mother?" To add insult to injury, Ward adds, "in the sixth round, Johnson turned his head to chat with the press so often, his seconds shouted that he should keep his eye on the champion. 'I see him, oh yes,' Johnson said, 'though he is so small.'" Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, 125-126.

[27] According to Carrington, The utter disdain for black deference towards white authority, and an example as to why Johnson would prove so destabilizing a force for the boundaries of white supremacy, was indicated by the way in which Johnson, self-aware of his own technical and physical superiority, would mock his white opponents *during* the bouts themselves." Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics*, 72-73.

It was Johnson's behavior outside the ring, in particular – where he defied contemporary racial customs by spending lavishly, drinking excessively, and most damningly, openly dating white women – that caused the greatest uproar. These interracial romances incensed whites across the nation who deemed it a dangerous affront to undermining notions of white racial superiority.[28] Johnson's refusal to be intimidated by white boxers and authorities, and his active efforts to subvert their racial and cultural ideologies, were transgressive events that few, if any other popular African Americans dared to attempt at that time. Indeed, as Bederman declares, "Johnson's championship, as well as his self-consciously flamboyant, sexual public persona, was an intolerable – and intentional – challenge to white Americans' widespread beliefs that male power stemmed from white supremacy."[29] Moreover, as scholar Ben Carrington states, "it was not so much that Johnson refused to accept his subordinate position to whites but that he actively and willfully suggested *his superiority*."[30] Johnson, thus, represented much of white America's deepest fears about what might occur when African Americans were given a chance to compete on a level playing field. Immensely strong and sexually virile, Johnson could not be tamed by intimidation or violence, which allowed him to run roughshod over the traditions racist whites held dear in their belief in white superiority.

Consequently, as Ward argues, "most whites (and some Negroes as well) saw him as a perpetual threat – profligate, arrogant, amoral, a dark menace and a danger to the natural order of things."[31] Unable to find a white boxer who could defeat Johnson in the ring and reestablish order in the boxing world, white officials sought to punish Johnson for associating with white

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[28] Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 8.

[29] Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 5.

[30] Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics,* 89.

[31] Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, 4.

women; in 1912, they charged him with violating the Mann Act for transporting women across state lines for immoral purposes.[32] The criminal allegations dogged Johnson throughout the rest of his career and white boxing fans rejoiced when Johnson finally lost the heavyweight title to Jess Willard in 1915. With the title safely back in white hands, boxing officials and promoters swiftly reinstituted an unofficial policy that denied African American boxers opportunities to fight for the heavyweight championship.

Ultimately, Johnson's legacy reshaped both the boxing world and sporting culture more broadly. The terror white boxing fans and officials felt when Johnson taunted white opponents while champion resulted, once he lost the title, in the reaffirmation of the color line in heavyweight professional boxing for over twenty years. Many talented black heavyweight boxers such as Harry Wills, for example, were denied the chance to attain athletic glory because of the repercussions of Johnson's actions while champion. African American heavyweight boxers did not earn an opportunity to fight for the title until Joe Louis squared off against James Braddock in 1937. Louis's managers and the black press, as will be examined in Chapter 1, carefully orchestrated Louis's ascent up the heavyweight ranks. In particular, they framed Louis as an upstanding, hard-working African American man worthy of fighting for the title; whether explicit or implicit, they conveyed to white boxing officials that Louis was not Jack Johnson in how he carried himself both in and out of the ring. This image, they hoped, would assuage white fears that Louis would not try to upend the racial hierarchy like Johnson had done three decades earlier.

This dissertation, therefore, extends Gail Bederman's analysis of the redefinition of manhood that took place during Jack Johnson's career by arguing that his legacy led to a further

[32] For a detailed analysis of this episode, along with Johnson's efforts to avoid jail by fleeing the country in 1913, see Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness.*

reimagining of what African American journalists deemed acceptable behavior for black men – and black athletes in particular – from the 1920s to the 1950s. This project builds on scholarship of boxing historians such as Geoffrey C. Ward, Randy Roberts, Gerald Astor, Lewis Erenberg, and David Margolick that rightly contends that, from the onset of his professional career, Joe Louis deliberately sold himself to white boxing officials and fans as Johnson's opposite.[33] This project, however, looks beyond how Johnson shaped Louis and African American boxers by arguing that his legacy affected how the black press framed black athletes *across* the sporting world during this time. In doing so, this dissertation makes explicit what most scholarship pertaining to Owens, Robinson, and other black athletes of this era often implies: that acceptance in the white sports world required black men to act in an upstanding, respectable manner.[34]

Moreover, this dissertation's analysis of the black press' efforts to break the color line in Major League Baseball and increase opportunities for African American football players at major college football programs asserts that African American journalists similarly situated black athletes in these sports as being upstanding and respectable. Beyond the athletes

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[33] For major biographies of Louis, see Roberts, *Joe Louis*; Astor, *"And a Credit to His Race";* Bak, *Joe Louis*; and Freedman, *Joe Louis.* For works exploring Louis' career from a political perspective, see Donald McRae, *Heroes Without a Country: America's Betrayal of Joe Louis and Jesse Owens,* (New York: ECCO, 2002); and Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, "Constructing G.I. Joe Louis: Cultural Solutions to the 'Negro Problem' During World War II," *Journal of American History* 89, no. 3 (December 2002): 958-983. Scholarship examining how the white media depicted Louis includes Chris Mead, *Champion: Joe Louis, Black Hero in White America,* (New York: Scribner, 1985); William H. Wiggins Jr., "Boxing's Sambo Twins,"; Jaher, "White America Views Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali,"; Jeffrey T. Sammons, "Boxing as a Reflection of Society: The Southern Reaction to Joe Louis," *Journal of Popular Culture* 16, no. 4 (Spring 1983): 23-33; and Bunk, "Harry Wills and the Image of the Black Boxer From Jack Johnson to Joe Louis." For major works exploring the political implications of Louis' fights with Max Schmeling, see Lewis E. Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmeling,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); David Margolick, *Beyond Glory: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling, and a World on the Brink,* (New York: Knopf, 2005); Patrick Myler, *Ring of Hate: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling: The Fight of the Century,* (New York: Arcade Publishers, 2005); and Theresa E. Runstedler, "In Sports the Best Man Wins: How Joe Louis Whupped Jim Crow," in *Sport in America: From Colonial Leisure to Celebrity Figures and Globalization, Vol. II,* ed. David K. Wiggins, (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics, 2010): 221-255. For works comparing Louis to Jack Johnson, see Thomas R. Hietala, *The Fight of the Century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and the Struggle for Racial Equality,* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002).

[34] A recent dissertation by historian Kimberly Stanley represents one of the few extensive efforts to examine how Johnson's legacy affected both Louis and Owens. Stanley, "Pulling Down the House and Tearing Up the Yard."

themselves, African American journalists were concerned with how black sporting institutions appeared to white audiences as well. As will be explored in Chapter 4, African American journalists' contentious relationship with the Negro Leagues at times centered around their belief that it was being managed in a manner that made it look undignified to white baseball officials. Black journalists' focus on the institution's appearance stemmed from their belief that, selling the Negro Leagues as an upstanding institution would pressure MLB officials to eradicate its segregationist policy. Yet, once MLB integrated, black journalists' struggled to come to terms with the continued presence of the Negro Leagues as it now served to highlight the legacy of segregation within the sport. Consequently, this dissertation's exploration of the black press' attempts to champion acceptable notions of black manhood and respectability for black athletes – and the institutions in which they competed – demonstrates the need to examine Johnson's legacy throughout this period and across the entire sporting landscape.

Finally, this project expands on literature analyzing how African American sports influenced black culture and civil rights initiatives throughout the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, the struggles African American athletes faced in becoming champions while demonstrating their physical and moral fitness to a white, mainstream audience broadens our historical understanding of the cultural components of the civil rights movement. An exploration of the black press' efforts to celebrate these athletes' achievements as part of a broader struggle for racial equality prior to the beginning of the "modern" civil rights era that began with the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, affirms that the history of amateur and professional sports conforms to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's conceptualization of a "Long Civil Rights Movement" that is, the actions

and events during the 1930s and early 1940s shaped the cultural components of the civil rights struggle during the 1950s and 1960s.[35]

The Great Migration, the Black Economy, and the African American Athlete

While Jack Johnson's legacy played a central role in the black press' development of a new black male archetype, this new image was also shaped by major shifts in African American politics, increased migration from the rural South to the urban North, Midwest, and West, the rise of an outspoken and activist black counterpublic sphere, and the development and expansion of a black economic sector that reconfigured African American social, political, and economic life from the 1920s to the 1950s. As a result, the new environment black athletes – and the journalists who covered them – faced served to deepen the black press' concern over Johnson's legacy by acknowledging how the two eras in which these black athletes competed were markedly different. Understanding black journalists' efforts to frame African American athletes from the 1920s to the 1950s in a manner to counter Johnson's legacy developed as a result of the environmental factors confronting black during this era as well.

The First Great Migration ignited a series of interconnected shifts in black social, economic, and political life. These changes partially explain how the black press treated athletes from the 1920s to the 1950s differently than during Johnson's reign as heavyweight champion. Beginning with the onset of World War I and continuing into the 1920s, the First Great

[35] Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (Mar., 2005): 1254. However, as Sundiata Keith Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang note in "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire," when utilizing the "Long Civil Rights Movement" framework, scholars need to avoid minimizing discussions of the contentious debates and rifts that emerged throughout the struggle. They argue, for example, that by folding Black Power into the civil rights struggle, scholars often "aggregate them into one undifferentiated mass of characteristics," drawing attention away from the unique "intellectual and cultural dimensions" of Black Power. Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," *The Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 275-279.

Migration resulted in African Americans leaving the South for urban communities in the North, West, and Midwest in unprecedented numbers.[36] Rumors of higher-paying industrial work in major urban cities, coupled with ongoing systemic racial violence plaguing blacks across the South, compelled many African Americans to head north.[37] By 1920, only a few years after the Great Migration began, the racial demographics of major Northern cities had dramatically altered. New York City's black population grew from 91,709 in 1910 to 152,467 by 1920; in Chicago, from 44,103 to 109,458; and in Detroit, from 5,471 to 40,818.[38]

African American newspapers played a central role in the rapid growth of these northern black metropolises. The northern black press relayed crucial information to black southerners about better economic opportunities and living conditions potentially awaiting them in the

[36] The Great Migration, as scholars such as James Gregory have rightly argued, encompasses a century-long process of African Americans and whites relocating from the South to the North – with some even returning to the South by the end of the twentieth century. This "Southern Diaspora," according to Gregory, occurred primarily in two waves – the first beginning with World War I and continuing through the 1920s, and the second extending primarily from World War II into the early Cold War era. African Americans and whites ultimately moved continually throughout the century, but the two largest waves of migration occurred during these time frames. As a result, scholars often refer to them as the First and Second Great Migrations. See James A. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America,* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America,* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1953,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s,* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995); and Stewart E. Tolnay, "The African American 'Great Migration' and Beyond," *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (2003): 209-232.

[37] These potential new jobs emerged predominantly because increased immigration restrictions enacted during World War I compelled northern employers to recruit blacks to serve "as a new source of labor to replace the southern and eastern Europeans." Tolnay, "The African American 'Great Migration' and Beyond," 212-214. Collectively, according to Great Migration scholar James Grossman, "'Northern fever' permeated the South, as letters, rumors, gossip, and black newspapers carried word of higher wages and better treatment in the North." Grossman, *Land of Hope,* 3. As historian James Gregory astutely notes, the same rumors compelled many poor whites to pack up and head north as well. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora,* 6.

[38] Grossman, *Land of Hope,* 4.

North.[39] The *Chicago Defender,* in particular, stood at the forefront of urging southern readers to trek north in search of a new, better life for themselves and their families. In an October 7, 1916 editorial, the newspaper declared

> Every black man for the sake of his wife and daughters especially should leave even at a financial sacrifice every spot in the south where his worth is not appreciated enough to give him the standing of a man and a citizen in the community. We know full well that this would mean a depopulation of that section and if it were possible we would glory in its accomplishment.[40]

The *Defender,* along with the *New York Amsterdam News,* and the *Pittsburgh Courier,* among others, played a central role in highlighting the racial violence and injustice plaguing black southerners, while simultaneously declaring that major northern cities offered southern blacks a path toward prosperity, safety, and comfort. By crafting this image juxtaposing the two regions, African Americans newspapers in the North galvanized many southern blacks to head north in search of a better life.

As tens of thousands of African Americans flooded cities like Chicago, New York, Cleveland, Detroit, and Pittsburgh, they dramatically reshaped the African American community

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[39] By publishing news articles, opinion pieces, and weekly advice columns, African American newspapers, according to Grossman, "provided glowing images of the North alongside lurid reports of Southern oppression." The extensive efforts to push for northern migration occurred primarily in African American newspapers situated in the North and Midwest. The black press in the South, as Grossman contends, could not take the same vocal and defiant stance as its northern counterpart in deriding the southern Jim Crow legal and extralegal system, nor could it encourage its readers to abandon the region for fear of white retribution. Grossman, *Land of Hope,* 68, 80; see also Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora,* 51-53.

[40] "Farewell Dixie Land," *Chicago Defender,* October 7, 1916, 12. The *Defender* achieved widespread readership and influence with black readers in the South due to the creation of extensive formal and informal distribution networks that circulated the newspaper throughout the region. *Defender* publisher Robert Abbott paid Pullman Porters on commission to distribute issues and sell subscriptions by rail, which were then sold in barbershops, churches, and other locations across the South. Once in the hands of southern readers, weekly issues were passed throughout the community, leading to a weekly national readership that, by the early 1920s, ranged from an estimated 160,000 to 250,000. Grossman, *Land of Hope,* 79. For an extensive examination of the scope of the *Defender's* distribution throughout the South, see "Chicago Defender Shipping List Map," in Grossman, *Land of Hope,* 76-77; and Michaeli, *The Defender,* 31-32. The extensive efforts of newspapers like the *Defender* urging southern readers to head north, coupled with the numerous letters sent by family and friends who had already migrated north, informed southern blacks of the better opportunities potentially available to them, and allowed them to coordinate their eventual emigration north.

in each region.[41] These changes greatly affected black sports as well. Many of the most iconic and influential African American athletes from the 1930s to the 1950s were products of the Great Migration. Owens and Louis, among many other black athletes, traced their roots to growing up impoverished in the rural South. Both families relocated when they were children: the Owenses moved from rural Alabama to Cleveland, Ohio, and the Louises from rural Alabama to Detroit, Michigan. Although their personal experiences and memories of growing up in the South varied – Owens and Louis were nine and twelve, respectively, when they relocated north – both noted how the threat of racial violence and lack of viable economic opportunities caused their families tremendous hardship that lingered even after they left the South.

The threat of racial violence often compelled athletes like Owens and Louis to avoid controversy.[42] Owens, for example, according to biographer William Baker, "always had a ready smile and open hand for everyone he met. 'I try awfully hard for people to like me,' he once told an interviewer."[43] Their reserved, humble nature, thus, stemmed in part from growing up in the South. The Great Migration restructured the northern black fan base, and the African American journalists who covered and celebrated these athletes' exploits as well. Having traversed similar paths, they understood the challenges black athletes faced and implicitly endorsed their approach to avoiding controversy. The Great Migration, therefore, influenced the black press' emphasis on

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[41] Scholars have examined how the First Great Migration reshaped black social, cultural, economic, and political life in major urban areas such as Chicago, Pittsburgh, and New York. See Rob Ruck, *Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh,* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Green, *Selling the Race;* Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes;* Douglas, *Terrible Honesty;* and Kimberley L. Phillips, *AlabamaNorth: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-1945,* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

[42] See Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 11, 51. Although, according to baseball historian Jules Tygiel, Brooklyn Dodgers General Manager Branch Rickey sought Robinson because Rickey believed Robinson had the fortitude to resist responding to white provocations and sparking controversy, Robinson did at times confront white authority figures. While in the United States Army, Robinson faced a court martial for insubordination for defying a southern bus driver who demanded that Robinson sit at the back of a segregated bus. Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment,* 57-59.

[43] Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 9.

an athlete remaining humble and reserved in order to avoid sparking controversy. This dissertation, therefore, is informed by scholarship from Great Migration historians such as James Grossman and James Gregory as their works have shaped the ideological foundation of how the Great Migration reshaped black life broadly throughout the twentieth century.[44] This dissertation deepens our understanding of the Great Migration's effects on African American life by illustrating how definitions of black manhood and athleticism during this period were borne out of changes caused by the migration.

The attitudes expressed by black journalists over what they deemed acceptable behavior for star African American athletes were also shaped by major changes in black political and economic life during this period. As will be discussed primarily in Chapter 2, the dramatic political shift away from the Republican Party toward the Democratic Party and President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal agenda throughout the 1930s reshaped black political thought. Owens's decision to support Republican presidential candidate Alfred "Alf" Landon during the 1936 election, thus, sparked intense debate and criticism among many African American journalists. Some of this criticism echoed the black press' broader belief that athletes like Owens should avoid controversy and therefore stay out of the political arena. Yet African Americans' growing disillusionment with the Republican Party spurred some journalists to attack Owens for making a poor political choice as well.

Just as growing support for the Democratic Party in the mid-1930s suddenly changed the black political landscape, a similar transformation occurred in the African American economic world, albeit at a slower pace. Tensions between African American journalists, athletes, and sports officials over notions of respectability for black athletes were rooted in economic

[44] See Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*; Grossman, *Land of Hope*; and Lemann, *The Promised Land.*

struggles of transitioning from a segregated environment to an integrated one.[45] In doing so, this dissertation broadens economic historian Robert Weems's argument that African Americans used their economic power as consumers to pressure Major League Baseball to integrate by stressing that a similar, contentious debate developed regarding what to do with the black-owned Negro Leagues once MLB desegregated. Scholarship analyzing the economic ramifications of segregated sports during this time period is limited. Roberta J. Newman and Joel Nathan Rosen's *Black Baseball, Black Business,* astutely investigates the challenges Negro League team owners faced as they attempted to improve the quality of black baseball.[46] Brian Carroll's *The Black Press and Black Baseball, 1915-1955* explores how African American sportswriters' relationships with the Negro Leagues changed during this time period and the economic impact desegregation had on the Negro Leagues.[47] Those works provide a framework to understand the economic challenges Negro League team owners experienced during the broader effort to break MLB's color barrier. This project, however, broadens their conclusions by examining how the economics of sports across this era affected black athletes and sports officials beyond baseball in college football, track and field, and boxing. More importantly, this dissertation argues that these economic concerns affected how black journalists framed black athletes as exemplars of upstanding moral character.

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[45] See Robert Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century,* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939,* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America,* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004).

[46] See Newman and Rosen, *Black Baseball, Black Business,* 16. Neil Lanctot's *Negro League Baseball,* similarly addresses these issues throughout his broader history of the development and social and cultural impact of the Negro Leagues.

[47] See Brian Carroll, *The Black Press and Black Baseball, 1915-1955: A Devil's Bargain,* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

Since slavery, African Americans had developed their own economic institutions in response to being shut out – on both a de facto and de jure basis – from fully participating in white-owned businesses and institutions. Beginning in the post-Reconstruction era, however, the specter of Jim Crow and the intense racial segregation prevalent across the South made it increasingly difficult for blacks to break into the mainstream economic world. This reality, according to Newman and Rosen, forced many African Americans to build their own economic institutions. Those institutions, largely disconnected from white-owned business, exemplified how "Jim Crow was an economy based primarily on the speculation that 'separate but equal' was not a temporary condition but rather a fixed and permanent fact of doing business in America."[48] The condition of de facto segregation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries extended beyond the South as well. In Chicago, for example, according to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's seminal study, *Black Metropolis*, "the pattern of residential segregation inevitably gives rise to an intense community consciousness among Negroes. They begin to think in terms of gaining control of their own areas," including over local politics and developing their own economic institutions.[49]

As a result, a litany of black-owned businesses – what scholar Michael Lomax describes as "cooperative business enterprises" – emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that tapped into an African American consumer market that white-owned businesses ignored.[50] Black-owned banks, hospitals, insurance companies, newspapers, and baseball teams, among many others, grew in size and scope during this time. Their growth occurred because

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[48] Newman and Rosen, *Black Baseball, Black Business*, 3-4.

[49] St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), 198. For a detailed analysis of the development of Black Chicago in the first half of the twentieth century, see Green, *Selling the Race*.

[50] Lomax, "Black Entrepreneurship in the National Pastime," 46.

African Americans were eager to have these goods and services widely available to them – and marketed to them – for the first time.[51] For some aspiring black entrepreneurs, the segregation of the majority of America's cities opened up opportunities to amass newfound wealth.[52] The segregation of professional sports like baseball, for example, allowed some African American team owners to create their own business – which ultimately coalesced into what historians refer to as the Negro Leagues – that featured mostly African American players and attracted predominantly black baseball fans. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, the Negro Leagues served a number of purposes: it allowed for the development of African American players, some of whom eventually gained entry into Major League Baseball; at the same time, it served to generate substantial revenue for individual team owners – most of whom were African American. This money aided a litany of black workers such as players, managers, league administrators, groundskeepers, and clubhouse attendants.[53]

While some of these black businesses thrived for a period during the first few decades of the twentieth century, the African American economy that developed as a result of segregation was littered with problems. In particular, many black businesses continually struggled to remain financially solvent. This challenge stemmed from a lack of financial resources readily available within the African American community. Black newspaper owners, for example, frequently

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[51] These "ethnic economies," according to sociologists Ivan Light and James Gold, "are characterized by an extensive degree of social organization and feature strong, independent social networks, personal responsibility for neighborhood problems and participation in voluntary and formal organizations." Ivan Light and Steven Gold, *Ethnic Economies,* (San Diego: Academic Press, 2000), 186.

[52] For a detailed discussion of the growth of the black middle-class, of which many of these black businessmen were members, see Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis;* and E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie,* (New York: Free Press, 1957).

[53] As Newman, and Rosen note, not all Negro League team owners were black as a select few were white. However, they argue, "Negro League baseball is conventionally termed a black business institution" because it was "born of segregation and aimed primarily at African Americans…As such, black baseball may still be seen as a vital component of the black enclave economy." Newman and Rosen, *Black Baseball, Black Business,* 11.

failed to attain sufficient advertising revenue from black-owned businesses to stay afloat.[54] Similar infrastructural issues hampered the Negro Leagues as well. This occurred, in part, because team owners did not operate their own stadiums, which, according to Negro League historian Neil Lanctot, forced teams to lease space from white MLB team owners, thereby diminishing the team's overall profitability.[55] The limited financial resources existing within the black community, thus, made it more challenging for African American business owners to jump-start their businesses and set them on a path toward financial success.

This economic system, moreover, often affected how star African American athletes acted as well. Jesse Owens's efforts to capitalize off his newfound fame following his outstanding performance at the 1936 Summer Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany, for example, were shaped by the racial discrimination of the era. Indeed, despite garnering widespread support and interest from a substantial portion of white America following his Olympic performance, white business owners and advertising executives refused to pay Owens to endorse their products. Star white athletes of this era such as baseball's Babe Ruth and football's Red Grange, however, had little trouble converting their athletic fame into personal financial gain. As a result, as will be analyzed in Chapter 2, Owens's financial struggles following the 1936 Olympics resulted in part from the rigid racial barriers that denied him opportunities to break into the mainstream business world. Those restrictions, in turn, shaped how African American journalists

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[54] See Patrick S. Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom,* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006); James Danky, "Reading, Writing, and Resistance: African-American Print Culture, 1880-1940," in *A History of the Book in America: Volume 4: Print in Motion: The Expansion of Publishing and Reading in the United States, 1860-1940,* ed. Carl Kaestle and Janice Radway, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008): 339-358; James Danky, "The Oppositional Press," in *A History of the Book in America: Volume 5: The Enduring Book: Print Culture in Postwar America,* ed. David Paul Nord and Joan S. Rubin, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009): 269-285; and Michaeli, *The Defender*.

[55] These financial agreements forced Negro League team owners to pay a substantial fee to access MLB stadiums. Additionally, Negro League teams were forced to schedule games at inconvenient times, which led to lower ticket sales. Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 170-172, 185, 196-202.

criticized Owens's efforts to cash in off his fame; they viewed it as a violation of the upstanding image they had crafted for Owens and other star athletes of the era.

More broadly, the emerging black economic structure that developed during the first few decades of the twentieth century exposed deeper ideological tensions among African Americans about how best to achieve racial equality. Some black political and economic leaders believed that developing burgeoning black-owned businesses would best serve the long-term goal of gaining a foothold into the white mainstream world. These attitudes were rooted in Booker T. Washington's accommodationist ideology that prioritized developing the black community's economic well-being ahead of attaining political equality and integration.[56] Washington argued that strengthening and showcasing the black community's economic capabilities would open doors toward integration more effectively than fighting first for political and civil rights. Thus, according to Newman and Rosen, Washington's ethos of accommodationism and economic nationalism "within the parameters of Jim Crow laid the groundwork for many of the businesses that comprised the urban African American ecosystem in the century to come."[57]

Washington's strategy, however, drew as many opponents as it did acolytes at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. His staunchest critic, W.E.B. Du Bois – who founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909 – harshly attacked Washington's accommodationist strategy, arguing in *The Souls of Black Folk,* that Washington "represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission…Mr. Washington's programme [sic] practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the

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[56] Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography of Booker T. Washington,* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1993). This was most evident in his famous speech at the Cotton States and International Exhibition in Atlanta on September 18, 1895, where he implored African Americans, particularly those in the South, to "cast down your bucket where you are; cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded." Booker T. Washington, "The Atlanta Compromise," in *Ripples of Hope: Great American Civil Rights Speeches,* ed. Josh Gottheimer, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Civitas, 2003), 129-131.

[57] Newman and Rosen, *Black Baseball, Black Business,* 16.

Negro race."[58] Instead, Du Bois stated that African Americans needed to endorse a policy of liberal integrationism, where they fought for nothing less than full enfranchisement, and the integration of every facet of daily life. These two strategies, consequently, dominated black political and economic thought for much of the first few decades of the twentieth century.[59]

The Washington-Du Bois divide shaped African American politics and economics in a litany of ways. Some of the most prominent black business owners of the era struggled to come to terms with how the continued existence of their thriving businesses illustrated the continued prevalence of racial segregation. Their success, moreover, allowed some white opponents of racial integration to claim that African Americans were benefitting – and were happy to continue to benefit – from the policy of separate but equal.[60] African American newspaper publishers, for example, wrestled with the symbolic nature of their existence in the face of their longstanding struggle to eradicate racial discrimination. *Chicago Defender* publisher Robert Abbott, according to journalist Metz Lochard, did not believe his newspaper's success signified his support for accommodationism. Rather, Abbott "saw the Negro-controlled economic power, not as a separate power-structure, rather as a power to break into the large economy and gain its respect. It was the goal of eventual integration that he called for the support of 'race' business enterprises, but he worried that Negro businesses should not be the nucleus of a Negro ghetto."[61] These concerns shaped the thinking of other black business- men and women as well,

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[58] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches,* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co, 1903), 41.

[59] Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association's (UNIA) strategy of African American self-reliance and Pan-Africanism garnered sizable support in the 1910s and 1920s as well. However, his policy never took hold among African American athletes studied in this dissertation. The Washington-Du Bois ideological struggle, as will be examined throughout this dissertation, meanwhile, clearly permeated many of the tensions that existed between the black press, the Negro Leagues, and African American athletes more broadly at this time.

[60] See Larry McPhail, "Plan to American League on Discouraging Integration of Baseball," in U.S. Congress, Committee on the Judiciary, *Organized Baseball* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1952): 483-495.

[61] Metz T.P. Lochard, "Robert S. Abbott - 'Race Leader,'" *Phylon* 8, no 2 (Summer, 1947), 131.

particularly within the Negro Leagues as efforts to desegregate MLB intensified in the early 1940s. While nearly all African American baseball supporters viewed the integration of Major League Baseball as their long-term goal, it nonetheless caused some Negro League owners to express concern over *how* the process of integration would occur, and *how* it would affect their business in the long-run. Their concerns, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, exposed deeper tensions between Negro League team owners and officials and African American journalists, who struggled to come to terms with how to treat the Negro Leagues once MLB's color line had been eradicated.

African Americans, the Black Press, & "the Public Sphere"

The debates African Americans had over how black athletes should act took place in black communities throughout the nation. Yet these debates were united by the fact that the black press served as the central conduit through which African Americans analyzed these athletes' exploits and negotiated the tensions inherent in their being exemplars of African American physical and moral fitness. Whether the coverage took place in the sports section, on the front-page, in editorials, or in letters to the editor from readers, African American newspapers served as the primary space where conversations about black manhood, respectability, gentlemanly behavior, shifting political allegiances, and the role sports could play in furthering the broader struggle for racial equality took place.

The conversations African Americans had in black newspapers stood in stark contrast to how white journalists discussed black athletes and their achievements, which frequently occurred to a much lesser extent. When they did, as one African American journalist complained in 1938, white sportswriters often tried to discredit a black athlete's victory over a white counterpart

because of physical differences between the two athletes; yet this was a one-sided tactic because, "in the field of sports, physical disparity between two contestants is often employed if the Negro is the larger and hardly mentioned if he happens to be the smaller."[62] Yet such disparities were mild compared to white journalists often using demeaning, racially offensive stereotypes to explain why African American athletes had bested their white opponents. Comparing Owens's supreme skill on the track, or Louis's boxing prowess in the ring to the animalistic qualities of a cheetah or a tiger, for example, stripped black athletes of their basic humanity. Not all white sportswriters viewed African American athletes along these lines, and black journalists frequently praised those white scribes who took a more nuanced and progressive approach in describing black athletic achievement. These voices, however, were largely in the minority among white journalists at major daily newspapers. Ultimately, some white journalists often simultaneously praised black athletes for their achievements on the field of play, while reasserting notions of white racial superiority.[63]

The division between white and black perceptions of African American athletes, therefore, illustrates how the black counterpublic sphere initiated its own conversations related to issues concerning its populace. Therefore, attention to the black counterpublic sphere deepens our historical understanding of how issues of racial and gender discrimination were contested within communities that had been predominantly excluded from the public sphere. Nancy Fraser's theory of the counterpublic sphere serves as a central framework to analyze the black press' role in disseminating notions of ideal black manhood through sports. Fraser's theory

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[62] Newsclipping, "In the Public Eye," *Publication Unknown,* 1938, Box 142, Folder 6, Claude A. Barnett Papers, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

[63] See Sammons, "Boxing as a Reflection of Society"; Jaher, "White America Views Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali,"; and Wiggins Jr., "Boxing's Sambo Twins." These issues will be discussed in much greater detail in Chapters 1 and 2.

critiques Jurgen Habermas's seminal thesis of the bourgeois public sphere.[64] According Fraser, the central flaw in Habermas's theory concerned the fact that those in control of the primary venues within the bourgeois public sphere – meeting groups, churches, newspapers, and publishing houses, among others – were almost exclusively controlled and operated by white, middle-class men. As a result, those outside that group – namely women, people of color, and individuals from the working- and lower-classes – were systematically denied access to make substantial contributions to the public sphere.[65] With little access to the public sphere, Fraser argues, these groups created their own subaltern or counterpublics, which "contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech."[66]

Thus, the debates that developed among black journalists and their readers over Owens's political affiliation, for example, shaped conversations within the African American community over which political party to support. Moreover, while these conversations often initially went undetected by many white newspapers, the black press' efforts to inform and engage its citizenry

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[64] Habermas argues that, beginning in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, as a bourgeois class emerged in Europe, a public sphere where private citizens could assemble freely to discuss the issues of the day and battle an absolutist government intent on enforcing its will on the people. This public sphere, Habermas added, allowed for individuals that previously had been divided to collectively discuss issues concerning their community and push for common goals, unfettered by political or private interests. The public sphere, he concluded, ushered in a new space where the discussion of public matters would be accessible to all. Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society,* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991).

[65] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of an Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text,* no. 25/26 (1990), 61. Fraser is the leading, but not exclusive voice in critiquing the exclusionary nature of Habermas's theory. See also Tanni Haas, "The Public Sphere as a Sphere of Publics: Rethinking Habermas's Theory of the Public Sphere," *Journal of Communication* 54, no. 1 (January 2006): 178-184; Steven Gregory, "Race, Identity and Political Activism: The Shifting Contours of the African American Public Sphere," *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 147-164; Catherine R. Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres," *Communication Theory* 12, no. 4 (November 2002): 446-468; Michael Huspek, "Habermas and Oppositional Public Spheres: A Stereoscopic Analysis of Black and White Press Practices," *Political Studies* 55, no. 4 (December 2007): 821-843; and Michael C. Dawson, "A Black Counterpublic?: Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics," *Public Culture* 7 no. 1, (1994): 195-223.

[66] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 61.

to better articulate the identities of the upstanding black gentlemen athletes they idolized ultimately contributed to reshaping the broader public sphere's understanding of the African American community's fight for racial justice.

In analyzing how the black counterpublic functioned from the 1930s to the 1950s, one must focus on the black press.[67] African Americans seeking to shape dialogue about issues concerning their community had to look outside the mainstream press as it largely ignored covering news within the community.[68] The development of weekly African American newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender, Pittsburgh Courier, New York Amsterdam News,* and the *Afro-American,* served to inform black readers across the country; moreover, as scholar Michael Huspek notes, they "attempted to stimulate public dialogue not otherwise attempted by the mainstream press."[69]

This dissertation focuses primarily on how four African American newspapers – the *Courier,* the *Defender,* the *Amsterdam News,* and the *Afro-American* – covered these four events in black sports. These four newspapers featured the most in-depth and extensive sports coverage throughout the time period of this study. Moreover, some of the most influential black sportswriters of this era such Fay Young, Dan Burley, Sam Lacy, and Wendell Smith established their careers at these newspapers by attacking racial injustice in sports. This analysis of these

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[67] According to scholar Michael Huspek, "as an essential medium through which flows a great deal of information, analysis and opinion, it [the press] always carries the potential to facilitate citizen engagement with issues of fact, norms and value." Huspek, "Habermas and Oppositional Public Spheres," 831. Moreover, print-capitalism, of which African American newspapers were a central component of during the first half of the twentieth century, according to Benedict Anderson, helped created new "imagined communities" by making "it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways." Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* (New York: Verso, 2006), 36.

[68] When it did so, as historian Patrick S. Washburn notes, it predominantly focused on black athletes, entertainers, and criminals. Patrick S. Washburn, *The African American Newspaper*, 5-6.

[69] Huspek, "Habermas and Oppositional Public Spheres," 832. See also Dawson, "A Black Counterpublic?" 206; and Danky, "Reading, Writing, and Resistance."

newspapers is supported by scrutinizing key articles written in other African American publications, ranging from other weekly African American newspapers such as the *Cleveland Call and Post,* to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) *Crisis* magazine; these additional texts illustrate that African American journalists, intellectuals, and civil rights leaders used whatever publications were available to them to celebrate the achievements of African Americans on the playing field and use their performances to challenge the white, mainstream public to change their racially discriminatory policies both within and beyond the sports world. The vibrant conversations that took place throughout African American publications during this time period, consequently, stress the need to build upon Fraser's critique of Habermas by placing the black counterpublic sphere at the forefront of these debates over black manhood, black athleticism, and the role African American journalists played in shaping conversations over their value from the 1920s to the 1950s.

Chapter 1

Building a Winner: The Black Press, Joe Louis, & the Creation of a Black Athletic Identity

Introduction

African American sportswriters' campaign to craft a new definition of black manhood and respectability developed in earnest through the rise of boxer Joe Louis's career in the early 1930s. At the start of his professional career Louis, and his managers and trainers John Blackburn, John Roxborough, and Julian Black, struggled to escape the shadow cast by Jack Johnson's legacy and win over white boxing fans who refused to grant African American boxers opportunities to compete for the heavyweight title.[70] Thus, although Louis earned a living and competed against white boxers in the mid-1930s – a rarity for black athletes in any sport at that time – he was clearly constrained by the sport's discriminatory policies. From the beginning of Louis's professional career in 1934 through his two bouts with German heavyweight boxer Max Schmeling in 1936 and 1938, black journalists led a campaign that refashioned Louis as the embodiment of gentlemanliness and respectability in hopes of erasing white fears of black athletic competition.

In selling white boxing officials and fans on the image of Louis as a respectable African American athlete, the black press' coverage focused on championing two central themes: Louis's actions both in and out of the ring were nothing like Johnson's; and he was an immensely talented winner who deserved an opportunity to compete against the best white boxers. To counteract the racist stereotypes perpetuated by whites about black athletes, African American sportswriters, alongside Louis's three advisors – Black, Blackburn, and Roxborough – explicitly

[70] These obstacles drastically limited Louis's opportunities to compete as boxing officials had unofficially banned black boxers from competing for the heavyweight title after Johnson's reign as champion ended in 1915 when he lost to Jess Willard. For more on Jack Johnson's struggles in the early twentieth century, see Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*.

situated Louis as Jack Johnson's opposite; whereas Johnson flaunted traditional racial mores by dating white women and humiliating white opponents, Louis adhered to a number of rules that presented him, both in and out of the ring, as a dignified, respectable gentleman. Every word spoken, every photograph taken, every article published, and every punch thrown, thus, was fashioned deliberately to showcase to the white sports world that Louis was a model citizen and a credit to his race.

As an exemplar of moral and physical fitness, black journalists also championed Louis's ability to dominate his opponents in an effort to become the best boxer in the heavyweight division in order to convince white boxing officials, sports fans, and media members that Louis deserved a fair opportunity to compete at the sport's highest level. Winning, thus, was central to the black press' mission in presenting Louis as an upstanding, respectable black man. Indeed, as John Blackburn stated to Louis early in his career, "it's mighty hard for a colored boy to win decisions. The dice is loaded against you. You gotta knock 'em out and keep knocking 'em out to get anywheres."[71] Yet in crafting a narrative of Louis as an ideal black male athlete, many African American journalists convinced themselves that Louis was far superior to all other boxers as well. In disseminating a myth of Louis's in-ring invincibility, black journalists became susceptible to being seduced by the narrative they crafted. Thus, when Louis lost to Schmeling in 1936 – a match that nearly all black journalists thought Louis would dominate – it threatened to eradicate the carefully constructed image they had crafted. The shock and disbelief many journalists expressed, therefore, demonstrates the challenges journalists faced in making Louis's ability to defeat all opponents a central component of his identity and manhood.

Rather than scrap the image, the black press redoubled their efforts, framing the loss as an unfortunate but necessary lesson from which Louis would learn to become a better fighter in

[71] In Roberts, *Joe Louis*, 23.

the long-run. This redemptive narrative, consequently, made Louis's victory over James Braddock for the heavyweight title in 1937 appear as his just reward for his hard work and dedication to earn back the boxing world's trust. His victory over Schmeling in 1938, moreover, validated the black press' belief that Louis was a worthy champion. Collectively, the three-year arc illustrates how the black press crafted an image of Louis as a uniquely talented fighter and citizen, defended it when it nearly came undone in 1936, and refined it to reflect the wisdom Louis had gained through defeat. Throughout it all, the black press cast Louis as a model citizen, embodying respectable, gentlemanly characteristics that would appeal to the white sporting world as he fought his way to the heavyweight title.

Selling Louis as the embodiment of black manhood and respectability also served to foster racial pride among African American newspaper readers as well. By repeatedly celebrating Louis's good looks, cool, friendly demeanor, devotion to his wife Marva Trotter, extensive charitable efforts, and dedication to become the best heavyweight fighter in the world, African American journalists conveyed to readers that Louis symbolized black capability and achievement. The manner in which Louis acted as he worked to gain opportunities in the boxing world, therefore, would serve as a model for all African Americans to follow. Their efforts often resonated with black readers; *Pittsburgh Courier* reader Mrs. Lillian Marsh, for example, declared that Louis "should make all of us so proud to know what a fine, upstanding and honest young man he is and what a fearless gentleman."[72]

Given the breadth and depth of scholarship about Louis, this chapter does not seek to address each aspect of Louis's life that historians have previously considered. Rather, by focusing on the black press' coverage of Louis during the beginning of his career, this chapter emphasizes how African American journalists struggled to craft an image that asserted his power

[72] "Lauds Joe Louis," *Pittsburgh Courier,* January 4, 1936, 10.

as a black man while attempting to gain acceptance within the white sports world. In developing the notion of Louis as the ideal black man, the black press' coverage highlights how African American journalists, readers, and civil rights leaders critiqued Louis on their own terms, apart from how white journalists interpreted Louis's racial, political, and social significance. In bringing these black voices to the forefront in analyzing Louis, this chapter showcases the debate and struggle *among* African Americans over how *they* wanted to present Louis – and by extension African American men more broadly – to a mainstream audience. This analysis, therefore, sheds light on a critical element of Louis's biography that historians have frequently downplayed or ignored.[73]

While biographies from historians such as Randy Roberts, Gerald Astor, Lew Freedman, and Richard Bak explore how African American journalists celebrated Louis from the beginning of his career and framed him as a symbol of racial opportunity, they downplay the struggles sportswriters experienced as they developed this image, particularly in response to Louis's loss to Max Schmeling in 1936.[74] Although Louis symbolized racial opportunity and potential to African Americans in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, this chapter challenges this interpretation by emphasizing that much of the success Louis enjoyed resulted from a conscious decision by his

[73] Historians such as Thomas Hietala have emphasized that scholars can best understand Louis's persona within the context of the legacy of white antipathy toward Jack Johnson. Hietala positions the two fighters' careers within the broader struggle for racial equality. In their own ways, Hietala contends, Johnson's and Louis's triumphs in the ring and the reactions they drew outside of it reflected the racial attitudes of each era. Hietala, however, fails to fully acknowledge that Louis's struggles to break into the white boxing world developed primarily *in response to* the damage caused by Johnson. Hietala, *The Fight of the Century.* Other scholars have similarly linked Louis to Johnson and Muhammad Ali. See Dorinson, "Black Heroes in Sport"' Wiggins Jr., "Boxing's Sambo Twins"' Jaher, "White America Views Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali"; and Bunk, "Harry Wills and the Image of the Black Boxer From Jack Johnson to Joe Louis."

[74] These works frame Louis's rise from economic poverty and the tremendous racial hardship he faced into the upper echelon of American celebrity primarily as an example of African American triumph in the mid-twentieth century. See Roberts, *Joe Louis*; Astor, *"And a Credit to His Race"*; Bak, *Joe Louis*; and Freedman, *Joe Louis*.

managers and black journalists to present him in a way that aimed to not upset the established racial order.[75]

This dissertation's focus on black journalists' efforts to present Louis as an ideal black athlete *prior to* his achieving widespread success both in and out of the ring challenges scholars to look beyond his reign as champion and time in the military during World War II. From the late 1930s to the early 1950s, Louis was the most popular black athlete in the country. His dominance as heavyweight champion from 1937 to 1949 asserted his place at the top of the sport's hierarchy.[76] Yet it was his efforts in the military during World War II, where he enlisted and starred in a number of war-related films to help drum up support for the war effort that helped strengthen his public image as a patriot and ideal citizen.[77]

The dual image of Louis as the longtime heavyweight champion and patriot are central to the popular memory of Louis and his contribution to American and African American history.[78] Indeed, as Louis biographer Randy Roberts notes, scholars have focused extensively on how "from the beginning of Louis' life, through his marvelous career, to his death, the twin themes of race and nationalism, issues that have vexed black Americans for more than one hundred and

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[75] Although they did not speak with a unified voice, African American journalists overwhelmingly praised how Louis's managers directed Louis, particularly during the early stages of his professional career. Indeed, as Art Carter noted, "If the colored race were as capably managed as Joe Louis has been, our future would be far more roseate." Thus, this dissertation argues that collectively, the black press and Louis's managers worked together to present Louis as an upstanding, respectable man who had escaped Johnson's shadow. In Hietala, *The Fight of the Century*, 169.

[76] Louis's 12-year uninterrupted reign as heavyweight champion is the longest in the sport's history.

[77] Louis appeared in two films, *This is the Army,* and *The Negro Soldier,* during World War II that encouraged African Americans to follow Louis' lead and enlist in the Army to support the war effort.

[78] Scholarship has ranged from expansive biographies chronicling Louis's career; studies situating Louis's life, particularly his military service during World War II, within the context of the shifting global racial and political climate of the 1930s and 1940s; detailed examinations of some of Louis's most prominent fights with Primo Carnera and Max Schmeling in the 1930s; investigations exploring how the white media's depictions of Louis changed over time; and analyses comparing Louis to other prominent black athletes of the twentieth century such as Jack Johnson, Jesse Owens, and Muhammad Ali.

fifty years, had coiled around the champion like a snake."[79] By scrutinizing the challenges Louis – and black journalists – faced in selling Louis to a skeptical white audience at the beginning of his career, this chapter deepens our historical understanding of Louis's actions at the height of his popularity.

Furthermore, this chapter's examination of the black press' coverage of Louis's two fights against Schmeling challenges scholarship from historians Lewis Erenberg, Patrick Myler, and David Margolick by emphasizing the obstacles black journalists faced in disseminating an idealized notion of Louis against the realities of the competition in the ring. These scholars note how, between Louis's 1936 loss and his victory over Schmeling in 1938, many white journalists' attitudes toward Louis shifted. Whereas Schmeling's victory in 1936 was seen by many as a vindication of the widespread belief that black boxers were inferior to whites, by the 1938 fight, as Erenberg notes, "in response to the Nazi politicization of sport, the American anti-fascist coalition transformed Schmeling into a Nazi representative and Joe Louis into a democratic hero."[80] Yet, while all three works frame Louis's victory in 1938 as a triumph for American democracy and for his African American supporters, it overlooks how black sportswriters struggled to come to terms with Louis's loss in 1936. This chapter's detailed look at African American journalists' response to the defeat, consequently, demonstrates how they attempted to rebuild his legacy long before the rematch took place. By focusing on the black press' coverage of these two fights, this chapter illuminates how African American journalists recast Louis's defeat as part of a broader effort to broadcast an image of Louis as a noble, respectable, and heroic figure to a white audience.

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[79] Roberts, *Joe Louis,* xii.

[80] Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation,* 111.

Finally, this chapter's investigation of how black journalists' efforts to distance Louis from Johnson's legacy was part of a broader initiative to redefine notions of African American manhood and respectability across black sports during this era. However, as will be analyzed throughout this dissertation, the attitudes black journalists expressed over what constituted ideal behavior for black male athletes differed between sports. Thus, this chapter's investigation of the black press' efforts to sell Louis as a dedicated, upstanding competitor complicates historian Donald McRae's argument that Louis and Jesse Owens were victimized by a system that exploited black athletic success for political purposes while refusing to grant the two athletes, and African Americans more broadly, racial equality.[81] Yet as this chapter and Chapter 2 reveal, intertwining the two athletes' experiences diminishes the stark differences that existed with regards to how African American journalists scrutinized each athlete's behavior in an effort to perpetuate a new definition of black manhood and respectability. Black journalists celebrated Louis's in-ring achievements as a testament to his dedication and hard work and predominantly praised his actions outside the ring to profit off of his fame; meanwhile, they were critical of how Owens attempted to utilize his athletic celebrity to financially support his family.

Escaping Jack Johnson's Shadow: Building Louis' Image at the Beginning of His Career

Joe Louis's ascent to the top of the boxing world required him overcoming two primary obstacles: escape the intense racial persecution and economic hardship of the South by moving north as part of the Great Migration; and escape Jack Johnson's shadow and help recast the image of African American boxers in a more positive light. Although Louis lived only briefly as a child in the South before moving to the North, the experience shaped his actions and attitudes once he became a boxer. Born amidst the cotton fields of rural Alabama, Louis was raised by a

[81] McRae, *Heroes Without a Country*.

family that struggled to withstand the racial and economic discrimination prevalent throughout the region. Driven in part by a desire to escape the ongoing threat of racial violence that plagued African Americans throughout the South, as well as to pursue better economic opportunities rumored to be available in urban areas in the North, Midwest, and the West, the Louises, like millions of other African Americans during the first few decades of the twentieth century, fled to the North as part of the decades-long Great Migration. As Roberts contends, Louis remained conflicted over how his southern upbringing affected him. On one hand, Louis claimed that he "never knew anything about race…If there was lynch talk, it never got to me or my folks…I never got to know about such things until we got to Detroit."[82] On the other hand, Roberts notes how, as a child in Alabama, Louis was intensely focused on his racial makeup, emphasizing how "the splitting of racial hairs, the preference for white and Indian blood, illuminated the emotional impact of the culture of Jim Crow" on Louis.[83] Louis's understanding of the racial hierarchy in the Jim Crow South, thus, suggests that he understood how he needed to transcend these limitations in order to gain wider acceptance among white boxing fans and officials later in his life.

Relocating to Detroit at age 12 also helped Louis down a path to develop his boxing skills. Louis quickly took to the sport – winning the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) and national Golden Gloves light-heavyweight titles in 1935 – and soon garnered interest from many black boxing officials in Detroit. In particular, John Roxborough, a major player in black Detroit's sports and gambling scenes, saw something promising in Louis's early bouts.[84] Roxborough earned his living and notoriety through a number of endeavors, most notably as a numbers

[82] In Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 10.

[83] Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 10.

[84] Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 16-17.

banker.[85] Although numbers operations were illegal, as historian Victorian Wolcott notes, many African American ministers and community leaders in Detroit and in other cities revered numbers bankers because they served as "guardians of the community" by providing financial assistance to a litany of black businesses when banks would refuse to lend them money. Numbers bankers, thus, were seen as legitimate members of the formal and informal economies of African American life in the first few decades of the twentieth century.[86] Roxborough's interest in Louis, Wolcott adds, reflected numbers bankers' broader efforts to support and promote black athletes and teams throughout the nation.[87]

Roxborough's interest in courting Louis to serve as his co-manager stemmed in part in his belief that Louis had the potential to become a topflight boxer. But Roxborough, as Roberts argues, stressed to Louis that the boxer needed to have black managers and trainers who would not exploit him as many white managers had done to other African American boxers in the past.[88] Louis agreed and Roxborough quickly brought in Julian Black to serve as Louis' co-manager, and John Blackburn to serve as trainer. Roxborough's desire to give Louis a black management team suggests that, by having African American managers, Louis would be better prepared and protected to effectively enter into the racially contentious world of elite heavyweight boxing.

Their desire to protect Louis stemmed from the decades-long racial discrimination African American boxers confronted. Since the end of the Civil War, boxing had been a highly

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[85] Other numbers operators such as Alex Pompez in New York, Gus Greenlee in Pittsburgh, and Julian Black in Chicago, were integral to developing black sports and black athletes at this time as well. As will be examined in Chapter 4, Pompez's illegal operation threatened to undermine his capabilities as owner of the New York Cubans Negro League baseball team.

[86] Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 195-204.

[87] Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability,* 196.

[88] Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 18.

contested terrain – at both the amateur and professional level – upon which men battled to demonstrate their manhood. Competing in rugged and often violent sports such as boxing, according to critical race theorists Eric Anderson and Mark McCormack, compelled boys and men to "desire to be associated with masculine dominance by partaking in sports that sculpt their bodies and construct their identities to align with dominant perspectives of masculinist embodiment and expression."[89] While men could express their manhood in a number of sports, at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, the boxing ring was the central arena in which issues of manhood and racial dominance were contested.

That boxing had become regarded as an accepted sport for upstanding men to showcase their manhood signified a dramatic refashioning of the sport's value in the public eye. Prior to the Civil War, boxing, according to Roberts, was a sport largely contested among working-class immigrants and was thus derided by elite white men as an ungentlemanly endeavor. But the emergence of boxer John L. Sullivan in the 1880s reshaped perceptions of the sport. His tremendous in-ring talent, coupled with his skill in promoting his bouts, resulted in Sullivan symbolizing strength and masculinity. Sullivan's ascendance in popularity developed, in part, from a reconfiguration of elite notions of manhood that occurred at the same time. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, according to Roberts, "the ideal mid-Victorian man had a certain softness, [and] a willingness to sentimentally express his deepest feelings." Following the Civil War, many Victorian men such as Theodore Roosevelt worried that this weak character threatened to damage elite white men's standing at the top of the racial and social hierarchy. These new men, according to Roosevelt, needed to embrace a more rugged, and potentially violent "strenuous life" to reassert their manhood. Boxing, and Sullivan's display of strength and

[89] Anderson and McCormack, "Intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, and American Sporting Oppression," 953.

virility, therefore, was coopted by elite men as a venue in which they would showcase their manhood.[90]

Boxing's heavyweight division – featuring the sport's largest and strongest competitors – consequently, according to Roberts, "became the symbol of the toughest man/boy in the world, a symbol that rested comfortably at the brow of an American."[91] Thus, many boxing officials and fans viewed the heavyweight champion as the ultimate embodiment of the ideal man. Yet, this exhibition of physical dominance, while theoretically available to all men, was utilized by middle- and upper-class white men as a means to draw distinctions based on class and race that reasserted notions of elite, white racial superiority.[92] Given these stakes, white boxing officials were extremely reluctant to let the title fall into the hands of an African American boxer. Sullivan shaped this system of exclusion in the heavyweight ranks by refusing to schedule title bouts against African American opponents during his championship reign. His actions influenced the sport's unofficial policy of denying black heavyweight boxers shots at the title throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[93]

Despite their best efforts, white boxing officials failed to keep black boxers out of heavyweight championship fights completely. At the beginning of the twentieth century, African

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[90] Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 35-36. See also Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," Speech Before the Hamilton Club, Chicago, April 10, 1899, in *The Strenuous Life: Essay and Addresses* (1900), 8, 20-21; and Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*.

[91] Roberts, *Joe Louis*, 37.

[92] When poor, immigrant, and black men were given chances to compete against elite whites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, according to Michael Messner, "the extension of sports to workers and blacks was viewed by elites as a means of control." African Americans, however, also used sports as an arena to contest this power dynamic "to redefine, negotiate, or even reject, the ruling group's rules, values, and meanings." Messner, *Power at Play*, 11-12. See also Anderson and McCormack, "Intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, and American Sporting Oppression," 957; and Hoberman, "The Price of 'Black Dominance,'" 49.

[93] Indeed, as Jack Johnson biographer Geoffrey C. Ward notes, "Sullivan had all the prejudices of his time and class. Black people were beneath his notice. 'Any fighter who'd get into the same ring with a nigger loses my respect,' he told one reporter, and he did his best simply to ignore the existence of black challengers." Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, 17; see also Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 37.

American boxer Jack Johnson took the sport by storm, dominating his opponents and demanding that he face the heavyweight champion for a shot at the title. After pursuing champion Tommy Burns for nearly two years, Johnson finally earned his opportunity and defeated Burns in Sydney, Australia in 1908 to become heavyweight champion.

As Johnson celebrated, the white boxing community responded with shock and outrage. Johnson's victory by itself infuriated many whites who sought to deny blacks an opportunity to compete alongside whites; yet it was the manner in which he carried himself both in and out of the ring that spurred intense antipathy toward the boxer throughout the rest of his career. As Johnson biographer Geoffrey C. Ward notes, boxers in the early twentieth century were expected to exhibit good sportsmanship and fair play in their matches. Johnson, on the other hand, frequently taunted and humiliated his opponents, making a mockery of the sport's traditions. These actions angered many white boxing fans who viewed Johnson's in-ring behavior as an attempt to humiliate white opponents and a clear repudiation of the established racial hierarchy. Johnson drew the ire of whites, according to one white southerner, because he "didn't know his place." An African American northerner, meanwhile, stated that "Johnson was a pure individual. He did everything exactly the way he wanted to. I don't think it ever crossed his mind that he should be anybody else's version of Jack Johnson."[94] Johnson's in-ring behavior, thus, confounded whites and blacks alike as he refused to bow to the racial hierarchy and act according to accepted notions of respectability.

But it was Johnson's behavior outside-the-ring, where he defied contemporary racial customs by spending lavishly, drinking excessively, and most damningly, openly dating white women that caused the greatest uproar. These interracial romances enraged whites across the nation who deemed it a dangerous affront to the established racial order. Consequently, as Ward

[94] Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 41.

argues, "most whites (and some Negroes as well) saw him as a perpetual threat – profligate, arrogant, amoral, a dark menace and a danger to the natural order of things."[95] Johnson, thus, represented all of white America's deepest fears about African Americans who had a chance to compete on a level playing field. Immensely strong, sexually virile, Johnson could not be tamed by intimidation or violence, which allowed him to run roughshod over the racist traditions many whites held dear in defending their belief in white superiority.

Many whites feared that each Johnson victory over a white opponent would encourage African Americans to challenge white authority, sending the nation into a period of racial violence and chaos as a result. Consequently, they responded to Johnson's victories with violence. When Johnson defeated Jim Jefferies in 1910, for example, riots broke out across the country where whites attacked African Americans celebrating the victory as a means to reassert white racial dominance.[96] White officials similarly sought to punish Johnson for associating with white women; in 1912, Johnson was charged with violating the Mann Act for transporting women across state lines for immoral purposes.[97] The criminal allegations dogged Johnson throughout the rest of his career and white boxing fans rejoiced when Johnson eventually lost the heavyweight title to Jess Willard in 1915. With the title safely back in white hands, boxing officials and promoters refused to grant African American boxers opportunities to fight for the heavyweight championship. The ban damaged the careers of many African American heavyweight hopefuls, such as Harry Wills, who suffered throughout his career in the 1920s because he never gained an opportunity to fight for the title. Thus, while in the short-term

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[95] Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, 4.

[96] See Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 47; and Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness,* 216-218.

[97] For a detailed analysis of this episode, along with Johnson's efforts to avoid jail by fleeing the country in 1913, see Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness.*

Johnson's reign as champion proved that black boxers could outperform white opponents, his demeanor and antics both in and out of the ring did long-lasting damage to future African American heavyweight boxing aspirants.[98]

Johnson's shadow still hung over the black boxing world when Joe Louis began his professional career in 1934. Roxborough, Black, and Blackburn understood the predicament Louis faced; his boxing ability would only represent a portion of the skills Louis needed to develop and exhibit at the beginning of his career. As Blackburn stated to Louis early in his career, "it is next to impossible for a Negro heavyweight to get anywhere. He's got to be very good outside the ring and very bad inside the ring."[99] This dual image – immensely talented and ruthless in the ring, and an upstanding citizen outside of it – illustrates the tricky terrain upon which Louis and his managers had to navigate in order to propel his career forward.

The emphasis on cultivating a likeable persona outside the ring, moreover, developed as an explicit effort to counteract how Jack Johnson's legacy had affected white perceptions of black boxers. Indeed, Blackburn stated to Louis early in his career that "the heavyweight division for a Negro is hardly likely. The white man ain't too keen on it…If you really ain't gonna be another Jack Johnson, you got some hope. White man hasn't forgot that fool nigger with his white women, acting like he owned the world."[100] Roxborough, Black, and Blackburn, according to Roberts, coached Louis "to express little, say even less, and allow his fists to give meaning to his existence." By carefully stating how Louis should appear in front of white audiences, particularly boxing officials who scheduled matches, his managers hoped to convey a simple

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[98] See Bunk, "Harry Wills and the Image of the Black Boxer From Jack Johnson to Joe Louis."

[99] Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 22.

[100] In Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 51.

message: I am not Jack Johnson.[101] These efforts also included creating seven rules for Louis to follow at all times: Never be photographed with a white woman; go to a nightclub alone; fight weaker opponents; fix a fight; or gloat over a fallen opponent. And keep a "dead pan" when photographed or filmed; and fight in a fair manner.[102] These rigorous standards ultimately served as the foundation for the Louis camp's efforts to portray the boxer in the best possible manner in the hope of appealing to a white audience.

Promoting a Persona: The Black Press' Construction and Dissemination of Louis's Image

The concerns Louis's management team and black sportswriters held over how Johnson's legacy would affect Louis's career were rooted in the racist stereotypes many white journalists used when characterizing Louis at the beginning of his career. Throughout the early stages of Louis's career, many white sportswriters acknowledged that Louis was an incredibly talented boxer. Yet as historian Chris Mead notes, many struggled to comprehend that an African American boxer had attained such a prominent place in the boxing world.[103] In the twenty years since Jack Johnson had shocked the white sports world, many white journalists assumed that African Americans would no longer have the opportunity to rise to the top of the sport's ranks. Louis's rapid improvement within the sport in 1935 and 1936, consequently, forced many white journalists to wrestle with this new reality. Many ultimately emphasized Louis's skin color when describing his boxing exploits. As a result, some white journalists crafted a coterie of nicknames to describe Louis – "the Brown Bomber," "the Dark Destroyer," "the Tan Tornado," and "the

[101] Roberts, *Joe Louis*, 57.

[102] See Mead, *Champion*, 52; Jaher, "White America Views Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali," 160-161; and Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation*, 46.

[103] Mead, *Champion*, x.

Sepia Slugger" – that made Louis's race a central component of his boxing identity.[104] This coverage differed greatly from how white journalists described white boxers.[105] Thus, by constantly drawing attention to Louis's race, white journalists perhaps aimed to qualify his achievements as being exceptional for an African American boxer. Referring to Louis simply as an American boxer, therefore, might have suggested that white sports journalists viewed him as an equal to white competitors. Using nicknames like the "Brown Bomber," therefore, maintained a sense of white racial superiority by demeaning Louis's race.

White journalists also reinforced racial stereotypes by describing Louis in dehumanizing, animalistic terms. In covering a Louis fight in 1935, for example, the *New York Herald Tribune's* Caswell Adams described Louis's boxing ability as being as "cold as ice and when he moves, he does so as would a tiger or lion."[106] Grantland Rice, one of the preeminent syndicated sports columnists of the era, moreover, utilized similar language, describing Louis's victory over Primo Carnera in 1936, as "the black panther of the jungle stalks its prey."[107] The *New York Times'* Meyer Berger similarly stated in a lengthy profile of Louis that, "he becomes sheer animal, moving with the grace of the jungle cat."[108] Reducing Louis to a set of baser, animal instincts allowed journalists to argue that Louis won simply because of his physicality. Louis's skill,

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[104] According to Mead, "to white sportswriters and their white readers, the color of Louis's skin was his most salient characteristic. Mead, *Champion,* 50.

[105] Even when describing foreign boxers such as Spain's Paulino Uzcudun or Germany's Max Schmeling, white journalists only occasionally referenced their country of origin when describing each boxer.

[106] In Mead, *Champion,* 44. Historian William H. Wiggins Jr. similarly notes that Jack Johnson and Louis frequently "were portrayed as savage, ape-like figures" in white newspaper cartoons. Wiggins Jr., "Boxing's Sambo Twins," 244.

[107] In Mead, *Champion,* 63. Davis Walsh of the *International News Service,* also viewed Louis's victory over Carnera as "something sly and sinister and perhaps not quite human came out of the African jungle last night to strike down and utterly demolish" Carnera. In Mead, *Champion,* 62.

[108] Meyer Berger, *New York Times Magazine,* June 14, 1936, in Robert S. Harding, *Joe Louis Scrapbooks, 1935-1944,* (Alexandria, Virginia: Chadwyck-Healey, 1986), Vol. 18, Microfiche 46.

consequently, according to Rice, "was a matter of instinct with him, as with most of the great Negro fighters...The great Negro boxer is rarely a matter of manufacture, like many white boxers. He is born that way."[109] Rice's argument, therefore, posited that Louis, along with other black boxers, lacked the mental and technical nuance white journalists believed boxers needed to perform at an elite level.[110] To compound matters, white journalists argued that Louis and other black boxers could not learn these skills, meaning that they would forever be cast as physically superior, but mentally inferior fighters.

The most derogatory images came from white cartoonists who portrayed Louis as slow, dim-witted, and intellectually inferior to white boxers. In the June 16, 1936 *New York Evening Journal*, for example, cartoonist Hal Coffman depicted Louis asking Max Schmeling, "Which yo' crave de most of – de right or de lef'?" This language misrepresented Louis's speaking ability – he was never quoted utilizing such language in the countless interviews he gave throughout his career – and instead suggested to white newspaper readers that Louis's speech patterns reflected his limited educational background.[111] Other cartoons similarly reveal some white journalists' preference to demean Louis's mental aptitude in a manner that echoed the racial mockery that occurred in minstrel shows. Louis, thus, was seen as having the same qualities as Jumpin' Jim Crow and Stephin Fetchit, traditional minstrel show characters that

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[109] In Mead, *Champion,* 64.

[110] The only mental abilities Louis possessed, according to white journalist Henry McLemore, were used to hypnotize opponents like Max Baer so he could win the fight. Henry McLemore, "Louis Used Hypnotic Power in Baer Fight, Agrees Herr McLemore," *Galveston Tribune,* April 3, 1936, in Robert S. Harding, *Joe Louis Scrapbooks, 1935-1944,* (Alexandria, Virginia: Chadwyck-Healey, 1986), Vol. 16, Microfiche 40.

[111] A June 16, 1936 *New York Evening Journal* cartoon, for example, has Louis ask Max Schmeling in the weeks leading up to their first match, "Which yo' crave de most of – de right or de lef'?" Hal Coffman, "Can One Good Hand Beat Two Good Hands?" *New York Evening Journal,* June 16, 1936, in Robert S. Harding, *Joe Louis Scrapbooks, 1935-1944,* (Alexandria, Virginia: Chadwyck-Healey, 1986), Vol. 18, Microfiche 46. See also Wiggins Jr., "Boxing's Sambo Twins."

served as derogatory depictions of African Americans.[112] As historian Frederic Cople Jaher notes, these attitudes represent a shift away from the vitriolic and often violent antipathy many journalists levied toward Jack Johnson in the 1910s, yet, "portrayed as docile and child-like, Louis was merely imprisoned in a more acceptable racial stereotype."[113]

The racially offensive attitudes espoused by many white journalists about Louis represented the central obstacle black sportswriters faced in their efforts to aid Louis in escaping Johnson's shadow. Yet African American newspapers recognized that some white journalists looked at Louis in a more positive light. Consequently, black journalists celebrated and amplified these instances as part of their broader initiative to recast Louis – and black male athletes more broadly – as upstanding gentleman. Indeed, African American newspapers such as the *Pittsburgh Courier* frequently reprinted many columns from white sportswriters who praised Louis's sensational skills.[114] The *Courier,* for example, hailed white journalist Richards Vidmer of the white-owned *New York Herald Tribune* for declaring that other white writers needed to stop using cheap, inaccurate and offensive stereotypes to describe Louis. To Vidmer, these journalists erred in "judging the whole race by one man's actions. Joe Louis is as different a character from Jack Johnson as Lou Gehrig is from Al Capone."[115] Black newspapers also reprinted articles from other white-owned newspapers that stated that Louis had done his race proud by being "a

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[112] For a broader history of the racial stereotypes presented throughout the history of minstrel shows, see Yuval Taylor, *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop,* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012).

[113] Jaher, "White America Views Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali," 161.

[114] The *Pittsburgh Courier's* Chester L. Washington described an editorial from the *Buffalo Times* that he reprinted as "one of the finest tributes ever written about the Detroit Destroyer." Chester L. Washington, "Ches' Sez," *Pittsburgh Courier,* March 14, 1936, A4. See also Richards Vidmer, "Richards Vidmer's Classic Comment on Joe Louis," *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 6, 1935, 15.

[115] Vidmer, "Richards Vidmer's Classic Comment on Joe Louis," *Pittsburgh Courier.*

clean living, well-behaved and thoroughly deserving young man."[116] By reprinting these articles, black journalists acknowledged that not all white journalists viewed Louis in racially offensive terms or believed that he acted like Johnson.[117] Unfortunately, these journalists' opinions represented only a small portion of the attitudes espoused by white sportswriters who covered Louis. Ultimately, highlighting this praise served as only one element of the black press' larger initiative to refashion Louis as an upstanding, respectable, and ideal black man.

In casting Louis as symbol of black moral and physical fitness, African American journalists emphasized a series of key attributes and characteristics regarding his out-of-the-ring demeanor and personality in order to sell his in-ring skills. In these endeavors, black journalists sought to both explicitly and implicitly highlight how Louis had distanced himself from how Johnson acted in order to develop a new ideal black male athlete archetype. Efforts to tout Louis's upstanding citizenship were particularly crucial in the early stages of his career as African American journalists hoped to make Louis as appealing as possible to boxing promoters who would, in turn, schedule Louis in lucrative title fights. In particular, black sportswriters emphasized specific elements of his day-to-day life in order to best demonstrate his upstanding behavior.

In nearly every aspect of Louis's life, African American journalists positioned his actions against Johnson's to promote Louis's overall respectability. Louis's decision to refrain from

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[116] James J. Long, "J.J. Long Hits 'Color Line' in Heavyweight Hunt," *Pittsburgh Courier,* January 25, 1936, A4. See also Ted Benson, "'The Battle of the Century - Joe Louis vs. Jim Crow,'" *Pittsburgh Courier,* February 29, 1936, A4; Chester L. Washington, "Ches' Sez," *Pittsburgh Courier,* March 14, 1936, A4; Arch Ward, "Arch Ward - The Chicago Tribune," *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 3, 1937, 16; and Bud Shaver, "Joe Louis a Challenge to Tolerance in an Intolerant World," *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 2, 1938, 16.

[117] By Louis's second fight with Max Schmeling in 1938, many more white journalists had moved away from describing Louis in a racially offensive manner and began to depict him as an American hero vanquishing an evil stooge of the Nazi empire. This change in perception – which will be analyzed in greater detail later in this chapter – while significant, still demonstrated that, as Louis began his journey to attain the heavyweight title, he had to overcome a litany of barrier denying him a fair opportunity to compete in the sport. And many white journalists helped erect these barriers by perpetuating inaccurate racial stereotypes about Louis that served to hinder his career aspirations.

drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes, for example, was viewed as a sign of his high moral character. Such behavior, the *Afro-American* noted, set Louis apart from boxers of previous generations who imbibed heavily, often damaging their in-ring talents as a result. While some other boxers in the 1930s followed a similar course of action, the newspaper stated that Louis's dedication in abstaining from liquor – which included banning everyone at his training camps from drinking – distinguished him from his peers.[118] These efforts, the *Chicago Defender* argued, illustrated Louis's commitment to train and compete at the highest possible level in hopes of becoming champion; doing so, moreover, suggested that, by holding himself to a higher moral standard, Louis had set himself apart from his boxing peers. Furthermore, his monk-like dedication implicitly demonstrated his efforts to distance himself from the free-wheeling, carousing ways of Johnson, whose drinking and illicit affairs with white women often overshadowed his dominance in the boxing ring.[119] Thus, as the *Defender's* Al Monroe contended, it reflected Louis's overall desire to live a clean and purposeful life. To Monroe, "it is natural for Joe to live a clean life. He is not living under pressure as some think. If you expect him to someday let down, then your guess is bad."[120]

Black journalists' emphasis on Louis's charitable efforts and strong faith served to further distance him from Johnson's illicit behavior. African American journalists frequently stressed Louis's faith and fierce dedication to God. The *New York Amsterdam News'* Theophilus Lewis, for example, declared that Louis often spent "his hours of leisure" reading the Bible, and stressed

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[118] "Trend of Boxers is Toward Cleaner Living," *Philadelphia Afro-American,* April 4, 1936, 23. See also "Joe Louis Doesn't Drink Ale or Eat Pie; Likes Red Shirts," *Chicago Defender,* December 21, 1935, 14.

[119] Al Monroe, "Joe Louis Took His First, Last Drink at 6," *Chicago Defender,* April 18, 1936.

[120] Monroe, "Joe Louis Took His First, Last Drink at 6," *Chicago Defender.*

Louis's commitment to the church.[121] Moreover, at times during the early stages of his career, black newspapers noted how Louis frequently contributed to and assisted numerous charities. These efforts ranged from Louis fighting in exhibition matches to aid victims of a flood in Pittsburgh, to sponsoring a home for delinquent and homeless children in Chicago.[122] These images served to emphasize Louis's desire to help those in need. In doing so, the black press framed Louis as actively uplifting African Americans who struggled to escape economic hardship. Louis's largesse, moreover, attracted the attention of many fans within the community, who sent him hundreds of letters seeking financial assistance. The *Defender's* Russell J. Cowans noted how a typical collection of Louis's fan mail included "letters bristling with love for the youthful and successful Louis, letters of advice and warning, and letters overflowing with despair. And then there are letters seeking to make a touch from the pile of gold Joe has accumulated."[123] These letters demonstrate how many African Americans looked to Louis to assist them through difficult times. While some letter writers certainly sought to exploit Louis's generosity – a problem that plagued him throughout his life – others, such as two young women that wrote to Louis, hoped he could help pay their tuition so they could attend college.[124] These requests exemplify how African Americans looked to Louis for help and inspiration; the black press' coverage of his charitable efforts, moreover, illustrate how they framed Louis as

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[121] Theophilus Lewis, "Sketchbook," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 5, 1935, 10. See also Richards Vidmer, "Richards Vidmer's Classic Comment on Joe Louis," *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 6, 1935, 15; and "Joe Begins a Fuss," *Philadelphia Afro-American,* January 25, 1936, 6.

[122] "'Sweetest Fighter' to Aid Sweet Charity," *Pittsburgh Courier,* April 4, 1936, A5; and Earl J. Morris, "'Brown Bomber' May Sponsor Home for Delinquent Boys," *Pittsburgh Courier,* January 18, 1936, 3.

[123] Russell J. Cowans, "Joe Louis' Fan Mail Keeps Large Office Force Busy," *Chicago Defender,* August 24, 1935, 13.

[124] Cowans, "Joe Louis' Fan Mail Keeps Large Office Force Busy," *Chicago Defender.*

embodying noble qualities that set him apart from Johnson that they hoped whites would acknowledge.

Black journalists' efforts to cast Louis as Johnson's opposite in how the two behaved outside the ring was most apparent in describing their romantic relationships. Unlike Johnson, who dated many different white women throughout his career, African American journalists framed Louis's loyalty and dedication to his wife, Marva Trotter, as the embodiment of an upstanding husband. Indeed, with a beautiful wife at home, the *Defender* noted that, by earning a substantial amount of money through his fights, Louis was able to provide for Marva, thereby fulfilling his duties as a supportive husband and traditional male breadwinner.[125] African American journalists added that Louis and Marva symbolized the ideal black couple of the era. In numerous articles and standalone photographs of the young couple, African American journalists celebrated Louis's devotion to his attractive and lovely young African American wife.[126] Other journalists, moreover, championed Trotter – with her beauty and her efforts to maintain a lovely, happy home – as the ideal woman for Louis to call his wife.[127] Much like Louis's efforts to abstain from alcohol, drawing attention to the happy couple illustrates black journalists' attempts to humanize Louis by depicting him as an upstanding citizen. Moreover,

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[125] "Louis Has Earned $371,645 in 6 Hours, 3 Minutes Work," *Chicago Defender,* December 28, 1935, 14. These attitudes were also evident in a 1938 *New York Amsterdam News* women's column where journalist Thelma Berlack-Boozer declared that, **"**Some folks are envious of Marva. She has beauty and charm; a warm personality; a famous husband; luxurious apartment; plenty fashionable clothes; the latest automobile; money in her pocket-book and money in the bank. What more could a matron want?" Thelma Berlack-Boozer, "Joe Louis Himself is Marva's Champ," *New York Amsterdam News,* June 25, 1938, 1, 11.

[126] See Roi Ottley, "Hectic Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News,* September 28, 1935, 11; Theophilus Lewis, "Sketchbook," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 5, 1935, 10; Ted Benson, "'The Battle of the Century - Joe Louis vs. Jim Crow,'" *Pittsburgh Courier,* February 29, 1936, A4; and Thelma Berlack-Boozer, "Joe's Always to Be Boss of the Family," *New York Amsterdam News,* June 20, 1936, 8. As Randy Roberts notes, however, Louis's dedication to Marva was not permanent: "In the language of gossip columnist Walter Winchell, Joe and Marva were perpetually just on the outskirts of 'splitsville,' or at least Joe was residing in 'Alonesville.'" Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 156. The couple divorced in 1945. Moreover, Louis, contrary to the black press' statements, cheated on Marva throughout the first few years of their marriage. Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 183-184, 216-217.

[127] Berlack-Boozer, "Joe's Always to Be Boss of the Family," *New York Amsterdam News.*

compared to Johnson's philandering ways with white women, Louis's marriage to an African American woman embodied a new, more respectable vision of black manhood.[128]

Collectively, the black press' efforts to highlight Louis's positive attributes and how they differed mightily from Johnson's inappropriate ways, suggest an attempt by African American journalists to disseminate an image of Louis as embodying what they regarded as the respectable, upstanding black man of the era. Indeed, many black journalists contended that emphasizing Louis's upstanding behavior would convince African American readers to follow his lead and act in a respectable manner as well. What made presenting Louis in this manner so appealing, according to a *Pittsburgh Courier* editorial, was that "his code of living and doing can be accepted so easily by the rest of Afroamerica."[129] The *Defender* agreed with this sentiment, noting in an editorial entitled, "Joe Louis a Good Example," that Louis acted in a way that black sporting fans could easily understand. Moreover, they could adapt many of the characteristics Louis exhibited to fit into their everyday lives. In doing so, the newspaper argued, it "set him apart as a teacher whose instruction in race pride and race consciousness should be a valuable lesson to his race."[130] Presenting Louis as a model black man who African Americans could follow, therefore, suggests that black journalists believed that all African Americans similarly valued these ideals as well.

Black journalists' efforts to sell Louis as an upstanding breadwinner, devoted husband, and morally sound gentleman illustrate a tension between attempting to abide by white standards

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[128] As historians such as Theresa Runstedler note, Louis often engaged in the same sexual exploits as Johnson; he repeatedly had affairs with white women while married to Marva. However, Louis's managers, through the assistance of the black press, kept these dalliances out of the public eye. Runstedler, "In Sports the Best Man Wins," 236. See also Dorinson, "Black Heroes in Sport," 119.

[129] "Ambassador of Good Will," *Pittsburgh Courier,* in "From the Press of the Nation," *The Crisis* 43, no. 5 (May 1936), 17.

[130] "Joe Louis a Good Example," *Chicago Defender,* July 13, 1935, 16.

of respectability, while also crafting a definition of black manhood on their own terms. Indeed, the manner in which black journalists framed Louis's marriage and his fulfilling the breadwinner ideal, according to historian Theresa Runstedler, appropriated "the gender roles of white bourgeois society." Their efforts, thus, demonstrate their understanding that they needed to conform to and abide by these social and gendered mores to a degree in order to gain white society's trust that Louis would not ultimately turn into Jack Johnson.[131] These concerns, moreover, were particularly acute with regards to Louis's actions outside the ring.

Their efforts to abide, in part, by white notions of respectability developed partially due to the fact that, as an athlete with a rare opportunity to showcase his talents in front of a white audience, Louis, by acting in a manner that appealed to white sensibilities, could change how many whites perceived African Americans more broadly. According to the *Defender,* Louis "has been instrumental, through a prizefight, to raise in the estimation of others a wholesome and interesting respect for the race with which he is allied."[132] As the embodiment of a new kind of black man – one who personified the breadwinning ideal that typified upstanding white men of that era – Louis could allow some white fans to find common ground, outside of athletic competition, based on shared definitions of manhood and respectability.

Yet the black press also attempted to challenge white perceptions of black athletes as competitors by developing a new image of black manhood – with Louis as its ultimate symbol – to counteract racially offensive depictions of African American athletes many white journalists had crafted. Thus, although African American journalists at times appropriated some white attitudes about manhood, they ultimately sought to develop a new image of black male athletes that would force whites to rethink how they interpreted black male athleticism, both on- and off-

[131] Runstedler, "In Sports the Best Man Wins," 243.

[132] "Joe Louis a Good Example," *Chicago Defender*.

the-field. Consequently, as *Associated Negro Press* publisher Claude Barnett stated in a memo about the black press, Joe Louis "is a symbol for race progress to the Negro press."[133] The "race progress" Louis symbolized was twofold: as an upstanding citizen and breadwinner who embodied much of what white society valued in gentlemen, Louis represented to many whites the progress African American athletes had made in shedding Johnson's legacy; to African Americans, Louis's ability to slowly shift white attitudes about black athletes had resulted in greater opportunities in mainstream sports.

The notion of Louis as a symbol of "race progress" resonated with many African American newspaper readers. From 1935 to 1938, hundreds of readers wrote letters to major black newspapers praising Louis. Many often discussed Louis in ways that echoed how black journalists wrote about him. They repeatedly noted, for example, that they thought Louis was an "upstanding and honest young man," "a high class Christian gentleman," and a man who, by living a clean, honest life, "has proven that the Negro can be a great man in the fight world."[134] Readers often paired those observations with arguments that African Americans would benefit greatly by following Louis's example. According to *New York Amsterdam News* reader B. Weldon Hayes, for example, the African American community needed "a Joe Louis to fight for our interests in every community; one who is as stern in the fight as the boxing ring."[135] *Chicago Defender* reader Ruth Stoball echoed this sentiment, stating that, "Louis is a credit to his race. I

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[133] Memo on Black Newspapers in Chicago, Box 149, Folder 4, Claude A. Barnett Papers, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

[134] "Lauds Joe Louis," *Pittsburgh Courier,* January 4, 1936, 10; "Church Will Offer Prayer for 'Bomber,'" *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 20, 1936, 10; and "Joe Should Be Champ," *Pittsburgh Courier,* February 27, 1937, 15. See also "Lauds Louis," *Pittsburgh Courier,* February 1, 1936, 12; "Southern Fan Talks of Joe Louis and Johnson," *Chicago Defender,* March 20, 1937, 13; "Honor the Hero," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 5, 1935, 10; "Joe Louis Supporter," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 5, 1935, 10; and "Winner for His Race," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 5, 1935, 10.

[135] "Winner for His Race," *New York Amsterdam News*.

only wish we had more young men like him."[136] These letters suggest that many black readers saw in Louis the characteristics they wished all African Americans exhibited on a daily basis. Such a development, as *Defender* reader L.R. Adams argued, would improve race relations with whites, including southerners.[137] More importantly, Adams declared that with each victory Louis would reverse the longstanding views whites had of black boxers due to Johnson's tarnished legacy:

> There is not a colored person on earth who is not less proud of his race on account of Johnson's conduct and not a white person who does not think a little less of us on account of it. Be it said to the eternal credit of Louis that his behavior so far has been high-toned, dignified, and profitable to his race, and we pray that he will not permit anything to affect his simplicity of life and faith.[138]

Collectively, letters from readers such as Adams indicate how much African Americans valued Louis's opportunity to compete in the boxing world. They also recognized that, by presenting himself in a dignified and civilized manner, Louis had quickly become the primary symbol for racial uplift and opportunity for many African Americans.[139] These laudatory statements helped make Louis one of the most prominent and influential black celebrities during the first half of the twentieth century. Black readers' words, furthermore, placed a tremendous amount of pressure onto Louis's shoulders as he embarked on a path toward winning the heavyweight title.

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[136] "Jack Johnson," *Chicago Defender,* March 14, 1936, 16.

[137] "Joe Can Be of Service," *Chicago Defender,* August 3, 1935, 16.

[138] "Joe Can Be of Service," *Chicago Defender.*

[139] It should be noted that not all black readers supported Louis. However, in the 50 letters to the editor between 1935 and 1938 analyzed for this chapter, only two expressed frustration either with the black press overhyping Louis' boxing abilities or the black press' extensive coverage of Louis. See "Says Joe Louis Isn't so Hot," *Chicago Defender,* April 11, 1936, 16; and Letter from Claude A. Barnett to Carl Murphy, July 23, 1934, Box 152, Folder 2, Claude A. Barnett Papers, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

Brimming with Overconfidence: Creating a Myth of Invincibility

In presenting Louis as an ideal black male athlete, many African American journalists struggled to negotiate the issue of promoting the notion of Louis as a nearly invincible fighter in order to persuade white boxing officials to give him a shot at the heavyweight title against the reality that Louis was in fact capable of losing. Louis's loss to German boxer Max Schmeling in 1936 shocked most African American journalists because, heading into the fight, hardly any black sportswriters believed Schmeling could win. Examining black journalists' attempts to promote Louis in the months leading up to the Schmeling bout illustrate an effort to sell a myth of Louis as a supremely talented, once-in-a-lifetime fighter who deserved an opportunity to face champion James Braddock for the title. But in selling the notion of Louis's invincibility, many black journalists fell victim to buying into the myth they had created. The episode, consequently, demonstrates the challenges African American journalists faced in presenting black athletes as supremely talented and respectable men in order to win over white sporting officials and fans.

The narrative of Louis as a nearly invincible boxer accelerated after Louis defeated former heavyweight champions Primo Carnera and Max Baer in 1935. Many African American sportswriters argued that Louis's dominance over the former champions should convince white boxing officials to give Louis a shot at the heavyweight title in his next bout.[140] Louis's boxing promoter Mike Jacobs, however, scheduled Louis to face another former champion, Max Schmeling, before battling Braddock.[141] At 30 years old, many black journalists believed that Schmeling's best days as a boxer were behind him; he took the fight, they argued, in order to

[140] Randy Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 106.

[141] Initially, the matchup puzzled some boxing fans who figured that Louis had earned an opportunity to fight James Braddock for the heavyweight title. But, as Roberts notes, Louis's boxing promoter Mike Jacobs placed the Schmeling fight before a potential bout with Braddock as "part of Louis' ex-champions tour" of Baer, Carnera, and Schmeling. Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 109.

cash in on Louis's immense fame. Thus, in the eyes of Louis's fans, he would easily defeat the German foe, and then defeat Braddock to become the first black heavyweight champion since Jack Johnson.[142]

As the fight approached, African American journalists repeatedly declared that Schmeling had little to no chance of beating Louis. The *New York Amsterdam News'* Roi Ottley, for example, referred to Schmeling as Louis's "next victim" nearly two and a half months before the fight took place, indicating that he viewed the outcome of the contest nearly a foregone conclusion.[143] Others questioned Schmeling's judgment for agreeing to the fight in the first place; the *Afro-American's* F.M. Davis, argued that Schmeling was "either (1) crazy (2) absolutely fearless or (3) crazy for leaving a perfectly good mansion in safe Berlin and voluntarily coming several thousand miles to get his block knocked off."[144] African American journalists, however, were not alone in believing that Schmeling would likely lose to Louis. Some white sports columnists believed that Louis would defeat Schmeling. Their confidence, however, did not translate into wider support for racial equality; many repeatedly utilized demeaning racial stereotypes when describing how Louis would win.[145] Others, such as Paul Gallico confidently predicted to readers that Louis would win, stating to his "friend," Max Schmeling to "stay in Germany. Have no truck with this man [Louis]. He will do something to you from which you may never fully recover. You haven't a chance."[146]

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[142] Roberts argues that, heading into the 1936 fight, boxing experts perceived Schmeling as "damaged goods. He had been beaten up, knocked out, and generally written off." Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 111.

[143] Roi Ottley, "Sportopics," *New York Amsterdam News,* April 4, 1936, 14.

[144] F.M. Davis, "Sports Snapshots," *Philadelphia Afro-American,* April 25, 1936, 22.

[145] Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation,* 79.

[146] In Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 109.

Black journalists left little room for ambiguity in predicting that Louis would win. They further belittled Schmeling by arguing that Louis – and his boxing promoter Mike Jacobs – scheduled the fight primarily to make a sizable amount of money and sharpen Louis's skills for the more significant contest against Braddock that they believed would follow.[147] Ottley added that Schmeling's diminished in-ring skills meant that Louis would do more than simply defeat Schmeling; he would "blot [Schmeling] right out of whatever measure of public esteem [he] had held up to the moment of climbing into the ring with" Louis.[148] Collectively, this rhetoric illustrates how, in promoting Louis as an exceptional black boxer, African American journalists also had to diminish Schmeling's skill set in order to further hype Louis's capabilities. Their opinions furthermore, suggest that they may have hoped that their words might persuade white boxing promoters to finally grant Louis an opportunity to fight for the heavyweight tile. In order to do so, Louis had to be exceptional – both as an upstanding gentleman who acted nothing like Johnson, and as a supremely talented fighter who white boxing critics could no longer ignore. Consequently, these articles indicate how black journalists devalued Schmeling's skill level going into the fight while also overinflating their perceptions of Louis's alleged invincibility within the ring.

These overly confident attitudes resonated with many black newspaper readers as well. *Pittsburgh Courier* reader W.D. McClelland, for example, echoed many black journalists' beliefs that Louis would defeat Schmeling "in short order and then beat Braddock to earn the

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[147] See George Lyle, "Ringside Chatter," *Philadelphia Afro-American,* May 2, 1936, 23; Al Monroe, "'Joe Can Whip Max, Leroy Same Night' - Al," *Chicago Defender,* May 30, 1936, 13; "Concede Louis K.O. Winner," *New York Amsterdam News,* June 20, 1936, 1, 17; Bill Gibson, "Hear Me Talkin' to Ya," *Philadelphia Afro-American,* June 20, 1936, 20; L.E. Harrington, "Schmeling Won't Come Out for 4th, Says Harrington," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 20, 1936, 4; and Chester L. Washington, "Ches' Sez," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 20, 1936, A5.

[148] Roi Ottley, "Sportopics," *New York Amsterdam News,* April 4, 1936, 14

heavyweight title."[149] Others based their opinions that Louis would easily defeat Schmeling on the fact that Louis had handily defeated a common opponent – Paulino Uzcudun – while Schmeling struggled to earn a victory.[150] Not all black readers who wrote to black newspapers, however, held these attitudes. *Pittsburgh Courier* reader Albert Martin, for example, stood in the minority, arguing that Louis, at that point, "is a little overrated;" Martin, moreover, was "afraid the Joe Louis bubble will burst" after losing to Schmeling.[151] This attitude, however, proved to be the exception among black readers at prominent African American newspapers in the weeks prior to the fight. Like the black journalists they read, African American readers anticipated that they would soon be celebrating Louis's dominant victory over Schmeling.

The overconfidence expressed in black newspaper articles and letters to the editor shaped how Louis perceived his upcoming opponent. Reflecting on the fight in his autobiography, Louis admitted that "the papers had built me up so high – calling me everything but Superman – that I thought I could knock out Schmeling without much trouble."[152] Louis also used Schmeling's German nationality as a rationale for his overconfidence, declaring that "I had conned myself into thinking nobody is stronger or better than an American."[153] Louis, therefore, was susceptible to believing the myth black journalists had created as well. These attitudes contributed mightily to Louis's lackluster preparation for the fight. Training at a posh resort in Pompton Lakes, New Jersey, Louis focused more on playing golf, eating extravagantly, and relaxing with his family

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[149] "What I Think About Joe Louis and His Future Fights," *Pittsburgh Courier,* March 28, 1936, A4. F.J. Johnson similarly wrote to the *Courier* stating that Louis would easily dispatch both opponents to take the title. "What I Think About Joe Louis and His Future Fights," *Pittsburgh Courier,* April 18, 1936, A5.

[150] "What I Think About Joe Louis and His Future Fights," *Pittsburgh Courier,* April 4, 1936, A4; and "What I Think About Joe Louis and His Future Fights," *Pittsburgh Courier,* April 18, 1936, A5.

[151] "What I Think About Joe Louis and His Future Fights," *Pittsburgh Courier,* March 28, 1936, A4.

[152] Joe Louis, *My Life Story,* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1947), 73.

[153] Joe Louis, *Joe Louis: My Life,* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 76.

and friends than on preparing himself to the best of his abilities.[154] Schmeling, meanwhile, closely studied Louis's previous matches and discovered a few key weaknesses that he planned to exploit.[155]

A few African American sportswriters noted how, after weeks at his training camp, Louis continued to appear out of shape and ill-prepared for the fight.[156] Yet, although Louis's physique alarmed some black journalists, they remained confident that he would improve his conditioning in time for the fight and beat Schmeling.[157] The black press' largely unwavering belief of Louis's supposed invincibility, despite physical evidence that challenged that narrative, highlights the challenges black journalists faced in hyping a prominent black male athlete during this era. As a competitor, black journalists had to promote the idea that Louis was capable of winning against every white opponent he faced. Questioning his training regiment, therefore, would cast doubt over Louis's ability to fulfill the promise set forth by black journalists and threatened to undermine the broader image of Louis as an exceptional black athlete. Consequently, as Louis stepped into the ring on June 19, 1936 in Yankee Stadium in New York, most black boxing fans believed that he would continue his dominant ways and beat Schmeling, further instilling racial pride among African Americans.

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[154] See Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 113-115.

[155] Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 112-113.

[156] See Al Monroe, "Speaking of Sports," *Chicago Defender,* June 6, 1936, 13; and "Louis Awaits Call to Face Max in Setto," *New York Amsterdam News,* June 13, 1936, 1, 14.

[157] The *Chicago Defender's* Al Monroe even argued that, while both fighters appeared overweight a month before the fight, Louis "figures to get better as his training increases and his weight decreases," while Schmeling would be unable to overcome being "overweighted with age and slow in the timing of his punches." Al Monroe, "'Joe Can Whip Max, Leroy Same Night' - Al," *Chicago Defender,* May 30, 1936, 13.

Shock and Confusion: The Black Press' Struggles to Comprehend Louis' Loss in 1936

When Louis fell to the canvas in the twelfth round after being battered by Schmeling throughout the bout, African Americans in attendance and listening to the fight across the nation were stunned.[158] Schmeling had destroyed the myth that their black athletic hero was invincible. On its surface, Schmeling's diligent preparation for the fight paid off as he repeatedly exploited Louis's in-ring weaknesses. Louis, meanwhile, appeared sluggish, listless, and according to some observers, disinterested in the fight from the moment it began.[159] Yet many African American journalists struggled to rationalize how Louis had lost, given how they had argued that he was invincible heading into the bout. Moreover, having presented Louis as the embodiment of ideal black manhood and respectability, many black journalists felt that his listless, indifferent performance against Schmeling threatened to eradicate their efforts to change white perceptions of African American athletes.

During the week after the fight, major African American newspapers responded to the defeat with a mix of shock, bewilderment, and devastation.[160] The *New York Amsterdam News'* Marvel Cooke described what transpired in the ring as being "like a nightmare. [Schmeling] reached out through space, even, and ripped out the heart of the country." Watching Louis tumble to the canvas, she added, was like "watching a great idol fall to the ground and break up in little pieces."[161] Other journalists reported that black boxing fans felt "stunned and

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[158] As Randy Roberts notes, eleven people died allegedly in shock from hearing of Louis's defeat. Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 121-122.

[159] Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 117.

[160] See the June 27, 1936 editions of the *Chicago Defender, Pittsburgh Courier, New York Amsterdam News,* and *Baltimore Afro-American.*

[161] Marvel Cooke, "Death and Sadness Mark Louis Defeat; Shock Fatal to 12, and Harlem Mourns," *New York Amsterdam News,* June 27, 1936, 1, 20. See also Enoch P. Waters, "Haile Selassie 1st, Now Louis; Who's Next?"

bewildered" by the outcome, unable to comprehend that Louis could lose, let alone to someone they considered as marginally talented as Schmeling.[162]

The shock many African American journalists expressed stemmed in part from concerns over how white journalists would perceive Louis after losing a fight he had been predicted to easily win. These fears were well founded as many white journalists viewed Schmeling's victory as a reaffirmation of white racial superiority. In the eyes of some prominent white sportswriters, Louis's loss confirmed what they believed heading into the match; while Louis possessed the physical skills to compete, he lacked the mental acuity to win against tough opponents like Schmeling. Louis, in other words, was not as manly as Schmeling. As Roberts notes, many white journalists' articles reflected a "sense of satisfaction, a feeling that the German had reestablished racial order. In a contest of brains against brawn, an agile mind had carried the day; the white Schmeling had outthought and outfought the black Louis."[163] The *Chicago Defender's* C. Cecil Craigne, moreover, noted that 84 white southerners wrote to the newspaper in the week after the fight, "chiding us on the downfall of Mr. Louis," and setting the African American community back in its rightful place.[164] Louis's loss, thus, in the eyes of many black supporters, did as much damage to African Americans' efforts to promote Louis as a respectable man as it did to Louis's

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Chicago Defender, June 27, 1936, 14; and Edgar T. Rouzeau, "Joe Louis' Defeats Astounds Sports World," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 27, 1936, A5.

[162] Roi Ottley, "Hectic Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News,* June 27, 1936, 13; and "Lessons From the Fight," *New York Amsterdam News,* June 27, 1936, 12.

[163] Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 122. These attitudes were even more prominent among southern sportswriters who, despite barely mentioning the fight in the weeks leading up to the bout, extensively covered Schmeling's victory, framing it as a triumphant victory in the battle to reassert white racial superiority. As historian Chris Mead notes, white southern sportswriters such as Ben Wahrman of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch,* "asked what sportswriter would be the first 'to change the Negro's name from 'Brown Bomber' to 'Brown Bummer.'" Mead, *Champion,* 98.

[164] C. Cecil Craigne, "Louis' Defeat Gives South Chance to Tell How it Felt," *Chicago Defender,* July 4, 1936, 13-14

record as a boxer. In assessing the harm done by the defeat, Craigne placed a heavy burden on Louis's shoulders, declaring that:

> The downfall or collapse of a Race prize-fighter of Joe Louis' calibre [sic] gives cause for more grief among the race than any other single event, and any black man gaining this height has a double duty to perform: one to himself; the other to his race. He no longer remains his own property. The public has an investment in his conduct; his successes and his failures.[165]

The ramifications of the fight's outcome, therefore, deeply troubled African American journalists who had worked extensively to promote Louis to the white sports world as a shining example of black athletic potential. The loss, in other words, threatened to stall or undo the progress African Americans had made in attempting to change white perceptions of black athletes like Louis.

In an effort to minimize the damage done to Louis's reputation as an upstanding black man, many black journalists offered up a litany of reasons to excuse his poor performance. Unwilling to concede that Schmeling simply outfought Louis, many black sportswriters declared that something illicit had occurred. The *Defender* wondered if Louis had purposely lost the fight in exchange for an unknown sum of money to help pay off his, and his managers, mounting pile of debt.[166] These concerns stemmed from rumors that individuals filming the fight worried that if Louis won easily in the first or second round, it would diminish the film's commercial appeal. Consequently, as Louis's manager, Jack Blackburn, stated to the *Courier's* Edgar T. Rouzeau, the film associates, "asked Joe to take it easy for the first three rounds so they could have a short length picture." By attempting to extend the fight, Blackburn surmised, Louis allowed Schmeling to take advantage of his distracted opponent.[167]

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[165] C. Cecil Craigne, "Despite Alleged Plot, Joe Must Mend Ways," *Chicago Defender,* June 27, 1936, 1, 11.

[166] "What Happened to Joe Louis?" *Chicago Defender,* June 27, 1936, 1.

[167] Edgar T. Rouzeau, "'Joe Agreed to Stall for 3 Rounds,' Says Trainer," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 27, 1936, 1, 4.

Other black journalists, in an effort to protect Louis's image, circulated a rumor that a fight between Joe and his wife Marva the night before the bout disrupted Louis's concentration against Schmeling.[168] Pinning Louis's underwhelming performance on Marva allowed black sportswriters to continue to promote the belief that Louis remained a uniquely talented boxer and the embodiment of black manhood. The only way he could lose, according to this logic, was if something negative – such as Marva's "feminine influence" breaking her husband's concentration – occurred.[169] This contention exposes the gendered dynamics at play in the black press' efforts to present Louis as an ideal black man. Stating that the Louis lost to the better, more prepared fighter would weaken the black press' argument about Louis's manhood and exceptional skill as a black athlete. Blaming Marva's "feminine influence" for Louis's loss, however, absolved Louis of any central responsibility for his shortcomings in the ring, and would potentially allow African American journalists to continue to perpetuate the image of Louis as a uniquely talented black male athlete.

Not all black journalists agreed with this argument. The NAACP's *Crisis* magazine vehemently chided black newspapers that spread this rumor, contending that, "If newspapers owned by white people had printed some of the references to Mrs. Joseph Louis Barrow which appeared in several of the colored papers, the latter would have led the hue and cry over 'insulting our women.'"[170] Turning Marva into a scapegoat, the *Crisis* argued, only reinforced attitudes held by many whites that African Americans lacked the ability to carry themselves in an upstanding manner. The tension between black journalists over this issue highlights the difficulty

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[168] See William G. Nunn, "Did Max or Marva Beat Joe?" *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 4, 1936, 1, 4; Al Monroe, "Speaking of Sports," *Chicago Defender,* July 4, 1936, 13; and Russ J. Cowans, "Louis Still Idol of Many," *Washington Afro-American,* July 4, 1936, 17.

[169] Bill Gibson, "Hear Me Talkin' to Ya," *Washington Afro-American,* June 27, 1936, 19.

[170] "Joe Louis and the Negro Press," *The Crisis* 43, no. 8 (August 1936), 241.

they had in reconciling selling Louis's exceptional qualities as a black male athlete while confronting the fact that he was susceptible to undermining those claims if he lost in the ring.

Many black journalists' struggles to rationalize Louis's loss – and its impact on his image as an upstanding gentleman – were most evident in their dissemination of a theory that Louis had been drugged before stepping into the ring with Schmeling. Journalists such as the *Courier's* Ira F. Lewis noted that "something" was amiss with Louis from the moment he stepped into the ring and only worsened as the fight wore on. In closely analyzing Louis's every move in the ring, Lewis argued that, Louis "appeared to be mentally befogged, he blinked his eyes, he could not find himself, he did not know where he was, try as he may." Other black newspapers saw similar nefarious behavior at work. The *Afro-American*, for example, stated that many black fight fans in Harlem were certain that Louis had been "temporarily paralyzed" by powdered opium that had been added to the fighter's water supply.[171] However, neither Lewis, nor other black journalists had any concrete evidence to support their claims. Nevertheless, they contended that something illicit occurred because it was the only reasonable explanation for how Louis, according to Lewis, forgot "all about boxing, even to the extent of forgetting the rudiments and fundamentals of the boxing art."[172]

These conspiracy theories turned some black journalists into amateur detectives; they scrutinized Louis's every move, arguing that the manner in which he entered the ring, the way he stared at his opponent prior to the opening bell, and the level of dilation in his eyes, all confirmed

[171] "Say Joe Was Doped," *Washington Afro-American,* June 27, 1936, 1. The *Afro-American* also noted that there were "reputedly more than one hundred ways to fix a prize fighter without his or his seconds knowing it." The *Chicago Defender* similarly stated in the weeks following the fight that Louis most likely had been doped either prior to or during the fight. "What Happened to Joe Louis?" *Chicago Defender*.

[172] Ira F. Lewis, "Was Louis Doped? Ira Lewis Raises Query," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 27, 1936, A4.

their suspicion that Louis had been doped.[173] Journalists had little to no evidence to base these accusations. Yet some sportswriters, such as the *Defender's* Al Monroe, ardently believed that someone or something acted to prevent Louis from performing to the best of his abilities. Despite having no hard evidence to defend any of the theories, Monroe argued that, *"The Chicago Defender*...feels that there is plenty of smoke behind the whole affair, smoke that may startle the boxing world and an entire race when it is finally uncovered."[174] The vague statements made by Monroe only further fanned the flames among many of Louis's supporters that he never stood a fair chance to prove to the white boxing establishment that he was the best heavyweight fighter in the world. Black journalists' inability to admit that Louis simply underachieved against Schmeling illustrates the lengths to which some African American journalists went to protect the notion that Louis symbolized ideal black manhood and respectability.

Many black readers similarly viewed Louis as a uniquely talented and upstanding black man. As a result, their concerns over how his loss threatened to tarnish his image compelled them to agree with Monroe, Lewis, and other black journalists that something illegal had occurred. Walter E. Randolph, for example, declared in a letter to the *Defender,* "frankly that I do not believe it was an honest fight;" Randolph added that he could not understand how Schmeling, "who was not a good fighter when he was younger by several years became a great fighter in this particular fight."[175] Dorothy L. Hinton, in a letter to the *Afro-American,* was more direct in accusing Schmeling of fighting unfairly, charging that, "Germans are clever people, and

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[173] See Al Monroe, "Truth about Louis-Max Fiasco!" *Chicago Defender,* June 27, 1936, 1, 11; "Say Joe Was Doped," *Washington Afro-American,* June 27, 1936, 1; and Al Monroe, "Big Money Backs Louis Fight Probe," *Chicago Defender,* July 4, 1936, 1, 2.

[174] Monroe, "Big Money Backs Louis Fight Probe," *Chicago Defender*.

[175] "Doubts Honesty of Joe-Max Bout," *Chicago Defender,* June 27, 1936, 14.

Schmeling had something that was not seen" that doped Louis.[176] The veracity of these claims mattered little to many of Louis's supporters; in their eyes, something illicit had occurred that delegitimized Schmeling's victory and more importantly, excused away Louis's poor performance.[177] These letters, furthermore, illustrate how Louis's loss devastated many black boxing fans who had viewed Louis as an invincible hero prior to the bout.

Other black journalists and readers rejected these conspiracy theories. Instead, they argued that Louis – and his black supporters – would be better served by taking responsibility and admitting that Louis did not effectively prepare for his fight with Schmeling. *Pittsburgh Courier* reader Ernest White, for example, argued that Louis lost "because the boy didn't have the necessary experience in ring generalship to be pitted against a veteran fighter like Schmeling." This discrepancy, White argued, was clearly evident before Louis stepped into the ring; therefore, it should have indicated to black boxing fans that Louis, despite his incredible talents and early career successes, was far from invincible.[178] *New York Amsterdam News* reader Annie St. A. Knox stated that many African American boxing fans had ignored the fact that even the most talented and highly touted boxers lost at some point during their careers.[179] Focusing on Louis's undefeated professional record heading into the Schmeling fight, according to Knox, created an unfair set of expectations that Louis would never be able to fulfill. Knox added that,

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[176] "Doped on Rope," *Washington Afro-American,* July 18, 1936, 4.

[177] See "Fan's Praise The Defender's Stand on Louis and Max Schmeling Fight with Letters," *Chicago Defender,* July 18, 1936, 14; "Sport Editor's Mail," *Chicago Defender,* July 25, 1936, 14; "America's Greatest," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 1, 1936, 12; "The Defender Asks a Question," *Chicago Defender,* July 4, 1936, 8; and "Fan Urges Sports Editor to Continue Investigation," *Chicago Defender,* July 25, 1936, 16.

[178] "Joe's Defeat Was No Surprise, Says," *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 18, 1936, A2. See also "Joe Lost Fairly," *Washington Afro-American,* July 4, 1936, 4; "Will He Come Back?" *Chicago Defender,* August 1, 1936, 16; and "Louis Sure Shot," *New York Amsterdam News,* August 15, 1936, 12.

[179] "Can't Win Always," *New York Amsterdam News,* June 27, 1936, 12. When examining the career arcs of former heavyweight champions, the *Chicago Defender's* Lucius C. Harper noted that most lost at least once prior to attaining the title; Louis's loss, therefore, put him in good company with the sport's legends. Lucius C. Harper, "Can Joe Come Back, or Is He All Washed Up?" *Chicago Defender,* July 4, 1936, 1-2.

while unfortunate, the loss would ultimately help Louis gain a better perspective on his talents; to Knox, "losing occasionally helps you appreciate victory."[180] White and Knox's statements illustrate a broader effort by some within the black community to rationalize and defend Louis's loss without relying on far-flung conspiracies to explain the result. Chalking the loss up to Louis's inexperience and as being part of any young boxer's career, thus, allowed some African Americans to believe that he still possessed the requisite skills needed to become champion; the loss, in their eyes, was nothing more than a brief setback on his longer, and hopefully more prosperous journey to the title. Moreover, it implicitly suggests that the loss should not jeopardize the black press' efforts to present Louis as an upstanding gentleman.

Imploring Louis to admit to his shortcomings and learn from them suggests that some black readers and journalists believed that it would benefit him – as both a boxer and as a man – in the long run. The *Afro-American's* Bill Gibson argued that Schmeling won because Louis "was over-confident in a big way and he was consequently unprepared." Louis, thus, "did as much to defeat himself as did Schmeling."[181] Gibson refused to concoct an excuse or endorse a conspiracy theory to justify Louis's poor performance; Louis – and his managers who allowed him to train at a substandard level – was ultimately responsible for the defeat. Gibson's argument that Louis needed to take responsibility for his poor performance suggests that how Louis acted, in both victory and defeat, were crucial in how black journalist shaped his image as a respectable man. A few other black journalists concurred, arguing that Louis's overconfidence heading into the ring blinded him from properly training to spar against an underappreciated and dangerous

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[180] "Can't Win Always," *New York Amsterdam News*. *Pittsburgh Courier* reader Matthew Bacote similarly argued that, "I feel it was destined to be, for you to know what it means to lose will teach you the value of gaining." "Best Wishes to Joe," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 29, 1936, 12. See also "The Defender Asks a Question," *Chicago Defender*; and "Joe Took it Like a Future Champ," *Chicago Defender,* June 27, 1936, 14.

[181] Bill Gibson, "Hear Me Talkin' to Ya," *Washington Afro-American,* June 27, 1936, 19.

fighter in Schmeling.[182] The *Courier's* Chester L. Washington acknowledged that black journalists may have played a role in overinflating Louis's ego in the weeks leading up to the fight, stating that, "all the writers declared that he was invincible, and maybe the youthful Joe had started to believe it."[183]

Despite these critical assessments of Louis's performance, many journalists remained optimistic that he would still become the heavyweight champion. Indeed, they reframed Louis's disappointing performance as an invaluable lesson from which he could learn to improve both as a boxer and as a man. In an editorial immediately after Schmeling's victory, the *Amsterdam News* argued that Louis must learn that "greater fame and fortune await him if he buckles down to hard work and keeps perfecting himself."[184] An *Afro-American* editorial similarly contended that Louis could reclaim his place at the top of the sport so long as he learned from the mistakes he made in preparing for this fight. To do so, the newspaper declared, Louis needed to adopt the maxim that, "a champion must work as hard to stay on top as he did to climb up there."[185] In some ways, according to Washington, by losing, Louis would become a "stronger and smarter" fighter capable of greatness than if he had defeated Schmeling; it was only through the disappointment of defeat that Louis would learn how to fully dedicate himself to the sport.[186] Collectively, these statements reveal the attempts made by some journalists to reconcile the

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[182] See Chester L. Washington, "Ches' Sez," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 27, 1936, A6; William G. Nunn, "Courier City Editor Writes a Letter to Joe - Asks Why He Didn't Listen to Blackburn," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 27, 1936, A5; "Will Joe Louis Learn?" *Philadelphia Afro-American,* June 27, 1936, 4; and "Lessons From the Fight," *New York Amsterdam News*.

[183] Chester L. Washington, "Ches' Sez," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 27, 1936, A6.

[184] "Lessons From the Fight," *New York Amsterdam News*.

[185] "Will Joe Louis Learn?" *Philadelphia Afro-American*.

[186] Chester L. Washington, "Ches' Sez," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 27, 1936, A6. *Chicago Defender* reader Jas E. Bradley similarly argued that he believed "Joe Louis will wax stronger physically, mentally, financially, and perhaps, morally – if his morale can be improved upon – largely because of this defeat." "What About Joe Louis?" *Chicago Defender,* July 4, 1936, 16.

disappointment they felt with their broader mission of promoting Louis as a uniquely talented black athlete. Additionally, compared to the bewilderment other journalists expressed in response to the loss, the optimism apparent within these remarks demonstrates that many journalists remained committed to selling the narrative of Louis as the ideal black man.

Ultimately, the dissonance between black journalists as they struggled to process Louis's loss reveals the challenges African American newspapers encountered as they attempted to promote an image of Louis – and black athletes more broadly – as symbols of both athletic dominance and respectability. The disagreements between journalists over who was responsible for the loss – Louis, or a coterie of outside influences – illustrate the difficulty African American journalists experienced in negotiating the construction of a black male athlete archetype in the face of adversity. Selling the notion that Louis was a figure within the African American community to celebrate was easier when he avoided controversy outside the ring, and won inside of it.

Road to Redemption: Situating Louis on the Comeback Trail

While Louis, stunned by the loss to Schmeling, retreated home to nurse his wounds, black journalists and his advisors quickly worked to rehabilitate his career and image. Louis's promoter Mike Jacobs scrambled to get Louis back into the ring as quickly as possible, believing, as historian Lewis Erenberg notes, that "the longer Louis was kept away from fighting for the title, the greater the opportunity for American racists to fortify the barrier against a black heavyweight champion."[187] As with every element of Louis's boxing career, his managers sold the first few fights after the loss as the beginning of his journey on a road to redemption. The

[187] Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation,* 107. Jacobs and Louis's managers also believed that a long layoff would weaken Louis's resolve and dull his boxing skills.

loss, in their eyes, while disappointing in the short-term, would only enhance his long-term legacy by making him a stronger and wiser boxer. Fighting to seek redemption, moreover, would enhance the narrative stakes of each fight; every victory, therefore, would move Louis one step closer to glory. This new and improved Louis, they concluded, would take the boxing world by storm and forever change the sport in the process.[188]

Black journalists echoed these sentiments after Louis tumbled to the canvas against Schmeling. Throughout the first few months after the loss, African American newspapers situated Louis on a comeback trail where he aimed to find redemption both as a boxer and to live up to the standards black journalists held him to prior to the first Schmeling fight.[189] The familiar themes discussed in the immediate aftermath of the loss – that Louis's youthful overconfidence, coupled with Schmeling's veteran tactical advantage caused him to lose – reappeared as black journalists contemplated Louis's next steps. Above all, according to a *Chicago Defender* editorial, Louis needed African Americans to fully support him and put the defeat firmly in the past. In their eyes,

> Joe Louis should be given the opportunity, unhampered and unfettered by unfair criticism, spurious gossip, and at times downright slander, to regain for himself that poise and respectability and high esteem in the minds of the public which he formerly held. We believe he will do it, and ask only that he be given a chance to redeem himself.[190]

The *Defender's* attitudes illustrate a belief held by other black journalists that the dismay many African Americans felt when Louis lost had cast a pall over the community. Letting that negative

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[188] Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation,* 107. See also Margolick, *Beyond Glory,* 193-194, 197.

[189] See "Lessons From the Fight," *New York Amsterdam News*; Al Monroe, "Speaking of Sports," *Chicago Defender,* July 11, 1936, 13; Craigne, "Despite Alleged Plot, Joe Must Mend Ways," *Chicago Defender*; Chester L. Washington, "Ches' Sez," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 15, 1936, A5; and A.I. Baron, M.D., "Says Joe Will Win Title, Retire Unbeaten to Farm," *Washington Afro-American,* July 25, 1936, 22.

[190] "The Molehill and the Mound," *Chicago Defender,* August 1, 1936, 16.

energy linger, they argued, threatened to drag Louis down precisely at a time when he needed the black community's full support as inspiration for his comeback.[191] Moreover, it threatened to diminish the public's perception of Louis as an upstanding gentleman.

Louis wasted little time in reassuring skeptical black sports fans that the loss would not derail his career. He dispatched a number of opponents ruthlessly and efficiently in the fall of 1936 and spring of 1937. Louis's dominant victory over Jack Sharkey in August 1936 – his first after losing to Schmeling – convinced the *Pittsburgh Courier's* William Nunn that Louis "was once again the perfect fighting machine." More importantly, Nunn stressed that Louis's in-ring demeanor had markedly improved: "gone was that falsely built impression that he could not be beaten. Tonight, Joe Louis, confident, but not over-confident, started from the first second of the first round, to drop down his man."[192] Other journalists followed suit, surmising that, after Louis's numerous victories following the Schmeling defeat, he had, according to the *Defender's* John M. Wilson, once "again become one hero of the Race."[193]

By the beginning of 1937, the *Amsterdam News'* Roi Ottley argued that "Joe Louis is a man redeemed," adding that Louis should be praised "for his courage, persistence and skill in the face of tremendous odds," and declared that he "richly earns the cheers of millions throughout the country."[194] Collectively, the black press' coverage of Louis's return to prominence in the boxing world demonstrates how quickly black journalists moved past the stinging defeat and recast Louis in a more positive light. Placing Louis on a road to redemption, therefore, made it

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[191] See Chester L. Washington, "Ches' Sez," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 15, 1936, A5; Harper, "Can Joe Come Back, or Is He All Washed Up?" *Chicago Defender*; Craigne, "Despite Alleged Plot, Joe Must Mend Ways," *Chicago Defender*; and Craigne, "Louis' Defeat Gives South Chance to Tell How it Felt," *Chicago Defender*.

[192] William G. Nunn, "Louis Winner!" *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 22, 1936, 1, 4.

[193] John M. Wilson, "Brown Bomber Again Race's No. 1 Hero," *Chicago Defender,* September 26, 1936, 3.

[194] Roi Ottley, "Sportopics," *New York Amsterdam News,* January 2, 1937, 14.

easier for African American sportswriters to interpret each victory as an indication of Louis's steady in-ring improvement. More broadly, emphasizing Louis's newfound dedication to his craft allowed black journalists to argue that the new-and-improved Louis fully embodied a humble, respectable man.

After defeating nearly every accomplished heavyweight boxer, by the spring of 1937, Louis's options for future opponents had been reduced to two: a rematch with Schmeling, or an opportunity to fight champion James Braddock for the heavyweight title. While both Schmeling and Louis clamored for a rematch in the near future, both made a title fight against Braddock their top priority. Schmeling argued that, having defeated Louis, he deserved the first opportunity to take the title from Braddock. On merit alone, Schmeling's argument was sound; however, the American boxing community's support for the German had dwindled during late 1936 and early 1937 because of growing anti-Nazi sentiment. Many who opposed a potential Schmeling-Braddock fight, according to Erenberg, feared that a Schmeling victory would serve as a symbolic victory for Nazi propagandists to flaunt over the United States.[195] As a result, Jewish activists and the *Daily Worker*, the influential communist newspaper, initiated a campaign to boycott a potential Schmeling title fight.[196] Although Schmeling repeatedly tried to distance himself from the Nazi political machine, he was unable to shake the stigma created by the

[195] These journalists also argued that by supporting the fight, Americans would be generating a tremendous amount of revenue that would ultimately make its way "to the coffers of the Third Reich." It should be noted that concerns over Schmeling's value to Hitler's Nazi propaganda efforts were rarely discussed in the lead-up to the 1936 fight. This was not the case, however, when the second fight occurred in 1938. As conflicts between Nazi Germany and the United States escalated between 1936 and 1938, the tenor of many journalists' attitudes toward the fight changed dramatically. American journalists, thus, portrayed Schmeling as a symbol of Nazi evil; Louis, concurrently, was depicted as an American patriot protecting the nation's democratic ideals from a foreigner invader. Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation,* 74-75, 110; and Margolick, *Beyond Glory*, 128.

[196] As Margolick and Erenberg note, Schmeling – never an ardent supporter of the Nazi cause – sought, whenever possible, to separate his boxing career from the political aspirations of the Nazi regime. Despite Schmeling's best effort, by agreeing to aid the Nazi cause when asked to do so in exchange for being allowed to continue to profit off his boxing career in America, he was linked as contributing to the Nazi effort. See Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation,* 111; and Margolick, *Beyond Glory,* 205-211.

American media that he was "Hitler's boyfriend," and "Hitler's emissary to America."[197] To compound matters, Nazi officials attempted to politicize Schmeling's matches against American foes, framing every victory as a sign of Germany's strength, and America's weakness.[198] For many American boxing officials, political activists, and journalists, the political stakes of granting either Schmeling or Louis a title fight against champion James Braddock, thus, "transformed Schmeling into a Nazi representative and Joe Louis into a democratic hero."[199] The Louis-Schmeling conflict, ultimately, was one of many collisions between African American and German athletes in the 1930s that highlighted broader political tensions between the United States and Nazi officials. As will be explored in Chapter 2, Jesse Owens's performance in the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin took on added political and racial significance because of his ability to outperform German competitors in front of Hitler and a Nazi propaganda machine determined to use the Games as a showcase of Aryan racial superiority.

While these sentiments would only escalate once Schmeling and Louis fought in 1938, Schmeling's inability to schedule a title fight in 1937 gave Louis's promoter Mike Jacobs the window he needed to gain the public's support and schedule a Louis-Braddock title match. The announcement surprised the *Chicago Defender,* which stated that Louis now had the chance to

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[197] Margolick, *Beyond Glory,* 208.

[198] These attitudes developed initially in response to Schmeling's victory over Louis in 1936. The *Crisis,* for example, reprinted an August 1936 article from George Spandau in "Der Weltkampf," a Nazi publication. Spandau argued that Schmeling's victory validated Nazi belief that in Aryan racial superiority. Moreover, he argued, "it is not only that Schmeling defeated Louis, that German honesty conquered brutality and want of discipline – through the German Schmeling the white race, Europe and white America defeated the black race." George Spandau, "Schmeling's a Cultural Victory," *The Crisis* 43, no. 10 (October 1936), 301.

[199] Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation,* 111.

"be repeating a bit of history that even the most conservative figured would never again be witnessed as late as two weeks ago."[200]

Louis did not disappoint as he defeated Braddock to earn the title – marking the first time an African American boxer had held the heavyweight title since Jack Johnson in 1915. The victory, according to the *Courier's* Chester Washington, ignited "an epidemic of hysterical joy [that] swept Chicago's famous black belt."[201] Black journalists hailed the achievement, framing it as a crowning moment in African American history.[202] The victory, for many African Americans, validated their longstanding belief that black athletes, when given the opportunity, could outperform the very best competition from across the world. Moreover, as the *Washington Tribune's* Art Carter noted, "the thunderous ovation he [Louis] receives from this mixed crowd…is high testimony that he is accepted as the champion in every sense of the word."[203] Louis's triumph, thus, suggests that sports officials needed to eradicate the barriers that denied black athletes in other sports from competing against integrated competition. Louis's victory, furthermore, validated the black press' efforts to sell Louis' exemplary talent as a means to increase African American athletic participation in boxing and in the sports world more broadly.

Yet, for many black journalists, Louis's ability to win without sullying his honorable, upstanding demeanor strengthened their belief in his exceptional nature. In a laudatory editorial published after defeating Braddock, the *Defender* declared,

> Joe Louis has not only been a clean fighter possessing exceptional ability to carry on his profession, but he has lived a clean life, both privately and publicly and has

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[200] "Louis, Jim Sign," *Chicago Defender,* February 27, 1937, 1-2.

[201] Chester L. Washington, "Joe Flattens Braddock in Eight Savage Rounds," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 26, 1937, 1.

[202] Al Monroe, "Terrific Right K.O.'s Braddock," *Chicago Defender,* June 26, 1937, 1, 19; and William G. Nunn, "'Jim in a Fog,' Declares Nunn," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 26, 1937, 1.

[203] Art Carter, "All Races Hail Joe in Chi," *Washington Tribune,* June 26, 1937, Art Carter Papers, Box 170-25, Folder 13, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

> adapted himself to sensible and respectable conduct. He has set a worthy example for both white and colored people throughout the country. Wealth has not changed his behavior.[204]

Louis's victory, therefore, affirmed black journalists' efforts to perpetuate the notion that he was a uniquely talented boxer and upstanding citizen. Moreover, according to David Kellum, unlike Jack Johnson, Louis's time as champion would not change his behavior; rather, "as champion he would meet all the requirements necessary to bring to the American public proper recognition of the race."[205] This emphasis on Louis's character in part reflects the black press' overarching effort to position Louis as a unique, upstanding African American that white society should embrace; it also attempted to counteract some white journalists and boxing fans' long-held stereotypes that dehumanized Louis by comparing him to jungle animals. Thus, the black press' efforts in this regard suggest that they understood that, even as champion, many in the white world would continue to view Louis through the lens of Jack Johnson. But with each victory as champion, Louis would further weaken these attitudes and potentially compel whites to view him as an upstanding, respectable black man.

With the title in hand, Louis and many black journalists felt that he still needed to vanquish Schmeling in order to legitimize his status as boxing's heavyweight champion. Schmeling helped fan the flames over this issue, complaining through the media that, having defeated Louis, he had proven he was superior to the Brown Bomber; if not for political factors outside of his control, Schmeling argued, he, rather than Louis would have fought and possibly defeated Braddock to become champion.[206] Louis and his camp countered, stating that

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[204] "More Power to New Champion," *Chicago Defender,* July 3, 1937, 14. See also St. Clair Bourne, "No Advice," *New York Amsterdam News,* July 3, 1937, 16; and Nunn, "'Jim in a Fog,' Declares Nunn," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

[205] David W. Kellum, "Louis May Begin Campaign as Champion with London Bout," *Chicago Defender,* July 3, 1937, 1-2.

[206] Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation,* 130; and Margolick, *Beyond Glory,* 231-235.

Schmeling was simply jealous that Louis had taken advantage of the opportunity to become champion. The jawing back and forth between the two sides piqued the interest of boxing fans and a rematch between the two was scheduled for June 23, 1938.

As they retreated to their respective training camps to prepare for the fight, the mainstream white press covered the fight in a markedly different manner than it had in 1936. As historian Chris Mead notes, while some white sportswriters supported Louis prior to his first bout, others rooted against him as part of a broader desire to deny African American boxers greater opportunities within the sport.[207] When he lost, these white journalists rejoiced, arguing that it validated their beliefs that Louis, and by association black boxers in general, lacked the mental toughness and intelligence to win difficult matches against crafty opponents like Schmeling. Louis's image as an invincible boxing specimen heading into the fight in 1936, they contended, had been nothing more than a gross exaggeration crafted by his promoters and black journalists to tout an inferior talent.[208] Moreover, these criticisms suggest that white journalists viewed Louis as inferior to Schmeling and other white boxers.

By 1938, however, the shifting political climate and growing anti-Nazi sentiment dramatically altered how many white journalists analyzed the second fight. Yet, as Margolick notes, while many white journalists opposed Schmeling, they continued to doubt that Louis could beat his German nemesis. Some focused unfairly on Louis's presumed lack of intelligence, declaring, according to the *Los Angeles Times,* that "there can be no question regarding

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[207] Mead notes that many who supported Louis described Louis's boxing skills in a racially demeaning manner by utilizing dehumanizing animalistic language. Mead, *Champion,* 88-89, 98-99. See also Wiggins Jr., "Boxing's Sambo Twins"; Jaher, "White America Views Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali"; and Sammons, "Boxing as a Reflection of Society.

[208] See Craigne, "Louis' Defeat Gives South Chance to Tell How it Felt," *Chicago Defender*; and Runstedler, "In Sports the Best Man Wins," 244.

Schmeling's mental advantage. Joe is not very bright."[209] Others debased Louis by continuing to attribute his skills to basic animalistic instincts. The *Atlanta Journal's* O.B. Keller surmised that "Joe Louis is not constructed for thinking. He is designed for action unhampered by any mental process that does not spring from the instantaneous reaction of the motor centers of the animal mind."[210] Overall, these white journalists' reluctance to support Louis demonstrates the inherent limitations at play when Louis attempted to defeat a foreign foe. His race, and the negative stereotypes embedded within it in the eyes of many white journalists, prevented Louis from gaining the full support of the white boxing community.

The black press, on the other hand, exhibited no such ambiguity. They roundly rejected mainstream white attitudes that Louis was dim-witted, animalistic, and Schmeling's mental inferior. To the contrary, according to the *Defender's* Fay Young, Louis had grown mightily since the 1936 fight, as "the carefree boyish fighter of two years ago has blossomed into a serious thinking man."[211] Others noted how diligently Louis trained for the fight, watching film to develop a tactical strategy that would lead to victory.[212] This newfound wisdom and focus, according to many black sportswriters, signaled that Louis "will not be the overconfident 'kid' of the prize ring that he was two years ago."[213] Black journalists similarly changed their tune in hyping Louis heading into the fight. Gone were the overconfident predictions based on an assumption that Louis was invincible; in its place, they argued that Louis would win because of

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[209] "Bill Henry Says," *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 1938, A9.

[210] In Margolick, *Beyond Glory,* 261. See also Mead, *Champion,* 136-137.

[211] Fay Young, "The Stuff is Here," *Chicago Defender,* June 11, 1938, 8.

[212] See Chester L. Washington, "'Sez Ches,'" *Pittsburgh Courier,* May 7, 1938, 17; Edgar T. Rouzeau, "'Gunning for Knockout' - Louis," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 18, 1938, 1, 16; and Al Monroe, "'Louis Inside of 9 Round' Says Al Monroe," *Chicago Defender,* June 18, 1938, 1-2.

[213] Fay Young, "The Stuff is Here," *Chicago Defender,* April 16, 1938, 8.

his diligent preparation, hard work and "obsession to avenge a wrong."[214] These attitudes, moreover, reflect their longstanding effort to present Louis, and other prominent black athletes, as upstanding, diligent, hard-working men who symbolized upstanding black manhood. While some in the black community feared that Schmeling could beat Louis and take the title from him, most black journalists, having framed Louis's comeback as resulting from his dedication to redeem himself, felt that Louis would bring glory to the African American community by defeating his German foe. His victory, in turn, would validate many black journalists' efforts to promote the new-and-improved Louis as the embodiment of respectability and moral and physical fitness.

Triumph and Redemption: The Significance of Louis' Victory over Schmeling

As one of the most heavily anticipated boxing matches of the first half of the twentieth century, Louis wasted little time in silencing any doubts that he had not fully prepared for the fight. Louis walloped Schmeling in two minutes and four seconds – then the shortest heavyweight title fight in history.[215] The result, according to the *Courier's* William Nunn, astonished the "vast crowd [that] sat spell-bound and awe stricken, [as] an invincible Joe Louis wrote his name in blazing letters across the fistic heavens."[216] For Louis, the victory legitimized his claim as boxing's champion, a title he would hold uninterrupted for the next twelve years by defeating over twenty opponents.[217]

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[214] Chester L. Washington, "'Sez Ches," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 18, 1938, 16.

[215] Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation,* 145.

[216] William G. Nunn, "'Louis Had Knocked Schmeling Before Referee Stopped Bout' - Nunn," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 25, 1938, 1-2.

[217] The result, however, crushed Schmeling, who returned to Germany defeated and humiliated; Nazi officials, were similarly embarrassed by Schmeling's poor performance. Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation,* 145.

As Louis celebrated his victory, black and white journalists framed his victory from very different perspectives. Louis's victory did compel some white journalists to acknowledge that Louis was one of the greatest heavyweight fighters ever, regardless of race.[218] Defeating the German foe, for example, as historian William Wiggins notes, resulted in white cartoonists "radically refashion[ing] their drawings of Louis…[he] was presented less as Sambo, the racial clown, and more as the Brown Bomber, a true American hero."[219] The image of Louis as an American hero emerged in many white newspapers during this time. However, this analysis focused more on denouncing Schmeling, and by extension Nazi Germany, than in celebrating Louis for his dedication to his country despite the racial hardship he faced.[220] Thus, while these white journalists viewed Louis as an American hero for vanquishing a foreign enemy, they refused to acknowledge how the victory might reshape attitudes of African Americans as a result. Even as heavyweight champion, these white journalists continued to refuse to see Louis, and African Americans more broadly, as racial equals.

To compound matters, some white journalists continued to dehumanize Louis even as they praised him for beating Schmeling. In commending Louis's growth as a boxer, for example, Grantland Rice declared that, "the lamb had turned into a lion. The garter snake of two years ago was now a king cobra, fresh from the jungle."[221] These attitudes, thus, vividly illustrate the limitations of the white press' praise of Louis's accomplishments. The continued use of

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[218] Mead, *Champion,* 153-154.

[219] Wiggins, "Boxing's Sambo Twins," 253.

[220] See Mead, *Champion,* 156-159. Erenberg argues that some white journalists even framed the fight "as a battle against anti-Semitism everywhere" and thus a resounding victory for the affirmation of Jewish, rather than African American rights. Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation, 139.*

[221] "Grantland Rice," *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 2, 1938, 16. Syndicated columnist Hugh S. Johnson was even more explicit in perpetuating racially inferior stereotypes, arguing that "the average of white intelligence is above the average of black intelligence probably because the white race is several thousand years further away from jungle savagery." In Mead, *Champion,* 158.

dehumanizing terms in celebrating Louis's championship signaled that some white sportswriters would continue to highlight his racial inferiority and strip him of his manhood by comparing him to animals, even as he wore the championship belt.

Not all white journalists, however, expressed such attitudes. The *New York Daily Mirror's* Dan Parker, for example, wrestled with the dilemma of lauding Louis while denying him and African Americans more broadly their full civil rights. To Parker, Louis's victory, coupled with Owens's performance at the 1936 Olympic Summer Games compelled him to question some of the nation's racial policies.[222] While significant, these discussions were limited in scope and often overshadowed by the continued use of racial stereotypes to describe Louis's athletic ability; the persistence of this framing technique, thus, indicates how many whites remained reluctant to interpret the victory as a sign that race relations in the United States needed to change as a result. Furthermore, they suggest a reticence among progressive white journalists to fully acknowledge Louis's manhood and respectability.

African American journalists saw Louis's victory from an entirely different perspective. Strictly from an assessment of his boxing skills, black journalists such as Chester Washington argued that the victory confirmed that Louis was the "King of Kings of the fistic forests."[223] In the weeks after Louis's dominant performance, black sportswriters noted how many white journalists had changed their tune about his boxing abilities; many hoped that it would silence his critics once and for all.[224]

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[222] "Joe to Vindicate Himself in Two Years - Parker," *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 4, 1936, 15.

[223] Chester L. Washington, "Joe KO's Max," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 25, 1938, 1-2.

[224] See St. Clair Bourne, "In this Corner," *New York Amsterdam News,* July 2, 1938, A4. Indeed, Louis's performance had even compelled former champions Jack Dempsey and Jack Johnson – two of Louis's longstanding critics – to admit that Louis was one of the greatest heavyweight boxers of all time. See Jack Johnson, "'Wrong' - Johnson - 'Swell Fight' - Wills," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 25, 1938, 17; and Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation,* 161.

Black newspapers, furthermore, reveled in how Louis's dominance had embarrassed Hitler and his Nazi propaganda efforts. Louis's victory, according to the *Associated Negro Press'* William L. Patterson, "killed the idea of Nazi supremacy. All the horses of 'King' Hitler will never put it on its feet again." While this analysis echoed some white journalists' coverage, Patterson crucially added that Louis had "laid to rest the idea of the supremacy of any racial or national group over another." Louis's victory, thus, should serve as a watershed moment in race relations because "the defeat of the color line in boxing makes the struggle against it in politics, in economics, on the cultural field, in other spheres of the sporting world easier."[225] Patterson, thus, interpreted the global implications of Louis's victory as a repudiation of all nations that endorsed racially discriminatory policies, not just those found in Nazi Germany. Other black journalists similarly framed Louis's victory as symbolizing what African Americans were capable of achieving when given a fair opportunity to compete. The *Defender's* James J. Reid, for example, declared that, "every time Louis' glove has exploded on the chin of his opponent, he has likewise smashed into smithereens the false prophets of racial inequality."[226] These attitudes, therefore, illustrate black journalists' efforts to utilize Louis's rare achievement – winning a prestigious title long denied to blacks in a popular sport – as an indication that African Americans deserved greater rights and opportunities both within sports and in society more broadly.

Even as African American newspapers positioned Louis's victory as irrefutable proof of black capability, they continued to attribute his success in part to his respectability, and humble,

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[225] William L. Patterson, "'Joe Louis Killed Nazi Supremacy Theory,' Says William Patterson," *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 9, 1938, 4

[226] James M. Reid, "Reid Cites Qualities of Louis Which Have Inspired Race Youth," *Chicago Defender,* June 25, 1938, 7. See also Mary McLeod Bethune, "Joe Louis Answered the Challenge - Kept His Head High as Victor Should - Mrs. Bethune," *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 2, 1938, 12; and "Is Hitler's Face Red?" *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 2, 1938, 10.

upstanding nature. Reid, for example, stated that Louis's success as a boxer mattered primarily because he continually upheld five core characteristics: modesty, confidence, clean living, reverence, and balanced intelligence.[227] Emphasizing these qualities stood in stark contrast to the demeaning stereotypes some white journalists and boxing fans forced upon Louis. African American journalists, therefore, hoped that, having won the title in an honorable manner – one wholly opposite from how Jack Johnson embraced life as a champion – white fans' opinions of Louis would finally improve as a result. More importantly, as civil rights leader Mary McLeod Bethune stated, "Negroes [should] feel newly inspired to get to the top – somewhere – because Joe Louis fought backed by the courage, the grit, and the persistence that will get any of us to the top and keep us there."[228] Louis, moreover, according to Reid, had inspired African American children to follow his lead, instilling "a new pioneering spirit in the youth of today and these twentieth century pathfinders have vowed to open avenues that lead to full social, political and economic emancipation."[229] These comments, therefore, represent a culmination of the black press' years-long effort to celebrate Louis as a uniquely talented African American athlete and respectable gentleman. After defeating all opponents, his boxing skills were second to none. Yet it was his demeanor, black journalists insisted, that made Louis a special figure in the African American community who, when given the chance to succeed, had the potential to change how the white mainstream sports world viewed African American athletes.

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[227] Reid, "Reid Cites Qualities of Louis Which Have Inspired Race Youth," *Chicago Defender*.

[228] Bethune, "Joe Louis Answered the Challenge - Kept His Head High as Victor Should - Mrs. Bethune," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

[229] Reid, "Reid Cites Qualities of Louis Which Have Inspired Race Youth," *Chicago Defender*. See also Enoch P. Waters Jr., "Dustin' off the News," *Chicago Defender,* July 2, 1938, 16; "Is Hitler's Face Red?" *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 2, 1938, 10; and Chester L. Washington, "'Sez Ches," *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 2, 1938, 15.

Conclusion

Although Louis's victory over Schmeling marked one of the most triumphant moments in the history of African American sports, it represented only one major achievement in a longer career littered with many accomplishments. Within the context of Louis's lengthy championship career, the Schmeling bout took place during the early stages of Louis's decade-long reign as heavyweight champion. Similarly, his image in the public eye underwent a radical transformation during World War II when he enlisted in the Army in 1942 and performed a variety of duties to help increase support for the war effort throughout the conflict.[230] The image of Louis as a patriot that developed after the Schmeling fight in 1938, consequently, exploded into a full-fledged national phenomenon once he jumped headfirst into supporting the war effort.[231] Throughout this period, African American journalists continued to chronicle Louis's exploits. Some such as the *Chicago Defender's* Fay Young commended Louis because "no other athlete, in fact no other individual, has matched Louis' efforts" to contribute to the war.[232] Here, as seen throughout the black press' coverage from 1935 to 1938, the black press framed Louis as the embodiment of black male citizenship through his sacrifice to help his nation's cause.

Analyzing the development of Louis as a symbol of American patriotism, however, requires a thorough understanding of how his black advisors, and African American journalists first attempted to sell an image to a white audience of Louis as an upstanding gentleman in the

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[230] Louis's contributions included fighting numerous exhibition matches that served as fundraisers for the war effort; starring in promotional war films, and being called upon by President Franklin Roosevelt to make public appearances supporting the war effort to help assuage frustration within the African American community about the gross inequality they faced during the war. See Roberts, *Joe Louis,* 208-213; and Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation,* 184-193.

[231] For a deeper examination of Louis's contribution to the war effort, see Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, "Constructing G.I. Joe Louis"; and Marlon B. Ross, "An Anatomy of the Race Icon: Joe Louis as Fetish-Idol in Postmodern America," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 279-312.

[232] Fay Young, "Negro Athletes Giving Their All for Victory," *Chicago Defender,* September 26, 1942, 12.

years prior to World War II. This chapter's investigation of how African American journalists disseminated a notion of Louis as a cunning athlete in the ring and an upstanding, respectable gentleman outside of it served as a central component of the black press' broader initiative to remake notions of black manhood for African American athletes. The shadow cast by Jack Johnson, whose behavior horrified white boxing fans and led to the unofficial segregation of the heavyweight title for over twenty years, forced Louis, his advisors, and black journalists to work within a restrictive environment to develop both Louis's boxing skills and how they hoped white audiences would receive him. Consequently, throughout the early stages of his career, African American newspapers stressed that Louis's embodiment of key characteristics – modesty, humility, gentlemanly behavior, clean living, and measured confidence – would signal to a white audience that, unlike Johnson, Louis was the model for a new respectable black man. Emphasizing these qualities suggests that African American journalists believed that, in order to succeed in the white mainstream sports world, black athletes like Louis needed to act in a manner that would appease whites still uncomfortable with the notion of black athletes outperforming, and occasionally humiliating white competitors. The fact that Louis's managers explicitly stated that Louis would not act like Johnson – whose freewheeling defiance of social and sexual mores and the traditional racial hierarchy evoked a form of black self-expression and autonomy never before seen in sports – indicates that they knew that Louis had to play by a certain set of rules, unofficially established and enforced by whites, in order to compete at the sport's highest level. The enforcement of these unofficial guidelines, however, was administered entirely by African Americans, particularly black journalists who scrutinized Louis's actions both in and out of the ring. The disparity between how white and black journalists framed

Louis's accomplishments, moreover, reveals the dissonance between white and black views of black athletic capability as well.

This dissonance developed among black journalists as well as they struggled to come to terms with Louis's shocking loss to Schmeling in 1936. In selling Louis as the symbol of black manhood, respectability, and physical fitness, African American journalist had to emphasize Louis's in-ring superiority in order to convince whites to give him greater opportunities in boxing's heavyweight division. Making Louis's ability to dominate seemingly every opponent he faced, however, led many black journalists to overlook Schmeling's chances heading into the 1936 fight. African American sportswriters, consequently, fell victim to believing the myth of Louis's in-ring invincibility that they had constructed. The shock and confusion some black journalists expressed when Louis lost – particularly the dissemination of wild, unfounded rumors that Louis had been doped, forced to throw the match, or weakened by his wife's "feminine influence" to excuse Louis's poor performance – reflect the struggles black journalists encountered in making Louis's in-ring dominance a central element of his image as an upstanding black man.

Ultimately, while the loss certainly damaged Louis's reputation in the short-term, black journalists, in keeping with their broader mission, refashioned it as a necessary step to help mold Louis into a smarter, more dedicated boxer. This new and improved Louis, they argued, would conquer the sport without displaying an overconfident demeanor that had been his downfall in 1936. Within this narrative, Louis's victory over Braddock for the heavyweight title represented a logical step in his march toward the top of the sport. But, according to black journalists, it was not until Louis defeated Schmeling in 1938 to avenge his earlier loss that he had vaulted himself into the rarified air of an all-time boxing great. The shifting political climate between the two

fights, meanwhile, led many white journalists to support and praise Louis for vanquishing a symbol of Nazi oppression. Despite this shift, most white journalists still considered Louis and African Americans more broadly to be inferior to whites. To black journalists, however, the victory signaled that the time had come for racial inequality to end in sports. Ultimately, the Louis-Schmeling bouts reveal how African American journalists wrestled with the central issue of developing an image of a black boxing prodigy, who through victory, would allow for the dissemination of a new, more positive symbol of black manhood and masculinity.

Chapter 2

Running Off Track: The Black Press' Criticism of Jesse Owens's Political Activism & the Challenges of Black Athletic Celebrity

Introduction

The dissemination of a new, upstanding, and respectable black male athlete archetype emphasized how athletes like Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, and others were winners; they dominated their white competitors on the field of play, and they exhibited upstanding behavior off the field that served to distance themselves from the legacy of Jack Johnson. Embodying these winning characteristics, thus, symbolized black moral and physical fitness. Like Louis, Owens had little trouble showcasing his winning ways on the track. After winning an unprecedented four gold medals – in the 100-meter dash, 200-meter dash, long jump, and 4x100-meter relay – at the 1936 Summer Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany, Owens became an international fan favorite and a source of immense racial pride for African American journalists. Running, as the *Pittsburgh Courier's* Robert L. Vann noted, "with the effortless speed of an antelope," Owens was equally gracious and humble when he received his medals and praise and adoration from German sports fans.[233] Owens's performance, consequently, demonstrated to a captivated international audience that black athletes could compete, and utterly dominate, the best athletes from across the globe when given an opportunity to participate on a level playing field.[234]

Although Owens enjoyed the laudatory coverage he received from black and white journalists in the weeks following the Olympics, it did little to assuage his concerns over transitioning from the track to finding work that would support his family. Owens's athletic

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[233] Robert L. Vann, "Hitler Salutes Jesse Owens," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 8, 1936, 1.

[234] African Americans were a central component of the 1936 Summer American Olympic squad. Owens and nine other African American athletes won a medal. In total, African American Olympians won 14 medals – eight gold, four silver, and two bronze – of the 56 total medals the U.S. Olympic team won.

skills and charming demeanor demonstrated his marketability to massive audience, which he hoped would result in a lucrative payday. Yet he labored to financially capitalize off of his newfound fame in the weeks and months following the Olympic Games. Consequently, in the months following his Olympic triumph, Owens's struggles to convert his athletic achievements into monetary gains highlight the difficulty African American athletes – particularly amateur athletes – experienced in achieving economic independence in a manner that satisfied black journalists' definition of respectability.

The financial obstacles Owens struggled to surmount stemmed from his status as an amateur athlete. Indeed, unlike Louis and other African American athletes competing in professional boxing and baseball, Owens's amateur status restricted his ability to make money directly from his athletic accomplishments. Furthermore, Owens's immediate post-Olympic confrontation with American Olympic Committee (AOC) President Avery Brundage and American Athletic Union (AAU) officials regarding his desire to profit off of his athleticism led to his subsequent suspension from amateur athletics. The suspension, which further curtailed Owens's ability to cash in on his fame, forced him to pursue a number of questionable and ultimately illusory endorsement opportunities as a result.

Initially, African American journalists defended Owens's efforts, arguing that he had a responsibility as an upstanding black man to provide for his family. Owens, in other words, best exhibited his manhood and respectability by serving as his family's primary breadwinner. While the black press supported Owens's broad objective to financially support his family, *how* he attempted to fulfill his obligation as the male breadwinner conflicted with black journalists' expectations for what they deemed appropriate behavior for black athletes. This shift in attitudes toward Owens occurred when he endorsed Republican Presidential candidate Alfred "Alf"

Landon in the months leading up to the 1936 election. For many African American journalists, stumping for Landon signaled that Owens had become unnecessarily entangled in a controversial political issue, which undermined the black press' contention that black athletes best exhibited their respectability by avoiding controversy and provoking white authority. Moreover, they contended that Owens sacrificed his dignity and upstanding reputation as an exemplar of black manhood – which they believed he had an obligation to protect – in exchange for Landon's money.

Their frustration with Owens's support of the Republican Party's nominee also reflected a broader shift within black politics during that time. African Americans had overwhelmingly supported the Party of Lincoln since the Civil War; incumbent Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal initiatives during his first term as president, which brought relief and opportunity to many African Americans, however, compelled some to reconsider their political allegiance. Although many blacks remained wary of the continued presence of racist white southerners within the Democratic Party's ranks, they ultimately believed that Roosevelt offered African Americans a better path to prosperity and racial equality than the GOP, which many blacks felt had taken its African American constituency for granted.[235]

The shift in the black press' treatment of Owens following his endorsement of Landon highlights the difficulty black athletes faced in upholding the key characteristics black journalists sought in a new generation of respectable black male athletes. Thus, whereas in August 1936, African American journalists described Owens as an iconic athlete whose ability to overcome racial discrimination in sports with dignity and honor demonstrated his physical and moral fitness, after stumping for Landon in the September and October of 1936, they argued that how

[235] See Leah Wright Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican: Pragmatic Politics and the Pursuit of Power,* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), 13-14.

Owens attempted to cash in on his fame should serve as a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of black athletic celebrity. Furthermore, the conflict between Owens and African American journalists over how he should achieve his athletic dreams and gain economic independence represents how the black press burdened African American male athletes with the expectation that they act in ways that often conflicted with their personal needs and ambitions. As an athlete who had demonstrated his moral and physical fitness through his on-field dominance, African American journalists expected Owens to utilize his fame to assist in the broader struggle for racial justice. Black journalists, in other words, believed Owens would best exemplify new notions of manhood and respectability by sacrificing his personal goals to help pursue the greater communal goal of fighting racial discrimination. However, while this issue was most acute when black journalists criticized Owens's decision to stump for Landon, their expectations for Owens had conflicted with his personal needs throughout his career *prior to* the Olympic Games as well.

Investigating Owens's struggles in the aftermath of his Olympic triumph to uphold his role as an upstanding breadwinner, furthermore, complicates our historical understanding of Owens's legacy in African American sports history. Frequently, scholars such as Jeremy Schaap have framed Owens's life around his Olympic performance.[236] Popular memory of Owens's legacy echoes Schaap's analysis; his victories in Berlin are repeatedly highlighted by the media during each Summer Olympic Games as an example of the how the event grants individuals like Owens opportunities to overcome hardship and attain athletic glory.[237] This narrative, however, fails to acknowledge the obstacles Owens faced once the Games concluded. His inability to

[236] Schaap concludes his analysis of Owens's struggles to overcome poverty and racial discrimination when Owens wins the last of four gold medals in Berlin. Schaap's approach, however, neglects to investigate how Owens's Olympic performance was immediately followed by tremendous financial hardship and a marked change in how African American journalists viewed the track star. Schaap, *Triumph*.

[237] The recent film *Race* similarly focuses solely on Owens's performance in Berlin, overlooking the hardship Owens faced after the Games concluded.

convert his fame into fortune and provide for his family was shaped by white business executives' racially discriminatory attitudes toward black athletes like Owens.[238]

Owens's financial struggles immediately after the 1936 Olympics, and his alliance with Landon in particular, has received scant attention from scholars. Schaap and historian Donald McRae's examinations of Owens's achievements at the 1936 Summer Olympic Games overlook how Owens's endorsement of Landon affected the black public's perception of the track star.[239] William Baker's biography, *Jesse Owens: An American Life,* meanwhile, provides the most thorough investigation of Owens's entire career. Baker pays particular attention to how Owens's actions immediately after returning from Berlin sparked the economic difficulties that plagued him for much of the rest of his life. Yet while Baker notes that Owens stumped for Landon, he situates it as part of a broader series of Owens's post-Olympic missteps.[240] This chapter's analysis, thus, complicates our historical understanding of the difficulties Owens encountered in attempting to embody the characteristics the black press sought in a new generation of upstanding, respectable black male athletes.

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[238] Pamela Laucella's recent examination of black and white press coverage of Owens during the Olympic Games, meanwhile, highlights the discrepancy between how white and black journalists framed their coverage of Owens's achievements. Laucella's work succeeds in exposing how, "despite his commendations for Owens's pursuits and character," white journalists like Grantland Rice "exhibited racially marked language, remarks, references, and stereotypes." Yet by focusing solely on coverage during the Olympics, she fails to address how tensions between black journalists and Owens following the Olympics illustrated broader challenges over notions of black manhood. Pamela Laucella, "Jesse Owens, a Black Pearl Amidst an Ocean of Fury: A Case Study of Press Coverage of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games," in *From Jack Johnson to LeBron James: Sports, Media, and the Color Line,* ed. Chris Lamb, (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 74.

[239] McRae frames Owens's inability to capitalize off of his Olympic fame as indicative of the intense racial discrimination that existed throughout the era. McRae analyzes Owens's plight alongside Joe Louis's, arguing that the two black sports heroes experienced similar paths of athletic success, only to struggle to attain financial security outside the field of play. Their plight, according to McRae, illustrates white America's refusal to fully accept African American athletes into mainstream society. Intertwining Owens's struggles with Louis's, however, diminishes a detailed examination of how many African American newspapers struggled to accept Owens's post-Olympic career choices. McRae, *Heroes Without a Country*.

[240] See Baker, *Jesse Owens.*

Early Career Exploits & Heightened Expectations

Owens's drive to provide for his family and make ends meet was shaped by a life of poverty and repression. Owens, like his fellow athletic peer Joe Louis, was raised in a family fighting to survive financially and avoid the constant threat of racial violence in rural Oakville, Alabama. Owens's family fled the South as part of a decades-long Great Migration in search of better economic opportunities available in the urban North, Midwest, and the West. After relocating to Cleveland, Ohio, his family continued to struggle to make ends meet. The constant poverty weighed heavily on Owens during his childhood. As Baker states, it "made Owens keenly sensitive to material symbols of adult success," and shaped his efforts to cash in on his athleticism throughout his adult life.[241]

From an early age, Owens understood that athletic performance could be a route to achieving economic stability. His ability caught the attention of many white track and field coaches, most importantly Charles Riley. Under Riley's tutelage, Owens dominated his high school competitors, winning a number of national competitions and nearly qualifying for the 1932 United States Olympic Team.[242] This success, in turn, piqued the interest of a number of college track and field coaches, none more so than Ohio State University's (OSU) Larry Snyder, who heavily recruited Owens to attend the school.

Owens's interest in attending OSU, however, sparked the first conflict between many black journalists and Owens over balancing his personal wishes against the black press' desire to frame him as a respectable gentleman. While Owens wanted to attend OSU because he believed Coach Snyder gave him the best opportunity to sharpen his skills and qualify for the 1936 Olympic Team, many African American journalists urged Owens to spend his college years

[241] Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 9.

[242] Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 24-32.

elsewhere. The school's long, checkered history of tolerating and at times institutionalizing racially discriminatory policies on campus, according to the *Chicago Defender,* vividly demonstrated that Owens needed to attend another university. The newspaper added that this attitude was not based on decades-old incidents; the school's recent refusal to allow an African American student to live in the girls dormitory because of her skin color exposed OSU's disinterest in changing its long-standing, racially-prejudiced attitudes.[243] Given the school's track record, the *Defender* pleaded with Owens to attend another school, stating that, as an immensely talented athlete who had "conferred honor and distinction upon your Race," Owens needed to wield his power and influence to chastise OSU for its behavior.

African American journalists' concerns over Owens attending OSU illustrated how they prioritized the symbolism it would represent for other black athletes ahead of Owens's personal desire to attend the school. By spurning OSU, the *Defender* surmised, Owens's actions would signal that talented African Americans would not tolerate such behavior. Attending OSU, the editorial added, would "have sanctioned hate, prejudice and proscription."[244] The newspaper also challenged Owens to do what was best for the broader black community, arguing that, "in the age in which you are living a militant spirit against prejudice in all of its forms must be shown by men who believe that the minorities are worthy of consideration and respect of the majorities."[245] The *Defender,* consequently, expected Owens to use his growing celebrity status as a means to force individuals and institutions to eradicate their racially discriminatory policies as part of a broader effort to fight racial inequality.

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[243] "A Message to Jesse Owens," *The Chicago Defender,* June 24, 1933, 14; and "What College, Jesse? Hope It Isn't Ohio - Remember What They Did to a Young Girl of Your Race?" *The Chicago Defender,* June 24, 1933, 9.

[244] "A Message to Jesse Owens," *The Chicago Defender*.

[245] "A Message to Jesse Owens," *The Chicago Defender*.

These expectations also suggest that African American journalists understood well before the Berlin Olympic Games that Owens's immense athletic talent could transcend the racial limitations black athletes faced. Throughout Owens's pre-Olympic career, black journalists lauded his sterling performance on the track and his demeanor off of it. After meeting Owens, the *New York Amsterdam News'* Romeo L. Dougherty, for example, "found him graceful, cultured and modest; his remarkable achievements seemingly not to have affected him in the least displaying thereby a very rare quality."[246] In highlighting his positive, upstanding, and gentlemanly characteristics, the black press implicitly situated Owens against the negative stereotypes many whites had toward black athletes that developed in response to Jack Johnson's boxing career in the 1900s and 1910s. Indeed, Dougherty noted how Owens's athletic journey "has been a road made doubly hard by the obstacles which he has been forced to surmount in reaching the place he occupies."[247] The obstacles Dougherty referred to may have predominantly concerned the racially discriminatory culture of sports, particularly track and field, at that time; yet the shadow cast by Johnson certainly affected both how Owens acted, and how black sportswriters like Dougherty framed his performances as well. Like Louis, Owens's burgeoning career at OSU signaled to black journalists that he had a rare opportunity to transcend the racially discriminatory attitudes prevalent in major professional and amateur sports institutions and garner widespread attention and admiration from whites sports fans and officials. Rarely had black athletes drawn such positive recognition from powerful white sports officials. With such an opportunity, however, black journalists argued that Owens needed to wield this power in a manner that would benefit the broader black community. Many black journalists ultimately viewed Owens's value as a symbol of black achievement as more valuable than the personal

[246] Romeo L. Dougherty, "Sports Whirl," *New York Amsterdam News,* July 13, 1935, 14.

[247] Romeo L. Dougherty, "Sports Whirl," *New York Amsterdam News,* June 8, 1935, 14.

victories he earned. The black press' desire that Owens not attend OSU, consequently, reveals the burdens placed on Owens by African American journalists during the early stages of his career that often prioritized his value as a symbol of black manhood and respectability ahead of his personal desires.

African American journalists ultimately failed to persuade Owens not to attend OSU, and Owens took the track and field world by storm, setting three world records – and tying a fourth – at the Big Ten Track and Field Championships in 1935. Black journalists subsequently redoubled their efforts to promote Owens's stellar collegiate performances; they focused in particular on the budding rivalries that developed between Owens and fellow African American track stars Eddie Metcalfe, Cornelius Johnson, and Eulace Peacock.[248] As these black athletes squared off at AAU meets in the years preceding the Olympics, African American journalists celebrated how "not one, but four unbeatable Negro boys seized the spotlight…and romped away with the most spectacular victories" against integrated competition.[249] These dominant performances, black journalists hoped, would lead to a dramatic increase in the number of African Americans on the 1936 Olympic squad.[250]

The anticipation for Owens and black Olympians reached a fever pitch nearly an entire year before the Games began. As George Lattimore, a former black AAU track star, declared in a letter published in the *Amsterdam News,* "sport writers have completely exhausted themselves in

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[248] In addition to covering Owens, black sportswriters frequently discussed the exploits of these other black track and field athletes, indicating that Owens was part of a growing wave of talented African American athletes finally getting a chance to compete in major competitions. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, moreover, pitted Metcalfe against Owens in part to build tension between the two prior to major track meets in the hopes of increasing awareness among African American readers of the competition. "Does Metcalfe Fear Jesse Owens?" *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 8, 1935, 18.

[249] "Eulace Peacock Defeats Jesse Owens Twice," *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 13, 1935, 14.

[250] Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 32. Journalists were encouraged by the four black Olympians who competed at the 1932 Games in Los Angeles, believing that it signaled that black athletes were finally welcome to represent the United States in the Olympics.

trying to find superlatives and glorifying adjectives for Jesse Owens, undoubtedly the greatest all-around athlete of the day."[251] Consequently, African American journalists, impressed by Owens's performances at OSU, did not want him and other black Olympic hopefuls to simply compete at the Games; they expected them to utterly dominate the world's finest athletes. Such an impressive performance, according to the *Amsterdam News*, would vividly demonstrate to an international audience that African Americans were fully capable of competing against, and outperforming all competitors.[252]

The Olympic Boycott Movement and the Burden of Owens's Athleticism

As black sportswriters optimistically projected Owens's potential Olympic performances, an emerging call to boycott the Games in protest of Adolf Hitler's racially discriminatory policies exposed ideological divisions among black journalists over how to use the Games to increase support in eradicating racial discrimination against African Americans. In particular, African American journalists disagreed over how Owens and his black teammates could help achieve this goal. The division stemmed over whether or not Owens would affect the most change by either boycotting or participating in the Games. For both camps, Owens's symbolic value as an upstanding black man and citizen was prioritized ahead of his desire to attain athletic glory against the world's best competition and utilize those triumphs to support his family.

Concerns over the political implications of the Games emerged shortly after Hitler rose to power in Germany. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) awarded Germany the opportunity to host the 1936 Summer and Winter Olympic Games in Berlin and Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, respectively, in May 1931, prior to Hitler's Nazi regime replacing the

[251] Romeo L. Dougherty, "Sports Whirl," *New York Amsterdam News,* July 13, 1935, 14.

[252] "Owens Greatest in All the World," *New York Amsterdam News,* June 1, 1935, 13.

democratic Weimar Republic.[253] Once Hitler took power, however, many international sports officials worried that his racial persecution of Jews, "trampled upon the fundamental Olympic principles of fairness and equality," and threatened to damage the reputation of the Games.[254] These concerns emerged beginning in 1933, and by 1935, many Americans urged the AOC, and its powerful leader Avery Brundage, to challenge Hitler's racists policies by threatening to boycott the Games.[255] Doing so, according to these activists, would embarrass and humiliate Hitler in front of an international audience. Simply threatening to boycott, therefore, would compel Hitler to change his policies in order to avoid this political fiasco.

Initially, many African American journalists' attitudes regarding the growing boycott movement concerned how the campaign's call for Nazi officials to eliminate their anti-Semitic laws and policies overlooked how people of African descent suffered similar forms of racial degradation under Nazi rule. Both groups of people, they argued, endured legal and social discrimination in Nazi Germany, and were violently persecuted for allegedly sullying the superior Aryan race.[256] These policies, as scholar David K. Wiggins notes, concerned many black journalists and civil rights officials, who worried that African American athletes would be similarly persecuted while competing in Berlin. Consequently, African American newspapers, along with NAACP officials sought "assurances that black athletes would be treated fairly during

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[253] Caroline M. Solomon, "Avery Brundage and the 1936 Olympic Games," (M.A. Thesis, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, 1995), 8.

[254] Stephen R. Wenn, "A House Divided: The U.S. Amateur Sports Establishment and the Issue of Participation in the 1936 Berlin Olympics," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 67, no. 2 (June 1996), 161.

[255] The AOC's actions, according to historian Carolyn Marvin, were particularly significant because many other nation's Olympic officials implicitly followed the actions of the most powerful and influential nation. Once the AOC decided to compete at the Games, all other nations that previously entertained the notion of boycotting, followed suit and competed. Carolyn Marvin, "Avery Brundage and American Participation in the 1936 Olympic Games," *Journal of American Studies* 16, no. 1 (April, 1982), 81-82.

[256] Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 64-65.

their brief stay in Germany" should they participate.[257] The growing boycott campaign forced Brundage and several AOC leaders to visit Germany in 1934, where they determined that, as Wiggins notes, Germany's "sports programs were in compliance with the spirit of Olympianism."[258] Black journalists, however, believed that Brundage's assessment focused solely on showing support for German Jews and declared that it indicated that the AOC and German sports officials had little interest in protecting the rights of people of African descent.[259] The *Amsterdam News,* among other black newspapers, urged readers to join the campaign to boycott the Games on the grounds of Hitler's anti-Jewish *and* anti-black policies.[260]

Brundage's declaration that the U.S. would participate in the Games refused to extinguish the issue. Debates over boycotting reignited in the summer of 1935 after Germany passed the Nuremberg Race Relations Laws, which institutionalized many anti-Semitic policies. Many African American journalists, however, condemned American boycott supporters, calling them hypocrites for expressing their concern over the fair treatment of German Jews while refusing to acknowledge or address the racial violence and discrimination that plagued African Americans across the United States. Columbia University track star Ben Johnson, for example, declared that, "the Negro in the South is discriminated against" through Jim Crow laws, "as much as the Jews in Germany" through the Nuremberg Race Relations Laws. Johnson added that, "it is futile and hypercritical that Judge Mahoney, president of the A.A.U. should atempt [sic] to clean up

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[257] David K. Wiggins, "The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin: The Response of America's Black Press," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 54, no. 3 (1983), 279.

[258] Wiggins, "The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin," 279.

[259] Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 64-65.

[260] Artie La Mar, "Our Negro Athletes," *New York Amsterdam News,* August 31, 1935, 12; and "Muss Him Up," *New York Amsterdam News,* August 31, 1935, 10.

conditions in Germany" by boycotting "before cleaning up similar conditions in America."[261] Although this comparison would be untenable and inappropriate after 1941 when the Holocaust was in full effect, Johnson's argument that both groups were discriminated against on a fairly equal basis in 1935 was plausible.

The *Pittsburgh Courier,* moreover, argued that the growing outrage among white politicians and officials over Nazis denying German Jews opportunities on the German Olympic team starkly overlooked how American sporting institutions like Major League Baseball, and most major college football programs remained lily-white. The newspaper added that, "there isn't an upright Negro in Mississippi who wouldn't swap places with a Berlin Jew and pay him a bonus. There isn't a Jew in Germany who, having agreed to come to Mississippi and live as a Negro, could be compelled to keep the bargain."[262] Like Johnson's statement, the *Courier's* argument would no longer hold true after 1941. In 1935, however, it highlighted how the challenges African Americans faced in the Jim Crow South warranted as much concern from white Americans as German Jews affected by the Nuremberg Race Relations Law. The *Amsterdam News'* Romero Daugherty, meanwhile, contended that, if the Olympics had been staged in Georgia, it would have exposed America's glaring mistreatment of African Americans to an international audience. In such a scenario, he argued,

> America would not only show how inconsistent she could be when it comes to something of this kind, but America would come dangerously near insulting the black millions among her population, for it is dollars to doughnuts that foreign Negroes would be allowed to compete right down there in Georgia and native Negroes given the cold shoulder.[263]

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[261] "Johnson, Columbia University Track Star, Speaks Against Discrimination," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 25, 1935, 12.

[262] "Gubernatorial Campaign Discloses That Jews in Germany Have Nothing on Negros in Mississippi," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 31, 1935, A5.

[263] Romeo L. Dougherty, "Sports Whirl," *New York Amsterdam News,* December 14, 1935, 12.

Consequently, as an August 1936 *Courier* editorial declared, former IOC member Ernest Lee Jahncke's efforts to protest the Games, while commendable, exposed how he and other white sports officials ignored how "America was doing the same thing to Negroes that Hitler was doing to the Jews and had been doing it longer."[264]

Black journalists also utilized the boycott movement to pressure white American officials to publicly clarify their views on race and racial prejudice in America and anti-black racism in Germany as well.[265] Arnold Shaw, a former AAU track athlete, for example, challenged the AAU to explain its "inconsistent" attitudes about race, arguing that AAU "members almost voted not to participate in the Olympic Games in Berlin because of the Nazi attitude toward the Jews. There are more than three times as many Negro Americans as there are Jewish Americans and Negroes contribute to America's Olympic chances more than Jews, but no howl has been raised about the Nazi attitude toward Negroes."[266] Shaw's argument, thus, suggests that concerns over showing solidarity with Jewish Americans' support of German Jews compelled the AAU to nearly boycott the Olympics. Yet the AAU showed little desire to support African Americans' calls to fight racial injustice – either at home or in Germany. Thus, the AAU's position on the boycott revealed its broader indifference to African Americans' concerns over gaining racial equality. In attacking the AAU and other boycott supporters' inconsistent views on African Americans and racial inequality in sports – as either a show of support or in deference to Jewish Americans – black newspapers focused specifically on the Olympic Games' charter statement, which avowed to promote and protect notions of fair play and sportsmanship for all athletes across the globe. If white sports officials sought to protect those principles for German Jews,

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[264] "The Strange Case of Mr. Jahncke," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 8, 1936, 12."

[265] Arnold Shaw, "This Week's Guest Editor Says," *New York Amsterdam News,* December 14, 1935, 7.

[266] Shaw, "This Week's Guest Editor Says," *New York Amsterdam News*.

African American journalists wondered, why were they unable to publicly express similar support for African American athletes? Similar to rhetoric used in the early 1940s during World War II, black journalists pitted America's democratic ideals against the Nazi ideology as a means to highlight how American politicians had repeatedly failed to uphold those values for African Americans.[267]

These attitudes, and the mounting campaign initiated in black newspapers, put AOC officials like Brundage in a dilemma. As pressure mounted for Brundage to respond to black journalists' criticisms, he attempted to circumvent the issue by reframing the Games as being solely about athletic competition. Throughout his career as AOC President in the 1930s and 1940s, and as IOC President from 1952 to 1972, Brundage, according to historian Alfred E. Senn, repeatedly refused to let larger political issues disrupt his efforts to carry out Olympic competitions.[268] Central to Brundage's ideology, according to scholar Allen Guttmann, was his belief that sports and politics did not mix. Above all, Brundage fought to preserve the sanctity of the Olympic Games, and refused to let political controversies diminish the Games' central mission. Consequently, as head of the AOC in the 1930s, he argued that the organization "must not be involved in political, racial, religious or sociological controversies." The campaigns to boycott the Games based on Germany's persecution of Jews, or America's hypocritical attitudes toward African American civil rights, in Brundage's opinion, were little more than attempts to

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[267] See "Hitlerism and the Negro," *New York Amsterdam News,* August 24, 1935, 10; Romeo L. Dougherty, "Sports Whirl," *New York Amsterdam News,* December 14, 1935, 12; Shaw, "This Week's Guest Editor Says," *New York Amsterdam News*; "Hitler vs. 'Amos and Andy,'" *New York Amsterdam News,* September 7, 1935, 10; and Insider, "U.S. Defends Jews in the Olympic; How About Race?" *Chicago Defender,* November 25, 1933, 8.

[268] In addition to the boycott campaign in 1936, Brundage also refused to postpone or cancel the 1972 Summer Games in Munich following the murder of eleven Israeli athletes in the Olympic Village. Alfred E. Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games: A History of the Power Brokers, Events, and Controversies that Shaped the Games,* (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics, 1999), 66-68.

use the Olympics as a political weapon to further each group's political goals.[269] As historian Richard D. Mandell notes, Brundage also contended that those calling for a boycott "were placing in peril an institution that was far more important than their petty egos."[270] Thus, preserving the Games for future generations, in Brundage's opinion, was of critical significance. Consequently, reframing the issue as one where politics and sports needed to remain separate allowed Brundage to ignore the boycott movement. After gaining assurances from German sports officials that the host nation would treat its visitors and citizens properly, Brundage declared in 1935 that the United States would participate in the Games.[271]

Although Brundage defused widespread calls for the United States to skip the Games, African Americans remained divided over how black athletes like Owens could assist in using the Olympics as a venue to fight for racial equality. Some argued that black athletes like Owens had a responsibility to boycott the Games, arguing that their sacrifice would symbolize the racial injustice all African Americans faced. The *Amsterdam News,* for example, urged potential African American Olympians like Owens to boycott the competition in defiance of Brundage's decision. They argued that Brundage's belief that sports and politics needed to remain separate was antithetical to the black press' notion that sports could be used to enact grater social,

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[269] Allen Guttmann, *The Games Must Go On: Avery Brundage and the Olympic Movement,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 71.

[270] Richard D. Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics,* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 82.

[271] Guttmann, *The Games Must Go On,* 71-75. As Marvin notes, Brundage defeated the calls for a boycott after a controversial vote at the 1935 AAU convention where Brundage, along with his allies, ensured that AAU members seeking to boycott the Games would not have the necessary votes needed to defeat his campaign. Marvin, "Avery Brundage and American Participation in the 1936 Olympic Games," 94.

political, and racial change.[272] In a front-page letter to Owens, Peacock, Metcalfe, Johnson, and other black Olympic hopefuls, the newspaper urged the athletes,

> As members of a minority group whose persecution the Nazis have encouraged, as citizens of a country in which all liberty has not yet been destroyed, as leaders in a field which encourages the removal of all barriers of race, creed and color, you cannot afford to give moral and financial support to a philosophy which seeks the ultimate destruction of all you have fought for.[273]

The newspaper implored Owens and his potential black Olympic teammates "to demonstrate a courage which, so far, has been lacking in the guiding spirits of the American Olympic Committee. We beg you to display that spirit of self-sacrifice which is the true mark of greatness."[274] The newspaper's pleas exemplify its belief that black athletes had an obligation to protest Hitler's racist ways even if powerful AAU and AOC officials refused to do the same.

The *Amsterdam News* also criticized African Americans who believed that black athletes would do more by competing in the Games than if they boycotted. The newspaper deemed this strategy a "naïve solution" that failed to properly weigh the ramifications of competing in the Games against the potential political and economic fallout for Germany if athletes boycotted. The "sloppy and superficial reasoning" of the plan, they added, threatened to destroy any momentum built by the AOC, AAU, and others to protest the Games. More significantly, the

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[272] This philosophy extended beyond imploring athletes like Owens and Louis when they faced international competition. African American journalists similarly demanded that black football players at northern, midwestern, and western colleges challenge their school's acquiescence to all-white southern football program's demands that black players sit during intersectional contests. Tensions between black journalists and Negro League baseball officials, meanwhile, revolved around black journalists' concerns that some black baseball leaders might obstruct efforts to integrate Major League Baseball out of concern with how that process would affect the financial viability of the Negro Leagues. Thus, as will be discussed throughout this dissertation, black newspapers framed their coverage of significant moments in black sports as having deeply political, social, and racial ramifications. Many black sportswriters adopted an attitude best epitomized by *Afro-American* sportswriter Sam Lacy, who declared that, "once I was in the writing business, fighting against racial discrimination through my sports pages and columns came naturally. There wouldn't be any of that nonsense about keeping politics out of sports." Sam Lacy with Moses J. Newton, *Fighting for Fairness: The Life Story of Hall of Fame Sportswriter Sam Lacy* (Centreville, Maryland: Tidewater, 1998), 6.

[273] "The 1936 Olympic Games: An Open Letter," *New York Amsterdam News,* August 24, 1935, 1.

[274] "The 1936 Olympic Games: An Open Letter," *New York Amsterdam News*.

Amsterdam News argued that it also implicitly ensured the maintenance of the status quo with regards to black athletes' rights. Focusing less on boycotting simply as a means to protect the rights of Jews, Catholics, and African Americans, the newspaper framed the battle as a "fight of all liberty-loving people who are opposed to a reversion to barbarism under the medieval direction of a perverted group of madmen."[275] Consequently, the newspaper's attitudes suggest that Owens would best demonstrate his manhood and citizenship by boycotting the Games.

Owens received a similar appeal from Walter White, Secretary of the NAACP, who in December 1935 urged Owens to take advantage of the tremendous opportunity available to him as a well-known black athlete "to strike a blow at racial bigotry and to make other minority groups conscious of the sameness of their problems with ours and puts them under the moral obligation to think more clearly and to fight more vigorously against the wrongs from which we Negroes suffer."[276] White, therefore, suggests that by sacrificing his chance at Olympic glory, Owens would compel other groups to show solidarity for African Americans' civil rights. Ignoring this plea and continuing to seek personal Olympic glory, White argued, "would alienate many high-minded people who are awakening to the dangers of intolerance wherever it raises its head."[277] In no uncertain terms, White's letter challenged Owens to sacrifice his chance at Olympic glory or risk being viewed by many African Americans as a selfish hypocrite who cared little about furthering efforts to eradicate racial discrimination in the United States. These

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[275] "Hitler vs. 'Amos and Andy,'" *New York Amsterdam News*. Nearly nine months later in May, 1936, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., in an *Amsterdam News* Op-Ed piece, framed black athletes' decision to attend the Games along similar lines, arguing that Owens and other had "sold out! You threw away a chance to take first place in the world's greatest race – barbarism vs. Civilization." A. Clayton Powell Jr., "The Soapbox," *New York Amsterdam News,* May 2, 1936, 12.

[276] Letter from Walter White to Jesse Owens, December 4, 1935, in *The Unlevel Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport,* ed. David K. Wiggins and Patrick B. Miller, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 164.

[277] Letter from Walter White to Jesse Owens, December 4, 1935, 165.

attitudes, consequently, reveal a broader philosophy held by some black journalists that star athletes like Owens had a responsibility as a symbol of black manhood and respectability to use their fame to challenge the obstacles all African Americans faced, even if it conflicted with their personal desire to achieve athletic glory.

Other African American journalists argued that, rather than forego their chance at Olympic glory, black athletes like Owens would do more damage to Hitler's Nazi regime by outperforming Aryan athletes on the field of play. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, in particular, in an editorial published a week after the *Amsterdam News'* letter to black athletes, characterized the call to boycott the Games as "unwise counsel." The *Courier,* instead, endorsed the notion that *all* American athletes should boycott. Asking only black athletes to skip the Games, the newspaper declared, reflected "an unfortunate disposition in Aframerica to want every Negro of prominence to fight the race problem for the other Negroes who sit back doing nothing."[278] The editorial also questioned why black athletes had to bear the burden of sacrificing their Olympic opportunity as a sign of solidarity and support for Jewish Americans and German Jews when Jewish Americans had done little to support African American athletes' rights: "we do not know whether or not we should go to great length to help fight their battles for them, in this instance, when we do not have more than one singular case in this country where athletes of major importance have refused participation in games on account of the southerners' attitude toward competing with Negroes."[279]

The *Courier's* frustration with a lack of Jewish Americans' participation in supporting black efforts to eradicate racial barriers for African American athletes reveals a deeper, conflicted, and nuanced relationship between the two groups as both struggled for equal rights

[278] "Unwise Counsel," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 31, 1935, A10.

[279] "Unwise Counsel," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

during this period.[280] As scholar Cheryl Lynn Greenberg notes, African Americans and Jewish Americans collaborated throughout much of the first half of the twentieth century to eradicate racial and religious discrimination. These efforts, however, were not universally celebrated or exhibited by all members of either group because of "polarizing internal differences based on class, region, gender, politics, generation, occupation, and a host of other less tangible factors."[281] Despite these tensions, Greenberg argues, during the first half of the twentieth century both groups found commonality through their overlapping struggles. As the *Amsterdam News* stated, "only these two [groups] knew what it meant to drink the bitter dregs of racial prejudice."[282] These shared experiences and sympathies, according to Greenberg, soon "broadened into a more committed collaboration between civil rights organizations in the two communities."[283]

The *Courier's* skepticism of Jewish support in the sports world in the mid-1930s, thus, represents an area in which the two groups' efforts did not overlap and result in collaboration. However, it did not signal that African Americans and Jewish Americans were not concerned with and supportive of one another's challenges in eradicating injustice. Beyond questioning Jewish Americans' sympathy for black athletes' struggles, the *Courier* also contended that boycotting the Games would prevent African Americans from damaging Hitler's racial

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[280] Extensive scholarship analyzing black-Jewish relations in the United States includes Jeffrey Melnick, *The Right to Sing the Blues; African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song,* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999); Jeffrey Melnick, *Black-Jewish Relations on Trial: Leo Frank and Jim Conley in the New South,* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2000); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual,* (New York: Morrow, 1967); and Hasia Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935,* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977).

[281] Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century,* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), 3.

[282] In Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters,* 10.

[283] Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters,* 10.

philosophy. Defeating the Germans in Berlin, the newspaper argued, would "lift the prestige of the despised darker races and lower the prestige of the proud and arrogant Nordic," thereby benefitting both African American and Jewish American's causes.[284] Therefore, according to the *Courier,* only through winning against the world's best competitors would Owens exhibit that he was superior to whites and embody the ideal characteristics of the black male athlete archetype.

The division among African American journalists and civil rights leaders over whether or not Owens should boycott the Olympics illustrates a broader challenge Owens and other black athletes across this era experienced in negotiating black journalists' expectations of their value as symbols of black athletic achievement against their personal needs and desires. Thus, while black journalists agreed that Owens's unique, otherworldly skill on the track gave him a rare opportunity to use his athleticism to affect broader changes to America's racial policies, the burdens they placed on him to use his skills for this greater cause constrained Owens's own personal desires.

Jesse Owens at the Olympics: Triumph

Ultimately, Owens and the entire Olympic team participated in the Games. For African Americans, the 1936 Summer Olympic Games served as an example of black athletic achievement as it was the first to feature a significant number of African American competitors on the squad. At the 1932 Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles, California, for example, the U.S. squad fielded only five black athletes, compared to the 19 black athletes that competed in Berlin.[285] Many black journalists celebrated the growing black presence on the team. Prior to the start of the Games, a *Courier* editorial declared that the potential victories "these fine young

[284] "Unwise Counsel," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

[285] African American Olympic athletes won 14 medals overall: eight gold, four silver, and two bronze.

colored men and women in Berlin will be at once a rebuke to both the New Germany and to America, both countries having made a fantastic religion out of skin pigment."[286] Given the tremendous stakes of the Olympic Games, as determined by the black press, Jesse Owens – and his fellow black teammates – put on a truly remarkable performance that surpassed even the highest sets of expectations. Collectively, African American Olympians took home eight gold medals; but it was Owens's sterling performance, with gold medals in four events – the 100-meter dash, 200-meter dash, long jump, and 4x100-meter relay – that garnered the most extensive and effusive praise from black journalists.[287] Throughout August and early September, black newspapers penned numerous front-page articles, laudatory editorials, and detailed sports columns highlighting Owens's every move while in Germany. Although much of the coverage focused on chronicling Owens's on-field efforts, African American journalists frequently situated his achievements within a larger narrative that served to challenge the racial discrimination African Americans faced, both at home and abroad. More broadly, Owens's performance validated the black press' contention that, as a winner, he embodied the characteristics of an upstanding, respectable black man.

When the Games began, the *Courier's* Chester Washington wondered if the German hosts would be good sports should African American athletes win.[288] Black journalists closely monitored how Hitler and German spectators treated Owens and other African American athletes.[289] They discovered that German fans were enamored with Owens; they cheered as he

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[286] "The Rising Tide of Color in Sports," *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 25, 1936, 10.

[287] Wiggins, "The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin," 285.

[288] Chester L. Washington, "Ches' Sez," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 1, 1936, 14.

[289] For example, see "Don't Know What Nazis Will Do About Jesse Owens," *Chicago Defender,* July 25, 1936, 24; Joe Jefferson, "Olympic Stars Given Welcome in Berlin; Prejudice Missing as Athletes Arrive," *Chicago Defender,*

won each of his medals, hounded him for autographs and photographs, and congratulated him whenever he left the track. The *Courier's* publisher, Robert L. Vann, one of the few black journalists to travel to Germany to cover the Games, stated that the 100,000 German fans who cheered for Owens were "mighty fine" people, displaying "a spirit of sportsmanship and fair play which overrides the color barrier."[290] Drawing attention to German fans' positive treatment of Owens served to emphasize that African American athletic performance could trump the harsh racial attitudes Germans allegedly held while under Hitler's rule. Owens's stellar performance, according to Washington, had turned Germans temporarily color-blind. Moreover, he believed that it suggested that through athletic competition, individuals from different nations comprising different races and ethnicities could look past these barriers and find common ground through elite athletic competition.[291]

The warm reception African American athletes received from German fans stood in stark contrast to how Hitler and other Nazi officials reacted to Owens's triumphs. When Owens and his black teammates defeated German competitors, the black press criticized Hitler and his political allies for their petulant, disgusted responses. These denunciations escalated after word leaked from German officials that some Nazi leaders stated that the African Americans who won medals were "black auxiliaries" – hired guns for the United States Olympic Team who did not fully represent the nation for which they competed. The *Courier* argued that such a "silly attitude

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August 1, 1936, 1; and "Germany Anxious to See Owens, Begs for New Mark," *Chicago Defender,* August 1, 1936, 1.

[290] Vann, "Hitler Salutes Jesse Owen," *Pittsburgh Courier*. The *Afro-American,* similarly noted the warm reception Owens received through the Games. William N. Jones, "'Adolf' Snubs U.S. Lads," *Washington Afro-American,* August 8, 1936, 1-2. See also Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 92.

[291] Chester L. Washington, "Ches' Sez," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 1, 1936, 14.

of Nazi propagandists" indicated how threatened Nazi leaders felt by African American athletic superiority.[292]

Meanwhile, the NAACP's monthly magazine, the *Crisis*, viewed Germany's "black auxiliaries" comments from a different perspective. The magazine declared that, while "pathetic," the attitudes exposed a deeper truth: although Owens and black Olympians were American citizens, they were rarely treated as such because they were so frequently denied their rights.[293] Drawing attention to these comments, therefore, served two purposes: to publicly shame Nazi officials for their racist attitudes, and to challenge American politicians to finally provide African Americans with the rights and privileges they deserved as American citizens. While the *Crisis'* analysis failed to galvanize American politicians to put an end to racial discrimination in the United States, it reveals how some black journalists refused to ignore how, even as Owens and black Olympians won gold medals in Berlin, they still lacked many basic rights and opportunities at home. Furthermore, it underscores their broader efforts to use Owens's upstanding behavior as champion as a tool to challenge racial inequality.

The black press' analysis of the "black auxiliaries" controversy paled in comparison to their outrage over Hitler's decision to "snub" Owens at the Games. One could argue that Hitler's refusal to congratulate Owens after his four victories has become one of the most indelible memories of the Games.[294] According to many white and black journalists covering the Olympics, after personally congratulating two German victors during the first day of competition, Hitler refused to extend the same courtesy to Owens and other black Olympic

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[292] "Views of Other Editors," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 15, 1936.

[293] "'Black Auxiliaries," *The Crisis* 43, no. 8 (September 1936), 273.

[294] Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 90-91.

champions.[295] The *Afro-American,* for example, determined that Hitler's actions signified that he had waved the "white flag of Nordic prejudice."[296] Hitler's cowardly actions, the *Amsterdam News* added, resulted from him "shivering in horror" as he watched "his vaunted Aryans bow in defeat before black stars from America."[297] Hitler's affront to Owens and other African American Olympians galvanized black journalists to discredit the Nazi regime. A month after the Games concluded, the *Crisis* argued that the entire episode demonstrated how "Hitler, although head of a nation, is a small man, surrounded by pompous small men. Small men are only capable of small acts."[298] Moreover, journalists such as Arthur Schomburg utilized the incident to challenge American politicians to congratulate Owens and his black teammates when they returned home to "let the world know they are Americans at all times."[299]

The notion that Hitler snubbed Owens was too tantalizing a story to debunk and it soon took on a life of its own. Black journalists discussed the incident weeks after it occurred, and continued to do so despite Owens's repeated declarations that Hitler did not snub him.[300] Yet, for as good a story as journalists shaped the incident into, little evidence supports the contention that Hitler snubbed Owens. As Baker notes, after greeting two German victors – as well as a Finnish champion – during the first day of competition, Hitler left the arena in the early evening on the

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[295] Laucella, "An Analysis of Mainstream, Black, and Communist Coverage of Jesse Owens in the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games," 86, 89, 109, 116, 120.

[296] Jones, "'Adolf' Snubs U.S. Lads," *Washington Afro-American*.

[297] "Unhappy Hitler," *New York Amsterdam News,* August 8, 1936, 12.

[298] "Small Acts from a Small Man," *The Crisis* 43, no. 8 (September 1936), 273.

[299] Arthur Schomburg, "Our Pioneers," *New York Amsterdam News,* August 15, 1936, 12.

[300] Roi Ottley, "$40,000 is Lot of Money to Pass Up, Says Owens," *New York Amsterdam News,* August 29, 1936, 1; Richards Vidmer, "Did Hitler Snub Owens?" *Pittsburgh Courier,* September 19, 1936, A5; and Edgar T. Rouzeau, "New York Gives Jesse Owens Hero's Welcome," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 29, 1936, 18. However, as Baker states, years later when Jesse Owens embarked on speaking tours across the country, his memory of the alleged incident changed dramatically. Owens's recollection now placed Hitler snubbing him at the center of the tale. Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 91.

second day, just as African American Cornelius Johnson won gold in the high jump. Consequently, it was Johnson, rather than Owens, who Hitler may have snubbed.[301] The veracity of the incident ultimately mattered little to black journalists at the time. Highlighting Hitler's disrespectful treatment of African American athletes, particularly in comparison to the warm reception Owens received from appreciative German sports fans, served as a useful framing device to challenge the broader racial inequality perpetuated by Hitler's Nazi regime and compel American politicians to defend African American athletes' rights as well.

The black press also situated Owens's athletic achievements within a broader narrative, arguing that, when given the chance to compete against whites, African Americans were more than capable of winning. Given the widespread racial discrimination African Americans encountered, particularly within the sports world, Owens had a rare opportunity to compete and outperform elite white athletes. Owens's victories, therefore, validated black civil rights leaders' beliefs that African American athletes possessed the necessary skills to stand alongside, and in Owens's case, above white competitors. Such performances, they surmised, made it harder for white officials to continue to uphold racially discriminatory policies in sports. Moreover, it validated their dissemination of the notion of Owens as an upstanding figure who symbolized black achievement and opportunity.

As a winner who demonstrated a reserved, humble demeanor as champion, Owens, according to the *Courier's* Vann, should have made white Americans proud of black athletic achievement: "Millions of Americans will recognize now that what I and the boys of my race are trying to do is attempted for the glory of our country and our countrymen. Maybe more people

[301] German officials stated that Hitler left the grounds early because he needed to adhere to his strict schedule, not because he did not want to congratulate an African American Olympic champion. In an effort to avoid further controversy and appear impartial, after consulting with the president of the IOC, Henri de Baillet-Latour, Hitler stopped personally congratulating any victors, Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 90-92. See also, Guttmann, *The Games Must Go On,* 78-79.

will now realize that the Negro is trying to do his full part as an American citizen."[302] As Olympic champion, Vann suggests that Owens had proven his worth as a symbol of pride for *all* Americans. The *Associated Negro Press'* founder Claude Barnett, furthermore, in a private letter to Owens at the Games' conclusion, stated his and the black community's "pride in your accomplishments…you deserve every bit of success which comes to you."[303] Barnett's comments suggest that he believed Owens had done more than stoke national pride; his performance served as a symbol of racial pride as well. Throughout the Games, black newspapers noted how Owens's stellar athletic feats were matched by his gentlemanly behavior.[304] The combination of his athletic prowess and upstanding demeanor off the track signaled to the black press that Owens embodied the ideal characteristics journalists sought in its black celebrities.[305] Owens's Olympic performance, thus, accomplished much of what many black journalists sought as it showcased how African American male athletes could be winners who acted in a manner wholly unlike how Jack Johnson carried himself as champion two decades earlier.

Other black journalists, however, tempered Barnett and Vann's enthusiasm, arguing that Owens and his black Olympic teammates should soak up the praise they received from German fans because harsh racial prejudice awaited them once they returned home. The *Courier's* Porter Roberts, for example, lamented the unjust situation Owens faced in which he could "live in the best hotels…and stand up like a man" abroad, only to "be ushered to the back row in theaters,

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[302] Vann, "Hitler Salutes Jesse Owen," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

[303] Letter, Claude A. Barnett to Jesse Owens, August 26, 1936, Box 395, Folder 4, Claude A. Barnett Papers, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

[304] R. W. Merguson, "Race Athletes Not Involved in Olympic Scandal Charges," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 1, 1936, 1; Vann, "Hitler Salutes Jesse Owen," *Pittsburgh Courier*; Jones, "'Adolf' Snubs U.S. Lads," *Washington Afro-American*; and "Why Jesse Owens Won," *Washington Afro-American,* August 15, 1936, 4.

[305] Vann, "Hitler Salutes Jesse Owen," *Pittsburgh Courier.*

barred from hotels, and will not be permitted to live in so-called 'white' neighborhoods" when he returned to Ohio.[306] These attitudes echoed many other black journalists' broader frustrations with how whites treated black sports heroes like Owens and Joe Louis: they were praised and commended when they defeated foreign foes like German Olympians or German boxer Max Schmeling because their athletic achievements symbolized the virtues of American democracy to an international audience. Unlike the victories African Americans gained in eradicating college football's Gentleman's Agreement and desegregating Major League Baseball, the international exposure Louis and Owens attained through their victories against white opponents elevated the symbolic value of their achievements. Yet these heightened stakes also exposed America's flawed racial policies toward African Americans to a greater extent. Their accomplishments, therefore, did little to change how many whites fundamentally treated African Americans on a daily basis. These articles, therefore, suggest that, while Owens could serve as an affirmation of nationalist pride, he and African American athletes more broadly, still faced tremendous obstacles in gaining greater inroads to achieve racial equality. Furthermore, they highlight many black journalists' beliefs that Owens had to embody the ideal, respectable black man both on and off the track, long after his Olympic triumph in hopes of changing white perceptions of African American male athletes.

Owens's Olympic performance did not immediately fulfill many of the broad and ambitious goals some black journalists created prior to the start of the Games. Despite winning four gold medals, Owens continued to struggle to overcome racial intolerance. The glory he brought to American sports fans for defeating Hitler's German athletes failed to change the attitudes of ardent racial bigots. But Owens's Olympic accomplishments should not be measured

[306] Porter Roberts, "Praise and Criticism," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 22, 1936, A7. See also "Victories at 11th Olympiad are Incentives to Negroes," *Pittsburgh Courier,* September 5, 1936, A2; and W.E.B. Du Bois, "Forum of Fact and Opinion," *Pittsburgh Courier,* October 24, 1936, A1.

solely against such lofty goals. The articles published by African Americans chronicling Owens's Olympic efforts illustrate the black press' immense pride and overall optimism that Owens's victories could help in the broader, long-term battle for racial equality. By winning, Owens had validated a central component of the black press' construction of ideal black manhood through sports. When the Olympic Games ended in late August 1936, Owens in many ways had reached the apex of black athletic celebrity. As he transitioned into a new phase of his life as a recent Olympic hero, he soon discovered that it was not very difficult to tumble mightily from that lofty perch.

Rough Honeymoon: Owens, Amateurism, and the Limits of Black Athletic Celebrity

Although African American journalists and fans across the globe praised Owens, it did little to assuage his fears that he would not make ends meet financially once the Olympic Games concluded. Indeed, as Bakers notes, Owens's drive to win on the track in Berlin was met by "an equal hunger to convert those victories into a lucrative payday."[307] Yet before Owens could return to the United States and cash in on his newfound fame, the AAU whisked Owens, and other top American Olympic performers away on an exhibition tour across Europe. The AAU staged the tour to help recoup the nearly $30,000 spent to train, transport, and house the American Olympic team.[308] The athletes, however, felt exploited by the AAU's actions, none more so than Owens. After growing increasingly frustrated with being physically overworked without pay by the AAU, Owens abruptly quit the tour before its conclusion to return to the United States to pursue a number of potentially lucrative endorsement opportunities. Owens's

[307] As Baker notes, "once Jesse Owens made money after his Olympic triumph, he purchased a new car every year for the rest of his life. Raised in a cramped sharecropper's shanty, he bought both himself and his parents huge new houses the first chance he got." Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 9.

[308] Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 110.

actions infuriated AAU officials and AOC President Brundage, who retaliated by suspending Owens indefinitely from all AAU-sanctioned events. The conflict illustrates how Owens's desire to attain financial security for his family clashed with the expectation that Olympic athletes uphold notions of amateurism. More broadly, the struggle between the two parties ultimately sparked a dramatic shift in how the African American press viewed Owens. Whereas black journalists described Owens as the embodiment of black athletic achievement and citizenship during the Olympic Games, in the months after the Games concluded, they struggled to support Owens's relentless attempts to profit off of his newfound fame. By the end of 1936, many black journalists treated Owens much differently, viewing him as a tragic, cautionary figure about the pitfalls of celebrity.

As the exhibition tour began in mid-August, 1936, Owens reluctantly joined his teammates as they set out across Europe. He quickly discovered that AAU officials prioritized maximizing their profit margins at each tour stop far ahead of protecting the interests of the Olympic athletes in their stead. The AAU's financial strategy relied upon Owens, and his incredible commercial appeal among European sports fans, appearing at every stop on the exhibition tour in order to maximize the revenue generated.[309] The tour hopscotched across Europe – stopping in Cologne and Bochum, Germany, Prague, and London – in a manner of days. The logistics of early twentieth century air travel, modest accommodations in each foreign city, meager meals, and a lack of rest and physical rehabilitation between events wreaked havoc on the Olympians' bodies.[310]

[309] As historian Donald McRae notes, the AAU agreed to take fifteen percent of the gate revenue at every tour stop, so long as Owens participated. McRae, *Heroes Without a Country*, 162.

[310] Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 111-113.

Owens complained to the *Associated Negro Press* shortly after returning to the United States that he had "lost six pounds being pushed around and circused all over Europe. They [the AAU] sent me to Prague from Cologne without a cent and I had to run a race in Prague without having an ounce of food for 10 hours."[311] Reflecting on the tour 30 years later in his autobiography, *Blackthink,* Owens charged that the AAU had "thought of me as their performing monkey, a running machine that never broke down and that would do some p-r work for America while mainly doing a lot more good for the old AAU."[312] To compound matters, Owens was infuriated that the Olympians did not receive a portion of the gate receipts from each exhibition, and were not given an adequate daily stipend for food and travel expenses. The exhibition tour, in Owens's opinion, had left him hungrier and poorer than when he had headed to Europe a month earlier.[313]

Broke, physically worn down, and mentally and emotionally exhausted from a grueling Olympic tour, Owens decided that he had had enough. During a brief break while in London, Owens, in consultation with his college coach and advisor Larry Snyder, decided that as the tour continued on to Stockholm, he would return home. Owens's decision resulted in his indefinite suspension from all AUU events. As the primary overseer of amateur track and field competition in the United States, the AAU's suspension effectively prevented Owens from competing at the amateur level.[314] The decision decimated Owens, who reflected in his autobiography that the

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[311] "Jesse Owens Turns Professional After Amateur Suspension," *Associated Negro Press,* August 17, 1936, Box 402, Folder 15, Claude A. Barnett Papers, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

[312] Jesse Owens, with Paul G. Neimark, *Blackthink: My Life as Black Man and White Man,* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1970), 199.

[313] "Cashing In on Jesse," *The Afro-American,* September 5, 1936, 4. As Baker notes, with so little money on hand, to pass the time between exhibition events, Owens and his teammates predominantly remained in their hotel rooms playing cards rather than explore these European cities as tourists. Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 114.

[314] Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 117-120; "The Owens Log," *New York Amsterdam News,* August 22, 1936, 16.

suspension meant that, "If I'd had any slight ideas left of doing something in sports, maybe going for a final record in my last year at Ohio State, they were dead. If I'd had any hope even of running a few exhibitions at home to set myself up for an outside job in sports, it was gone."[315]

Owens's clash with the AAU exposed much larger, long-standing tensions between proponents of amateur and professional sports. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, and accelerating after the Civil War, interest in sports grew significantly across the United States, particularly among working-class immigrants. As Warren Goldstein documents in his study of the rise of baseball in the nineteenth century, sports like baseball developed initially at the local level as a means to strengthen social bonds within communities. The outcome of each game mattered little; the elaborate post-game meals and celebrations between clubs were often the most significant event of the day. According to Goldstein, "the social interests of the players and other club members acted as checks on the importance of the game itself."[316] By the 1870s, however, some teams began to professionalize, focusing more on honing each player's skills and assembling the most talented squad of players. A contingent of elite, white sports enthusiasts worried that the rise of these new professional teams might sully the sanctity of the game. Amateur baseball enthusiasts, Goldstein argues, responded by declaring that amateurs played the sport simply for recreation and for a general love of the game, and therefore were superior to those who played sports professionally.[317]

The idea of amateur sports as superior to professional sports leagues was rooted in elitism. Amateurism, according to historian S.W. Pope "was an invented tradition," crafted by

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[315] Owens, *Blackthink*, 200.

[316] Warren Goldstein, *Playing for Keeps: A History of Early Baseball,* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 41. As Goldstein notes, newspaper coverage of these early baseball contests focused overwhelmingly on analyzing the social aspects rather than on the on-field results.

[317] Goldstein, *Playing for Keeps,* 121-123.

affluent middle- and upper-class white men seeking to "draw class lines against the masses, and to develop a new bourgeois leisure lifestyle as a badge of middle- and upper-class identity."[318] The new professional athletes were predominantly working-class men, many of whom recently immigrated to America. Amateur athletes, Pope notes, argued that they played sports for purer reasons than their professional counterparts; focusing on fair play, good sportsmanship, and camaraderie through athletics rather than on ruthless and highly-skilled competition, and financial compensation.[319] A gentleman athlete – the ideal amateur competitor – according to Walter Camp, an early and vocal advocate for amateurism, did not earn a living from playing sports; rather "he does not earn anything from his victories except glory and satisfaction."[320]

The amateur-professional division shaped track and field's dynamic at the turn of the twentieth century as well. Influential sports officials such as William N. Curtis, co-founder of the New York Athletic Club (NYAC), adopted and championed the notion of amateurism as superior to professional sports by creating events and competitions exclusively for amateur track and field athletes at the NYAC and other elite athletic clubs across the country. These efforts soon led to the creation of the Amateur Athletic Union, which became the strongest and most vocal advocate for amateurism in American sports.[321] The amateur ideal was further codified in American sporting culture with the rise of the Olympic Games in 1896. As Pope notes, amateur enthusiasts weaved the amateur ethos with a new nationalist ideology: America's finest athletes would represent their country in Olympic competition by displaying notions of gentlemanly behavior

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[318] S.W. Pope, *Patriotic Games: Sporting Traditions in the American Imagination, 1876-1926,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19.

[319] Pope, *Patriotic Games,* 19.

[320] Pope, *Patriotic Games,* 23.

[321] Pope, *Patriotic Games,* 23-25.

that "reflected America's institutions, social structures, work ethic, and national superiority."[322] This ideal amateur Olympic athlete, therefore, symbolized what supporters like Curtis believed to be the best American virtues. Therefore, as an Olympic athlete, Owens's athletic ability was tethered to the expectation of upholding the central tenants of the amateur sporting philosophy. Leveraging his Olympic triumphs into personal, financial gain, according to amateurism idealists like Brundage, was a direct affront to amateur and Olympic ideals.

Although touted as a pure, idealistic ethos, amateur sports rarely universally upheld these virtues. Since the inception of the ideal by Curtis and others, amateur athletics have been riddled with inconsistencies and blatant contradictions, particularly with regards to compensating athletes for their performances.[323] Despite these irregularities, amateur athletics took hold by the beginning of the twentieth century in a number of sports at the collegiate level and at Olympic competitions. Although, as Pope argues, the rise of the Olympics shifted the amateur ideal away from focusing solely on drawing class lines through sports to serving more nationalist purposes, amateur athletics continued to reflect and reinforce certain white, middle-class values.[324] Competing in the Olympics or at the collegiate level demonstrated an individual's love of competition for its own sake, in the eyes of amateur enthusiasts such as Brundage. As historian Allen Guttmann notes, Brundage steadfastly sought to maintain the amateur ideal, stating that, "in his fantastic desire to achieve absolute purity within the sacred realm of amateur sports, he

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[322] Pope, *Patriotic Games,* 34.

[323] As Pope notes, the thorny issue of allowing collegiate baseball players, especially those at Ivy League schools, to compete in semiprofessional summer leagues befuddled many advocates of amateurism. Most of these athletes were allowed to have it both ways, competing both as amateurs during the school year, and earning money for their talents in the summer. Similar conflicts emerged throughout the early twentieth century as the AAU and other amateur sports officials struggled to enforce a universal policy on the matter. Pope, *Patriotic Games,* 25-27.

[324] Pope, *Patriotic Games,* 34.

insisted that a professional in *any* sport lost his amateur status in *all* sports."[325] Brundage's quest to uphold the amateur ideal, consequently, echoed his attempts to avoid racial politics when overseeing the United States Olympic Team. The two attitudes were part of Brundage's central philosophical foundation: the Olympics were about amateur competition, free from outside political, social, religious, or racial conflict.

By the 1936 Olympic Games, Brundage had made these amateur values largely implicit; amateur athletics were firmly entrenched in American sporting life, particularly at the quadrennial Olympic Games. Consequently, few opportunities existed outside of the Olympic Games, collegiate meets, and AAU-sponsored events for Owens to compete against top-level talent. Without a viable, professional track and field circuit, Owens had little recourse but to bow to the demands of Brundage and AAU officials. His defiance of Brundage, therefore, represents a marked departure from how most amateur athletes challenged the confines of their sport. Furthermore, by defying his sport's central philosophy toward competition and compensation, it forced many black journalists to evaluate Owens's efforts to achieve breadwinner status and exhibit his manhood against the constraints of the amateur ethos.

Initially, many black journalists supported Owens's decision to leave the tour to pursue financial opportunities, deeming Brundage and the AAU's decision as inappropriate. They framed the post-Olympic exhibition tour as a blatant example of white sports officials exploiting black athleticism for their financial gain.[326] Implicitly, this analysis reflects black journalists' broader mistrust of white authorities who exploited black physicality for profit. Moreover, it confirms the black press' earlier skepticism of Brundage that developed during the debate over boycotting the Games. Brundage, in their eyes, repeatedly failed to indicate that he cared about

[325] Guttmann, *The Games Must Go On,* 117.

[326] "Cashing In on Jesse," *The Afro-American*.

the rights and well-being of African American Olympians.[327] Former athletes also rushed to defend Owens and lambast Brundage, who they felt "stole a leaf from the notebook from Der Fuehrer" when he banned Owens from amateur competition.[328] Comparing Brundage to Hitler indicates that many African Americans viewed Brundage's suspension of Owens as the act of a ruthless, power-hungry official.

While many journalists framed Owens as the victim of Brundage's abuse of power, some viewed Owens's actions as an empowering example of black manhood and respectability. In an editorial, the *Courier* argued that, by refusing to acquiesce to the AAU's demands while on the exhibition tour, Owens had "acumen enough to look out for his personal interest instead of permitting himself to be exploited by white people."[329] This attitude suggests that some journalists deemed Owens's off-the-track defiance of oppressive white authorities as emblematic of his strong moral character and upstanding behavior. Owens's defiance, moreover, served as a symbol of black male strength and had the potential to galvanize other African American athletes to protest how Brundage, the AAU, and other white sports officials exploited and abused black athleticism for their personal gain. As a result, challenging the amateur ethos represented an attempt by the black press to refute the class-based ideology perpetuated by white amateur sports officials. The elitist values of Brundage and others, black journalists noted, were inapplicable as far as African Americans were concerned. Owens had little use in upholding white standards of amateurism while he competed because his need to escape poverty and racial hardship took priority. Moreover, his actions affirmed the black press' belief that Owens exhibited the ideal qualities of a strong, respectable black man.

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[327] Romeo L. Dougherty, "Sports Whirl," *New York Amsterdam News,* December 14, 1935, 12.

[328] "Ex-Athletes Lambast Suspension of Owens," *New York Amsterdam News,* August 22, 1936, 15.

[329] "The Judgment of Owens," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 29, 1936, 10.

Many black journalists' support of Owens's decision to abandon the AAU tour stemmed from their belief that he was attempting to fulfill his role as an upstanding black man and breadwinner. With a wife and a daughter at home in Cleveland, many African American journalists contended that Owens had an obligation as the man of the household to profit off of his newfound fame and "accumulate a stake for the future" for his family.[330] This attitude reflected broader gender norms of the era where men acted as the family's primary breadwinner – providing a home, food, and financial security for his wife and children.[331] The male breadwinner ethos, moreover, had been an established element of American culture by the 1930s. The notion, according to historian Martin Summers, emerged alongside the "self-made man" ideology, which posited that through hard work and rugged discipline, American men would attain economic success that allowed them to provide for their family.[332] Being a breadwinner, therefore, allowed men to assert their manhood.

In asserting his manhood, many African American journalists framed Owens's devotion to his wife and desire to provide her with material comfort as evidence of his embodying notions of respectability. Indeed, Owens's manhood and gentlemanly behavior were central to many articles black journalists published throughout his career. As a "tall and clean-cut" individual "with plenty of personality as well as speed," Owens, according to the *Courier's* Chester

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[330] "The Judgment of Owens," *Pittsburgh Courier*; Art Carter, "Sports," *Washington Afro-American,* August 21, 1936, Art Carter Papers, Box 170-10, Folder 18, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; "New Running Shoes for Jesse Owens Were Source of Worry to Coach," *New York Amsterdam News,* November 7, 1936, 19; "An Editorial: The Story is One of Unfairness to the Greatest Athlete Olympic Games Have Ever Known," *The Chicago Defender,* November 28, 1936, 4; and "Cashing In on Jesse," *The Afro-American,* September 5, 1936, 4; "Why Shouldn't Jesse Owens Turn 'Pro'?" *The Afro-American,* August 22, 1936, 4. See also Ottley, "$40,000 is Lot of Money to Pass Up, Says Owens," *New York Amsterdam News*.

[331] This breadwinner ideal maintained its place in shaping American gender norms through World War II into the post-war era. See Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s,* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).

[332] Martin Summers, *Manliness and its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930,* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2-3.

Washington, "has won many friends for his race through his gentlemanliness and modesty in manner."[333] The black press also repeatedly noted that when Owens was not on the track, he spent time with his wife, Ruth.[334] Depicting Owens as a dedicated family man allowed the black press to situate Owens as an upstanding member of the African American community. Collectively, it signifies that Owens epitomized the "self-made man" ideal that many African American journalists sought in presenting prominent black men of the era to a wider audience. From this perspective, Owens's desire to make a living off of his newfound fame did not reflect a selfish desire to enlarge his celebrity status; nor did it suggest that Owens had made a mockery of the AAU's amateur ideal. In many ways, black journalists contended that providing for his family was the best way Owens could exhibit his gentlemanly behavior, his strong moral integrity, and his desire to be an outstanding father and husband. Thus, African American journalists implicitly situated Owens's upstanding behavior against Jack Johnson's actions in order to present Owens as an ideal black male athlete and citizen to a white audience.

These attitudes resonated with African American newspaper readers such as Chester Gillespie, who in a letter to the editor to the *Pittsburgh Courier* stated that Owens had to capitalize on his celebrity because it "would be absurd to pretend that economic opportunity…is open as widely to Negro men and women as to whites."[335] Gillespie's statement, therefore,

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[333] Chester L. Washington, "Ches' Sez," *Pittsburgh Courier,* May 2, 1936, 14. Other journalists also noted Owens' charm and overall gentlemanly behavior. See Marvel Cooke, "James Toted Books for His New Bride," *New York Amsterdam News,* July 13, 1935, 7; and Romeo L. Dougherty, "Sports Whirl," *New York Amsterdam News,* July 13, 1935, 14.

[334] "Jesse Owens Marries; Peacock Beats Him Second Time," *Associated Negro Press,* July 8, 1935, Box 402, Folder 15, Claude A. Barnett Papers, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois. Black newspapers also occasionally accompanied their coverage of Owens' performances in Berlin with feature stories discussing his childhood and close relationship with his parents. Levi Jolley, "Ma Owens Hasn't Had Good Meal Since Sunday," *Washington Afro-American,* August 8, 1936, 1-2

[335] "Views of Other Editors," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 22, 1936, 10. Owens's coach, Larry Snyder, expressed a similar opinion to the *New York Amsterdam News,* stating that Owens "got a break that comes once in a lifetime and never comes at all for a lot of people. It's tough for a colored boy to make money at best." "New Running Shoes for

recognized the limited opportunities available to African Americans at this time to climb out of the poverty they experienced and attain an affluent lifestyle. The racial discrimination of the early twentieth century that was perpetuated by Jim Crow laws and traditions, however, denied many black men opportunities to achieve sole breadwinner status. Thus, as Summers argues, racial discrimination during this era "not only blurred class distinctions within the black community; it also had the potential of blurring gender conventions that were otherwise rigidly delineated within the dominant culture."[336] As a star athlete with a substantial black and white fan base, Owens had a rare opportunity to transcend these boundaries and obtain a level of financial comfort for himself and his family typically available only to white men. Thus, many African American journalists, and their readers, initially supported Owens's decision to pursue lucrative business opportunities on the grounds that it exemplified his manhood and respectability.

The black press' initial support of Owens's decision did little to help him cash in on his fame. Indeed, in the weeks following the Olympics, Owens's struggles to convert his popularity into lucrative paydays revealed the limitations of his commercial appeal, and exposed the boundaries under which black journalists deemed his off-the-field behavior as appropriate. When Owens returned from Berlin, he received a litany of offers and opportunities to cash in on his new celebrity. These offers ranged from performing on stage, starring in short films, and endorsing a variety of products. The amount of money offered, moreover, reached dizzying heights, with some for as high as $50,000, a staggering amount during the Great Depression. For a young African American man who grew up in harsh poverty, the money represented a path out

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Jesse Owens Were Source of Worry to Coach," *New York Amsterdam News*. See also "An Editorial," *The Chicago Defender*.

[336] Summers, *Manliness and its Discontents,* 4.

of hardship and into financial comfort and stability. Yet, while the black press highlighted these lucrative offers, some black journalists worried that these opportunities might damage Owens's sterling reputation. These concerns suggest that African American journalists sought to protect Owens from individuals who they felt did not have his best interests at heart. Many, for instance, cautioned Owens to reevaluate his newly formed coterie of "advisors," specifically Marty Forkins, an influential white entertainment manager and agent, and star African American entertainer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson.[337] The *Amsterdam News'* Roi Ottley argued that granting Forkins access and influence over Owens's career could jeopardize his financial future. Ottley pointed to Forkins's mismanagement of former Olympian Eddie Tolan's career, who went from a celebrated athletic hero in 1932, to broke and destitute by 1936, as reason to caution Owens from taking Forkins's advice. Additionally, Ottley believed that aligning with a white manager rather than an African American, as Joe Louis had, did little to demonstrate to a national audience that African Americans could survive financially without white influence.[338] Moreover, it suggested that powerful white men like Forkins had a right to financially benefit from Owens's hard work.

Black journalists were similarly skeptical of Robinson's intentions with regards to Owens's career. As Baker states, with a lengthy career in the public eye, Robinson "found Jesse Owens ripe for the picking. Jesse wanted money, and Robinson wanted Jesse's spotlight."[339] During a parade in Harlem in late August celebrating Owens's return from Berlin, for example, the *Afro-American* noted that Robinson sought to shift the public's focus from Owens to

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[337] See Roi Ottley, "Hectic Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News,* September 5, 1936, 13; "Cashing In on Jesse," *The Afro-American*; Willis N. Huggins, "Why Was Harlem Frigid to Jesse Owens Upon Return?" *The Afro-American,* September 12, 1936, 23; William N. Jones, "Day by Day," *The Afro-American*, September 26, 4; and William N. Jones, "Day by Day," *The Afro-American,* October 31, 1936, 4.

[338] Ottley, "Hectic Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News*.

[339] Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 124.

himself.[340] The *ANP's* Claude Barnett, in a letter to Edwin Meyers, felt that Robinson simply was trying to use Owens to enhance his career.[341] Insulating Owens from these risks was of critical importance because black journalists believed that one false step in the public spotlight might damage Owens's reputation as a well-respected and adored African American man.

The black press expressed such concern in part because they were skeptical of many of the financial offers Owens received. The sheer number of offers, and the generous sums of money attached to many of them, initially astounded Owens and many black journalists. In the weeks following the Berlin Olympics, Owens received offers to perform alongside famed comedian Eddie Cantor for ten weeks for $40,000, appear in short films for Paramount Studios, endorse a variety of commercial products, conduct a public-speaking tour across the country, and serve as track and field coach at Wilberforce University. Collectively, Owens's advisors publicized to African American journalists that he could stand to make up to $100,000 through these opportunities.[342] Yet amid the fevered optimism, Ottley cautioned Owens to carefully scrutinize each offer, stating that "danger lurks in every corner and crevice for the individual that goes out to sell his 'name.'"[343] Ottley's statement exemplifies the black press' broader attitude that, as a successful black celebrity with a number of white fans, choosing an endorsement or career path that damaged his reputation as an upstanding, respectable black man could diminish how whites viewed Owens and other black athletes in the future.

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[340] Huggins, "Why Was Harlem Frigid to Jesse Owens Upon Return?" *The Afro-American*.

[341] Letter, Claude A. Barnett to Edwin J. Meyers, September 4, 1936, Box 395, Folder 4, Claude A. Barnett Papers, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

[342] Robert L. Vann, "Owens Gets $200,000 Offers," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 15, 1936, 1; "The Owens Log," *New York Amsterdam News,* August 22, 1936, 16; and "Why Shouldn't Jesse Owens Turn 'Pro'?" *The Afro-American*.

[343] Ottley, "Hectic Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News*.

While Ottley cautioned Owens to fully vet each financial opportunity, the *Courier's* Porter Roberts took a more pessimistic view of the situation. In his opinion, Owens's fame had attracted individuals like Robinson and Forkins who had little interest in helping Owens amass wealth. He argued that if Owens asked either to invest in Owens for business purposes, they would abandon him. Owens's new "friends," Porter stated, "just want to be seen with you while you are in the 'limelight.'"[344] His concerns were soon proved accurate, particularly with regards to many of the lucrative offers made to Owens immediately after his triumph in Berlin. Eddie Cantor's $40,000 offer, for example, was made by his agent without his knowledge. The agent concocted the offer strictly as a public relations tactic to increase Cantor's publicity; he had no intention of working with Owens.[345] By mid-September, Owens discovered that most of the other lavish offers he received were similarly fictitious.[346]

The *Afro-American's* William N. Jones sympathized with Owens's predicament. Unable to compete at the amateur level because of the AAU's suspension, and without any substantial financial opportunities available, Jones argued that, Owens "is beginning to feel the prick of the golden crown of thorns is due more to his youthful innocence and lack of experience than to any intention to make mistakes."[347] Owens's dilemma, therefore, fit within a larger narrative emphasized by African American journalists that black athletes like Owens continually struggled to free themselves from the vicious pattern of exploitation and abuse they suffered at the hands of powerful whites within the sports and entertainment world. Their ability to dominate their competitors in athletic events, thus, was matched by their inability to profit off of that fame. This

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[344] Porter Roberts, "Praise and Criticism," *Pittsburgh Courier,* September 5, 1936, A7.

[345] Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 129.

[346] Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 129; and "To Be or Not to Be Pro - Owens' Nightmare," *New York Amsterdam News,* September 19, 1936, 15.

[347] Jones, "Day by Day," *The Afro-American*, September 26, 4.

challenge, furthermore, highlights the tension between black journalists' expectations of Owens as a symbol of black manhood and achievement and his need to support his family.

Political Miscalculation: Stumping for Landon

The black press' coverage of Owens's initial attempts to cash in on his fame following the Olympics, while predominantly supportive and sympathetic to Owens's struggles, did little to help him earn a living. Facing a reality where lucrative professional opportunities were few and far between, coupled with the AAU's insistence that he remain suspended from amateur competition, Owens pursued one of the few remaining options available that offered him financial security. Stumping for Republican presidential candidate Alf Landon, however, caused many black journalists to shift their attitudes toward Owens. While some of the criticism stemmed from a broader shift in African American politics away from the Republican Party and toward the Democratic Party and incumbent President Roosevelt's New Deal agenda, it also reveals tensions among many black journalists over what constituted acceptable behavior for upstanding, respectable black athletes like Owens.

Owens's foray into politics occurred at a critical transition point in African American politics. As the 1936 election neared, for the first time in American electoral history, many political leaders believed that African American voters would play a significant, and potentially decisive role in selecting the next president.[348] Although African Americans had resoundingly supported Republican candidates since the 1860s due to the legacy of party member Abraham Lincoln, by the late 1920s, many had grown disillusioned with the party's politics. A number of factors spurred the eventual migration of black voters away from the GOP toward Roosevelt and

[348] James J. Kenneally, "Black Republicans During the New Deal: The Role of Joseph W. Martin Jr.," *The Review of Politics* 55, no. 1 (1993), 117-119.

the Democratic Party. As New Deal historians Janet Weiss and Harvard Sitkoff contend, the first wave of the Great Migration, which occurred from World War I through the 1920s, drastically changed the demographics of African American communities. As more blacks relocated from the rural South to the urban North and Midwest, it severed black allegiance to the Republican Party. As a result, according to Sitkoff, "blacks in the city became less patient and more political, less docile and more demanding, less religious and more rebellious."[349] This growing African American political constituency, consequently, demanded more out of their political leaders, particularly the Republican Party, which they believed had taken their allegiance for granted.[350]

Beyond geographic and demographic shifts in the black voting population, President Herbert Hoover's indifference to African Americans and their struggle for racial and economic justice added to many African Americans' growing disillusionment with the GOP. Hoover's actions in response to the Stock Market Crash in 1929, in particular, rankled many longtime black Republican supporters. In lieu of lending aid and support to African Americans decimated by the nation's financial collapse, Hoover, according to historian Raymond Wolters, focused instead on currying favor with white southern Republican voters.[351] Hoover compounded this miscue by refusing to condemn the 57 reported lynchings of African Americans that took place during his four-year term as presidency. Collectively, Hoover's refusal to assist African Americans as they struggled against economic hardship and racial violence compelled an increasing number of black voters to question their longstanding allegiance to the Republican Party.

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[349] Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue, Volume 1: The Depression Decade,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 90; see also Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR,* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 4-12.

[350] Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks,* 91.

[351] Raymond Wolters, "The New Deal and the Negro," in *The New Deal: The National Level,* ed. John Braemen, Robert H. Bremmer, David Brady (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1975), 203.

Their exodus to the Democratic Party did not occur overnight. During the 1932 election, some African Americans remained skeptical of abandoning the GOP, arguing that Roosevelt had yet to prove that he would lead African Americans down a better path than the Republicans.[352] However, as Sitkoff notes, "many of the most prominent Negro newspapers and spokesmen in 1932, as never before, insisted that the black voter act independently and forsake traditional party loyalty. No longer, they reiterated…should Afro-Americans blindly cast their ballots for Abraham Lincoln and against Jefferson Davis."[353] African American voters who did break from tradition in the 1932 presidential election, however, did not ultimately serve as a decisive factor in ushering Roosevelt to victory. By the 1936 presidential campaign, however, both parties believed that attaining black votes would be crucial in winning the election.

The growing disillusionment with the Republican Party, however, did not translate into African Americans overwhelmingly supporting Roosevelt and his fellow Democrats. As Weiss and Sitkoff note, the early New Deal initiatives Roosevelt introduced during his first term intrigued many African Americans as offering potential paths out of economic destitution; yet he had done little to signal his widespread support to federally protect and broaden African Americans' civil rights.[354] Moreover, despite Roosevelt's initial efforts, such as creating his "Black Cabinet" of African American intellectuals and advisors, many blacks remained skeptical of the broader Democratic Party.[355] The strong, vocal contingent of southern white Democrats who staunchly opposed any and all efforts made by Roosevelt to impose federal civil rights

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[352] Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln, 4-12.*

[353] Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks,* 87.

[354] According to Weiss, prior to the 1936 election, "blacks were still peripheral to the main business of the new administration: handling the Depression…Blacks, like other Americans, were going to judge the new administration by the way it met their economic needs." Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln,* 33; see also Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks,* 34, 55.

[355] Kenneally, "Black Republicans During the New Deal," 117-122.

legislation concerned black voters who worried that they would continue to impede any efforts to initiate federal civil rights legislation.[356]

Ultimately, the fate of black voters heading into the 1936 election became a central issue for both parties. Republican congressmen Joseph W. Martin Jr. of Massachusetts observed this changing political landscape and urged Landon to court African American voters who remained wary of committing to the Democratic Party. Martin, who served as Landon's East Coast campaign manager, aimed to dissuade African Americans from aligning with the Democratic Party in a variety of ways. In particular, Martin and other GOP strategists attempted to discredit the Democratic Party's alleged interest in helping African Americans. According to Sitkoff, the GOP repeatedly pointed out "the President's dependence on race-baiting demagogues from the South and to the fact that the Democratic party label in Alabama bore the imprint 'white supremacy' on its masthead. Believing they needed the Northern Negro vote to win, the GOP widely publicized its stands against lynching and discrimination and the Democrats' refusal to adopt a civil rights plank."[357]

Painting Roosevelt as sympathetic to, or complicit with southern Democrats' policies was only one of Martin's strategies to dissuade African Americans from voting for the Democratic candidate. Martin also understood that courting African American voters to support Landon would require attaining a number of celebrity endorsements. Coming off of his triumphant performance in Berlin, Martin believed that having Owens publicly endorse and drum up black support for Landon at a series of campaign events across the East Coast would help break up

[356] Kenneally, "Black Republicans During the New Deal," 119.

[357] Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks,* 92-93.

Roosevelt's growing coalition of black Democratic supporters and help elect Landon.[358] Beginning in early September, Martin and other members of Landon's campaign team persuaded Owens to stump for the Republican candidate in exchange for a sizeable fee. Owens viewed the arrangement in a similar manner to endorsing a commercial product; it was a means to use his celebrity status to make money; the political implications of his endorsement were a secondary concern. His central focus was on attaining financial security to support his family. For most African American journalists, however, it marked a sudden and dramatic change in how they treated Owens. His endorsement infuriated many black journalists, who argued that Owens had sold his name and reputation to a politician who had shown little interest in protecting African Americans' political and economic rights. Furthermore, it exposed tensions between the constraints black journalists placed on Owens as a symbol of black manhood and his personal desire to support his family.

Although it was never officially confirmed, Landon's campaign team most likely paid Owens between $10,000 and $15,000 to give speeches at a number of events throughout the fall of 1936.[359] The veracity of these claims mattered little to black journalists, who assumed Owens took money from Landon, and repeatedly criticized him for doing so.[360] Owens repeatedly tried to downplay or ignore this issue by declaring that his support for Landon resulted from his genuine admiration of the candidate and belief in his political agenda. On September 5, when news of Owens's support of Landon became public, Owens declared to the *Amsterdam News* that he found Landon to be a "sincere man," one who "does not promise a lot of things but what

[358] Kenneally, "Black Republicans During the New Deal," 122.

[359] Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 136-138.

[360] See "'Kids' Boo Landon at G.O.P. Rally Featuring Jesse Owens," *Pittsburgh Courier,* October 10, 1936, 1.

promises he makes, I think he will keep."[361] Owens also claimed that his support stemmed in part from Landon publicly commending Owens's Olympic achievements.[362] A month later, Owens reiterated his support, claiming that, "Governor Landon's cause is our cause. He is the only presidential candidate who can better conditions for the Negro."[363] Owens's statements illustrate his efforts to express his support for Landon in clear, basic terms. Landon's sincerity, political credibility, and public recognition of Owens's achievements signified to the track star that Landon had the broader African American community's best interests at heart.

Many black journalists, however, saw Landon not as a sincere and honest politician who fought for blacks, but rather as a politician who was wholly indifferent to the issues concerning African Americans. During the summer of 1936, before Owens endorsed Landon, the *Courier,* among other black newspapers, repeatedly declared that Landon perpetuated a culture of racial discrimination by refusing to challenge Jim Crow policies in his home state of Kansas, where he served as Governor between 1933 and 1937.[364] In an August 8 editorial, the newspaper derided Landon for these policies and his frequent political inaction, stressing that a number of influential black Republicans in Kansas had grown disillusioned with the party and had aligned with Roosevelt. The editorial questioned why African Americans should vote for Landon instead of reelecting Roosevelt, stating that, "at worst Governor Landon is extremely cold to the colored people and we had enough of his kind in President Hoover. At best he is only a pale reflection of

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[361] "Jesse Owens Backs Landon," *New York Amsterdam News,* September 5, 1936, 20.

[362] As the *Pittsburgh Courier's* S.B. Wilkins noted, Owens was hurt after President Roosevelt did not personally congratulate him after his triumph in Berlin. When Landon quickly congratulated Owens, he felt strongly that it showed how much Landon cared for Owens, making it much easier for him to support the candidate for President. S.B. Wilkins, "Jesse Talks About Olympic Triumphs at Landon Meeting," *Pittsburgh Courier,* October 10, 1936, 2.

[363] "Jesse Owens Given Heroes Welcome by Chicagoans," *Associated Negro Press,* October 12, 1936, Box 402, Folder 15, Claude A. Barnett Papers, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

[364] See "Landon Scored on Race Issues," *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 25, 1936, 6; and "Landon Won't Talk But His Actions Are Jim Crow," *Afro-American,* August 1, 1936, 4.

Roosevelt. So why change?"[365] By highlighting his checkered political history with regards to legally protecting African Americans' rights, the newspaper further indicated that their objection to the Republican candidate was firmly rooted in protecting African Americans from electing a candidate who they believed would harm their everyday lives.

Frustration with Landon continued throughout the fall as other black newspapers amplified the *Courier's* beliefs. The *Afro-American,* for example, reported on October 3 that Landon's failure to eradicate racial discrimination at the University of Kansas triggered a mass exodus of black Republican voters to align with Roosevelt.[366] In an editorial in the same issue, the newspaper argued that Landon's belief that individual states, rather than the federal government, should oversee and administer New Deal unemployment laws, old-age pensions, and broader relief efforts would greatly harm African Americans. The editorial contended that, under state control, southern politicians would deny African Americans their legal right to these benefits. Landon's proposal, therefore, according to the *Afro-American,* "is equivalent to surrendering us to our enemies."[367] The *Amsterdam News* agreed with the *Afro-American* and the *Courier* that Roosevelt's New Deal policies, coupled with Landon's indifference toward African Americans, signaled that the time had come to transition the newspaper's longstanding support of the Republican Party toward the more progressive and liberal-minded policies of Roosevelt and most non-southern Democrats.[368]

Not all African American newspapers were stridently against Landon. The *Chicago Defender* stood as the lone major voice within the black press endorsing Landon for the

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[365] "Landon: His Heart's in the Wrong Place," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 8, 1936, 12.

[366] Ralph Matthews, "Afro Finds Kansas is Vocal on Landon," *Afro-American,* October 3, 1936, 1-2.

[367] "Selling us Down the River," *Afro-American,* October 3, 1936, 4.

[368] Floyd J. Calvin, "Negro Press for F.D.R.," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 24, 1936, 1-2.

presidency. This support stemmed from *Defender* publisher Robert Abbott's lifelong loyalty to the Republican Party. Although Abbott was intrigued by Roosevelt's positions toward African Americans prior to the 1932 election, by 1936, according to historian Ethan Michaeli, Roosevelt had done little to convince Abbott that he cared about protecting the interests of African American voters. Abbott, consequently, published "a series in *The Defender* that enumerated the president's misdeeds when it came to African Americans. Abbott railed against discrimination in New Deal programs and the exclusion of skilled black workers from the administration's large public works projects."[369] In a front-page editorial on October 10, the *Defender* advised readers to weigh a number of crucial factors when deciding which party to vote for in the upcoming election. Although Democrats in the North, East, and West had recently supported African Americans, the editorial argued that the immense political power of racist southern Democrats would prevent the party at large from allowing Roosevelt to enact legislation that would predominantly benefit African Americans.[370] Roosevelt's reelection, the newspaper contended, would do little to change how the party operated because those "who still believe in peonage, lynching, concubinage, segregation and disenfranchisement" ultimately controlled the party.[371]

Roosevelt's failure to fully support African Americans, thus, signaled to Abbott that black voters should not yet abandon the Republican Party. The *Defender*, as a result, situated Landon and his policies within the long legacy of Republican support for African Americans and their struggle for civil rights. However, as Michaeli notes, Abbott acknowledged that although the Republican Party's record on racial issues was less than sterling as well, "Roosevelt had not

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[369] Michaeli, *The Defender*, 218.

[370] "Governor Alfred M. Landon (An Editorial)," *Chicago Defender,* October 10, 1936, 1.

[371] "Governor Alfred M. Landon (An Editorial)," *Chicago Defender*.

fulfilled his vaunted promise to lead the Democrats in a new direction."[372] Consequently, the newspaper urged readers to vote for Landon because it believed he would carry on the traditions and policies of the Republican Party that had supported the African American community's cause for over 70 years.[373]

The newspaper's ardent support for the GOP did not lead to universal praise of Owens's efforts in stumping for Landon. When Owens announced his endorsement of the Republican candidate, the *Defender* initially lauded his decision. After a well-attended event in Chicago in early October, where Owens spoke in support of Landon, the newspaper argued that Owens was "a great American and a typical example of what this land of opportunity affords." Owens's participation in the event, the newspaper added, "was great for Jesse Owens, great for the Race and great for the Republican party and America."[374] The newspaper, however, soon criticized Owens when he "appeared extremely embarrassed" after talking about his Olympic triumphs instead of declaring his support for Landon in front of Republican supporters at a disastrous campaign event in Columbus, Ohio in mid-October. His poor performance, the newspaper concluded, illustrated that Owens was

> Ill advised when he accepted his political birth on Landon's bandwagon, or any other politician's for that matter…It is claimed here that some unforeseen force misguided the world's greatest sprinter, only to wreck the glory he had achieved and wrest from him his laurels. It is considered here by many as a very unsportsmanly act.[375]

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[372] Michaeli, *The Defender*, 128.

[373] "Governor Alfred M. Landon (An Editorial)," *Chicago Defender*. The newspaper's support of the Republican Party also included publishing a number of articles throughout the fall accusing the Democratic Party of unjustly smearing Landon's political reputation among black voters in order to increase support for Roosevelt. See "Democrats Spread 'Lie' on What Landon Said," *Chicago Defender,* October 31, 1936, 20; and David Monroe Adams, "Kansas Educator Comes Out for Landon; Cites His Record of Fairness," *Chicago Defender,* October 17, 1936, 1-2.

[374] "Large Crowd Hears Owens in Talk Here," *The Chicago Defender,* October 17, 1936, 2.

[375] "Jesse Owens is Speaker at Columbus Meet," *The Chicago Defender,* October 17, 1936, 5.

The *Defender's* criticism of Owens, however, did not signal that Owens had picked the wrong political party to support, as other black newspapers suggested; the *Defender* continued to support Landon's candidacy despite Owens's actions. Instead, according to the *Defender,* his embarrassing behavior indicated that the track star had made an egregious mistake in attempting to leverage his athletic celebrity to influence black voters to elect Landon. Therefore, the *Defender's* attitudes ultimately echoed much of what other black newspapers argued when analyzing Owens's foray into the political world: he had no business weighing in on political matters. In doing so, he threatened to damage the image black journalists had disseminated that he was an upstanding black man.

The *Defender's* criticism of Owens's efforts on the campaign trail was relatively sparse compared to how other major black newspapers treated Owens's political actions. Upon announcing his support for Landon in September, the *Courier, Amsterdam News,* and *Afro-American* repeatedly criticized his decision. These censures were printed throughout each newspaper, as black journalists vilified Owens on the front-page, in editorials and letters to the editor, and in sports columns. When Owens announced his endorsement of Landon, an *Afro-American* editorial questioned his decision, declaring that Owens was not qualified to publicly support a politician. The editorial sarcastically noted that Owens had made a mistake because he believed "that the ownership of a good pair of legs entitles him to give advice on politics."[376] The editorial added that, in the newspaper's opinion, Owens's lack of political knowledge meant that his support of Landon was worth little more than if he, or a star baseball player, had endorsed breakfast foods or other commercial products.[377]

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[376] "Jesse Okeys Landon," *The Afro-American,* September 12, 1936, 4.

[377] "Jesse Okeys Landon," *The Afro-American*.

The *Courier* was similarly disappointed with Owens's decision, arguing that his endorsement had little to do with political conviction. The substantial amount of money Landon allegedly paid him for the endorsement, the newspaper claimed, triggered Owens's newfound interest in supporting the Republican candidate.[378] Although Owens denied that Landon paid him, the *Courier* argued that it was the only reasonable explanation for why Owens, who had previously worked as a page for the Democratic legislature in Ohio while he attended Ohio State University, would suddenly switch his political allegiance.[379] The allegation frustrated Owens, who declared that his decision to support Landon was driven in part by the fact that, upon winning gold in Berlin, Landon had personally congratulated Owens. Roosevelt, Owens alleged, never contacted him, leaving the track star hurt for being "snubbed" by the President.[380]

Yet as the *Courier* noted, Owens failed to mention that Roosevelt had not congratulated *any* athlete. In fact, no President had ever made such a public gesture to an individual Olympian. Owens's complaint, therefore, according to the newspaper, seemed unnecessary; more importantly, Owens's claims failed to add up. The newspaper wondered if it was "possible that the Republican campaign fund had anything to do with the momentous decision of Mr. Jesse Owens? Or is our Jesse really just whooping for Landon on account of a telegram?"[381] Owens's statements ultimately mattered little to the *Courier,* which argued that his actions suggested that he was susceptible to being easily persuaded to support a political campaign because of either trivial or financial reasons. The newspaper, therefore, viewed his endorsement of Landon as little

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[378] Porter Roberts, "Praise and Criticism," *Pittsburgh Courier,* October 31, 1936, A9. See also "This Week's Mississippi Editorial," *Pittsburgh Courier,* October 10, 1936, A8.

[379] "Owens States His Political Creed After Landon Visit," *Pittsburgh Courier,* September 19, 1936, 2.

[380] See "Owens was Snubbed," *Pittsburgh Courier,* October 17, 1936, 12; and Wilkins, "Jesse Talks About Olympic Triumphs at Landon Meeting," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

[381] "Owens was Snubbed," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

more than an effort by Landon to manipulate the young and impressionable black celebrity for his potential political gain.

Many statements Owens made throughout his time stumping for Landon further dismayed many black journalists. Following the black press' initial wave of criticism, Owens attempted to defuse the situation and retreat from his early support of Landon. On September 19, he claimed to the *Amsterdam News* that he had been misquoted with regards to his alleged support of Landon. In truth, Owens declared, "I believe I am too young to know anything about politics," adding that he was unsure if he would even vote for Landon.[382] Owens's retraction amused the newspaper's Floyd Calvin, who stated in a column the following week that it was "too bad Jesse was not tipped off earlier" about his lack of political acumen.[383] The comment angered Landon's political team, and Owens soon retracted his retraction and redoubled his efforts for the campaign.

But for many black journalists, the damage had already been done. Owens's admission proved many black journalists' contention that the track star was in over his head when he took up Landon's offer to endorse the candidate. Admitting that he might not even vote for the candidate he publicly supported, in the eyes of many black columnists, demonstrated how Owens had sold his name, athletic triumphs, and the celebrity cache that came with those accomplishments, to the Landon campaign to exploit and increase Landon's popularity among African American voters. Furthermore, it undermined black journalists' efforts to perpetuate an image of Owens as an upstanding and respectable gentleman who would not sully his reputation by wading into the political arena when he was unqualified to do so. Owens's behavior while on the campaign trail, particularly the sloppy, embarrassing, and poorly-received speeches he gave,

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[382] "'Back Landon?' - Owens Sticks to Running," *New York Amsterdam News,* September 19, 1936, 1.

[383] Floyd J. Calvin, "Around the World," *New York Amsterdam News,* September 26, 1936, 13.

frustrated many black journalists who worried that it threatened to tarnish his reputation.[384] To compound matters, the black press discovered that Owens had not registered to vote, confirming to the *Courier's* Porter Roberts that Owens had lost any credibility he may have had to endorse Landon.[385]

While many black journalists aired their frustrations with Owens's actions, the *Afro-American's* William N. Jones attempted to comprehensively examine Owens's political efforts. Over the course of three Op-Ed columns published from September to late October, Jones analyzed Owens's post-Berlin career, paying particular attention to study his decisions from the perspective of a young, newly popular black athletic hero attempting to capitalize off of his fame. On September 26, in assessing Owens's recent career choices, Jones cautioned the Olympian to consider how each decision he made might affect his long-term reputation among African Americans and white supporters. Jones argued that Owens "has a right to cash in on any amount of money as an athlete, but he has no right to place his athletic prestige on a political auction block in such a way that it may or may not work to the disadvantage of innocent people – especially innocent people who acclaim him."[386] Owen's popularity, Jones surmised, might persuade many African Americans to vote for Landon even though the Republican candidate had done little to protect black rights. Electing Landon, thus, would do immense damage to the black community, something Jones believed Owens had not fully contemplated when he endorsed the candidate.

Jones's statement also vividly exemplifies many black journalists' broader beliefs that celebrated black male athletes like Owens had a tremendous responsibility to protect their public

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[384] "'Kids' Boo Landon at G.O.P. Rally Featuring Jesse Owens," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

[385] Porter Roberts, "Praise and Criticism," *Pittsburgh Courier,* October 31, 1936, A9.

[386] Jones, "Day by Day," *The Afro-American*, September 26, 4.

image. As one of the few African American men of the era who had achieved such prominence, Owens could not squander this opportunity to stay in the good graces of a large and attentive white audience. Making an uninformed endorsement of Landon, according to Jones, threatened the prestigious reputation Owens had achieved and demonstrated how little Owens cared about how his actions might be perceived by a widespread, discerning audience. As Jones argued, "if Jesse believes that the attention he is receiving from the party bosses and the welcome he is alleged to have got from Landon means anything more than the routine of politics, he has some even sadder moments of disillusionment coming."[387] Such behavior, consequently, not only damaged Owens's reputation, it also risked causing the black community immense political, social, and economic harm. Jones, along with other black journalists, expected Owens to demonstrate a certain set of characteristics that embodied an upstanding black man that would reflect positively on how whites would perceive African Americans. The black press viewed Owens's attempts to sell his name and celebrity cache to the Landon campaign as antithetical to this effort. As a result, Jones's criticism illustrates the boundaries under which many black journalists deemed acceptable behavior for athletes like Owens to act outside the field of play.

As Owens continued to stump for Landon, Jones's criticism intensified. On October 10, he panned Owens's performances on the campaign trail. Describing him as a "befuddled young man" who had made numerous blunders at these events, Jones declared that many of Owens's supporters were embarrassed by his efforts to stump for Landon. To Jones, Owens, "while admitting that he is not a politician and has no right to try and tell people how to vote, is being hauled about the country as the vaudeville attraction in a partisan Presidential fight."[388] Yet by October 31, Jones had eased up on his relentless criticism of Owens. The track star's decision to

[387] William N. Jones, "Day by Day," *The Afro-American,* October 10, 1936, 4

[388] Jones, "Day by Day," *The Afro-American,* October 10, 1936, 4.

endorse Landon, according to Jones, resulted from bad advice Owens had received from his advisors. Jones wanted Owens to learn from the debacle and become more cognizant of how his reputation and status as a symbol of black manhood could be exploited by those close to him who cared little about protecting his best interests. Jones, furthermore, hoped that the experience might compel Owens in the future to campaign for issues that greatly concerned African Americans.[389] Collectively, these articles suggest that Jones and other black journalists criticized Owens's political actions in hopes that they might protect him, and other black athletes who attain such status, from being exploited by malevolent individuals. Moreover, their efforts stemmed from concerns that damaging Owens's reputation would also diminish the African American community's broader credibility and notions of black manhood and respectability.

Criticism of Owens's foray into politics resonated beyond black journalists as many African American newspaper readers lamented his decision to endorse Landon as well. Throughout the fall of 1936, readers of the *Courier, Afro-American,* and *Amsterdam News* expressed their disappointment with Owens's post-Berlin behavior. Many stated that the track hero had chosen the wrong candidate and political party to support. Backing Landon signified to *Amsterdam News* reader Rice Jennings that Owens had either overlooked or was unaware of how little Landon cared about protecting African Americans' rights.[390] Similarly, *Courier* reader James W. Payne was befuddled by Owens's decision given his earlier support of the Democratic Party. Payne stated that Owens must have understood how President Roosevelt's New Deal

[389] Jones, "Day by Day," *The Afro-American,* October 31, 1936, 4.

[390] "Uneasy Over Jesse," *New York Amsterdam News,* September 19, 1936, 12.

initiatives had helped blacks across the country, making him the right candidate for African Americans to support.[391]

While some reader criticism stemmed from their belief that Owens had supported the wrong candidate and political party, other African American readers argued that Owens should not be involved in politics at all as it undermined his image as a respectable black man. A group of African American men in the Young Negro League for Intelligent Leadership, for example, deemed Owens's endorsement of Landon a foolish miscalculation of using his celebrity status to alter the political race. The group sarcastically demanded that the Republican National Committee recruit other black celebrities like boxer Joe Louis and entertainer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson to endorse Landon so as to ensure that all African Americans would vote for the candidate. Their sarcasm exemplified their belief that Landon's campaign team thought very little of African Americans' political acumen; blacks would vote for Landon simply because their hero Jesse Owens endorsed him.[392]

Others, such as *Afro-American* reader R.T. Covington were more explicit in condemning Owens's political actions. Covington contended that Owens – and black celebrities more broadly – had the "crazy notion" that their fame entitled them to influence a political race.[393] Covington, therefore, echoed many black journalists' efforts to constrain black athletes' behavior in order to protect an image of upstanding black manhood and respectability. James Hall, moreover, wrote to the newspaper that Owens had no business getting involved in politics, arguing that his "athletic prowess certainly doesn't rate him as a political demagogue."[394] Taking Landon's

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[391] "Owens Was a Democrat Before Olympic, Claims," *Pittsburgh Courier,* October 17, 1936, A2.

[392] "League Sends Resolution," *New York Amsterdam News,* September 12, 1936, 12.

[393] "Running, Not Politics, is Owens's Forte, Says Writer," *The Afro-American,* September 12, 1936, 4.

[394] "No Politics, Jesse," *The Afro-American,* September 26, 1936, 4.

money and publicly supporting the Republican, to many black newspaper readers, signaled that Owens had disgraced himself by selling his fame and celebrity cache to the highest bidder.[395] Similarly, Charles Johnson, in a letter to the *Courier,* pleaded with Owens to not "sell your birthright for money and for promises and think because you're great, your people are going to follow behind you when you are leading them in a blind alley."[396] Johnson worried that by aligning with Landon, Owens had unknowingly compelled many African Americans to reevaluate their opinion of the Olympic hero. The Owens-Landon fiasco, Johnson surmised, sparked Owens's fall from grace and damaged his image as a symbol of respectability within the black community: "We have had many negroes reach the top and when they had a chance to do something to advance their people further, let someone buy them out…and in the end become victims of shame and disgrace."[397] Payne took a similarly pessimistic view of Owens's demise. After his triumphant victories in Berlin, Payne declared that blacks nearly unanimously viewed Owens as the "Ideal Man," full of prestige, honor, and respect from both whites and blacks throughout the world. But Payne felt that if Owens "wished to remain the ideal hero and maintain his own self respect he should not have committed himself to the political questions."[398] Collectively, these black readers' opinions exemplify the larger issue expressed throughout black newspapers in the fall of 1936 that, as a black celebrity, Owens had a responsibility to act in an upstanding manner. Weighing in on a contentious political race because he was a popular black

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[395] See "Just for Jesse Owens," *The Afro-American,* November 21, 1936, 4; and "Jesse Offside," *The Afro-American,* November 28, 1936, 4.

[396] "Warns Jesse Owens," *Pittsburgh Courier,* October 3, 1936, A2. Payne used similar language in his letter to the *Courier,* asking if Owens had "sold his birthright for a mess of political pottage?" "Owens Was a Democrat Before Olympic, Claims," *Pittsburgh Courier.*

[397] "Warns Jesse Owens," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

[398] "Owens Was a Democrat Before Olympic, Claims," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

athlete, therefore, was viewed by many black journalists and their readers as undermining the broader effort to present Owens as a respectable black man to a white, mainstream audience.

Not all readers agreed with black journalists' criticisms of Owens's actions. Mrs. Rudolph A. Schaefer expressed anger and disappointment over the *Courier's* Porter Roberts's relentless and unnecessary attacks on Owens's character. These accusatory articles, Schaefer argued, hindered the advancement of the African American community as a whole.[399] In an unsigned letter written to the *Amsterdam News,* moreover, a reader stated that the newspaper had unfairly criticized Owens's right to endorse whichever candidate he preferred. The newspaper's penchant for ridiculing Owens's endorsement, the letter noted, represented "a touch of tragedy at the unfair attitude of a misguided few among our people."[400]

Yet these sentiments were far outnumbered by readers who wrote to major black newspapers during the campaign season criticizing Owens's actions. For the most part, many readers worried that Owens had made a terrible mistake in supporting Landon. Specifically, many thought that Owens had struggled to transition from achieving athletic glory in Berlin to having the black press scrutinize his every thought and action. The endless praise, adulation, and massive parades showering down on Owens, coupled with the lucrative financial offers allegedly being made, therefore, may have made it difficult for Owens to comprehend how many black journalists' expectations of him had shifted. As an Olympic hero who embodied black manhood and respectability, many black sportswriters held Owens to a very high set of standards with regards to his public behavior. The products Owens endorsed, the political candidates he supported, and the comments he made in front of white sports officials carried widespread ramifications for many within the African American community. Black journalists, therefore,

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[399] "Owens No Joke," *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 21, 1936, A2.

[400] "Defense of Owens," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 10, 1936, 14.

focused on how Owens's endorsement of Landon would damage his credibility in the public eye. Much of this stemmed from their opinion that Owens did not truly support Governor Landon's political agenda. His endorsement, according to black journalists, was bought by the Landon campaign.[401] Yet placing constraints on Owens's actions conflicted with his personal needs to support his family and attain an economically secure and comfortable lifestyle wholly unlike the poverty he experienced as a child. Most African American journalists neglected to consider how these personal factors may have motivated Owens's decision to take Landon's money. Consequently, the tension between black journalists and Owens over endorsing Landon illustrate the broader challenge African American athletes like Owens faced in attempting to adhere to a set of guidelines constructed and administered by black journalists to exhibit upstanding behavior while also fulfilling their personal needs.

Conclusion: Falling From Grace

As the 1936 presidential election results came in, it was clear that Owens's endorsement of Landon did little to help the Republican candidate's overall chances at victory. Roosevelt defeated Landon by the widest margin of electoral votes in American history. The loss similarly left Owens in a defeated and difficult situation. Owens had drawn the black press' ire for endorsing Landon, yet the job was the only substantial, lucrative offer he had taken since the end of the Olympic Games. With the AAU refusing to lift its suspension of Owens from all amateur events, Owens had very few opportunities to make a living off of his athleticism. The money accrued from the Landon campaign should have provided Owens and his family with a necessary

[401] As historian William Baker notes, it is difficult to ascertain Owens's definitive opinion on this issue because he often revised his position on this moment, and many others, in his life. Owens repeatedly contradicted or refashioned major critical moments throughout his life when he gave speeches later in his life. Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 136-137.

financial cushion to allow Owens to pursue other career opportunities at his own pace in the coming months. However, as Baker notes, Owens was a spendthrift; despite earning nearly $20,000 that fall – more than ten times what the average household earned annually in 1936 – he lavishly spent most of it on a number of high-priced goods.[402] Given Owens's impoverished upbringing, where his family struggled mightily to simply feed and clothe Owens and his siblings, his desire to enjoy the spoils of his Olympic triumph made sense to an extent. Owens, however, quickly understood that, in order to maintain an affluent, comfortable lifestyle, he had to pursue any business opportunity available. But the AAU's refusal to lift its suspension of Owens, coupled with the mainstream business community's declining interest in Owens, severely limited his options.

By December 1936, Owens, eager to showcase his athleticism to a large audience, traveled to Cuba for an exhibition race. Owens, however, did not race against other top track stars. When news of the event reached the AAU, the organization threatened to ban Cuban athlete Conrado Rodrigues from all amateur events in the United States if he raced Owens. Rodrigues complied, and other opponents, worried that the AAU would levy similar punishments against them, followed suit.[403] Thus, on a rainy afternoon in late December, Owens outdueled Julio McCaw, a prized thoroughbred horse, after being given a 40-yard head start.[404] The *New York Amsterdam News*, in announcing the upcoming event, noted that "Owens' participation, incidentally, definitely ends his amateur standing…but the fleet-footed champion is not

[402] Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 139-141, 151. Owens was particularly susceptible of buying new cars every year.

[403] Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 141.

[404] "Owen Passes Horse, and Now Asks Comet," *New York Amsterdam News,* January 2, 1937, 1

apparently bothered about that."[405] Indeed, Owens said little to the press about the incident, stating briefly after the event that he felt "good to get out on the cinders again" and compete.[406]

When Owens reflected on the event 30 years later in his autobiography, *Blackthink,* however, he stated that the offer made him want to "throw up." By agreeing to the race, Owens felt that he had "sold myself into a new kind of slavery. I was no longer a proud man who had won four Olympic medals. I was a spectacle, a freak who made his living by competing – dishonestly – against dumb animals. I hated it."[407] The black press agreed with Owens's self-assessment. After the race, the *Amsterdam News* ruefully noted that, having outraced a horse, Owens's managers ought to match him "against comets, bullets, and pocketbook snatchers" in future events.[408] Owens's actions embarrassed many African Americans, who worried that despite bringing him short-term economic relief, the race did more long-term damage to his reputation.[409] Moreover, racing a horse served to strip Owens of his dignity, dehumanizing him and distilling all of his charm, personality and athletic skill to focus strictly on his physicality.

Owens's embarrassment over racing a horse was compounded by his failure to win the James E. Sullivan award, which was designated by a group of white sportswriters and sports officials to the most outstanding amateur athlete of the year. The decision to give the award to Olympic decathlon champion Glenn Morris stunned Owens and many black sportswriters. The *Courier's* W. Rollo Wilson, for example, argued that Owens had amassed a far more impressive

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[405] "Can Jesse Go Faster Than Nag?" *New York Amsterdam News,* December 26, 1936, 15.

[406] "Owen Passes Horse, and Now Asks Comet," *New York Amsterdam News*.

[407] Owens, *Blackthink,* 50.

[408] The article added sarcastically that, "although it hasn't been announced officially, the only two-legged anything left for the Ohio State demon to compete against is the Kangaroo – in possibly the broad jump." "Owen Passes Horse, and Now Asks Comet," *New York Amsterdam News*.

[409] "Owens Will Be 'Unsung' Says Miller," *New York Amsterdam News*, January 9, 1937, 15.

Olympic record than Morris. Only Owens's skin color, Wilson contended, prevented him from winning the award.[410] The *Afro-American,* moreover, declared in an editorial that Owens lost because, while "600 voters made a brave effort to forget Owens' color…the Southern element was too strong and too prejudiced."[411] The *Amsterdam News'* Roi Ottley similarly declared that voters had let their racial prejudice cloud their judgment.[412] The Sullivan Award was awarded based on an amateur athlete's on-field performance while demonstrating an ability to uphold notions of sportsmanship and fair play. Owens, Ottley argued, had passed this test with flying colors and had inspired both black and white children to be better athletes and citizens.[413]

Yet while many journalists initially blamed the snub on white racial prejudice, Owens's defiance of the AAU's wishes to perform at every stop on the post-Olympic exhibition tour may have played a significant role in the outcome. As Baker notes, although AAU officials explicitly implored voters to disregard Owens's post-Olympic endeavors, many used his efforts to cash in on his performances against him.[414] Ottley concurred, arguing that the racial prejudice of some voters kept Owens off of their ballots, while his "to-be-or-not-to-be attitude about turning pro" offended a more substantial contingent of voters.[415]

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[410] W. Rollo Wilson, "Thru' the Eyes," *Pittsburgh Courier,* January 9, 1937, 16. Wilson added that, given Owens's stellar performance in 1935 as well as 1936, the track star should have won the award twice.

[411] "Who is Glenn Morris," *Afro-American,* January 9, 1937, 4.

[412] The *Chicago Defender,* finally, noted that not all white sportswriters agreed with the outcome. Shirley Povich and William F. McDermott contended that the racial prejudice of some journalists had prevented them from making the rational decision to vote for Owens. "D.C. Scribe Hits AAU About Owens," *Chicago Defender,* January 16, 1937, 17; and William F. McDermott, "Daily Sports Scribe Hits Snub of Owens," *Chicago Defender,* January 16, 1937, 15, 17.

[413] Roi Ottley, "Sportopics," *New York Amsterdam News,* January 9, 1937, 14.

[414] The voting results between Morris and Owens were incredibly close, with Owens earning 1,106 points to Owens's 1,013. The margin of victory most likely resulted from the fact that many voters kept Owens off of their ballots entirely, while Morris appeared on every ballot in either first, second, or third place. Baker, *Jesse Owens,* 144-145.

[415] Roi Ottley, "Sportopics," *New York Amsterdam News,* January 9, 1937, 14.

The snub, coupled with Owens's race against a horse in Havana, served as a cruel epithet that capped a rollercoaster year for Owens. In a few short months, he went from reaching the peak of athletic stardom as black and white fans across the globe cheered his Olympic victories. Yet the glory he attained did little to help line his pocket with endorsement money he desperately needed to support his family. Finishing the year racing a horse, thus, vividly illustrates the very stark limitations in place for black amateur athletes like Owens at that time.

Yet more importantly, Owens's decision to stump for Landon – to cash in his celebrity cache in hopes of influencing African American voters – reveals a much broader and more profound shift in African American politics. Prior to the 1930s, Owens's public support of a GOP presidential candidate most likely would not have been derided to the same extent. Yet crucial changes that reshaped African American communities across the country – the First Great Migration, the Great Depression and Republican President Hoover's antipathy toward providing blacks with any semblance of economic relief – compelled some African Americans, beginning in 1932, to question their longstanding, largely unwavering loyalty to the GOP. President Roosevelt's New Deal agenda, while imperfect given his reluctance to fully commit to usher in civil rights initiatives, convinced many more blacks to rethink their political allegiances. Thus, in some ways, Owens's endorsement of Landon exposed his inability to see how black politics had changed.

Analyzing how African American journalists treated Owens's endorsement of Landon illustrates that the black press held Owens to a high set of standards regarding his behavior both on and off the track. As one of the few African American men who had become well-liked by a broad contingent of white America, black journalists argued, Owens had a responsibility to present himself as an exemplar of black moral and physical fitness. Allowing himself to be

manipulated by Landon's political team in a brazen effort to court black voters, in the eyes of the African American press, threated to undermine the progress he had made in changing how some whites viewed Owens, and the black community more broadly, just a few weeks before in Berlin. Furthermore, it reveals how, throughout his career both prior to and immediately following the Olympic Games, the black press' expectations that Owens utilize his rare opportunity as a star athlete to serve as a symbol of black manhood and respectability repeatedly conflicted with his personal needs and desires.

More broadly, they demonstrate the tensions inherent in how the black press framed Owens as embodying the ideal characteristics of black manhood and respectability. African American journalists' shifting attitudes toward Owens's attempts to monetize his athletic achievements highlights how their definition of acceptable behavior for black male celebrities often developed *in response to* Owens's actions. His desire to make money to support his family, in other words, was initially hailed by black journalists as a sign that Owens was fulfilling his duties as an upstanding black man. *How* he attempted to achieve this goal, however, revealed the black press' conflicting attitudes regarding what was deemed acceptable behavior for a black athlete like Owens. Wading into the political arena to endorse a candidate and a political party that most African Americans were largely abandoning at that point at time, thus, exemplifies how many black journalists deemed his actions as inappropriate only after Owens had committed the gaffe. The tragedy of Owens's rapid fall from beloved Olympic hero to a flawed former athlete, thus, demonstrates the very real challenges black male athletes faced when attempting to monetize that fame while remaining an upstanding gentleman.

Chapter 3

Benched No More: The Black Press Challenges the Gentleman's Agreement in College Football, 1929-1940

Introduction

Although the black press scrutinized Joe Louis and Jesse Owens's careers – particularly their off-the-field behavior – in different ways, African American journalists contended that both were exemplars of black moral and physical fitness who embodied upstanding, respectable black manhood. Since both athletes were able to compete at the highest level in their respective sports – albeit while continuing to endure racial prejudice from white sports officials, journalists, and fans – black journalists framed their on-field achievements as symbols of African American ability and an indication that blacks deserved racial equality in sports, and society more broadly. Yet, in assessing their off-the-field actions, the black press' definition of respectability for both athletes posited that they avoid unnecessarily confronting whites, particularly in contentious arenas concerning politics and economics. Much of this stemmed from concerns over how such behavior would echo Jack Johnson's legacy and cause white sports fans to look down on black athletic achievement.

Black players at major college football programs in the late 1920s and 1930s, on the other hand, encountered a different on-field environment that resulted in the black press defining their value to the broader struggle for racial equality from a different perspective. The racial politics within college football – where African Americans joined some predominantly white, integrated northern teams but were completely barred from all-white teams in the South – placed black players in direct opposition to southern segregation. As the sport's popularity increased in the early 1900s, teams competed against opponents from far outside their geographic region. These intersectional games often pitted all-white southern squads against integrated teams from the

North, Midwest, and West. Southern schools, however, refused to take the field against any African American player. In order to avoid cancelling these games and frustrating fan bases at both schools, college football programs developed the Gentleman's Agreement, an unofficial policy between football coaches and school officials in which integrated teams sat their black players against all-white southern squads. The Gentleman's Agreement developed slowly during the early twentieth century; but by the late 1920s, it had become a well-established element of college football.

As a result, it allowed all-white college football programs to dictate the pace at which African American players gained an opportunity to compete. Moreover, although unable to prevent other schools from integrating, the Gentleman's Agreement allowed southern sports officials to perpetuate a culture within the sport that denigrated African American players and marginalized their accomplishments. As long as all-white southern teams could keep blacks off the field during intersectional games, substantial progress in achieving racial equality broadly throughout the sport would remain out of reach. Likewise, when integrated teams agreed to the Gentleman's Agreement, they suggested to African Americans that the school was not committed to protecting the rights of its black players.[416] Eradicating the Gentleman's Agreement, thus, was essential for black athletes to feel fully accepted within the sport.

Yet in attacking the policy, black journalists were divided over how to treat African American players caught in the middle of these conflicts. Many lauded them for gaining an opportunity to compete at the sport's highest level, a rarity for most black college football players at the time. Yet others ridiculed them for failing to demand that they play. This passivity, in the eyes of some journalists, signified that the players were unmanly and cowardly. These

[416] It also indirectly compelled some teams to have only one or two black players on the roster at a time because having a significant number of African Americans on the roster would put the team at a tremendous disadvantage when they sat these players in intersectional games.

criticisms often overlooked why black players felt pressured into accepting their school's wishes, which suggests that some African American journalists prioritized the symbolic value of these players challenging white sports officials above a player's personal career ambitions. Some African American sportswriters, therefore, sought to situate black players into the center of a larger struggle to eradicate segregation in sports that they did not want to be a part of.

The frustration levied by some African American journalists reflects a broader theme found across the black press' coverage of prominent African American athletes during this time: given the rare opportunity to compete against whites, African American athletes – in the eyes of black journalists – had a responsibility to challenge the racially discriminatory culture they encountered. Part of this entailed that – like Owens and Louis – black college football players needed to exhibit upstanding, gentlemanly behavior on the field of play, which African American journalists felt would help persuade white football officials and fans to accept black athletes within the sport to a greater extent. Yet unlike in individual sports like track and field and boxing, many black journalists believed that African American college football players on integrated teams had to do more than simply help their teams win; they also had to actively challenge the Gentleman's Agreement's culture of racial discrimination and inequality as part of a broader initiative to eradicate racial injustice in the sporting world. Black college football players, therefore, were burdened with the heightened expectation of balancing attempting to win on the field of play with also leading the attack on university officials that acquiesced to the Gentleman's Agreement.

This chapter's analysis of African American journalists' efforts to eradicate the Gentleman's Agreement prior to World War II challenges scholarship that has overlooked the black press' role in initiating a campaign to increase opportunities for African American college

football players in the late 1920s and 1930s. In doing so, it broadens historians Lane Demas and Charles Martin's investigations of African Americans' efforts to eliminate the Gentleman's Agreement after World War II. Martin's *Benching Jim Crow* chronicles how most southern schools developed the Gentleman's Agreement in the early twentieth century and fought to keep their football teams all-white into the 1960s and early 1970s.[417] While Martin's work carefully recounts how these schools enforced the color line in college football and college basketball, he focuses on how the policy eroded after World War II and only briefly examines how African Americans challenged the policy in the 1930s.[418] Lane Demas's *Integrating the Gridiron* complements Martin's work by exploring how black football players at four major universities fought for and attained greater opportunities on integrated teams. Through an interregional approach examining the struggle to integrate the sport across the country, Demas challenges the historical tendency to frame civil rights efforts as occurring overwhelmingly in the South.[419] Yet like Martin, Demas's emphasis primarily on efforts that took place after World War II – only one of his four case studies occurred prior to the war – results in a limited analysis of how the Gentleman's Agreement shaped the sport's racially discriminatory culture in the late 1920s and 1930s. Additionally, both Martin and Demas situate African American journalists as one of many voices in the conflict over college football's Gentleman's Agreement. In doing so, they

[417] Martin's investigation analyzes the effect the policy had in both college football and basketball. African Americans challenged each sport's Gentleman's Agreement and its effect on black players in both sports in slight different ways.

[418] The Gentleman's Agreement, ultimately, serves as only one element of Martin's investigation because he focuses primarily on how and why different segregated southern schools integrated during this era.

[419] Demas, *Integrating the Gridiron,* 4.

diminish how black journalists' efforts to challenge the policy stood at the forefront of this campaign.[420]

This chapter, in contrast, places African American journalists' efforts to eradicate the Gentleman's Agreement prior to World War II at the center of the narrative. In doing so, it emphasizes that the struggles Demas and Martin chronicle were rooted in debates made primarily by the black press in the late 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, while African American sportswriters only occasionally succeeded in overturning the policy during this time, their coverage sparked widespread debate among readers, university administrators, and civil rights leaders that influenced efforts to attain widespread integration within college football throughout the postwar era. The tension among black journalists over whether or not black players should actively challenge the policy – at the risk of sacrificing their athletic career and college education – further illustrates the difficulties African American journalists experienced in defining black manhood and respectability for college football players in ways that often conflicted with an athlete's personal interests.

Finally, the cases studied in this chapter challenge the tendency to focus strictly on efforts to desegregate a sport or institution. Indeed, the struggles African American college football players faced and the expectations black sportswriters had for them were unique even within team sports at that time. Unlike the wholly segregated Major League Baseball, college football was never strictly segregated during this era. All-black teams existed at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) throughout this period, and some integrated schools and universities outside of the South added African Americans to their rosters beginning in the late

[420] Demas, *Integrating the Gridiron,* 21-22.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[421] Thus, unlike the integration of Major League Baseball in 1947, college football lacked a singular "Jackie Robinson moment" where one individual broke the sport's color barrier and sparked widespread acceptance of blacks within the sport. The sport's integration, therefore, occurred on a smaller, more localized, school-by-school basis.[422] More importantly, the Gentleman's Agreement, which denied African Americans an opportunity to compete on a level playing field where they felt safe and accepted by both teammates and opponents alike, perpetuated a culture within the sport that asserted white racial superiority. This chapter's emphasis on black journalists' efforts to overturn the policy, consequently, compels scholars to examine how the acceptance of the policy shaped the struggle to integrate the sport and black journalists' expectations for how African American college football players would best demonstrate their manhood.

Although black journalists had challenged the Gentleman's Agreement prior to the late 1920s, the first large-scale effort to end the policy occurred in 1929. For the next fifteen years, African American sportswriters criticized integrated schools that acquiesced to the Gentleman's Agreement. Although the policy began to dissipate incrementally over the fifteen-year period, it did so in an erratic and disjointed manner. Football programs such as New York University (NYU) repeatedly failed to force all-white southern schools to end the policy, while the

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[421] While African Americans sought to increase the number of black college football players at major programs, they continued to develop and increase interest in football programs at HBCUs. Promoting HBCU football, however, did not affect the central effort of fighting to eradicate the sport's Gentleman's Agreement. Unlike in professional baseball, where the continued presence of the Negro Leagues was viewed by many white baseball officials as an admission by African Americans that they accepted and flourished within the sport's segregated environment, supporting HBCU football was not seen as antithetical to the broader agenda of increasing opportunities for black players at major college football programs. For more on the history of HBCU football, see Hurd, *Black College Football, 1892-1992*; and Samuel G. Freedman, *Breaking the Line: The Season in Black College Football That Transformed the Sport and Changed the Course of Civil Rights,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

[422] Historian Lane Demas frames this process as a force made up of countless integrating moments spanning from 1888 when William Lewis became the first black player at Amherst College to 1972, when the University of Mississippi, Louisiana State University, and the University of Georgia were the final three major college football teams to integrate. Demas, *Integrating the Gridiron*, 6, 11.

University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) successfully compelled three all-white southern schools to play its integrated team. Some all-white schools such as the University of Maryland refused to play an integrated team, only to modify its position a year later. In each instance, the black press, civil rights leaders, and segments of the student population at each integrated school challenged officials at both integrated and all-white programs to end the policy. Coaches, athletic directors, and school administrators at integrated programs usually bore the brunt of the black press' vitriol. These attacks tended to outnumber those levied at officials at all-white programs, suggesting that black journalists may have felt that their words would fail to persuade southern school officials to end the Gentleman's Agreement.

This chapter investigates how African American players at four universities dealt with the obstacles presented by the Gentleman's Agreement from 1929 to 1940. New York University's acquiescence to the University of Georgia's demands to sit Dave Myers for a 1929 game triggered the black press' first widespread campaign to eradicate the Gentleman's Agreement. Despite the extensive and scathing critiques levied at NYU, the school became ensnared in a nearly identical scandal in 1940 when the university benched Leonard Bates against the University of Missouri. The school's repeated inability to challenge the Gentleman's Agreement serves as bookends to this chapter's exploration of how the black press' efforts to eradicate the policy changed over the eleven-year period. Moreover, their division over how Myers and Bates should participate in the campaign to overturn the policy reveals the obstacles black college players faced in upholding the black press' notions of upstanding black manhood while fighting to eradicate the Gentleman's Agreement.

Similarly, the University of Iowa's Ozzie (Oze) Simmons's struggle to feel accepted and safe among his own teammates throughout his career from 1934 to 1936 exemplifies the

difficulty black college football players – and the black journalists who covered them – faced in changing the sport's racially discriminatory culture. Black journalists initially sympathized with Simmons, arguing that, although the sport had slowly begun to integrate, the culture – as perpetuated by the Gentleman's Agreement – had not yet embraced black athletes. Their attitudes changed, however, when Simmons attempted to escape college football's punishing environment and cash in by playing professionally. Simmons's actions, according to some black journalists, sullied his reputation as an upstanding gentleman because of *how* he attempted to capitalize off his popularity.

Syracuse University's Wilmeth Sidat-Singh's encounter with the policy in 1937, meanwhile, closely paralleled the struggles Bates and Myers experienced at NYU. Yet, as the black press argued, the decision to sit Sidat-Singh occurred only after African American journalist Sam Lacy informed white sports officials that Sidat-Singh was African American and not an Indian-American as they had previously assumed. The decision to force Sidat-Singh to the bench, therefore, revealed southern sports officials' zealous commitment to uphold racial boundaries despite glaring inconsistencies based upon assumed racial, ethnic, and religious identities; it also highlighted tensions among some black journalists regarding opportunities to pass as another racial and avoid racial persecution. Finally, by the end of the 1930s, the UCLA's three "sepia stars" – Kenny Washington, Woody Strode, and Jackie Robinson – galvanized black journalists to be more proactive in challenging and eliminating opportunities for segregated schools to enforce the Gentleman's Agreement.

While African American journalists covered other instances where the Gentleman's Agreement denied black players their rightful opportunity to compete, these five cases exemplify the challenges black journalists, civil rights officials, and black players faced in attempting to

celebrate black achievement in college football while also fighting to eradicate the sport's racially discriminatory culture. Tensions among African American journalists developed over how black college football players should use their position within the sport to assist in the broader cause of eliminating the Gentleman's Agreement, which often stood at odds with their personal ambition to compete. As a result, it illustrates the difficulty African American journalists experienced in selling black athletes at major college football programs as symbols of black manhood and respectability as part of the broader struggle for racial equality.

Manliness and Racial Exclusion: The Creation of the Gentleman's Agreement

College football's symbolic value to African American journalists who used the sport – and black college football players – as a vehicle to demonstrate black moral and physical fitness was rooted in the belief that the sport nurtured ideas about manhood. Like boxing, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, men such Theodore Roosevelt and Walter Camp believed that a rugged, often violent activity like football could reveal a man's power and virility. These attitudes, consequently, contributed to the increasing popularity of college football at the turn of the twentieth century.[423] Beginning in the late nineteenth century, many elite universities, primarily in the East and Midwest, created intercollegiate football programs for their schools to address the growing demand from young collegiate men hungry for more opportunities to exert their physical prowess. The sport was particularly popular among men at Ivy League schools such as Yale, Harvard, and Princeton, who viewed the sport as an ideal activity to heighten and

[423] Championing the Strenuous Life on the gridiron was only one of a number of factors spurring greater interest in the sport on college campuses. Students, school administrators, and sportswriters began to view college football as a means to bring notoriety and prestige to one's alma mater. Heated matchups between rivals, thus, served as a symbol for one school's superiority over another. For more on the growth of college football at the turn of the twentieth century, see Michael Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle,* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Michael Oriard, *King Football: Sport and Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio and Newsreels, Movies and Magazines, the Weekly and Daily Press,* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Martin, *Benching Jim Crow*.

accentuate one's manliness. The sport, moreover, as Walter Camp – one of the early leaders of college football – argued, taught men to behave in a manner that "business desires and demands."[424]

The rise of college football predominantly at Ivy League schools during this period resulted from the fact that elite, upper-class white men believed college football should exist almost exclusively at these institutions as an arena in which elite men could assert their manhood. Football, according to Roosevelt, Camp and other prosperous white men, was viewed as a sport that offered elite men a path toward social, political, and economic prosperity. Competing at elite Ivy League universities that were predominantly closed off to lower-class men and people of color, moreover, set elite men playing college football apart from the influx of new immigrants that politicians like Roosevelt believed threatened to undermine and dramatically alter the racial and cultural dynamics of the nation.[425] Elite definitions of manhood honed on college football fields, therefore, served to reassert white racial superiority. Consequently, according to historian Gail Bederman, "as white middle-class men actively worked to reinforce male power, their race became a factor which was crucial to their gender."[426] Within the context of college football, the rugged, violent activity on the field heightened the social standing only of elite, native-born *white* men, as they were the only ones who initially

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[424] Walter Camp, "Coach Walter Camp on Sportsmanship," in *Major Problems in American Sport History: Documents and Essays,* ed. Steven A. Reiss, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 114-115.

[425] These fears centered on concerns about the rapid increase in immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, while immigrants from western and northern Europe – nations that had constituted the bulk of earlier immigration populations – flattened. The demographic in immigrant populations, consequently, contributed to the rise of nativist fears among many Americans in the 1910s and 1920s. See Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 2000," *U.S. Census Bureau*, February 2006, accessed February 17, 2015, http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0081/twps0081.pdf.

[426] Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization,* 5.

could play the game at the collegiate level.[427] Thus, despite the sport's overarching emphasis on fair play and gentlemanly behavior, it began as an activity rooted in affirming notions of white racial superiority.[428]

Yet, elite white men were not the only ones interested in testing their strength and proving their manhood on the gridiron. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, colleges and universities across the country created college football programs. Consequently, as participation in the game increased during the first three decades of the twentieth century, public interest in college football exploded; by the start of World War II, only Major League Baseball surpassed college football in capturing America's sporting attention.[429] Although a much more established sport at this point, MLB had a limited geographic presence as it featured teams only in a handful of major urban cities in the Northeast and Midwest.[430] College football, meanwhile, flourished at universities across the country, particularly in the South. Thus, although elite white collegiate men could no longer lay claim to college football as an exclusive venue in which they exerted their manhood, the sport still had symbolic value for school officials and fans based on other factors. Indeed, heated rivalries between neighboring schools increased fan interest in the game, as football historian Michael Oriard contends, "football fans identified with their favorite

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[427] Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization,* 20-31.

[428] The violent elements of early college football, particularly the alarming number of on-field deaths that occurred at the turn of the century, briefly plunged the sport into crisis. Modifications to the game's rules – particularly the development of the forward pass – decreased the sport's violence to a more tolerable level. The new game, while somewhat safer, still was viewed by elites like Roosevelt and Camp as a rugged symbol of white, male virility and power. See Oriard, *Reading Football,* 229-247.

[429] Oriard, *King Football,* 6.

[430] During this era, college football was also more popular than professional football. The National Football League (NFL) was in its nascent period. Founded in 1920, the NFL, up until World War II, fielded teams only in the Northeast, Midwest, and Rust Belt regions. This limited geographic scope diminished the NFL's nationwide popularity.

teams not only through geography but also by race, religion, and ethnicity."[431] To college football fans, their team represented the broader community; where the players came from, the attitudes espoused by the team's coach and athletic officials, and the school colors and fights songs featured during games reflected the broader philosophical identity of the team's most ardent supporters.

All-white southern colleges often scheduled intersectional games pitting their upstart programs against elite, well-established schools in the North. Southern athletic officials hoped these matchups would bring prestige and acclaim to their schools. Intersectional games took on additional meaning because many southern schools, still chastened by Confederate defeat in the Civil War, viewed athletic competition as a means to reclaim honor and prestige for the South. For some, these contests served as a means to "replay" the Civil War; a southern victory on the gridiron, therefore, brought glory to the former Confederacy and an affirmation of the southern way of life. Additionally, football officials such as Walter Camp argued that, unlike boxing and track and field, which required brute strength and physicality, football necessitated utilizing one's intelligence. Thus, according to football historian Charles Martin, "gridiron success in a scientific and manly sport like football could help shatter the image of the South as a backward and primitive area populated by mental and physical defectives."[432] Consequently, the stakes of these contests were very high for many southern sports officials eager to establish their universities as legitimate rivals to their northern counterparts. As the games took on greater

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[431] Oriard, *King Football,* 15.

[432] Martin, *Benching Jim Crow*, 14. Some football officials have utilized this attitude to denigrate African American players in order to perpetuate a belief in white athletic superiority in the sport. This has been most notable in the limited opportunities available for African Americans to play quarterback, viewed by most football experts as the most cerebral and challenging position in the sport. See William C. Rhoden, *Third and a Mile: The Trials and Triumphs of the Black Quarterback,* (New York: ESPN Books, 2007).

importance, all-white southern schools scheduled matches against northern and midwestern squads at an ever-increasing rate.

White collegians were not the only ones invested in the rise of football. African American men gravitated toward the game for many of the same reasons as their white counterparts. Competing on the gridiron was a rare opportunity for African American men to showcase their physical prowess while also demonstrating their mastery of the highly technical, cerebral, and tactical elements of football strategy that Walter Camp and others touted.[433] To some black sports officials, playing college football was an important symbolic victory for African Americans because it demonstrated that they could play the same sport as whites.[434] However, for the overwhelming majority of black college football players, their contests occurred on HBCU campuses in relative isolation from white sports fans. Although games between HBCU rivals drew large crowds of black football fans, white college football officials and white sportswriters ignored black college football games as part of a broader effort to delegitimize black college football. In doing so, white college football officials sought to assert the notion that white universities were the true home of the sport and black players by association were inferior to their white counterparts. The resulting separation, according to Martin, "guaranteed that black college sports would remain ensconced in a separate world, sealed off from the larger national sporting community."[435]

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[433] Though it must be noted that white football officials believed that only white players were capable of utilizing their intellectual acumen while playing. African Americans, when given the chance to play, were seen as solely utilizing physicality and animalistic abilities to play the sport. This attitude has remained firmly entrenched in popular perceptions of football, particularly with the notion that African American men cannot handle the technical aspects of playing the quarterback position like white quarterbacks.

[434] Martin, *Benching Jim Crow,* 6.

[435] Martin, *Benching Jim Crow,* 14.

Although African Americans initially had little recourse but to play at all-black HBCUs, beginning in the late nineteenth century, some predominantly white schools in the North, Midwest, and West added a small number of black players to their football teams. Unlike the longstanding segregation of Major League Baseball, college football programs outside the South integrated slowly and at an irregular pace. Yet as the number of integrated programs increased, no discernable pattern emerged as to which squads would desegregate. In the Ivy Leagues, for example, Brown and Dartmouth allowed black players onto their squads by 1908; Princeton, however, did not enroll any African Americans, let alone invite them onto the football team, until the 1940s.[436] Outside the Ivy Leagues, by the late 1920s, black players had joined a growing number of teams at public universities outside the South.[437] Paul Robeson, for example, starred as a member of Rutgers University's Scarlet Knights football team, earning All-American honors in 1917 and 1918. Yet, the number of black players on each team rarely numbered more than one or two at a time.

The presence of one or two black players on a squad nonetheless angered all-white southern teams, who vehemently objected to taking the field if one African American player was present. These concerns were rooted in white southerners' fears that, if blacks had the opportunity to defeat white opponents on the field in any sport, it would greatly damage the ideological foundation of their racially discriminatory policies. Athletic competition between the two races, at either the collegiate or professional level, was unacceptable because, as Martin notes, "it would invalidate the fundamental principles of white supremacy and racial

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[436] Martin, *Benching Jim Crow,* 11.

[437] There is no official statistic quantifying the number of predominantly white college football programs that featured African American players during this era. However, according to historian Michael Oriard's analysis, only 13 black players participated on integrated squads prior to 1900, and another 27 competed on integrated teams from 1900 to 1914. From World War I to the early 1930s, the number increased substantially. Oriard, *Reading Football*, 232.

subordination."[438] Indeed, as an ardent segregationist from Louisiana declared in 1897 about interracial athletic competition, "if that darned scoundrel would beat the white boy the niggers would never stop gloating over it, and as it is, we have enough trouble with them."[439] The fear of losing to an African American competitor, thus, drove these schools' zealous efforts to only compete against other whites.

Southern programs pushed for an unofficial policy, the Gentleman's Agreement, which stipulated that integrated teams would keep black players out of games when competing against all-white teams.[440] Initially, most teams observed the policy only for games played on southern campuses. By 1920, however, the policy expanded and southern teams demanded that teams sit black players during games played outside the South as well.[441] Through marquee regular season contests or at newly created postseason bowl games such as the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, talented southern schools had greater opportunities to play midwestern, western, and northern teams in front of a national audience. These contests offered both teams a tremendous opportunity to boost each school's prestige, fan base, and future earning potential.

A variety of factors influenced each integrated school's decision to force their black players to the bench. Many intersectional games drew more fans to the stadium, leading to higher ticket sales that both schools utilized to pay for their athletics budget. As a result, many integrated teams acquiesced to the policy out of fear of losing money if the game was cancelled.

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[438] Martin, *Benching Jim Crow,* 13.

[439] Dale A. Somers, *Rise of Sports in New Orleans: 1850-1900,* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 183.

[440] Although utilized predominantly by historians after the fact, some white and black journalists used the phrase "Gentleman's Agreement" to describe the policy in the late 1920s and 1930s. See Heywood Broun, "Observations: Mason-Dixon Comes North," *Chicago Defender,* November 2, 1929, 14; and Lewis Caldwell Jr., "Five Boys Make Varsity on the Big Ten Team," *Chicago Defender,* December 3, 1932, 9.

[441] Martin, *Benching Jim Crow,* 18-19.

Others worried that southern teams would stop scheduling games against noncompliant programs, damaging the program's bottom-line and reputation within the college football community. Finally, despite the presence of one or two black players on a team, integrated universities often remained hostile toward African Americans and refused to publicly support their black students.[442] Finally, as Martin contends, integrated teams often agreed to the policy simply "as a courtesy to southern sensibilities."[443] Collectively, these factors helped make the Gentleman's Agreement a well-established element of early twentieth century college football. Consequently, according to Martin, "in accepting the gentleman's agreement, northern schools thus agreed to a form of 'sectional reconciliation' in athletics based exclusively on southern terms, sacrificing African Americans on the altar of national harmony."[444]

Skirting the Issue: NYU, Dave Myers, and the Beginning of the Black Press' Campaign

The acceptance of the Gentleman's Agreement between white officials at northern integrated schools and all-white southern universities forced African Americans to lead the charge in fighting to eradicate the policy. When NYU athletic officials and school administrators agreed to abide by the Gentleman's Agreement for an upcoming contest against the University of Georgia on November 9, 1929, it galvanized black journalists to initiate the first widespread campaign to challenge the policy.[445] In a short, front-page article on October 23, the *New York*

[442] Black players such as the University of Iowa's Oze Simmons often stated that they felt isolated both on their team and at the university more broadly. Simmons's clashes with university officials and teammates will be discussed in greater detail in this chapter.

[443] Martin, *Benching Jim Crow,* 18.

[444] Martin, *Benching Jim Crow,* 18.

[445] Incidents involving the Gentleman's Agreement occurred prior to 1929. Yet, as Martin notes, prior to the late-1920s, African Americans were excluded from college football games on an inconsistent basis. Martin, *Benching Jim Crow,* 17-18.

Amsterdam News reported that NYU planned to sit Dave Myers, its star black player, in compliance with Georgia's wishes to keep the field lily-white.[446] The story quickly spread to black newspapers far outside New York, indicating that African American journalists believed that the conflict had far-reaching national implications for African American athletes. Allowing NYU to acquiesce to Georgia's demands, in other words, might trigger a more widespread acceptance of the policy at colleges across the nation, thereby diminishing black players' opportunities on the gridiron.

Throughout the *Amsterdam News'* weeks-long coverage of the Dave Myers-NYU conflict, the newspaper argued that, by agreeing to the Gentleman's Agreement, NYU officials were primarily responsible for stripping Myers of his right to play. In an October 30 editorial, the newspaper chided the school for failing to uphold notions of inclusiveness, decency, fair play, and progressive thinking, characteristics the university believed it embodied and touted to the public. The editorial focused in particular on how the school's decision would mar its legacy, wondering "what will be thought of New York University and its professions of leadership if it plays the coward and publicly subscribes to a prejudice which is opposed to its eloquently stated principles?"[447] The potential bad publicity surrounding the event dominated much of the black press' coverage, suggesting that a threat to the school's standing as it sought to be viewed as an institutional equal to Harvard and Yale might have compelled school officials to reverse their decision.[448]

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[446] "Dave Myers, New York University Football Star, May Not Play Georgians," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 23, 1929, 1.

[447] "New York vs. Georgia," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 30, 1929, 20.

[448] "New York vs. Georgia," *New York Amsterdam News*; and "N.A.A.C.P. Busy with Protests," *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 2, 1929, 9.

Many NYU students and alumni took these threats seriously. The Cosmopolitan Club, an NYU organization "devoted to the propagation of mutual understanding, especially among university students, regardless of difference of race, color, or creed," responded to the conflict with a stinging rebuke of the school's administrative actions. Benching Myers, according to the club, "jeopardizes New York University's reputation for upholding, at all times, the doctrine of racial equality."[449] The Liberal Club, a similar NYU organization comprised of students and alumni, issued a petition demanding that school administrators end their policy of honoring the Gentleman's Agreement. While the petition declared that students felt "that our university's good name has been damaged by its action in catering to Georgia's prejudice against the Negro race," it did not demand that Myers play. The petitioners, instead, sought only for the school to avoid scheduling games in the future against teams requiring the Gentleman's Agreement.[450] Although the petition heightened the public scrutiny NYU officials faced, demanding only *future* changes to the athletic department's racial policies provided a modicum of support for Dave Myers and his African American allies. These concerned alumni and students, thus, focused primarily on how NYU's acceptance of the policy risked tarnishing the school's legacy. Their efforts, therefore, did little to signal their allegiance toward Myers and African Americans' broader struggle for civil rights. By reframing the issue away from ensuring that Myers received his rightful opportunity to play, and focusing instead on how the school's reputation had been damaged by acknowledging and enabling the discriminatory desires of southern collegiate competitors, these critics signaled their singular desire to protect their institution's reputation.

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[449] "Will Dave Myers Be 'Benched?'" *New York Amsterdam News,* November 6, 1929, 3, 13.

[450] "Students Side With Myers in N.Y.U. Case," *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 2, 1929, 1; and "Student Body is Up in Arms," *New York Amsterdam News,* November 6, 1929, 13.

The black press, while thankful for the publicity generated by NYU alumni and students, looked beyond the potential damage to the school's image and placed Myers's plight into a larger narrative where white athletic, social, and political leaders repeatedly failed to provide African Americans with an equal opportunity to compete. *Pittsburgh Courier* columnist W. Rollo Wilson, for example, stated bluntly that, "keeping Myers out of the game will be moving the Mason and Dixon line to Yankee Stadium," an attitude many other black journalists expressed throughout the ordeal.[451] Likewise, to Ferdinand Q. Morton, a member of the Municipal Civil Service Commission of New York City, allowing Jim Crow discrimination to dictate the school's actions disgraced the city's image and "violates the spirit, if not the letter, of the constitution of the state and the ideals and practices of our city government."[452] Myers's case, to these journalists, starkly revealed the utter hypocrisy of America's supposed democratic ideals of fair play and equal opportunity.

This contradiction stood at the center of much of the *Amsterdam News'* coverage. In a series of three editorials published on October 30, the newspaper declared that Myers's struggles symbolized the injustice all African Americans faced. To the newspaper, the decision to sit Myers, "is simply another reminder that, despite the guarantee which the constitution of these United States is supposed to carry, Negroes are but subjects of this Government and not yet citizens."[453] Accepting the University of Georgia's racially discriminatory policies, moreover, "simply reminds one that while physical slavery – to some extent – went out of date with the

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[451] W. Rollo Wilson, "Sports Shots, Press Box & Ringside," *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 2, 1929, A6. See also Ed Sullivan, "Color Line to Be Raised Here," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 23, 1929, 13; The Editor, "Professionalism - Race Prejudice, Etc." *New York Amsterdam News,* October 30, 1929, 12; and "Will Dave Myers Be 'Benched?'" *New York Amsterdam News*.

[452] "'Penalize N.Y.U.' - Morton," *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 2, 1929, 1.

[453] The Editor, "Professionalism - Race Prejudice, Etc." *New York Amsterdam News*.

Civil War, mental slavery exists to an alarming degree."[454] In another editorial, the newspaper interpreted NYU officials' acquiescence as a sign that the nation as a whole had "failed lamentably to grasp the opportunity to stand midst [sic] the family of nations as a true exemplar of real democracy."[455] Framing NYU's acceptance of the Gentleman's Agreement as a contradiction of America's sporting ethos of fair play and good sportsmanship paralleled the black press' contention that white Americans celebrating Jesse Owens's achievements at the 1936 Summer Olympic Games as a symbol of American democracy's superiority to German fascism overlooked the racial discrimination Owens and African Americans faced at home. However, unlike Owens, who was able to compete in the Olympics, the black press' criticism of the Gentleman's Agreement centered around the policy's *exclusionist* strategy of denying blacks an opportunity to compete.

While black journalists lamented the backwards, bigoted attitudes of University of Georgia officials, they focused far more on the short-term damage caused by NYU's actions. They believed that, although African American athletes like Myers had gained the opportunity to play on the team, NYU's acquiescence to the Gentleman's Agreement meant that the school had little interest in defending the rights and opportunities of its black athletes. Their inaction, moreover, allowed southern officials to institutionalize segregationist policies throughout the nation. Consequently, by failing to take responsibility for forcing Myers to the bench, NYU administrators, in the eyes of African American journalists, prolonged the struggle to overturn the Gentleman's Agreement and increase black college football players' opportunities in the sport. All the goodwill generated by allowing Myers to play on the team in the first place, therefore, was squandered if the school would not let him play against every opponent.

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[454] The Editor, "Professionalism - Race Prejudice, Etc." *New York Amsterdam News*.

[455] "The Hypocrisy of Democracy," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 30, 1929, 12.

The language utilized by African American newspapers, coupled with the resources they dedicated to report and analyze the event stood in stark contrast to the scant coverage found in white-owned daily newspapers. The *New York Times*, for example, printed only a brief article noting that NYU Football Coach Chick Meehan planned to sit Myers against Georgia.[456] The newspaper neither reported on the petition campaign initiated by NYU students, nor criticized NYU officials for how their actions stripped Myers of his right to play.

A few prominent white sportswriters did briefly criticize NYU's actions. Ed Sullivan of the white-owned *New York Evening Graphic*, for example, initially broke the story a few days before the *New York Amsterdam News* reported on the incident. His article, which the *Amsterdam News* reprinted later that week, contended that the university had made an egregious error in accepting Georgia's racist demands. Sullivan, like black journalists who covered the story in the following weeks, urged students and school officials to pressure the university to cancel the game unless Myers played.[457] The *Chicago Defender*, meanwhile, reprinted a similarly supportive article from Heywood Broun of the *New York Telegram,* in which Broun labeled NYU football Coach Chick Meehan a "gutless coach of a gutless college."[458] Reprinting these articles demonstrates that the black press sought out and publicized the few white journalists who aligned with their struggle. But compared to the tone of the articles published by black journalists, these supportive white columnists failed to fully articulate how the Gentleman's Agreement reflected the broader racial inequality all African Americans faced.

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[456] See *New York Times,* October 24, 1929 and November 7, 1929.

[457] Sullivan, "Color Line to Be Raised Here," *New York Amsterdam News*; and "Dave Myers, New York University Football Star, May Not Play Georgians," *New York Amsterdam News*.

[458] Broun, "Observations: Mason-Dixon Comes North," *Chicago Defender*.

Despite the weeks-long campaign to persuade the university to reverse its decision, Dave Myers did not play against Georgia. Officially, NYU officials stated that Myers missed the game because of an injury he suffered during the previous week's contest against Georgetown University. Black sportswriters, however, believed that school officials had fabricated the injury to obfuscate the truth that they had complied with Georgia's demands. The *Amsterdam News* declared that, "skeptics always will remain positive that Myers' injury was invented by N.Y.U. officials as a graceful means of escaping from a delicate situation."[459] While the legitimacy of Myers's injury was never definitively determined – Myers may have been physically unable to compete – the black press' skepticism was rightly placed because integrated teams frequently claimed that black players had suffered injuries just before they played segregated southern teams.[460] Concocting bogus injuries allowed school officials to escape blame for sitting these players.

Although many black sportswriters rallied behind Myers and urged the school to let him play, a few took issue with him not challenging the school's decision. In the weeks leading up to the game, the *Amsterdam News* and the *Courier* urged Myers to vehemently demand that NYU officials allow him to play.[461] After the game, the *Courier's* George Schuyler took issue with Myers's acceptance of NYU's decision, arguing that, "all Myers had to do was say something himself, deny that he was physically unfit…and in general show some kind of manly spirit.

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[459] "Poor Davie Myers, He Severely Damaged Acromic-Clevicular Ligaments in Shoulder," *New York Amsterdam News,* November 13, 1929, 14.

[460] Martin, *Benching Jim Crow,* 25-26, 29. In the case of Myers, the skepticism was warranted as he returned to play in the game following the matchup against Georgia and showed little signs of injury in submitting a dominating performance. University officials also often defended their decision to sit players on the grounds that it *protected* black players from sustaining an injury against southern foes; yet white teammates were not considered at risk of suffering an injury competing against the same opponents.

[461] The Editor, "Professionalism - Race Prejudice, Etc." *New York Amsterdam News*; "'Penalize N.Y.U.' - Morton," *Pittsburgh Courier*; and "N.A.A.C.P. Busy with Protests," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

Instead he permitted a bad precedent to be set in one of our largest universities without uttering a peep."[462] Civil rights leader W.E.B. Du Bois was similarly disappointed with Myers's inaction. In his monthly column in *The Crisis*, Du Bois condemned Myers's passivity, stating that while groups ranging from NYU students, New York City officials, NAACP members, and New York civil rights activists had challenged NYU's decision, Myers had not vocally protested his mistreatment. To Du Bois, "we have much sympathy for the struggle of the younger Negro between the prejudice of whites and the selfish conservatism of blacks, but for this colored player, we have nothing but contempt."[463] Myers's silence, according to Schuyler and Du Bois, disrespected the countless civil rights advocates who had worked tirelessly to try and get him on the field.

Myers's inaction also worried Schuyler because it might justify the attitudes of other black journalists such as the *Norfolk Journal and Guide's* Gordon B. Hancock, who framed Myers's decision as the prudent and proper behavior needed for white authority figures to accept black athletes. According to Hancock, by sitting out the game, Myers "did more to help Negro athletes in northern institutions than he ever could have done by insisting on playing…or quitting outright forever."[464] Hancock's views, in the eyes of Schuyler, represented a passive, accommodationist approach to addressing racial segregation that stymied efforts to overcome racial inequality. Schuyler, therefore, believed that Hancock's outdated attitudes only served to derail the progress African Americans had made in overcoming racial discrimination in sports.[465] Myers's silence, thus, perpetuated this culture that had denied blacks equal opportunities in

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[462] George S. Schuyler, "Views and Reviews: Views of the Author-Uncensored," *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 30, 1929, A12.

[463] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Postscript," *The Crisis* 37, no. 1 (January 1930), 30.

[464] Schuyler, "Views and Reviews: Views of the Author-Uncensored," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

[465] Schuyler, "Views and Reviews: Views of the Author-Uncensored," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

sports for decades. By not challenging the status quo, Myers prevented black athletes and African Americans more broadly from escaping the vicious cycle that deprived them opportunities to expand their presence in mainstream society.

The tension between Hancock and Schuyler's attitudes exemplifies deeper divisions among African Americans over what they regarded as appropriate behavior for prominent black athletes. As seen in Chapters 1 and 2, most black journalists' definition of respectability and upstanding gentlemanly behavior for star athletes like Jesse Owens and Joe Louis competing in individual sports with more integrated competition entailed avoiding controversy with whites outside of athletic competition. Black journalists encouraged this passivity because they believed it helped Owens and Louis decrease the risk of offending white sports fans. In college football, where the Gentleman's Agreement helped perpetuate a far more racially segregated culture within the sport, some African American journalists wanted black athletes to actively confront white officials who helped institutionalize this policy. Thus for Myers, journalists such as Schuyler believed he had an obligation as an upstanding black man playing college football to *stir up* controversy by publicly demanding that NYU let him play, rather than adhere to an older, and from Schuyler's perspective, outdated strategy of accommodationism and acquiescence. For Myers and other black college football players of the era, some black journalists expected them to openly confront southern segregation in a manner Owens and Louis never encountered. The predicament Myers faced, thus, suggests that black journalists' expectations of black athletes depended in part on the political climate and social implications of the sport they played.

Although Du Bois and Schuyler represented the only two dissenting opinions among prominent African American journalists, they demonstrate how some black journalists held black athletes to rigorous standards when they confronted the Gentleman's Agreement. While both

journalists believed that Myers should have defied the school's orders and insisted that he play, they overlooked and delegitimized the potential risks Myers may have encountered such as being kicked off the team and expelled from the school.[466] Moreover, neither columnist, nor any major African American newspaper, conducted a lengthy interview with Myers to ascertain how he felt about the conflict. Schuyler and Du Bois failed to provide the full context as to why Myers may have sought to stay out of the center of the controversy; yet their words underscore a deeper tension between some black journalists about the obstacles black athletes faced when trying to gain greater opportunities in college football. Specifically, the Myers-NYU conflict reveals the challenge some black journalists faced in balancing a desire for African American athletes to sacrifice their careers if necessary to assist in the broader struggle for racial justice against the athlete's personal desire to compete.

Ozzie Simmons and the Isolation at the University of Iowa

The strict enforcement of the Gentleman's Agreement forced Dave Myers, and many other black players to the bench. Yet the policy also hampered the opportunities of African Americans on integrated squads that never competed against all-white southern teams. Widespread acceptance of the Gentleman's Agreement allowed southern programs to curtail black opportunity on the field and perpetuate an environment within the sport that deemed African American players inferior to whites. Keeping African Americans off the field against all-white southern teams represented only one element of this effort. Failing to support the rights and needs of black players on integrated teams compounded many black players' beliefs that they were not fully accepted within the sport. African American sportswriters understood the

[466] These concerns were ever-present for African American athletes on predominantly white colleges throughout the first half of the twentieth century. As will be examined later in this chapter, school officials often warned black football players that they would be severely sanctioned if they challenged the school's decisions.

discriminatory nature of this culture within the sport. Their coverage of African Americans in major college football, therefore, included publicizing and protecting black players on integrated squads who felt vulnerable and isolated. Much of this involved celebrating black athletes' achievements that white journalists overwhelmingly ignored.

Black running back Ozzie (Oze) Simmons's career at the University of Iowa from 1934 to 1936 exemplifies many of the subtle challenges black players faced while on integrated teams, and demonstrates the difficulties black players encountered while competing for marquee college football programs. Simmons's career at Iowa blossomed quickly as he became Iowa's most dynamic offensive player. That success, however, was soon matched by his frustration both with his coach, Ossie Solem, and white teammates who he believed were not protecting him from the violent and dirty play dished out by opponents. To compound matters, outside of his brother Don, and one or two black teammates, Simmons largely confronted these challenges on his own.

Initially the black press came to Simmons's defense by celebrating his overlooked on-field success, which they interpreted as another glaring example of white coaches, players, and sportswriters refusing to accept black success in an integrated sporting world. Yet for all this support, some African American sportswriters condemned Simmons at the end of his career at Iowa, deeming his decision to profit off his celebrity as an attempt to undermine journalists' broader efforts to increase black athletic opportunities. Taken as a whole, the black press' criticism of Simmons illustrates the tensions African American journalists felt in celebrating black football players' achievements while perpetuating a broader, self-constructed definition of respectable, upstanding black manhood for black athletes.

Seemingly from the moment Simmons stepped onto the field at Iowa in 1934, black sportswriters wrote at length about his stellar performances. Simmons's talents compelled

newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* to compare him to Fritz Pollard, the standout black football player who dominated the sport in 1916 while at Brown University. By linking Simmons to Pollard, the *Defender* contended that Simmons possessed an incredibly rare set of skills that African American football fans needed to celebrate because it was unlikely to occur again in the near future.[467] Beyond his on-field exploits, journalists touted Simmons's humble, reserved nature, and stoic determination to succeed in the classroom despite his meager educational opportunities as a child in Texas. To the *Pittsburgh Courier's* Chester Washington, this combination of on- and off-field skills made Simmons a rarity among black athletes. According to Washington, "our race needs more Joe Louises and Ozie Simmons" if African Americans hoped to make greater inroads in desegregating sports.[468] Comparing Simmons to Louis – then the most iconic and well-loved African American athlete in the country – suggests that Washington believed that Simmons was similarly talented, acted in an upstanding manner, and had the potential to become as well-renowned as Louis. Highlighting Simmons's similarities with Louis outside the field of play, moreover, signals how black journalists initially sought to position Simmons as an ideal black college football player of the era. In 1936, the *Courier* went so far as to award the "Wizard of Iowa" with a one-of-a-kind golden football in recognition of his contribution to black sports.[469]

Black sportswriters' praise stood in stark contrast to what they felt was the white media's continued refusal to recognize Simmons's tremendous talents. The *Defender's* Al Monroe, for example, scolded the *Chicago Tribune* for omitting any discussion of Simmons's stalwart

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[467] Al Monroe, "Oze Simmons, the Joe Louis of Football, Runs Illinois Dizzy," *The Chicago Defender,* November 2, 1935, 13, 15. See also G.D. Lewis, "Sport Squibs," *Chicago Defender,* November 16, 1935, 14.

[468] Chester L. Washington, "Sez Ches," *Pittsburgh Courier,* February 8, 1936, A5. See also Al Monroe, "Speaking of Sports," *Chicago Defender,* November 23, 1935, 13; Lewis, "Sport Squibs," *Chicago Defender*; and "Simmons, a Star to Others, Just a Player to Himself," *Chicago Defender,* October 27, 1934, 17.

[469] "Courier Chief Rewards Wizard of Iowa," *Pittsburgh Courier,* January 25, 1936, A4.

performance from its coverage of the 1934 Iowa-Northwestern game. To Monroe, "when Oze Simmons, a Race lad, comes along…and equals the brilliance of [white star player] Red Grange in his best days, the paper [*Chicago Tribune*] must find excuses to inform readers of the act."[470] By the end of the 1935 season, black columnists' frustrations had reached a breaking point; many argued that white media members who selected year-end awards did not vote for Simmons because of his skin color.[471] African American journalists repeatedly returned to this issue in the coming years as they argued that white journalists' racial prejudices had denied a number of stellar black athletes in a variety of sports the recognition and awards they deserved. In particular, as seen in Chapter 2, Jesse Owens's failure to win the James E. Sullivan Award in 1936, according to black journalists, occurred primarily due to many white voters' racial prejudice.[472] Overlooking Simmons for postseason awards and keeping him out of college football's spotlight, black journalists contended, perpetuated white stereotypes that black athletes were inferior to white competitors. Moreover, it stymied the black press' efforts to tear down the obstacles prejudiced whites created to keep African Americans out of the mainstream sporting world. Black journalists' coverage, therefore, promoted the efforts of African American athletes, and served as a crucial counterpoint to mainstream white sportswriters' decision to downplay, or completely ignore the exploits of accomplished African American athletes like Simmons.

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[470] Al Monroe, "Speaking of Sports," *Chicago Defender,* October 13, 1934, 16.

[471] The *Courier's* Chester Washington hoped that, "The All-American board may try to give Oz the grand run-around, but if they do, we're hoping that their conscience throws them for a 15-yard loss. It takes those New York papers to set the pace for fairness in many situations like Ozzie's." Chester L. Washington, "Ches Sez: Picking 'Em Out of the Air," *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 28, 1936, 17. See also Harold Parrott, "Daily Scribe Lets 'Cat' Out of Bag on Grid Jim Crow," *Chicago Defender,* November 23, 1935, 15. These complaints increased immensely in 1937 and 1938 when Kenny Washington, the star running back at UCLA was denied a number of postseason awards despite having superior statistics. This episode will be analyzed later in this chapter.

[472] W. Rollo Wilson, "Thru' the Eyes," *Pittsburgh Courier,* January 9, 1937, 16; and "Who is Glenn Morris," *Afro-American,* January 9, 1937, 4.

While the white media largely ignored Simmons, he faced overt hostility and even violence from white opponents. Players with the University of Minnesota, in particular, targeted him with excessive tackles, punches, and other illegal and harmful acts. At the end of many games, black journalists noted how Simmons often appeared bruised, battered and worn-down from the abuse he endured.[473] In a 1934 contest against Northwestern University, Dan Burley of the *Associated Negro Press* stated that, after Simmons dominated play against the Wildcats, "the Northwestern white boys got so hot under their jerseys that they had to take a punch at Simmons' head to cool off tortured spirits."[474] Burley and others framed Simmons's ability to brush off the abuse, abstain from retaliating, and continue his outstanding play as a sign of his upstanding character.[475] Nevertheless, these incidents angered black sportswriters, who felt that it reflected how the white college football community refused to fully tolerate and protect African American athletes.

Simmons had greater trouble refraining from clashing with his teammates. He believed that many of the bumps and bruises he received could have been avoided had his teammates performed to their fullest potential. Simmons often complained to black sportswriters that his teammates often purposely let opposing defensive players tackle him, potentially putting him at risk of suffering a serious injury.[476] African American sports columnists defended Simmons and chided his teammates for their poor sportsmanship. The *Defender's* Ted Robinson*,* for instance,

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[473] Leon H. Hardwick, "The Sport Broadcast," *Philadelphia Afro-American,* September 25, 1937, 18.

[474] Dan Burley, "Oze Simmons, the 'Wizard of Oz,' Headache to Wildcats," *Associated Negro Press,* October 8, 1934, Box 401, Folder 13, Claude A. Barnett Papers, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

[475] "What Happened to Ozie Simmons Comes Out at Last as Coach Solem of Iowa Tells of His Great Star," *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 17, 1934, A4.

[476] These concerns began in October 1934 when Al Monroe noted that Simmons's teammates were jealous of Simmons's stellar performance against Northwestern, and continued well into the 1936 season. See Al Monroe, "Speaking of Sports," *Chicago Defender,* October 27, 1934, 17; and Ted Robinson, "Jealousy Jams Oze at Iowa," *Chicago Defender,* October 24, 1936, 13.

argued that if Simmons's teammates intentionally played at a substandard level, "then something should be done. It is too bad to make a great athlete like Simmons suffer because someone happens to be jealous of his football ability and the publicity he is getting." Robinson added that, had Simmons's teammates fulfilled their duty, the team would have won more games and their disastrous 1936 season would have been avoided as a result.[477]

The conflict reached a boiling point in November 1936 when Simmons quit the team in the middle of the season after clashing with Head Coach Ossie Solem. The confrontation developed after Solem questioned Simmons's toughness. Simmons stated to the *Defender* that he accepted Solem critiquing his on-field performances; however, "what burned me up was coach Solem saying…that I was laying down against Minnesota," and refusing to play while hurt. Simmons believed that this unjust attack on his character signified that the entire Iowa team and coaching staff no longer supported him.[478] These concerns were compounded by the fact that white fans such as Hugh H. Shepard cheered Solem's decision to punish Simmons, declaring that he "heartily approve[d] your Simmons action although [it was] three years too late."[479] University officials scrambled to persuade Simmons to rejoin the squad, which he reluctantly did. Yet the fracas wounded Simmons, exposing a deep chasm between white members of the team and Simmons, who felt marginalized.[480] African American sportswriters agreed, declaring that the actions and attitudes of Solem and Shepard reflected a "hangover of antebellum bigotry" that sought to isolate and physically intimidate black players that had no place in college football

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[477] Robinson, "Jealousy Jams Oze at Iowa," *Chicago Defender*. See also Al Monroe, "Speaking of Sports," *Chicago Defender,* November 30, 1935, 13.

[478] "Simmons Quits, Returns to Iowa Team All in One Day," *Chicago Defender,* November 21, 1936, 14; and "Simmons Opens Up Off the Gridiron," *Chicago Defender,* November 21, 1936, 15.

[479] "Hits Attack on Oze, Iowa Gridiron Star," *Chicago Defender,* November 28, 1936, 13.

[480] "Simmons Quits, Returns to Iowa Team All in One Day," *Chicago Defender*; and "Simmons Opens Up Off the Gridiron," *Chicago Defender*.

at that time.[481] The sport's culture of tolerating and perpetuating racial prejudice, furthermore, prevented Simmons and other black college football players from feeling truly accepted by their teammates. Above all, the Simmons-Solem episode made it clear that, long after they gained entry to play on integrated teams, black athletes still had major obstacles to overcome in order to be accepted by white sports fans, officials, and players.

Yet in celebrating how Simmons's collegiate achievements affirmed the black press' belief that he demonstrated upstanding, respectable behavior, some African American sportswriters criticized him for attempting to cash in on his fame shortly after his career ended at Iowa, arguing that it threatened to undermine that image. Seeking to capitalize on the notoriety he attained at the university and provide his family with a modicum of financial stability, Simmons pursued a number of lucrative opportunities to play professional football the moment he finished his career as a Hawkeye.[482] Yet Dan Burley believed that Simmons had foolishly chased these financial opportunities, arguing that, "the cash is all right, but it isn't as good as jumping at the right time." Burley, however, failed to suggest when Simmons should have transitioned to the pros, stating simply that making the move immediately at the end of the season "spoiled the Texan's chance to get in on real big time football and killed, to a certain extent, his athletic future."[483] Given his longstanding, vocal support of Simmons throughout his time at Iowa, Burley's criticism represents an abrupt and largely unexpected departure from how he had praised Simmons's exploits. Burley's disapproval of Simmons, moreover, highlights discrepancies in how black journalists interpreted different black athletes' attempts to profit off of their athleticism. When Owens won four gold medals in Berlin, most African American

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[481] "Hits Attack on Oze, Iowa Gridiron Star," *Chicago Defender*.

[482] "Simmons Quits, Returns to Iowa Team All in One Day," *Chicago Defender*.

[483] Dan Burley, "Talkin' Out Loud," *Chicago Defender,* December 26, 1936, 13.

journalists initially supported his efforts to cash in on his fame. They argued that it reflected Owens's desire to be an upstanding breadwinner, and supportive husband and father. Meanwhile, Simmons's actions, according to Burley, threatened to sully his reputation as an upstanding black college football player.

The *Afro-American's* Leon Hardwick expressed similarly contradictory attitudes about Simmons. When previewing the upcoming 1937 college football season, Hardwick chastised Simmons's selfish behavior while at Iowa, arguing that "Ozzie is strictly an individualist, not a team player…He did things, big things, for Iowa University. However, all was not for Iowa's best interest."[484] Yet in a column published two weeks later, Hardwick lauded Simmons, stating that, "when, battered and bruised, he was pulled from the game, it easily could be seen that his body was broken but not his spirit. No, Iowa didn't win but Simmons did. That was competitive spirit!"[485] Neither Hardwick nor the *Afro-American* attempted to explain to readers his conflicting opinions about Simmons's character. The abrupt shift in describing Simmons's character suggests that black journalists like Burley and Hardwick had not fully formulated an opinion on Simmons.

In a manner similar to the sudden shift in opinion about Dave Myers, one could argue that black journalists' criticism of Simmons indicated their low tolerance for actions by African American athletes that challenged the narrative presented by the black press. Journalists portrayed Myers and Simmons as upstanding gentlemen who overcame the racially discriminatory policies prevalent in college football and flourished on an integrated playing field. Yet when Myers failed to push NYU officials to let him play, some columnists framed it as a cowardly act that threatened to undermine their broader campaign to eradicate the Gentleman's

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[484] Leon H. Hardwick, "The Sports Broadcast," *Washington Afro-American,* September 11, 1937, 20.

[485] Leon H. Hardwick, "The Sport Broadcast," *Philadelphia Afro-American,* September 25, 1937, 18.

Agreement. Simmons's decision to monetize his fame through a professional contract, moreover, contradicted the motif that Simmons was a humble, determined collegian. These abrupt changes in how they perceived Myers and Simmons may not have been entirely fair as they overlooked a number of personal factors that weighed on each player's decision. Nonetheless, it reveals how the black press sought to present a narrative to its readers that black college football players on integrated teams focused primarily on using their unique position to challenge the status quo and push for greater opportunities for African Americans to compete in the sport in the future.

Wilmeth Sidat-Singh and the Complexities of Race

Although Iowa never attempted to bench Simmons in order to comply with the Gentleman's Agreement, the policy shaped college football's broader culture that prevented Simmons and other African Americans from feeling accepted on the field. Black journalists' extensive coverage of Simmons's struggles, therefore, reflected their effort to frame the policy as being responsible for the sport's racially discriminatory culture. Throughout the mid-1930s, African American newspapers covered the sport utilizing this two-pronged approach. They celebrated the achievements of players such as Cornell's Brud Holland and Iowa's Homer Harris, while also attacking schools such as the University of Michigan for sitting Willis Ward against Georgia Tech in 1934.[486] During this time, they received an unexpected victory in their battle against the Gentleman's Agreement when the University of North Carolina allowed NYU's Ed Williams to play in a contest between the two teams in 1936.[487] While the black press

[486] Leon H. Hardwick, "The Sports Broadcast," *Washington Afro-American,* September 11, 1937, 20. See also Ed B. Drake, "Michigan Students Aroused Over Barring of Ward," *Chicago Defender,* October 20, 1934, 1-2; and Dewey R. Jones, "Michigan U. Bows to Demands of South," *Chicago Defender,* October 27, 1934, 1-2.

[487] "Barriers Fall When Williams Plays N.C.," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 24, 1936, 16; and Edgar Rouzeau, "N.Y.U. Star Plays Against North," *Pittsburgh Courier,* October 24, 1936, 4. A similar incident occurred

celebrated this moment, their efforts to eradicate the Gentleman's Agreement in many ways had stalled. The rhetoric utilized in each incident closely resembled the framing techniques used in covering the Dave Myers-NYU affair in 1929.

Thus, when black journalists discovered that University of Maryland officials wanted Syracuse University to keep its African American player off the field for an upcoming game in 1937, their initial coverage echoed their earlier efforts. They attacked Maryland officials for demanding that Syracuse bench its black player; Syracuse coaches and administrators, meanwhile, were scolded for complying with Maryland's racist demands. Yet what made this incident unique was that, up until the start of the game, white media members and Maryland officials were unaware that Syracuse's Wilmeth Sidat-Singh was African American. Most white football officials, including many on Syracuse's staff, assumed Sidat-Singh was Indian-American whose family had recently emigrated from India based on his last name and light skin complexion. Sidat-Singh, in fact, was born Wilmeth Webb to African American parents in Harlem; however, after his father passed away when Wilmeth was a child, he was adopted by his Indian-American stepfather, Samuel Sidat-Singh, a doctor who emigrated from India.

Black sportswriters knew of Sidat-Singh's identity, and celebrated his African American heritage in their coverage of the team throughout the 1937 season. Their articles ultimately played an integral role in informing Maryland officials of his true racial identity, leading them to invoke the Gentleman's Agreement for the game against Syracuse. Although publicizing Sidat-Singh's African American identity forced Sidat-Singh to the bench, the black press' coverage of the conflict highlights their refusal to deny a black player's racial identity in order to earn a place on the playing field. Consequently, the episode demonstrates how African American journalists'

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the following year when Duke University played an integrated Syracuse University squad in 1938. "Duke Joins Up," *The Crisis,* November 1938, 361.

construction of ideal black manhood for athletes required them to celebrate their racial identity and use it to openly challenge racial discrimination on the playing field.

During the 1936 and the beginning of the 1937 seasons, Wilmeth Sidat-Singh lived a relatively anonymous existence on the Syracuse football team. Once his career began to blossom in 1937, white sportswriters began reporting his exploits. Given his light skin color and last name, mainstream newspapers viewed him as an anomaly, frequently describing him as the only "Hindu" player at a major college football program. The *New York Herald-Tribune's* Harry Cross, for example, paid particular attention to Sidat-Singh's supposed ethnicity, stating that, "although his ancestry is steeped in the stories of romance of the Orient, the athletic interest of Wilmeth Sidat-Singh of Syracuse, centers in the forward pass and the end sweep."[488] Syracuse officials, similarly unaware that Sidat-Singh was in fact African American, sought to capitalize on his unusual surname and assumed religious and ethnic background to draw more fans to games. As football historian James Roland Coates Jr. argues, "it was natural for the schools' publicity agent to use the angle of Sidat-Singh being a Hindu to attract attention to the player."[489]

This perception, however, changed when Sam Lacy, in an editorial for the *Washington Tribune,* delightfully noted that Maryland would be in for a surprise when it played Syracuse because Sidat-Singh was African American. Despite all their hard work to discriminate against black players, Lacy noted, Maryland would now "match wit and brawn, shoulder to shoulder, with a colored [Negro] person. What ironical tricks are played on the poor un-suspecting

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[488] "Sidat-Singh Proves to Be Mister Webb: White Press Takes Glory From Race by Styling Gridiron Hero 'Hindu,'" *Chicago Defender,* October 30, 1937, 2. These attitudes continued nearly until the start of the game against Maryland. The *New York Times,* for example, referred to Sidat-Singh as the "Hindu passing star" two days before the Maryland game. "Injury Hits Syracuse," *New York Times,* October 21, 1937, 28.

[489] Coates, Jr., "Gentlemen's Agreement," 33-34.

Nordics!"[490] Lacy's declaration, however, was premature as it informed Maryland of the situation in time for them to demand that Syracuse sit Sidat-Singh prior to kickoff. In the weeks following Lacy's revelation, black newspapers' coverage of the event echoed that of the 1929 incident at NYU as University of Maryland officials received the bulk of the criticism.[491]

What separated this event from earlier incidents was the contentious debate between some black columnists and their readers about Lacy's decision to expose Sidat-Singh's racial identity. A *Washington Tribune* reader chided Lacy's actions, declaring that, "Negroes like you that like to dig up such on your race to help the white man keep you down are the cause of the Negro race being where they are today."[492] This attitude had some merit because Sidat-Singh most likely would have played had Lacy not disclosed his race. But doing so would have perpetuated a long-standing tradition of attempting to "pass" as another race or ethnicity, a practice with a long, checkered history within the African American community. Since slavery, some African Americans with lighter skin tones, known European ancestry, and facial features and hair styles typically associated with white Europeans attempted to pass as white and escape racial prejudice and limited economic and political opportunities.[493] Yet, according to historian Allyson Hobbs, attempting to pass frequently forced African Americans to abandon the black

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[490] Coates, Jr., "Gentlemen's Agreement," 36-37.

[491] Art Carter, "From the Bench," *Washington Afro-American,* November 13, 1937, 21; and Coates, Jr., "Gentlemen's Agreement," 45-46. Journalists also chided Syracuse coach Ossie Solem's decision to agree to Maryland's demands. St. Clair Bourne, "In This Corner," *New York Amsterdam News,* November 6, 1937, 14; and "'Why, the Dirty So-and-So's!' Syracuse U. Coach Tells of Color Bar," *Washington Afro-American,* October 30, 1937, 1-2.

[492] Coates, Jr., "Gentlemen's Agreement," 46.

[493] See Daniel J. Sharfstein's *The Invisible Life* for a more detailed exploration of the history of "passing" in African American history. Daniel J. Sharfstein, *The Invisible Line: Three American Families and the Secret Journey from Black to White,* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011). See also Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life,* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014); and F. James Davis, *Who Is Black?: One Nation's Definition,* (State College, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2001).

community. Many African Americans, consequently, viewed passing as a violation of racial solidarity, which, in turn, weakened broader efforts to attain racial equality.[494]

Sidat-Singh did not actively attempt to pass as an Indian-American, although, according to Coates, his own teammates were unsure of his racial, religious, or ethnic identity prior to the Maryland game.[495] While a few football fans wanted Sidat-Singh to deceive Maryland so he could play in the game and embarrass the southern university, many black sportswriters opposed the strategy. Sidat-Singh, to many African American journalists, needed to embrace his racial identity while at Syracuse.[496] Throughout the remainder of the 1937 season, black journalists repeatedly corrected white columnists' misperceptions that Sidat-Singh was Indian-American by stating that he was an African American man born in Harlem.[497]

Some also celebrated his racial identity and rejected any suggestions that he should attempt to deceive the white sports world. Lacy, for example, in his autobiography, *Fighting for Fairness,* contended that attempting to trick Maryland was a "weak-livered admission that we are willing to see our boys progress under any kind of masquerade; that we agree with the Nordic observation that ANYTHING BUT A NEGRO is okay."[498] Edwin B. Henderson, a black athletic

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[494] Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 4-6. Efforts to pass, moreover, often failed as skeptical white authorities studied an individual's ancestral bloodlines when they suspected that an African American sought to circumvent the established racial hierarchy. This was particularly true throughout this era because of the legal focus on the "one-drop rule." A long-established legal system of categorizing people by race, the one-drop rule stated that if an individual had one ancestor of African descent, they were legally categorized as African American. See Davis, *Who Is Black?*

[495] In 1982, Coates interviewed Sidat-Singh's teammates, such as Robert L. Walton, who stated that, "the Black situation, and we were not sure that Sidat-Singh was a Black, really gave the players no concern." Coates, Jr., "Gentlemen's Agreement," 56-57.

[496] "Sidat-Singh Proves to Be Mister Webb," *Chicago Defender*.

[497] See "Singh Threw 'Em Holland Ran 'Em: Negroes Starred in Cornell Upset," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 23, 1937, 16; St. Clair Bourne, "In This Corner," *New York Amsterdam News,* November 6, 1937, 14; and "Syracuse Ace Season's Find," *New York Amsterdam News,* November 20, 1937, 16-17.

[498] Lacy, *Fighting for Fairness*, 36-37.

official in Washington, D.C. echoed Lacy's sentiments, stating in a letter published by Art Carter in the *Afro-American*, that attempting to pass was analogous to "where Jews and many foreigners drop off the un-American consonants or extra syllables from their names."[499] This attitude reveals a clear rejection of the longstanding tradition of circumventing racial politics and conflicts by passing as another race or ethnicity. More importantly, it suggests a determined effort by Lacy, other black journalists, and black newspapers readers, to refuse to adhere to a set of rules about racial or ethnic identity developed and perpetuated by whites. Having Sidat-Singh play against Maryland as an Indian-American, to Lacy, would accomplish little for African Americans seeking to eradicate the sport's Gentleman's Agreement. One could argue that it might have damaged the broader effort as it may have encouraged more light-skinned players to deny their racial heritage and attempt to pass as another race or ethnicity. Doing so could have weakened the resolve of black athletes, journalists, and their fans to continue the fight to gain entry into major college football programs. Furthermore, their efforts to encourage Sidat-Singh to publicly embrace his racial identity suggest that African American journalists believed that racial pride was a central characteristic of the ideal black male athlete of the era. Attempting to pass, in other words, was seen as antithetical to the upstanding gentleman archetype black journalists perpetuated when celebrating African American male athletic achievement.

Ultimately, it took one year for white scribes such as the esteemed Grantland Rice to look beyond Sidat-Singh's last name and refer to him as an African American. While Rice, in a syndicated October 1938 column, framed the news as a startling discovery, the *Pittsburgh Courier's* Randy Dixon playfully mocked Rice's analysis, noting that black journalists had

[499] Art Carter, "From the Bench," *The Afro-American,* November 13, 1937, 21.

"known for lo, these many years, but which the paleface faction purposely avoided in the name of Singh, the Hindu. (A Harlem Hindu)."[500]

Much had changed in the year following Maryland's discovery of Sidat-Singh's identity, Maryland and Syracuse agreed to let him play in the 1938 contest between the two schools. Maryland may have regretted the decision as Syracuse avenged the previous year's bitter loss with a 50-0 thrashing of the Terrapins.[501] Sidat-Singh's standout performance in the game, moreover, showcased how black players were integral to the success of major college football teams. His performance, in turn, could be interpreted as proof that all-white teams would have to adapt and add black players in the near future in order to stay competitive. To the black press, by playing explicitly as an African American, Sidat-Singh challenged a culture that had compelled many light-skinned black men to deny their racial identity and conform to white ideas about racial categorization in order to survive in mainstream society. By repeatedly highlighting and celebrating Sidat-Singh's racial identity, black journalists subverted traditional notions of racial hierarchy, where claiming to pass as a non-African American was better than attempting to gain equality as a black person. Although no other black college football player emerged with a set of circumstances similar to Sidat-Singh's during this era, the episode illustrates a broader effort by black sportswriters to celebrate black athletic achievement on their own terms as a means to challenge white authority within the sport.

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[500] Randy Dixon, "The Sports Bugle: Wilmeth Sidat Singh the 'Harlem Hindu,'" *Pittsburgh Courier,* October 22, 1938, 17.

[501] Maryland may have been more open to playing an integrated Syracuse squad in 1938 because the game was played in Syracuse, New York, rather than the 1937 game in College Park, Maryland. To some Maryland officials and their ardent fans, keeping Sidat-Singh off the field in Maryland allowed them to maintain the belief that the Maryland campus remained lily-white. See Charles Martin, *Benching Jim Crow,* 34.

UCLA and the Rise of Black Stardom

As black journalists' celebration of Sidat-Singh's racial identity revealed their belief that racial pride was a central element of the ideal black male athlete archetype, they utilized the on-field success of three black players on the University of California at Los Angeles' (UCLA) football team as a tool to actively attack and undermine the Gentleman's Agreement. The Bruins' success, driven by their three "sepia stars," Kenny Washington, Woodrow Wilson "Woody" Strode, and Jackie Robinson, the future baseball star, provided African American sportswriters with new methods to attack the Gentleman's Agreement and the sport's broader racially discriminatory culture. Unlike integrated teams such as Syracuse and NYU before them, UCLA's team could not succeed without its black players, an opinion, many black journalists noted, many UCLA coaches, students, and local white journalists held. Furthermore, during four contests against all-white teams from Texas, the opposing squads did not invoke the Gentleman's Agreement. This remarkable achievement buoyed black sportswriters' spirits and their coverage of integrated college football became more pointed and proactive in challenging the racist traditions of all-white southern programs as a result. Black journalists, consequently, situated their on-field success that won over white supporters as an implicit acceptance of these athletes' upstanding character.

The addition of Washington and Strode to UCLA's varsity squad in 1937 shifted the perception of black players on integrated teams. Though Oze Simmons and Wilmeth Sidat-Singh were vital contributors to their respective teams, they often felt isolated within their locker room; they believed that they had to confront an opponent, both on and off the field, without the full support of their teammates or school officials. Washington and Strode, however, quickly became star performers for the Bruins. Strode, in his autobiography, *Goal Dust,* notes that, while a few of

his white teammates initially struggled to accept him on the team, the tensions quickly dissipated and his teammates rallied around their star black players. And unlike what happened to Simmons, Strode and Washington's teammates physically confronted and often fought racist opponents when they attacked their black teammates.[502]

The team steadily improved during the 1937 and 1938 seasons; when Robinson joined the squad at the start of the 1939 campaign, the Bruins dominated opponents across the West Coast. Black newspapers in the Midwest and Northeast extensively covered UCLA's three "sepia stars" throughout the 1939 season, demonstrating that their exploits meant a great deal to black readers far outside California. As Washington put together a stellar individual season, many African American sportswriters predicted that he would earn a number of postseason awards, including a spot on the All-America team and an invitation to play in the East-West College all-star game.[503] Yet the *Courier's* Wendell Smith worried that the racial prejudice of some white journalists who voted for these awards would deny Washington the national recognition he deserved. To Smith, any All-America list that omitted Washington must "be called the 'un-American' team."[504] Franklyn Bolden, a Professor at the University of Pittsburgh, in a letter published by the *Courier's* Chester Washington*,* echoed Smith's concerns, contending that, except for one or two instances, mainstream media members historically had unjustly denied black players the recognition they deserved.[505]

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[502] Woody Strode, *Goal Dust: An Autobiography*, (Lanham, Maryland: Madison Books, 1990), 65.

[503] See Randy Dixon, "The Sports Bugle," *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 4, 1939, 17; Randy Dixon, "The Sports Bugle: Kenny Washington Making Easier Task of the All-Team Selections," *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 11, 1939, 17; and Wendell Smith, "'Washington All-American,'" *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 18, 1939, 17.

[504] Smith, "'Washington All-American,'" *Pittsburgh Courier.*

[505] Chester Washington, "Sez Ches: Harding and Washington," *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 18, 1939, 16.

Some white journalists, particularly those at UCLA's *Daily Bruin* – the university's daily student newspaper – agreed with Smith, Bolden, and other African American journalists that Washington deserved a number of postseason awards. Yet when Washington failed to earn these awards, the *Daily Bruin's* Frank Klingberg did not attribute this to racial prejudice.[506] The *Daily Bruin's* coverage of the team's black players, in fact, rarely discussed the racial discrimination they faced. These student journalists may have avoided discussing the racial challenges black players encountered in part because they viewed Washington, Strode, and Robinson primarily as collegiate peers and not strictly as African Americans. Yet, as college football historian Lane Demas contends, while African American students at UCLA enjoyed a better experience than most black athletes at other integrated universities, they still endured racial discrimination from some students and members of the surrounding community, and often felt isolated on campus.[507] Klingberg's analysis, more likely, reflects the sharp differences between how most white and black journalists covered African Americans competing in major college football at the time. Nevertheless, the frustration that developed in response to Washington being denied his national recognition affirmed many of the underlying obstacles black players and sportswriters faced in trying to win over the hearts and minds of mainstream white journalists to overturn the sport's racially discriminatory culture.

While African American journalists remained dismayed over Washington's lack of national recognition, an unexpected sequence of events bolstered their attack on the Gentleman's Agreement. As UCLA and Southern Methodist University (SMU) of Dallas, Texas set to face one another in November 1937, it was unclear whether or not SMU would demand that the

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[506] Frank Klingberg, "Kenny Vastly Underrated," *California Daily Bruin,* December 4, 1939, 3.

[507] Demas, *Integrating the Gridiron*, 34.

Bruins sit their black players.[508] Yet, rather than follow the longstanding tradition of almost all other southern programs, SMU agreed to play against the full UCLA squad. SMU's players voted on the issue, according to historian Charles Martin, and concluded that it would be a "hollow victory" if they defeated UCLA without their best players.[509] SMU's actions demonstrated a strong commitment to notions of fair play and good sportsmanship that college football's creators had championed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The decision surprised African American journalists, who praised SMU players for their "liberal attitude." The *Chicago Defender's* Fay Young, for example, was particularly impressed with SMU Head Coach Matty Bell's actions, which he believed could teach prejudiced coaches at other southern universities that more could be gained from exhibiting good sportsmanship and fair play than from adhering to outdated, racist ideologies.[510] The black press also emphasized that SMU fans cheered loudly for Washington after he put together another stellar performance for the Bruins.[511] The episode, consequently, indicated to black journalists that celebrating SMU's actions might accelerate the process of winning over white fans and increase opportunities for African American college football players.

The good fortune continued for black football fans when UCLA played Texas Christian University (TCU) to open the 1939 season. The Bruins hosted SMU and Texas A&M for contests in 1940 as well. In all three games, these southern, all-white teams agreed to compete

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[508] Initially, neither school considered the issue because the SMU and UCLA scheduled their two contests for the 1937 and 1940 seasons before UCLA added Washington and Strode to their roster.

[509] Martin, *Benching Jim Crow,* 36-38. SMU was also more amenable to revoking the Gentleman's Agreement because the game took place in California. It would have been much more difficult to persuade local supporters of the team in Dallas to allow black players to compete on their campus.

[510] Fay Young, "The Stuff is Here," *Chicago Defender,* December 18, 1937, 9. See also Ira F. Lewis, "The Passing Review: An Orchid to Texas," *Pittsburgh Courier,* December 4, 1937, 17; and Chester L. Washington, "Sez Ches," *Pittsburgh Courier,* December 4, 1937, 16.

[511] Washington, "Sez Ches," *Pittsburgh Courier,* December 4, 1937, 16.

against the African American players on UCLA's squad.[512] These games buoyed black sportswriters' spirits; more importantly, it gave them new ammunition with which to attack other southern schools that continued to endorse the archaic, racially prejudiced Gentleman's Agreement. When the University of Missouri refused to play NYU in 1940, for example, the *Defender* argued that Missouri had little reason to avoid facing black players given that their southern peers at SMU and TCU enjoyed competing against the African American players on UCLA's squad.[513] Black journalists similarly utilized UCLA Head Coach Babe Horrell's refusal to entertain the notion of sitting his black players against officials at Boston College when the school sat their star Lou Montgomery against Clemson University in the 1939 Cotton Bowl.[514] These games ultimately legitimized many black sportswriters' long-held beliefs with irrefutable proof that southern white college players and their fans survived competing against African Americans; and in certain cases, they saluted the standout performances of their black opponents.[515] These contests, furthermore, debunked the racist ideology that served as the foundation for many supporters of the Gentleman's Agreement.

Although UCLA's "sepia stars" enjoyed unexpected success against all-white southern opponents, they were not entirely free of the sport's racially discriminatory ways. As the team piled up victories during the 1939 season and ascended the national rankings, it entered the season's final regular season game against the University of Southern California (USC) with a berth in the lucrative New Year's Day Rose Bowl game at stake. Created in 1902, the Rose Bowl

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[512] Although, as the *Pittsburgh Courier* noted, some Texas A&M players were not thrilled at the idea of playing against Robinson as they tried to hurt him throughout the game. The harsh play resulted in the cancellation of future games between the two schools. "Tex. Team 'Roughs' Jackie Out of Game," *Pittsburgh Courier,* October 19, 1940, 18.

[513] "Race Issue Stirs New York University Campus," *Chicago Defender,* October 26, 1940, 23.

[514] "Race Issue Stirs New York University Campus," *Chicago Defender*.

[515] Ira F. Lewis, "The Passing Review," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

game and its corresponding New Year's Day parade quickly became the premiere postseason contest for college football's finest teams. The game typically pitted the best team from the West Coast against a squad from the Midwest or Northeast as a means to attract tourists seeking to escape their harsh, cold winters for the warm sunshine of Pasadena, California. By the late 1930s, college football officials had capitalized on the Rose Bowl's immense success by creating similar postseason bowl games such as the Cotton Bowl in Dallas, the Orange Bowl in Miami, and the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans. Successful college football programs hoped to earn an invitation to play in one of these games at the end of each season as it brought schools national exposure as well as a sizable amount of revenue from ticket sales.[516]

The possibility of UCLA's black stars earning an opportunity to showcase their skills to a national audience excited African American sportswriters. Sam Lacy, for example, asked readers, "who among you wouldn't like to see those three colored boys they have sparking the team given a chance" at the Rose Bowl?[517] Yet amidst the excitement, some black journalists were concerned that a victory might lead to a troubling predicament for UCLA and its African American stars because their likely Rose Bowl opponent, the University of Tennessee, ardently refused to compete against African Americans. As the *Oakland Tribune's* Art Cohn noted in an article reprinted by the *Pittsburgh Courier,* Tennessee officials had expressly declared their intentions to skip the Rose Bowl, and its $100,000 in revenue, and play in a less-heralded postseason bowl game if UCLA refused to sit their black players.[518] The article not only questioned the logic of Tennessee officials passing up such a prestigious honor, but it was also

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[516] For an extensive look at the creation of the Rose Bowl and its impact on college football, see Herb Michelson, *Rose Bowl Since 1902,* (New York: Stein and Day, 1977).

[517] Sam Lacy, "UCLA Makes Bowl Bid," *Washington Afro-American,* November 18, 1939, 26.

[518] Chester Washington, "Sez Ches: The Case of Kenny," *Pittsburgh Courier,* December 9, 1939, 16.

the first time the black press had challenged an all-white program's attitudes for a *hypothetical* game. Calling attention to an upcoming, potential conflict, rather than reacting to the actions of a southern program could be interpreted as an inversion of the power dynamic between the two institutions over the issue.

The black press' actions in publicizing this potential issue were raised primarily because white journalists, for the most part, were either unaware of, or neglected to discuss the possible conflict. The *Los Angeles Times,* in its extensive coverage prior to the UCLA-USC game, for example, never speculated on what might happen if UCLA advanced to play an all-white Tennessee team. The *Daily Bruin,* similarly, did not discuss the issue.[519]

Thankfully for Tennessee fans, and much to the chagrin of black journalists and UCLA supporters, the conflict remained only a hypothetical as UCLA tied USC, allowing the Trojans to advance to the Rose Bowl. Some African American journalists sarcastically noted that the tie "allowed plenty of folk, both in the North and South to sleep without nightmares that night and the narrow escape from a national issue that would have been created had U.C.L.A. won is being hailed on many fronts."[520] Overall, however, the issue galvanized African American journalists to redouble their efforts to celebrate black achievements like those of UCLA's stars and instigate efforts to eradicate the Gentleman's Agreement rather than react to the actions of stubborn, all-white teams. Although the success of this new strategy would be difficult to definitively determine, the strategic shift reveals more broadly how black sportswriters' methods of

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[519] Milt Cohen, "Here's Our Angle...," *California Daily Bruin,* December 6, 1939, 3. The only commentary from white newspapers that mirrored what black journalists discussed came from the *Pasadena Star-News,* which wondered if Tennessee would respect UCLA's wishes about its roster since it would be the visiting team for the Rose Bowl, and the *New York Times'* Allison Danzig, who contemplated who would replace Tennessee if they skipped the Rose Bowl. Bob Foote, "Foote-Loose in Sports," *Pasadena Star-News,* December 6, 1939, 20; and Allison Danzig, "Tennessee Hopes to Insure Rose Bowl Nomination by Beating Auburn," *New York Times,* December 9, 1939, 20.

[520] Daniel, "UCLA and USC Tie so Dixie Forgets Nightmare," *New York Amsterdam News,* December 16, 1939, 19.

confronting issues of racial discrimination in major college football had changed dramatically in the ten years since NYU refused to let Dave Myers play against the University of Georgia. Moreover, it illustrates how black journalists celebrated the on-field accomplishments of UCLA's African American players, and their ability to compel all-white teams to not invoke the Gentleman's Agreement as a symbol of black athletic achievement when given a fair opportunity to compete.

Conclusion: Déjà Vu at NYU – The Black Press' Campaign Comes Full Circle

While much had changed for African Americans at major college football programs during the 1930s, the 1940 season brought an uneasy sense of déjà vu for black journalists covering NYU's football team. Just as had occurred in 1929, NYU found itself mired in controversy for agreeing to sit African American player Leonard Bates for an upcoming game against the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri. Much of the black press' initial analysis could have been pulled from their coverage of the 1929 episode; they expressed frustration with NYU officials' acceptance of Jim Crow policies, chided Missouri's backward views on race in sports, and lamented how the Gentleman's Agreement made a mockery of America's supposed democratic ideals of fair play and good sportsmanship.

Yet much had changed in the eleven years between the two events. Journalists had learned from the setbacks Dave Myers and Wilmeth Sidat-Singh had endured earlier in the decade to sharpen their attacks on the schools and individuals seeking to uphold the Gentleman's Agreement. Instead of responding to the actions of white school officials, by the end of the decade, black journalists had proactively instigated many confrontations with schools seeking to deny African American players opportunities to compete. The success of black players at Iowa

and UCLA, moreover, galvanized sportswriters to criticize mainstream media members and white college football fans who diminished or ignored the exploits of star black athletes dominating mainstream college football. Their coverage of the key players involved in the controversy – from Missouri officials, NYU coaches and administrators, and Leonard Bates – in many ways synthesized the major themes utilized in their previous coverage of African Americans in integrated college football over the prior eleven years. Though their efforts failed to get Bates on the field, the black press' coverage of the event reveals the tremendous strides African Americans had made over the decade in attacking and changing college football's treatment of African American players. Moreover, it illustrates many black journalists' belief that African American players had an obligation to challenge the policy, even if it forced the athletes into the center of a conflict they wanted to avoid.

The *New York Amsterdam News* informed readers of NYU's decision to sit Bates nearly six weeks before kickoff. The newspaper's Dan Burley hoped that informing readers at such an early stage would help the "liberal elements at the schools…girding for what they expect to be an ugly fight in the Missouri game."[521] The newspaper increased its coverage of the event in the following weeks, publishing a series of articles and photographs expressing outrage at Missouri's actions, arguing that it was "hard to talk about 'freedom and democracy' so long as southern prejudices are allowed free sway against one tenth of the population of the land."[522] Burley, in a corresponding column, noted that unlike in 1929, NYU refused to falsely claim that Bates was injured so as to not appear that they had officially accepted Missouri's demands. This decision, in Burley's opinion, "force[d] Missouri to make the decision which cannot but cast more

[521] Dan Burley, "Confidentially Yours," *New York Amsterdam News,* September 28, 1940, 18.

[522] "Jim Crow Bars NYU Star," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 12, 1940, 19.

aspersions upon the southern school."[523] This initial spate of coverage focused overwhelmingly on attacking Missouri and framing their actions as an ugly reminder that certain southern schools continued to cling to outdated, undemocratic forms of racial prejudice that contradicted notions of fair play and good sportsmanship that the sport supposedly represented. In doing so, this first phase of coverage mirrored the methods black sportswriters frequently utilized earlier in the decade in exposing and challenging the Gentleman's Agreement.

The black press' attention, however, quickly shifted away from Missouri officials, focusing instead on criticizing a number of NYU officials. Black sportswriters were particularly frustrated with Head Coach Mal Stevens. Dubbed "Wishwashy" by the *Chicago Defender,* Stevens, in the opinion of black journalists, needed to admit that he had agreed to Missouri's demands rather than hide behind a litany of flimsy excuses.[524] The *Amsterdam News'* Frank Forbes, for example, found Stevens's declaration that the team's chances for victory would not diminish because of Bates's absence galling because it contradicted a statement Stevens made earlier in the season that Bates was "a fine boy…and unless I am very, very wrong, Bates is going to be a great player."[525] The lengths to which Stevens went to avoid taking responsibility for the fiasco, according to the *Defender,* meant that he would soon "get some offers from southern white schools since they know he would like to make America like Germany."[526]

The frustration levied at Stevens broadened to include NYU administrators and athletic officials, who critics believed actively sought to keep Bates on the bench. This included a

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[523] Dan Burley, "NYU Bows to Dixie Jim Crow: Missouri Eleven Upholds Dixie's Noble Tradition," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 12, 1940, 19.

[524] "Race Issue Stirs New York University Campus: Missouri Game is Cause," *Chicago Defender,* October 26, 1940, 23.

[525] Frank Forbes, "Sports Shots," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 26, 1940, 19; and Morgan S. Jensen, "Bates Must Play Campaign On: Students Protest NYU Grid Star Ban," *Pittsburgh Courier,* October 26, 1940, 1, 4.

[526] "Race Issue Stirs New York University Campus," *Chicago Defender* 23.

number of NYU students who were disappointed with their school's attitudes toward perpetuating racial equality. Led by Argyle A. Stoute, many NYU students created the All-University Committee to pressure school officials to change their ways. Unlike the Liberal and Cosmopolitan Clubs' actions in response to the Dave Myers episode in 1929, the All-University Committee demanded that Bates play in the upcoming Missouri game. As historian Donald Spivey notes, more than 2,000 students and sympathizers cried out that "Bates Must Play!" in a rally outside the NYU administration building on October 18. The committee, furthermore, drafted a four-point resolution that highlighted their support of Bates as well as their desire for NYU to radically alter its treatment of African American athletes. The resolution called for

> Len Bates be released from his gentleman's agreement and be allowed to make his own decisions as to whether he will or will not play; that New York University never again enter upon any contract with Jim Crow schools; that the University administration make a statement clarifying its view on this issue; and that if the administration fails to comply with the aforementioned resolutions, there be a boycott of all the home games for the remainder of the season.[527]

The resolution showcased a tremendous level of commitment from many NYU students to finally eradicate the school's discriminatory ways. Moreover, the specific, aggressive nature of their demands, and the threat of a boycott if NYU failed to comply, represented one of the few moments where white students fully supported one of their black teammates.

The black press celebrated NYU students' actions, viewing it as a crucial wellspring of support from white allies to their broader cause. The *Amsterdam News'* Frank Forbes believed that "only by such action can we ever expect to effectively eliminate such a condition."[528] Their actions, moreover, buoyed journalists' spirits and confirmed that white support for their cause

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[527] Donald Spivey, "'End Jim Crow in Sports': The Protest at New York University, 1940-1941," *Journal of Sport History* 15, no. 3 (Winter 1988), 285.

[528] Frank Forbes, "Sport Shots," *New York Amsterdam News,* November 2, 1940, 19.

might help pressure NYU and other college football officials to change their ways.[529] In the weeks following the "Bates Must Play!" movement, African American journalists' attacks on NYU officials intensified; Dan Burley, for example, declared that "NYU's spineless action in bowing to the edicts of the Muleheads" at Missouri made a mockery of America, the "so-called land of freedom and equality."[530] The *Courier's* Wendell Smith similarly interpreted the struggle Bates and other black college football players faced as a form of racial violence, arguing that, "NYU operates under a cloak of deceit and superficial sincerity. NYU will accept Negroes, then lynch them and flay them with a democratic rope and whip." Bates, in Smith's opinion, needed to leave NYU immediately because "he is being taught by Messers. Chase and Stevens that he is inferior. He is being taught that NYU's way is…that there is no place for the black man in the American scheme of things."[531] Calling on Bates to sacrifice his career and quit NYU in protest of the Gentleman's Agreement illustrates some black journalists' contention that athletes like Bates needed to prioritize contributing to the broader struggle for racial justice, even if it required sacrificing their career, ahead of their personal athletic ambitions.

African American journalists discovered that the "NYU Way" also involved coercing Bates to take the blame for the fiasco. Initially, George Sheiebler, NYU's director of publicity for the athletic department, sent a letter from Bates to the press emphasizing that Bates knew about the agreement between the schools prior to joining the team. The letter also stated that Bates wanted to sit out the game so as to avoid causing the school any controversy.[532] Bates concluded the letter by declaring that he accepted the school's decision because he enrolled at

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[529] Spivey, "'End Jim Crow in Sports,'" 286.

[530] Dan Burley, "Confidentially Yours," *New York Amsterdam News,* November 9, 1940, 18

[531] Wendell Smith, "Smitty's Sport Spurts," *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 9, 1940, 18.

[532] Spivey, "'End Jim Crow in Sports,'" 293.

NYU to "gain a college education. Football is a secondary matter."[533] The *Defender* vilified Bates's statement, arguing that, "perhaps Bates wants a job down in the rural section of some southern county where he has to 'mister' the dog catcher. Folk don't want him up North if he hasn't any manhood."[534] This scathing indictment of Bates's character and manhood closely reflected the attitudes expressed by George Schuyler and W.E.B. Du Bois toward Dave Myers in 1929.

However, unlike in the earlier incident, black journalists soon discovered that NYU officials had manipulated Bates's words to their benefit. As Spivey notes, Sheiebler used Bates's words out-of-context; Bates, in fact, understood that, while he could not play, he adamantly wanted to compete in the game.[535] Bates, the *Amsterdam News* noted, felt that defying the school's decision might jeopardize his academic scholarship.[536] While it was never determined if NYU administrators officially threatened Bates with this action, one can reasonably conclude that the school actively pressured Bates to shoulder the bulk of the blame for the conflict. Upon discovering this information, African American journalists sympathized with Bates, viewing him as an unwitting pawn in the school's efforts to limit opportunities for its black students.[537] As a result, most black journalists, having gained a greater understanding of the pressures Bates faced

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[533] "Bates Knew About the Missouri Game, Is Claim," *Pittsburgh Courier,* October 26, 1940, 16; and Spivey, "'End Jim Crow in Sports,'" 293-294.

[534] "Race Issue Stirs New York University Campus," *Chicago Defender* 23.

[535] Spivey, "'End Jim Crow in Sports,'" 293.

[536] "Len Bates to Stay in City as NYU Goes South: Student Protests Appear Futile," *New York Amsterdam News,* November 2, 1940, 18.

[537] See "Len Bates to Stay in City as NYU Goes South," *New York Amsterdam News*; Burley, "Confidentially Yours," *New York Amsterdam News,* November 9, 1940, 18; Smith, "Smitty's Sport Spurts," *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 9, 1940, 18; and Ed Hughes, "Brooklyn Scribe Flays N.Y.U. For 'Protecting' Bates," *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 9, 1940, 17.

from NYU administrators, did not declare that he had to actively challenge the school's policy in order to uphold notions of black manhood and respectability.

Despite the best efforts of frustrated NYU students and African American journalists, NYU officials never relented, and Bates remained on the sideline for the game against Missouri. Yet while the defeat temporarily stymied those challenging the Gentleman's Agreement, the black press' efforts galvanized more football fans to publicly oppose the policy. What began in 1929 as a conflict that African Americans primarily took issue with became a larger, more contentious debate among a broader swath of the college football community about black players' rights. Changing attitudes toward interracial athletic competition soon boosted the campaign initiated by the black press. This shift developed primarily because of World War II, where black and white soldiers began to compete against one another more frequently on military bases and in public exhibitions across the country. These competitions, according to historian Charles Martin, helped de-stigmatize the concept of interracial athletic competition; it also weakened the resolve of whites who had opposed athletic integration, and by the end of the war, "proponents of athletic democracy were guardedly optimistic about the future."[538] Following World War II, black college football players had greater opportunities to compete at major universities as both the Gentleman's Agreement's hold on the sport began to erode and all-white southern teams slowly began to integrate.

The successes black college football players enjoyed following the war, however, were indebted to the black press' efforts to eradicate the Gentleman's Agreement from 1929 to 1940. Framing the era of the black press' strongest efforts to tear down college football's Gentleman's Agreement as beginning and ending with defeats to NYU officials in 1929 and 1940 may suggest

[538] Martin, *Benching Jim Crow,* 54. It must be stressed, however, that while the Gentleman's Agreement gradually eroded in the postwar era, many teams across the South refused to play integrated teams into the late 1950s, and kept their teams segregated well into the 1960s.

that their coverage did little to improve black players' opportunities in the sport. Yet focusing only on the short-term setbacks obscures the broader gains African American journalists made. Much had changed over the course of the 1930s. Whereas African Americans were a relatively rare sight on integrated teams in 1929, by 1940, a significant number of teams had added black players to their rosters.[539] Star players such as Kenny Washington, moreover, attained celebrity status on campus and the black press extensively covered their exploits.[540] The black press' rhetoric, moreover, underwent a dramatic transformation; by 1940, journalists utilized a litany of techniques to shame school administrators intent on keeping black athletes off the playing field, compel readers to protest the school's actions, and frame the injustices within a much broader discussion of the racial inequality all African Americans felt in everyday life.

The black press' campaign across this period, therefore, highlights the *process* through which African American journalists utilized their coverage of black sports to compel black fans, and white sports officials to eliminate official barriers denying black participation in sports and destroy a discriminatory culture in college football perpetuated by the Gentleman's Agreement. Black sportswriters' conflicting attitudes toward how black college football players caught in the middle of these conflicts should act, however, reflects the ongoing, overarching debate over how black male athletes should act in order to gain white approval in the mainstream sports world. Indeed, in individual sports like track and field and boxing, black journalists sought athletes like Owens and Louis to refrain from actively confronting whites. Yet, the attitudes expressed by some African American journalists that black college players, as representatives of their race at

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[539] The rates increased further beginning in 1945 with the end of World War II, particularly after Major League Baseball integrated in 1947, thereby weakening public support for the persistence of segregated college football teams. Martin, *Benching Jim Crow,* 55-60.

[540] During each season, most African American newspapers published brief articles noting the achievements of black players on integrated teams. By the late 1930s, the coverage expanded to include full-length articles about key star players and their team's performance throughout the season.

major college football programs, had an obligation to actively challenge white officials who enforced the sport's racially discriminatory policies highlights a shift in black journalists' views of ideal black manhood based on the sport each athlete played.

Chapter 4

A Bitter Partnership: The Black Press' Contentious Relationship with the Negro Leagues in the Struggle to Integrate Major League Baseball

Introduction

In perpetuating an image of black athletes as upstanding gentlemen, African American journalists argued that Owens, Louis, and black college football players best exhibited their moral and physical fitness by outperforming their white competitors. Competing in integrated sporting environments, albeit on a limited basis, was central to achieving this endeavor. Yet throughout their efforts in the 1930s and 1940s to pressure Major League Baseball officials to desegregate America's national pastime, African American journalists could not position black baseball players as winners in a similar manner. Due to MLB's color barrier, African American baseball players harnessed their skills in the black-only Negro Leagues. As a result, African American journalists' campaign to integrate MLB necessitated celebrating the Negro Leagues as a respectable *institution* that nurtured upstanding, highly skilled black ballplayers in order to sell the notion that they were worthy of joining MLB's ranks. This initiative achieved its central victory once Jackie Robinson broke MLB's color barrier in April 1947. The moment – which has become an iconic event in modern American history – was viewed similarly by black journalists as a validation of their twenty-year campaign to integrate America's most popular and culturally significant professional sports league. Indeed, as Robinson declared shortly after signing with the Dodgers in 1945, "I know that my position was obtained only through the constant pressure of my people and their press. It's a press victory, you might say."[541]

Yet once MLB integrated, many black journalists' attitudes toward the Negro Leagues shifted. In particular, as the stewards overseeing the development of black baseball players,

[541] Carter, "It's a Press Victory, Jackie Robinson tells AFRO," *Washington Afro-American*.

African American journalists directed their criticism toward Negro League officials and team owners for failing to reconcile the impact MLB's integration had on the Negro Leagues. Consequently, support for the Negro Leagues decreased as many black journalists contended that its continued existence following integration symbolized the problematic legacy of segregation and complicated the black press' broader efforts to sell African American athletes as upstanding citizens. Thus, while many historians have celebrated the integration of MLB as a crucial victory in the civil rights movement, this chapter argues that this episode also serves as a bitter, ironic conclusion to the black press' 20-year campaign to disseminate a redefined notion of upstanding black manhood and respectability for African American athletes, and the institutions that nurtured those players. Indeed, unlike in the three cases previously discussed in this dissertation, the strictly enforced color line in Major League Baseball forced black journalists to address promoting African American players in the Negro Leagues in a different manner than athletes who could compete against whites. Thus, the black press' contentious relationship with the Negro Leagues from the 1920s through integration into the 1950s exposes the difficulties African American journalists experienced in attempting to position a segregated *institution* that nurtured African American athletes as upstanding and respectable while transitioning from a segregated environment to an integrated one.

Highlighting many black journalists' struggles to reconcile these tensions challenges the popular memory of Robinson breaking MLB's color barrier. MLB officials have transformed the event into a narrative perpetuating MLB's romantic conception of baseball's progressive ability to eradicate racial inequality and influence civil rights initiatives in the decades that followed.[542] Yet MLB's official narrative utilizes a simplistic notion of progress and downplays the

[542] Since 2004, Major League Baseball has annually commemorated April 15 as Jackie Robinson Day with a series of events at MLB ballparks across the country.

challenges Robinson faced, as well as the tension that existed among African Americans – particularly black sportswriters and intellectuals – over how Robinson broke into the Major Leagues and its impact on the Negro Leagues.[543]

Far from following a narrative that viewed the October 1945 breakthrough as inevitable, the black press' efforts to integrate the sport began in the mid-1920s and continued for a decade after Robinson started playing for the Dodgers. Over that period, the tone of the articles, the themes stressed, and even the audience of sportswriters' observations shifted course. In particular, the intended audience of black journalists' articles oscillated between African American readers, who were urged to become more active in integrating the game, Negro League officials, who were pressed to improve the quality of the Negro Leagues, and white MLB officials, who were criticized for maintaining segregation.[544] Moreover, the black press' coverage illustrates that not all African American sportswriters uniformly endorsed the belief that breaking baseball's color barrier had to occur immediately and by whatever means necessary.[545]

Black journalists' efforts to integrate MLB developed alongside their extensive coverage of the Negro Leagues – a vibrant institution within the African American community that existed

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[543] Robinson gained entry into, and later succeeded in, the Major Leagues. Yet historians often downplay the fact that Robinson was only one of a cadre of individuals and institutions – ranging from Brooklyn Dodgers General Manager Branch Rickey to the pioneering and highly influential *Pittsburgh Courier* sportswriter Wendell Smith – involved in the thirty-year campaign to integrate the sport. Studies of Robinson and the integration of Major League Baseball span from children's works such as Derek T. Dingle's *First in the Field: Baseball Hero Jackie Robinson,* to historical analysis such as Jules Tygiel's *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy,* Roger Kahn's *Rickey and Robinson: The True, Untold Story of the Integration of Baseball,* and Jonathan Eig's *Opening Day: The Story of Jackie Robinson's First Season.* The 2013 film, *42,* moreover, illustrates how Robinson's story has become a cultural touchstone for America's popular memory of the sport, serving as a visual reminder of the tremendous challenges Robinson overcame to increase opportunities for more black athletes.

[544] Although it should be noted that black journalists commended whites, both in Major League Baseball as well as in the mainstream media, who helped desegregate the game.

[545] Indeed, Joe Bostic of the *People's Voice,* a popular African American newspaper headquartered in New York City worried that integrating Major League Baseball might ruin the Negro Leagues. See Carroll, *When To Stop the Cheering*, 149.

because of segregation.[546] African American sportswriters continually wrestled with the significance of the Negro Leagues as it fought to integrate MLB. At times, some argued that supporting the Negro Leagues implicitly signified to white society that African Americans accepted segregation. Yet at other points, many black sportswriters celebrated the institution for its ability to develop upstanding, talented black ballplayers and urged Negro League officials to improve the league in order to become MLB's equal, thereby making comparisons between the quality of black and white players more legitimate.

Many journalists also struggled to assess what would happen to the Negro Leagues once MLB integrated. Indeed, as Joe Bostic of the *People's Voice*, a popular African American newspaper headquartered in New York City, declared in 1942, "Would Negro baseball profit or lose by the entry of Negroes in the American and National Leagues?"[547] Journalists wrestled with Bostic's concerns throughout the 1940s and early 1950s; ultimately, most agreed with Bostic that "the induction of Negro stars into the majors will probably ruin or seriously weaken the drawing power of teams in Negro circuits."[548] This conflict exemplifies the underlying challenges African Americans faced as they transitioned from a segregated sporting environment into an integrated one. Moreover, it exposes a central tension between Negro League officials concerned with protecting their short-term economic success and black journalists' integrationist

[546] This dissertation utilizes the term Negro Leagues to refer to the collection of established, professional black teams playing in the Negro National League, Negro American League, Eastern Colored League, or the Southern League from the 1920s to the 1950s. Throughout the history of professional black baseball, individual teams moved between these leagues as some disbanded, while others emerged to take their place. The term was utilized both by black sportswriters at the time as well as by current historians.

[547] Carroll, *When to Stop the Cheering,* 149.

[548] Stephanie M. Liscio, *Integrating Cleveland Baseball: Media Activism, the Integration of the Indians and the Demise of the Negro League Buckeyes* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2010)*,* 63.

ambitions to break the sport's color barrier.[549] These very same integrationist ambitions, ironically, ultimately made the continued existence of African American newspapers increasingly irrelevant by the 1950s and 1960s, as mainstream newspapers hired many talented black journalists and began covering news about the African American community to a much greater extent.[550]

Overall, the black press' relationship with the Negro Leagues throughout its thirty-year campaign to integrate MLB falls into three distinct phases. Initially, what began as a harmonious partnership between the two institutions, where they worked together to publicize and improve the quality of the Negro Leagues gave way to bitterness and resentment, as each questioned the other's role in integrating the sport. Once Robinson signed with the Dodgers, many African American sportswriters' criticisms of the Negro Leagues intensified as they worried that officials' concerns over how the Negro Leagues would survive following integration might derail the broader effort to increase black opportunity in MLB. Some journalists, moreover, believed that continuing to support the Negro Leagues would highlight the problematic legacy of segregated baseball and hinder their efforts to gain greater inroads in MLB. Consequently, in the decade following Robinson's signing, the relationship deteriorated as the black press devoted less attention to the Negro Leagues, opting instead to chronicle the efforts of the increasing number of black players in the integrated Major Leagues. When black sportswriters reported on

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[549] The development of the Negro Leagues, according to scholar Gerald Early, was riddled with debates over this conflict. He argues that, "by expressing the desire for freedom and respect, even esteem, through entrepreneurship and enterprise, as well as by demonstrating the nationalistic urge of blacks to act independently of whites, the [Negro] leagues - such as black colleges, black churches, and other 'shadow' institutions that blacks developed - became ends in themselves, taking on a compelling racial *mission."* Gerald Lyn Early*, A Level Playing Field: African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports,* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), 174-175.

[550] As baseball historian Brian Carroll notes, as mainstream newspapers began to employ the most talented black journalists, which weakened the quality of weekly African American newspapers, it triggered a "cycle [that] mirrored the talent drain that rapidly diluted the Negro Leagues." Carroll, "'There Couldn't be any Other Way,'" 18.

the Negro Leagues, many argued that it would fail because of poor management. Yet, by the early 1950s, some black sportswriters attempted to revitalize the Negro Leagues after recognizing that the integration of the sport had damaged this distinctly African American social and economic institution.[551]

This struggle to integrate the sport did not occur on the periphery of American culture. To the contrary, for whites and blacks alike, baseball played the dominant role in American sporting culture during the first half of the twentieth century. As historian Richard O. Davies notes, although teams played primarily in the Northeast and Midwest, MLB successfully captured the attention of millions of Americans across the nation through the first half of the twentieth century. He contends that "millions of fans raptly followed their teams' fortunes on the road" by listening to radio broadcasts and reading the extensive coverage provided in their local newspaper.[552] Thus, African American journalists viewed its campaign to integrate America's favorite sport as a capstone to their 20-year initiative to increase opportunities for African Americans across the sporting world and disseminate a new ideal black male athlete archetype.

By placing the complicated relationship between black journalists and Negro League officials at the center of the narrative, this chapter highlights a crucial element of the black press' efforts to integrate MLB that historians have often overlooked. Indeed, while scholars such as Jules Tygiel and William D. Rubenstein investigated how the social and political significance of the integration of professional baseball shaped subsequent civil rights efforts, they overlooked how African American efforts to gain entrance into the white-owned Major Leagues resulted in

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[551] See Wendell Smith, "Sports Beat," *Pittsburgh Courier,* May 5, 1951, 14; and A.S. Young, "Sportivanting with A.S. 'Doc' Young," *Chicago Defender,* May 13, 1950, 18.

[552] The national sporting environment would change beginning in the 1950s, as the National Football League and major college football programs began competing more aggressively with MLB for the attention of American sports fans. Richard O. Davies, *America's Obsession: Sports and Society Since 1945* (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1994), 11-13; see also Randy Roberts and James S. Olson, *Winning is the Only Thing: Sports in America Since 1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

complicated economic and cultural ramifications for many individuals associated with the Negro Leagues.[553] The rapid decline of the Negro Leagues in the years immediately following the integration of MLB illustrates that the economic consequences of this historical event must be considered when evaluating the overall significance of the breaking of the sport's color barrier.[554]

Historians Michael Lomax, Neil Lanctot, and Roberta J. Newman and Joel Nathan Rosen's explorations of the development of the Negro Leagues from the early 1900s to the 1950s, meanwhile, illuminate the critical role that the institution of Negro League baseball played in fostering racial pride within the African American community.[555] While these works demonstrate the economic challenges Negro League team owners faced as they tried to operate – what Lomax describes as "cooperative business enterprises" – they neglect to emphasize the often-contentious relationship between Negro League officials and African American journalists.[556] Recent scholarship from historians of African American baseball, especially Brian

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[553] See Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment;* and Rubenstein, "Jackie Robinson and the Integration of Major League Baseball."

[554] This essay complements historical analysis from scholars such as Robert Weems and Lizabeth Cohen, who explore how increased consumer consumption during the decade following World War II reshaped the African American community by highlighting how the desegregation of Major League Baseball had tremendous economic consequences for the black-owned Negro Leagues. Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic*; and Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar*.

[555] Lomax, "Black Entrepreneurship in the National Pastime"; and Newman and Rosen, *Black Baseball, Black Business*. See also Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860-1901*; and Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902-1930*.

[556] Lomax, "Black Entrepreneurship in the National Pastime," 46. Lomax's studies of the business of operating the early National Negro and Eastern Colored Leagues concludes in 1930, thereby overlooking how the challenges Negro League team owners faced once they became more established in the 1930s and 1940s changed dramatically once the black press increased its efforts to integrate Major League Baseball. Meanwhile, although Lanctot's comprehensive examination of the Negro Leagues examines the challenging working relationship that existed between black sportswriters and Negro League officials, his analysis occurs predominantly from the perspective of how Negro League team owners and officials attempted to work with African American journalists. Viewing this relationship from the perspective of African American sportswriters, consequently, shows how these journalists struggled to come to terms with the continued presence of the Negro Leagues once Major League Baseball integrated.

Carroll and Chris Lamb has shed light on the black press' role in integrating the game. Lamb's *Conspiracy of Silence* places African American newspapers' efforts within a comprehensive study of how many journalists, both black and white, fought to integrate the sport.[557] Carroll's works, meanwhile, situate the black press as a central player in the decades-long battle to integrate the game, spanning from the creation of the Negro National League in 1920 to its attempts to integrate every MLB team by the mid-1950s.[558] While both acknowledge the black press' contentious relationship with Negro League officials, they overlook how black journalists' troubled relationship with the Negro Leagues reflected their broader difficulty in disseminating redefined notions of respectability and manhood for black athletes across sports during this time period.

Through a close reading of the articles black sportswriters published, coupled with their personal correspondence with Negro League and MLB officials, and with other black journalists, this chapter demonstrates how black journalists struggled to come to terms with presenting the Negro Leagues as a symbol of black respectability and achievement once MLB integrated. African American sportswriters' shifting relationship with the Negro Leagues, from the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s, particularly after Robinson joined the Dodgers, illustrates the tremendous philosophical division that existed among African American journalists over how to transition from a segregated environment to an integrated one.

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[557] In particular, Lamb highlights the extensive efforts made by the communist newspaper, *The Daily Worker,* and its lead sportswriter Lester Rodney, to pressure Major League Baseball to integrate. Lamb, *A Conspiracy of Silence*. See also Chris Lamb, "'I Never Want to Take Another Trip Like This One': Jackie Robinson's Journey to Integrate Baseball," *Journal of Sport History* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 177-191; and David K. Wiggins, "Wendell Smith, the *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal* and the Campaign to Include Blacks in Organized Baseball, 1933-1945," *Journal of Sport History* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 5-29. For a greater examination of Rodney, and the *Daily Worker's* efforts to desegregate the game, see Irwin Silber, *Press Box Red: The Story of Lester Rodney, the Communist Who Helped Break the Color Line in American Sports,* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); and Henry D. Fetter, "The Party Line and the Color Line: The American Communist Party, the *Daily Worker,* and Jackie Robinson," *Journal of Sport History* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 375-402.

[558] Carroll, *When To Stop the Cheering*; Carroll, "'There Couldn't be any Other Way'"; Carroll, "To Pittsburgh from Chicago"; and Carroll, "The Black Press and the Integration of Professional Baseball."

Building a Business: Black Newspapers' Early Relationship with the Negro Leagues

The challenges black journalists faced in reconciling with the continued presence of the Negro Leagues following integration were rooted in both institutions' development under the specter of segregation. As African American sportswriters in the 1920s began to attack MLB's policy of segregation, they followed the black press' tradition of advocating for the African American community. Black newspapers in major urban areas such as Chicago, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and Washington D.C. emerged, beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to counteract the racist, inaccurate, and insufficient coverage white-owned daily newspapers provided on the issues and events that concerned African Americans.[559] As the *Afro-American* declared to readers in a 1905 editorial, "at present, the mission of the AFRO-AMERICAN is twofold. First to present to the world that side of the Afro-American [people] that can be had in no other way, and in the second place to as far as possible assist in the great uplift of the people it represents."[560] As a result, according to historian Hayward Farrar, the *Afro-American,* like other major black newspapers, covered events that concerned the well-being of African Americans while also exposing "racism in education, jobs, housing, and public accommodations, [and] encouraged its readers to fight racism, and publicized their activities

[559] See Hayward Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American, 1892-1950* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998); Andrew Buni, *Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier: Politics and Black Journalism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974); and Washburn, *The African American Newspaper.* Additionally, as Claude A. Barnett, founder of the *Associated Negro Press* news service argued in a speech entitled, "The Negro Press in America's War Effort," **"**But, since the daily paper, as a rule, carries little or no information about doings of Negroes other than that which is criminal or comical, if he wishes to translate those national events into terms of his own people; if he wishes to know what is going on in religious, educational, social, business and sporting circles among Negroes, he must turn to the special papers published for the specific purpose of giving him that information." Newsclipping, Claude A. Barnett, "The Negro Press in America's War Effort," *Associated Negro Press,* March 7, 1942, Box 143, Folder 6, Claude A. Barnett Papers, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

[560] Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American, 1892-1950,* xii.

when they did."[561] This attitude was particularly evident during World War II when the *Pittsburgh Courier* initiated the "Double V for Victory" campaign, which urged African Americans to wage two battles: to contribute to the war effort and support the United States while at once fighting fascism abroad and racial discrimination at home. In an August 8, 1942 editorial, for example, the newspaper argued that "our motive in this fight is not solely racial interest, for we devoutly believe that 'Our Country' cannot attain its rightful place among the nations of the world until it is first purged of the sordid mess of race prejudice at home."[562]

The attitudes expressed on the front pages and in the editorial sections of African American newspapers influenced how black journalists framed their sports coverage as well. While many articles focused on recapping specific athletic contests and publicizing upcoming events, black sportswriters penned columns attacking the racial injustice African American athletes faced. Publishers such as the *Courier's* Robert L. Vann sought to make the newspaper's sports reporting a key component of its broader effort to eradicate racial inequality. By 1935, the *Courier* devoted four pages in each issue to sports, featuring stories on local as well as national events highlighting black athletic achievements, as well as columns attacking racism in sports.[563] Many black sportswriters adopted an attitude best epitomized by *Afro-American* sportswriter Sam Lacy, who declared that "once I was in the writing business, fighting against racial discrimination through my sports pages and columns came naturally. There wouldn't be any of

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[561] Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American, 1892-1950,* xv.

[562] "Why Our Slogan is 'Double V,'" *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 8, 1942, 6.

[563] Buni, *Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh* Courier, 142-145. As Hayward Farrar contends, the *Baltimore Afro-American's* sports coverage followed a similar template, publicizing initiatives to desegregate local sporting institutions such as public golf courses as well as integrating Major League Baseball. Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American, 1892-1950,* 185-189.

that nonsense about keeping politics out of sports."[564] Sportswriters' efforts to integrate baseball, therefore, exemplified the philosophy African American newspapers had championed since the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The growth of African American newspapers in the early twentieth century paralleled the emergence and rapid development of black-only professional baseball teams. The strictly enforced barriers – official and unofficial – preventing nearly all African Americans from learning alongside white children, eating in the same restaurants, and playing on the same professional and collegiate sports teams represented a critical challenge faced by African American leaders. While many within the black community made integration a long-term goal, segregation did not preclude some African Americans from making successful, vibrant, and culturally important institutions. The creation of the Negro Leagues quickly became one of the more economically successful institutions within the African American community of the era. After beginning as a loosely organized unit of teams barnstorming different regions in the country, the Negro National League emerged in the 1920s and 1930s as an iconic institution that helped nurture the talent of some African American players who many blacks believed could outperform their MLB counterparts.[565]

During this period, the black press worked closely with the Negro Leagues to develop a viable, high-quality institution. Negro League teams called upon black newspapers to publicize upcoming games and celebrate each team's recent achievements in order to increase interest in the game among black newspaper readers. Some journalists held official and unofficial positions with individual teams and within the league offices of the Negro American and National

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[564] Lacy, *Fighting for Fairness*, 6.

[565] By the early 1940s, the Negro League East-West game, which pitted the league's best players against one another, drew crowds in excess of 45,000, far outdrawing many MLB games. Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*, 67-75, 128.

Leagues. The *Afro-American's* sports editor Art Carter, for example, served as "Public Relations Counselor" for the Negro National League throughout the 1930s and early 1940s.[566] They collaborated in part to improve the African American community's chances to integrate the sport; but they also understood that both institutions would gain financially as interest in the Negro Leagues increased. For the black press, providing greater coverage of Negro League games and news attracted more readers, which in turn increased the newspaper's revenues.[567] The symbiotic relationship highlighted how each institution worked together in order for the Negro Leagues, and African American players more broadly, to prosper.

Yet in working to improve the quality of the Negro Leagues, African American journalists expected league officials to project an upstanding, respectable image of the league to the mainstream sports world. However, beginning in the mid-1930s, many black journalists chided Negro League officials for failing to meet their expectations for how the league should operate. Much of the black press' disappointment stemmed from what they perceived as a lack of professionalism among some team owners. The New York Cubans' owner Alex Pompez, for example, attained much of his wealth by running illegal numbers lotteries, a form of low-stakes gambling popular among African Americans in major cities at the time. When business flourished, Pompez fielded a talented squad; yet when he endured devastating financial losses, or

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[566] Art Carter Papers, Box 170-16, Folder 1, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. The National Negro League also selected W. Rollo Wilson, a *Pittsburgh Courier* columnist, to serve as its first salaried commissioner in 1933 to oversee all aspects of the league, which demonstrated the symbiotic relationship between the two institutions. This pattern of incorporating members from one institution into the other was a two-way street, as the *Courier* employed Cumberland "Cum" Posey, owner of the Homestead Grays and secretary of the National Negro League, as a columnist for the paper. In his "Posey's Points" columns, Posey frequently discussed Negro League officials' efforts to integrate the game. See Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 33; Al Monroe, "Speaking of Sports," *Chicago Defender,* April 21, 1934, 16; Cum Posey, "The 1944 All-American Baseball Team," *Pittsburgh Courier,* December 16, 1944, 12; Cum Posey, "Many Problems League Must Solve," *Pittsburgh Courier,* May 5, 1945, 16; and Cum Posey, "Posey's Points," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 1, 1942, 16.

[567] The *Chicago Defender's* Robert Abbott was an early advocate of utilizing his newspaper to promote the Chicago American Giants. Through the newspaper's extensive distribution network that involved Pullman porters dispersing copies to railroad passengers across the nation, the *Defender's* circulation increased mightily in the 1920s. Carroll, *When to Stop the Cheering,* 22-23.

came under investigation for his illegal activity, Pompez was forced to unload his star players at a discount rate, thereby diluting the quality of the Cubans' squad.[568] These issues, as baseball historian Neil Lanctot notes, "undermined the legitimacy of an enterprise struggling to win recognition from whites and blacks."[569] These troubles concerned black journalists because many believed that MLB officials would not take the call for integration seriously unless the Negro Leagues became a top-quality organization. African American sportswriters' desire for the Negro Leagues to become a more respectable institution suggests that their calls paralleled the efforts of many middle-class civil rights leaders to foster a politics of respectability when fighting for integration and racial equality.[570]

As the primary venue to nurture African American baseball talent, black journalists' expectations that league officials act in a respectable manner also echoed their treatment of Louis, Owens, and other African American athletes. These attitudes developed partly in response to a statement made by MLB Commissioner Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis in 1938 that black players lacked the ability to play in the Major Leagues because the inferior Negro Leagues

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[568] Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 61. See also Adrian Burgos, *Cuban Star: How One Negro League Owner Changed the Face of Baseball* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011). It should be noted that not all owners ran illegal numbers operations like Pompez; some derived the majority of their income from the team, while others owned a variety of businesses in addition to the team.

[569] Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 60.

[570] Scholars have written extensively about how many civil rights activists focused intently on presenting their leaders as respectable, upstanding citizens, particularly during the modern civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Scholars Danielle McGuire and Christina Greene argue that, for African American women in the South fighting sexual violence and discrimination in the 1950s and 1960s. The issue of class, moreover, often divided African American activists as they fought for racial equality. This was evident, for example, when members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee such as Stokely Carmichael rejected Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s calls for nonviolent passive resistance efforts in the mid-1960s. See Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power,* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011); Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina,* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); and Wesley Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America,* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

stunted their development and limited their skills.[571] Rather than contest Landis's rhetoric and argue that it reflected his resistance to integration, sportswriters conceded this point, agreeing "that the present [Negro] league certainly isn't what it should be."[572] Legitimizing Landis's attitude also revealed an interesting challenge because, as African Americans attempted to eliminate MLB's 40-year ban on blacks players, they simultaneously sought to abide somewhat by the standards created by white officials.

The off-field troubles of some team owners, coupled with the leadership void that emerged after the death of Negro Leagues founder Andrew "Rube" Foster in 1930 compelled some black columnists in the late 1930s and early 1940s to find a league president who embodied Foster's visionary spirit while increasing the league's revenues.[573] To the *Courier's* Wendell Smith, the league needed strong management at this time: "Negro baseball is no longer a novelty. It is a major business and I'm afraid that someday it is going to be killed by the very people who [are] thriving off of it now."[574] Journalists also argued that the owners' inability to address a number of other important issues further undermined the legitimacy of the Negro Leagues. Sportswriters used their columns to urge the league to improve in a number of small ways, including increasing the salaries of players, creating a farm system to develop talented players, and improving the quality of the East-West game.[575]

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[571] Chester L. Washington, "'Sez Ches'" *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 16, 1938, 16.

[572] Chester L. Washington, "'Sez Ches'" *Pittsburgh Courier,* January 22, 1938, 16.

[573] "Baseball Needs Another Rube Foster!" *Pittsburgh Courier,* January 29, 1938, 17.

[574] Wendell Smith, "Smitty's Sports Spurts," *Pittsburgh Courier,* December 16, 1944, 12; and Wendell Smith, "Baseball Seeks Capable Man for Commissioner," *Pittsburgh Courier,* December 23, 1944, 12.

[575] Wendell Smith, "Smitty's Sports Spurts," *Pittsburgh Courier,* January 20, 1945, 16; Posey, "Many Problems League Must Solve," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

This criticism irritated many Negro League officials and widened the gap between sportswriters and league officials. Moreover, it revealed differing opinions between the two regarding the role black newspapers played in developing the Negro Leagues. Team owners believed that the black press should obey their wishes and support the league in their mutual desire to improve its overall quality. Thus, to team owners such as Effa Manley of the Newark Eagles and Cumberland Posey of the Homestead Grays, as well as to Negro National League President John H. Johnson, criticism was unwelcome, adding that white newspapers overwhelmingly supported the MLB teams it covered.[576]

Rather than back down, sportswriters intensified their critiques of the league. In particular, journalists attacked team owners when they attempted to exclude the black press from league meetings in an effort to control the message they delivered to the public. After being shut out of the league's spring meetings in 1940, for example, the *Courier's* Randy Dixon scolded league officials for making a mockery of its organization. Dixon railed that "the league is married to pettiness, lack of foresight and failure to recognize the change in trends" regarding what fans sought. He added that the league had become selfish in thinking that "the public should please the league, instead of the league pleasing the public."[577] Dixon's tirade concluded with an open letter to Tom Wilson, Chairman of the Negro National League, where he

[576] Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 192; Cum Posey, "Pointed Paragraphs," *Pittsburgh Courier,* February 29, 1936, 5. In a letter from Johnson to Carl Murphy of the *Afro-American,* Johnson argued that, "baseball thrives by reason of a tremendous amount of free publicity. This has made Major League Baseball what it is today. However, the papers gain too from those who read about, and follow sports in their favorite paper. That's a fact well known to all daily sports writers and papers. Free publicity from the Negro Press to Negro Baseball was always lacking even before the advent of Jackie Robinson into organized baseball." Letter from John H. Johnson, President, Negro National League to Carl Murphy, Afro-American Newspapers, February 18, 1948, Art Carter Papers, Box 170-16, Folder 7, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

[577] Randy Dixon, "The Sports Bugle," *Pittsburgh Courier,* February 3, 1940, 16.

sarcastically highlighted many of Wilson's failings as the league's primary steward.[578] Dixon's words made it clear that even as black journalists worked with the Negro Leagues to help integrate MLB, their patience for Negro League officials' continued mishaps had worn thin. Moreover, it suggests that many journalists like Dixon had begun to distance themselves from the Negro Leagues as they grew closer to integrating MLB.

Resentment: The Black Press' Growing Critique of the Negro Leagues

Tensions between the two institutions increased after Robinson signed with the Dodgers in October 1945. The event represented a dramatic shift in the black press' campaign to integrate the game. For the rest of the 1940s and into the mid-1950s, black sportswriters attacked MLB team owners who had not integrated their rosters and pressured them to follow Brooklyn Dodgers General Manager Branch Rickey's example and add black players to their squads. They cited the mostly positive reception Robinson received from white society and his stellar play on the field as compelling evidence that "baseball's great experiment" to integrate worked.[579]

Yet, as black sportswriters continued their campaign to increase opportunities for black players in the Major Leagues, their relationship with Negro League officials deteriorated dramatically. By the early 1950s, as more African Americans joined MLB teams, formerly robust and dynamic Negro League teams struggled to survive, with flagship teams such as the Kansas City Monarchs, Newark Eagles, and New York Cubans disbanding within a few years of the sport's integration. During the decade after Robinson's signing, the black press paid greater

[578] Randy Dixon, "The Sports Bugle," *Pittsburgh Courier,* February 17, 1940, 16.

[579] Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment*. Robinson's success with the Dodgers began immediately as he won the National League's Rookie of the Year award in 1947 as the top first-year player in the league and was named the National League's Most Valuable Player in 1949, his third season in the league. He remained one of the league's top players throughout the rest of his career until his retirement in 1956.

attention to black Major Leaguers and dramatically decreased its coverage of the Negro Leagues, ending their once symbiotic relationship.[580]

As more black players entered the Major Leagues, African American newspapers dramatically altered their coverage of the Negro Leagues. The response of black sportswriters to Robinson's first season, for instance, exemplified the broader African American community's desire to see Robinson and the "great experiment" to integrate baseball succeed. Throughout the 1947 season, black newspapers wrote extensively about Robinson. The coverage included weekly statistical recaps of Robinson's performance throughout the season, collections of photographs chronicling his exploits both on and off the field, a weekly first-person column from Robinson, and columns and broader news stories discussing Robinson's impact and reception in Major League Baseball.[581]

As more black players joined other MLB teams in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the black press substantially increased its coverage of African American players in the Major Leagues while decreasing its coverage of the Negro Leagues. The Cleveland *Call and Post,* for example, wrote almost exclusively about the Negro Leagues' Cleveland Buckeyes prior to integration; its coverage reached a peak when the team won the Negro League World Series in 1945. However, according to historian Stephanie Liscio, "the Buckeyes, who already took a back seat to the Indians post-integration in the *Call and Post*, were almost completely forgotten after

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[580] Historians Stephanie Liscio and Brian Carroll have noted how black newspapers in cities with both Negro League and MLB teams largely dropped covering the Negro League team once the hometown MLB squad integrated. The *Chicago Defender,* moreover, as Carroll states, extensively covered Jackie Robinson's exploits throughout 1947 and 1948, long before the White Sox and Cubs integrated. Liscio, *Integrating Cleveland Baseball,* 142; and Brian Carroll, "North vs. South: Chicago Defender Coverage of the Integration of Professional Baseball in the City," *Journalism History* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 166.

[581] A prime example of the extensive coverage can be seen in the sports section of the *Pittsburgh Courier* during the 1947. See *Pittsburgh Courier,* April 19, 1947; April 26, 1947; and September 20, 1947.

the Indians' 1948 World Series win."[582] Moreover, as scholar Ryan Ryzner notes, black sportswriters referred to the Indians as "our Indians" after Doby and Satchel Paige integrated the squad, indicating that, "because there were black players on the Cleveland Indians, all blacks should support the team."[583] Similar patterns emerged in black newspapers in cities where the local MLB team had yet to integrate. The *Defender* extensively covered Doby and Robinson's exploits throughout 1947 and 1948, long before the White Sox and Cubs integrated. As Brian Carroll argues, only after the White Sox desegregated in the early 1950s did "the bulk of the newspaper space once devoted to black baseball games in 1953 [go] instead to the White Sox."[584]

Cutting the coverage of the Negro Leagues severely limited black baseball's ability to widely publicize its product. Negro League team owners struggled throughout its existence to inform fans about crucial information such as team schedules and player performances. While black newspapers provided and at times collected this information before integration, they largely abandoned this practice by the late 1940s because, according to Lanctot, "black newspapers, regardless of their attitude toward the NAL [Negro American League], had little choice but to focus on Organized Baseball and offer the increasingly detailed coverage of individual athletes craved by their readers."[585]

When the black press did discuss the Negro Leagues, it often framed the officials as inept. The seeds of resentment between African American newspapers and Negro League officials developed in the early 1940s as journalists bristled when they believed that league

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[582] Liscio, *Integrating Cleveland Baseball,* 142.

[583] Ryan Ryzner, "The Black Press and Negro League Baseball in 1940s Cleveland," *Black Ball* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2009), 80.

[584] Carroll, "North vs. South," 166.

[585] Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 344.

officials attempted to actively impede the progress of any efforts made to integrate the Major Leagues. To journalists, league officials who put their interests ahead of the greater communal good of eradicating systemic racial inequality committed a cardinal sin. Thus, in the summer of 1945, Sam Lacy criticized Negro League official J.B. Martin's statement that league officials would support the promotion of black players into the Major Leagues should the opportunity occur. Lacy, given his experience with league officials who he believed continually avoided addressing how to integrate the Major Leagues, viewed the declaration as nothing more than a bald-faced lie. In Lacy's opinion,

> The Negro American League president and the heavy majority of his cronies in colored baseball, are bitterly opposed to any move that even barely suggests one of their players is going to be freed from the bonds that tie him to the sport. None of them wants to see a colored player progress beyond his own backward, selfish estate.[586]

Lacy's frustration with league executives also grew out of Negro League officials' rejection of his offer to help pressure the Major Leagues to integrate. Rather than interpreting his call as an offer to help, Homestead Grays owner Cumberland Posey told Lacy that, "we don't want you to help break up our league."[587] To Lacy, Posey's attitudes exemplified how the self-interest of league officials threatened to derail the push for integration.

These concerns escalated once Robinson signed with the Dodgers and Negro League team owners were forced to contend with MLB teams raiding their rosters for talented black players. While the African American community celebrated Robinson's signing with the Dodgers, the Kansas City Monarchs' owners Tom Baird and J.L. Wilkinson worried that Branch Rickey might attempt to take Robinson without compensating them. Their fears proved accurate as Rickey successfully argued that he had no legal obligation to pay the Monarchs for Robinson

[586] Sam Lacy, "Looking 'Em Over," *Washington Afro-American,* August 11, 1945, 14.

[587] Lacy, *Fighting for Fairness,* 57.

because the team never signed him to an official contract.[588] Following Rickey's lead, most MLB teams did not compensate Negro League team owners when signing black ballplayers.[589] These moves devastated Negro League teams in two ways: they lost star players who attracted fans to games, and completed transactions without compensation further weakened a team's financial stability. Yet, more significantly, most team owners understood that black journalists would frame their objections to Rickey's attempt to poach Robinson from the Monarchs as an effort to obstruct the process of integrating the sport.[590]

Initially, journalists argued that this situation could have been avoided if Negro League officials had better prepared themselves for the sport's integration. In 1947, Wendell Smith contended that Negro League officials foolishly continued to operate as if it were 1944 or 1945, when the league earned record profits.[591] Smith, moreover, repurposed an earlier argument that once the Negro Leagues "got its house in order," MLB officials would stop raiding it for players. Finally, Smith returned to a familiar theme utilized prior to the sport's integration, arguing that "few, if any, of the owners in Negro baseball are sincerely interested in the advancement of the Negro player, or what it means with respect to the Negro race as a whole."[592] Smith repeatedly framed team owners' behavior as selfish, mincing few words when accusing owners of putting their needs ahead of the black ballplayers they employed and the African American community

[588] The lack of an official contract between Robinson and the Monarchs was commonplace in the Negro Leagues; many contracts consisted of little more than a verbal agreement between the team owner and player. Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 279-284.

[589] Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 279-288.

[590] Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 281; and Carroll, *When to Stop the Cheering,* 144-148.

[591] Wendell Smith, "Payrolls Killing Negro Teams," *Pittsburgh Courier,* September 20, 1947, 13.

[592] Wendell Smith, "They're Reaping What They've Sown," *Pittsburgh Courier,* January 26, 1946, 14.

that supported them as the sport integrated.[593] Many other black journalists echoed Smith's attitudes, indicating that during the early moments of the sport's integration they prioritized the breaking of baseball's color barrier far ahead of also attempting to preserve the Negro Leagues in the process.[594]

Journalists also feared that Negro League officials' threats to dissuade MLB teams from signing more black players could potentially undo the progress made in integrating the sport. This was particularly evident when Monte Irvin of the Newark Eagles signed with Rickey's Dodgers in 1949. Effa Manley, the Eagles' co-owner, objected to Rickey's poaching tactics and refused to release Irvin from his contract with the Eagles. Rather than negotiate with Manley, Rickey abandoned signing Irvin. However, due to economic troubles, the Eagles disbanded shortly after Manley challenged Rickey, leaving Irvin with neither a Negro League nor an MLB team to play for. Sportswriters argued that the Irvin episode exemplified how Negro League officials acted in an undignified manner by actively impeding the process of integrating the sport.[595]

Manley, however, vehemently disagreed with this assessment, arguing that African American newspapers were also responsible for the decline of the Negro Leagues. Throughout her tenure as co-owner of the Eagles, Manley challenged black sportswriters to improve their coverage of her Eagles and the Negro Leagues more broadly. In her view, black sportswriters

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[593] In 1946, for example, Smith cautioned readers that the cooperation between Negro League team owners and MLB Commissioner Happy Chandler to resolve the issue of player raiding was "not motivated by a desire to improve the status of the Negro player, but simply to protect their own selfish interests." Smith, "They're Reaping What They've Sown," 14.

[594] Wendell Smith, "Monty Irvin Can Thank Effa Manley," *Pittsburgh Courier,* January 22, 1949, 10; Dan Burley, "Replaying the World Series," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 11, 1947, 12.

[595] Smith, "Monty Irvin Can Thank Effa Manley," *Pittsburgh Courier*. Irvin eventually signed with the New York Giants in 1949, who paid Manley $5,000 to release Irvin from his contract with the Eagles. Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 347. Dan Burley, moreover, declared that he "hated to see the attitudes of owners of Negro ball clubs in their inane and thoughtless attempt to fight major league baseball." Burley, "Replaying the World Series," *New York Amsterdam News*.

rarely gave Negro League team owners the credit they deserved for creating a popular and prosperous institution.[596] Her frustration with the black press reached a breaking point shortly after Robinson began playing with the Dodgers. According to Manley, black sportswriters such as Smith unfairly ridiculed her and other team owners for attempting to protect their financial investments when MLB teams tried to poach their players. Moreover, she found the black press' dramatic decrease in coverage of the Negro Leagues as having a potentially devastating effect on the team, and on the prospects of black players reaching the Major Leagues in the future. In a statement made to the Negro Publishers Association in 1949, Manley pleaded with black sportswriters to recommit to the Negro Leagues, declaring:

> The Negro press has a very definite responsibility in helping to preserve the leagues. If the sports writers on your publications will evidence the same enthusiasm toward our Negro baseball leagues and our colored boys playing in these organizations, as they do about the feats of the Negro players in the White major leagues, the future of Negro baseball will not be in jeopardy. If they will give us the space, coverage, and buildup, the fans will give us the support necessary to make the Negro teams financially successful.[597]

Manley's statement acknowledged that black baseball fans would continue to flock to MLB stadiums to watch the few black players on integrated teams. Yet, African American journalists, according to Manley, should not abandon the league. To the contrary, their support was now more vital than ever in keeping the Negro Leagues alive.

The grievances aired between African American sportswriters and Negro League officials did little to persuade black baseball fans to remain interested in the Negro Leagues. The most disapproving critique Negro League officials faced, however, came not from a prominent

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[596] Effa Manley maintained a scrapbook throughout her time as co-owner of the Eagles, collecting a series of articles from black journalists highlighting their inadequate or inaccurate coverage of the league. See Newspaper Articles, Coll. BA SCR 105, Effa Manley Scrapbook, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, New York; and Newark Eagles Records, 1935-1946, Newark Public Library, Newark, New Jersey.

[597] Statement of Mrs. Effa Manley to the Negro Publishers Association, Washington, D.C., 1949, Box 3, Folder 3, Coll. MA BSS 189, Ashland Collection, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, New York.

journalist, but rather from the nation's most famous African American ballplayer. In a June 1948 article in *Ebony* magazine titled, "What's Wrong with Negro Baseball," Jackie Robinson argued that the Negro Leagues "needs a housecleaning from top to bottom." Based on his experience during his one season with the Kansas City Monarchs in 1945, Robinson stated that shoddy playing conditions, an inadequate training period prior to the season's start, the squalid accommodations players endured while traveling, and the Monarchs' failure to sign him to an official contract illustrated the grave ineptitude of league officials.[598]

These problems were all the more apparent to Robinson after he finished his first season in the Dodgers organization, which largely treated him with respect and care. Consequently, Robinson declared that "the indifference of the [Negro League] owners towards the players' welfare and the laxity of the rules tend to create a bad situation as far as the athletes are concerned."[599] As a player with first-hand experience dealing with the many structural problems plaguing the Negro Leagues, Robinson's article legitimized many attitudes sportswriters had expressed for years.[600] Furthermore, Robinson's feelings echoed the grievances other black ballplayers had long expressed as well.[601] But the fact that the most popular black ballplayer publicly derided the Negro Leagues resonated with African Americans in ways that other talented black players and popular black sports columnists could not.

Robinson's statement reverberated mightily among black baseball officials. Manley quickly responded in a May 1948 *Chicago Defender* article, arguing that she and other Negro

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[598] Jackie Robinson, "What's Wrong with Negro Baseball," *Ebony*, June 1948, 16-18.

[599] Robinson, "What's Wrong with Negro Baseball," *Ebony*.

[600] Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 332-333; and Robinson, "What's Wrong with Negro Baseball," *Ebony*.

[601] Monte Irvin, for example, aired his dislike of Manley through black newspapers as well. When Manley decided to sell the Newark Eagles, Irvin celebrated the move, declaring that "Mrs. Manley has been a great help to Negro baseball by getting out of it." W. Rollo Wilson, "'Campy' Florida Bound," *Pittsburgh Courier,* March 5, 1949, 11.

League owners had worked tirelessly to improve the quality of black baseball.[602] Moreover, she refuted Robinson's claim that league officials failed to properly oversee league operations, contending that his allegations were largely unfounded.[603] Manley then sought to further undermine Robinson's credibility by arguing that he was "being ungrateful and more likely stupid" in writing the *Ebony* article. She also contended that "Jackie Robinson is where he is because of Organized Negro baseball…I firmly believe that Jackie Robinson would never [have] been noticed – discovered – or given a chance if it were not for the people and the team that he derides."[604] Manley's scathing statement clearly illustrated that Robinson's words greatly wounded her and also threatened to shatter black baseball's position among African Americans.

Unfortunately, her words ultimately did more harm than good in an effort to persuade black baseball fans to empathize with Negro League officials. Specifically, it appeared to provide black sportswriters with more ammunition to use against Manley in their nearly decade-long battle of wills over who was responsible for black baseball's demise. However, it must be noted that, in response strictly to Robinson's article, the black press gently chided him for his public outburst. The *Defender's* Fay Young, for instance, argued that "a little more concentration on his weight problem and less on writing articles knocking Negro baseball – the very thing that helped make him – may help save an unfortunate situation."[605] Young's criticism or Robinson echoed how many black journalists criticized Louis, Owens, and other African American athletes for unnecessarily provoking controversy. Young's disapproval of Robinson's actions, however,

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[602] Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 333-334.

[603] In fact, she noted that Robinson's assessment overlook a number of critical components that invalidated his argument. See Lanctot, 334; "Mrs. Manley Call Jackie Robinson 'Ungrateful,'" *Chicago Defender,* May 29, 1948, 10.

[604] "Mrs. Manley Call Jackie Robinson 'Ungrateful,'" *Chicago Defender*.

[605] Fay Young, "Through the Years," *Chicago Defender,* June 5, 1948, 10.

lacked the vitriol levied toward Manley for expressing fairly similar sentiment. Speaking broadly to all black Major Leaguers, Young added stated that, "practically every player who has been signed and who remains in white organized baseball owes a debt of gratitude to the owners in the Negro Leagues. No one should overlook that fact."[606] Young's words, while comforting to black baseball officials, ultimately represented one of the few instances where black sportswriters defended the Negro Leagues. More often than not, journalists' attitudes toward the Negro Leagues demonstrated how they prioritized supporting and defending black Major Leaguers such as Robinson ahead of protecting Negro League officials such as Manley.

Constructive Criticism: The Black Press' Efforts to Help the Negro Leagues

Robinson's words vividly illustrated the breakdown in the relationship between African American journalists and Negro League leaders. Yet, despite the deep, damaging wounds, the black press had not completely given up on the Negro Leagues. The *New York Amsterdam News'* Dan Burley, for instance, made it clear to readers that prior to the 1948 season, "when this column criticizes [black baseball], it does so in the line of constructive suggestion."[607] The *Pittsburgh Courier's* Wendell Smith, similarly argued that "the fans will continue to support Negro baseball, we believe, if the Negro leagues have faith in themselves and in the future, and roll up their sleeves and go to work."[608] These suggestions to work hard and believe in their abilities, however, rang hollow; lacking any specific, practical suggestions as to how team owners would improve the league's fortunes suggests that Smith and Burley were merely showing superficial support for the league. Amidst their criticisms of league officials, African

[606] Fay Young, "Let's Support Them," *Chicago Defender,* May 7, 1949, 14.

[607] Dan Burley, "Some Lines About Jim Semler," *New York Amsterdam News,* February 7, 1948, 26.

[608] Wendell Smith, "Robinson Year's Number One Rookie," *Pittsburgh Courier,* August 9, 1947, 14.

American sportswriters offered some recommendations to help the league survive. At the end of the 1947 season, Burley believed that the Negro Leagues would continue because the "novelty" of flocking to watch African Americans play in the Major Leagues would "wear off…when [more] Negro players move onto other big league club rosters."[609]

Burley's prediction was wrong. African American interest in MLB increased as more black players entered the league. Before the start of the 1948 season, Burley adjusted his stance, declaring that although "the major leagues reverse[d] [its] age-old policy and admit[ted] two or three Negroes [it] is no sign everything colored has to fold up and die."[610] His analysis presciently understood that widespread integration – where many African Americans entered the Major Leagues rather than just a select few superstars – would not occur until long after Robinson retired. Moreover, it implicitly suggested that the careers of over 200 Negro League players would be sacrificed because a select handful thrived in the Major Leagues. Burley, furthermore, viewed the experience of integrating baseball within the context of broader social and political events. Specifically, he noted that African American churches, nightclubs, and other institutions remained after they integrated; thus, in his opinion, there was little reason for the Negro Leagues to suffer a different fate. Burley's assessment, however, failed to acknowledge that churches and nightclubs operated in an entirely different economic and cultural environment than professional baseball; white churches and clubs had neither the monopoly power nor the national branding prestige of MLB.[611] Integrating these businesses, therefore, allowed African

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[609] Burley, "Replaying the World Series," *New York Amsterdam News*.

[610] Burley, "Some Lines About Jim Semler," *New York Amsterdam News*.

[611] Major League Baseball had a long history of wielding its power to weaken and eliminate rival competitors. When the upstart Federal League began playing in 1914 and 1915 in hopes of challenging the Major Leagues, MLB officials interfered with the Federal League's operations, leading to the landmark Supreme Court case – *Federal baseball Club v. National League* – which argued that Major League Baseball was exempt from the Sherman Antitrust Act, thus giving the Major Leagues the ability to create a monopoly in the sport. See Nathanial Grow,

Americans to access previously segregated spheres without sacrificing competing black-owned institutions. However, given the unique nature of Major League Baseball and its widespread popularity and dominance within the market, once it integrated, the Negro Leagues could not compete with such a powerful and influential institution.[612]

Negro League team owners understood this predicament and, beginning in the late 1940s, lobbied with MLB officials to create a formal relationship between the Negro American and National Leagues and Major League Baseball that mimicked the affiliation between major and minor league teams. As Lanctot notes, Negro League officials hoped the partnership "would eventually allow black teams, like their minor league counterparts, to develop alliances with major league franchises through 'working agreements'" that "could prove advantageous for an industry now entering a critical transitional period."[613] MLB officials ultimately rejected the offer, gravely wounding the Negro Leagues' long-term economic viability.

Despite the increasingly dire circumstances Negro League officials faced, some black journalists compelled readers to continue to attend Negro League games. These calls, in fact, began the moment Robinson signed in 1945, as the *Courier* declared that "in its intensive campaign to smash the color barriers in organized Major league baseball, [the newspaper] does not intend to jeopardize the best interests of Negro organized baseball in any way."[614] Journalists repeatedly returned to this familiar refrain in the ten years after the sport integrated as fan interest in the Negro Leagues continued to plummet. *Courier* reporter Jack Saunders, for example, feared

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Baseball on Trial: The Origin of Baseball's Antitrust Exemption, (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

[612] Burley's opinions, ironically, did not acknowledge that African American newspapers might suffer a similar fate as the Negro Leagues in the future once mainstream newspapers added more black journalists to their newsrooms and expanded their coverage of the African American community in the 1950s and 1960s.

[613] Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 326.

[614] "The Courier Supports Organized Negro Baseball!" *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 3, 1945, 18.

that black fans would disregard the Negro Leagues as they celebrated the achievements of black Major Leaguers such as Robinson, Larry Doby, and Roy Campanella. Sagging attendance figures at Negro League games – fewer than 1,700 fans often attended games, a steep decline from the 5,000 to 10,000 fans teams averaged in the years prior to integration – demonstrated to Saunders that black fans had abandoned the league. Although Saunders understood why African Americans yearned to see integrated MLB games, he believed that black baseball fans should not sacrifice their support of the Negro Leagues in the process.[615] Some journalists such as A.S. "Doc" Young stressed that fans should return to the Negro Leagues in part because, despite the loss of a handful of star players, "the Negro leagues played a much better brand of ball than they're generally credited with having played."[616]

The stakes extended beyond questions of the survival of the Negro Leagues itself. Saunders feared that the absence of a strong fan base would trigger the death of the Negro Leagues, and, by extension, "the hopes of hundreds of Negro aspirants for major league careers will be doomed."[617] These concerns were borne out of many sportswriters' beliefs that, as Wendell Smith stated, the Negro Leagues had served as the primary "breeding ground for Negro players" to hone their talents before moving on to play in the Major Leagues. To Smith and Saunders, opportunities to improve their skills alongside whites on minor league teams would be extremely limited, making the continued existence of the Negro Leagues all the more vital. Increasing the number of African Americans in the Major Leagues, therefore, depended upon the

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[615] Jack Saunders, "Don't Let Negro Baseball Die!" *Pittsburgh Courier,* September 4, 1948, 12. For more information about average Negro League attendance figures, see Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 197-198, 329.

[616] A.S. 'Doc' Young, "Pro Negro Baseball," *Chicago Defender*, May 13, 1950, 18. See also Wendell Smith, "Negro American League Deserves Fans' Support," *Pittsburgh Courier,* May 5, 1951, 14; Dan Burley, "The Local Story in Baseball," *New York Amsterdam News,* May 29, 1948, 20; and William Webster, "Is Negro Baseball Dying?" *Pittsburgh Courier,* April 2, 1955, 3.

[617] Saunders, "Don't Let Negro Baseball Die!" *Pittsburgh Courier*.

existence of the Negro Leagues that would continue to nurture black talent.[618] When Smith returned to this issue in 1951, he employed much of the same language; doing so indicates that while his opinions of how the Negro Leagues operated had soured over time, he remained resolutely steadfast "that there will be fewer Negroes performing in the majors in the future if the Negro American League folds because of the lack of patronage."[619] Smith and Saunders's words resonated with some readers such as Robert Davis, who in a letter published in Dan Burley's weekly column, argued that "it is the fans who are woefully letting Negro baseball down." Moreover, he contended that when black fans "desert Negro baseball they are deserting a Negro institution whose success or failure means another success or failure of the whole Negro race."[620]

Smith, moreover, implored Negro League team owners to improve the quality of their product so that it would make Negro League stars more attractive candidates to MLB squads. However, Smith directed this new rhetoric not at Negro League team officials but at black baseball fans, suggesting that Negro League leaders could no longer maintain a sustainable institution. To Smith, the Negro Leagues' survival would occur primarily through the black press' ability to persuade readers to ardently support it. Smith's effort, however, appeared somewhat out of place given the broader attitudes black journalists expressed about the state of the league throughout the 1940s and 1950s. In particular, some occasionally lamented that integrating baseball would likely result in the quick death of the Negro Leagues. To compound matters, some argued that the continued existence of the black-only Negro Leagues no longer

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[618] Wendell Smith, "Egan's Still in There Pitching," *Pittsburgh Courier,* May 3, 1947, 14.

[619] Smith, "Negro American League Deserves Fans' Support," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

[620] Robert Davis in Dan Burley, "Flashes and Dashes on Sports Row," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 3, 1948, 26.

served as a symbol of racial pride; instead, it represented racial prejudice, segregation, and an earlier era African Americans had worked diligently to overcome.

While some black journalists argued that the league would likely perish after integration, some journalists such as Smith still occasionally held out hope that the Negro Leagues would survive in one form or another. Many readers may have noted that sportswriters conveyed contradictory opinions about the Negro Leagues and its place in the black community after integration. During the summer of 1947, for example, in his weekly "Sports Beat" column, Smith expressed disgust at Negro League officials for mismanaging their affairs, compelled readers to continue to attend Negro League games despite the league's glaring shortcomings, and provided extensive coverage of Robinson's highly successful first season with the Dodgers.[621] Smith's columns vividly demonstrated how conflicted he remained over what to do with the Negro Leagues after the sport desegregated. Beyond the arguments he expressed, the manner in which the *Courier*, and most major black newspapers, shifted from covering the Negro Leagues to Major League Baseball made his calls for readers to continue to support the league appear out of place or paradoxical.[622] One should not fault Smith and other sportswriters; rather, one could argue that their continued support for a dying institution represented their inability to completely abandon a league it had worked with so closely for decades. Moreover, it illustrates their difficulty in coming to terms with the fact that the league once symbolized opportunity and racial pride in the face of segregation only to become a reminder of segregation's harsh exclusionist policies after MLB integrated.

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[621] Smith, "Egan's Still in There Pitching," *Pittsburgh Courier*; Wendell Smith, "Negro Baseball Forgetting the Public?" *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 14, 1947, 14; and Smith, "Robinson Year's Number One Rookie," *Pittsburgh Courier*.

[622] As Carroll contends, "with involuted logic black newspapers called on readers not to turn their backs on the Negro Leagues while the newspapers did precisely that." Carroll, *When to Stop the Cheering?*, 152.

Conclusion: End of an Era – The Black Press & the Decline of the Negro Leagues

Ultimately, the Negro Leagues did not survive the integration of baseball. Black baseball fans overwhelmingly shifted their attention from the Negro Leagues to follow Robinson, Doby, and other black players in the Major Leagues, crippling Negro League attendance figures and revenues in the process. After drawing crowds that averaged between 5,000 and 10,000 fans per game in the years prior to integration, as Neil Lanctot notes, Negro League attendance in 1948 declined dramatically, "as crowds ranging from 700 to 1,700 were reported in NNL cities, leading a disheartened official to comment that 'this is awful…If this keeps up we'll be lucky to finish out the season.'"[623] Multiple factors caused the league's decline, many of which were outside league officials' control such as increased radio and television coverage of MLB games in the late 1940s and early 1950s.[624] To compound matters, the gradual integration of white minor league teams across the South in the 1950s further diminished African American interest in the Negro Leagues, as blacks in these communities began to follow these newly integrated minor league squads.[625] Yet, while these developments contributed to the African American community's decreasing interest in the Negro Leagues, the black press' treatment of and

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[623] Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 329.

[624] Beginning in 1950, radio networks broadcast MLB games to audiences far outside a team's local market, with some transmitting games nationwide. Doing so eliminated geographic barriers that had previously confined a team's fan base primarily to smaller, regionally-based areas. These broadcasts drew fans, both black and white, from regions such as the South and West that previously lacked extensive MLB exposure. As a result, it often attracted black fans that previously followed the Negro Leagues. The rise of television coverage of some MLB teams in the late 1940s and early 1950s only increased interest in the Major Leagues and further weakened support for the Negro Leagues. Consequently, according to Lanctot, "the less favorable environment for local and community-based sport by the early 1950s suggests that even delayed integration would not have entirely preserved the prosperity of black teams." White minor league teams were similarly impacted by the rise of MLB broadcasts on television, as their attendance figures declined in areas where MLB teams broadcast games. As Lanctot notes, minor league teams in cities such as Wilmington and Trenton, which were "within range of televised major league games from New York and Philadelphia," saw attendance figures drop from 199,586 in 1948 to 120,031 after televised broadcasts were introduced to the market. Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 360-362.

[625] As Lanctot argues, "burdened by a shortage of talent, finances, and profitable territory, black baseball had no realistic hope of ever rebuilding its fan base, now decimated by competing attractions and changing values." Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 369-370.

relationship with the Negro Leagues played an important role as well. African American newspapers' attitudes toward the Negro Leagues shifted dramatically from the cooperative spirit between the two institutions in the 1920s and 1930s, to a fractured, contentious relationship during the 1940s and 1950s. Moreover, whereas African American journalists hailed the Negro Leagues as an upstanding institution for developing respectable black ballplayers as part of its campaign to integrate MLB, following the desegregation of MLB, many viewed the Negro Leagues as an uncomfortable reminder of the legacy of segregation. This change influenced African Americans' perception of the league. More importantly, the deteriorating relationship between these two black institutions illustrates the struggles African Americans encountered as they transitioned into an integrated environment.

Indeed, the contentious relationship between many black journalists and Negro League team owners and officials from the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s exemplified the tremendous challenges African Americans encountered as they fought to gain entrance into Major League Baseball. The two institutions, particularly in the late 1920s and 1930s, collaborated to help improve the quality of black baseball in hopes that it would not only benefit Negro League team owners in the short-term but make black ballplayers more attractive candidates to break into MLB in the long-term as well. Yet as the possibility that an African American player would enter into the Major Leagues appeared to become a greater likelihood, tensions that had existed primarily beneath the surface between many black journalists and their Negro League counterparts became exposed. Many black journalists, who feared that Negro Leagues officials might derail the broader effort to increase opportunities for African American ballplayers in the Major Leagues in the future, met Negro League team owners' concerns with how the integration of the game might do irreparable harm to the Negro Leagues predominantly with scorn.

The division that developed reflects a broader tension among many African Americans between liberal integrationism and economic nationalism, and between individual and collective success. The concerns expressed by Effa Manley and other Negro League officials about sacrificing their livelihoods, and the well-being of widespread professional baseball within the black community in order for a small number of black players to earn an opportunity in the Major Leagues highlights the complicated conundrum they faced as the sport integrated. Indeed, many African American journalists at times expressed a similar ambivalence over the issue as well. While many sportswriters became increasingly critical of the Negro Leagues after Robinson signed with the Dodgers in October 1945 and began playing for the team in 1947, they remained uncertain about what to do with the Negro Leagues in a post-Robinson racial world.

Some argued that Negro League officials' inability to adjust to post-integration life caused their downfall, while others urged readers to continue to support it. To compound matters, some optimistically believed that a black-only league could coexist alongside the integrated Major Leagues while overlooking that black newspapers' coverage of the Negro Leagues had significantly declined. Other journalists failed to take a definitive position on the matter as they oscillated between the two positions, and at times endorsed both simultaneously.

In fact, the black press' struggle to articulate its attitudes toward the continued presence of the Negro Leagues after Major League Baseball integrated speaks to a much larger and more complicated legacy of the sacrifices made by African Americans throughout the twentieth century to tear down the racial barriers separating whites from blacks. The tensions that developed between African American journalists ardently fighting for the sport's desegregation and Negro League team owners expressing concern for how their business might be sacrificed as a result of integration paralleled similar struggles African Americans faced as they integrated

other institutions such as banks, hospitals, and schools.[626] However, many African American newspapers would suffer a similar fate in the late 1950s and 1960s as mainstream newspapers integrated their newsrooms and began to cover news within local African American communities to a much greater extent. Ironically, most African American journalists failed to acknowledge this possibility when they criticized Negro League officials for their actions in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

More significantly, this story demonstrates the complex, conflicting, and at times contradictory attitudes of many African Americans involved in the decades-long process of integrating American collegiate, amateur, and professional sports. African American journalists' complicated relationship with Negro League officials, in particular, echoed how many black sportswriters' criticized African American star athletes when they acted in a way they felt could threaten notions of upstanding, respectable black manhood. As the primary institution that developed black players, African American journalists expected Negro League officials to develop an institution that symbolized black respectability and athletic achievement. Thus, black journalists' criticism of Negro League officials' behavior prior to and during the process of integrating MLB exemplified their broader initiative to perpetuate a new archetype of ideal black manhood in sports.

The deteriorating relationship between African American journalists and Negro League officials following the integration of MLB highlights another central component of many black journalists' expectations of African American athletes and sports institutions across this era. Specifically, many black sportswriters took with issue with Negro League officials who expressed concern over *how* the process of integration MLB occurred. Their criticism echoed many journalists' broader expectation that the campaign to eradicate racial inequality in sports

[626] Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball,* 320-326.

often required African American athletes and Negro League officials to contribute to the greater cause of attaining racial justice that conflicted with their own personal interests and ambitions. Thus, in constructing notions of upstanding behavior for the stewards of the Negro Leagues, many journalists favored liberal integrationist strategies ahead of economic nationalist ones when attempting to desegregate America's national pastime. Consequently, as part of a broader initiative to reframe black athletes and black sports institutions as symbols of respectability and achievement, many African American journalists believed that Negro League officials had to incur a tremendous cost in sacrificing the Negro Leagues and its cultural and economic significance within the African American community to achieve the broader goal of increasing opportunities for African Americans to compete on a level playing field.

Conclusion

As Joe Louis garnered greater attention within the professional boxing world in the mid-1930s, the *Chicago Defender* noted how, even during the early stages of his career, Louis had emerged as an exemplary figure within the African American community. In an editorial entitled, "Joe Louis a Good Example," the *Defender* hailed the boxer, declaring that Louis's "belief in and respect for members of his own race supported by his concrete example sets him apart as a teacher whose instruction in race pride and race consciousness should be a valuable lesson to his race." Through his actions, the newspaper added, Louis had served as a credit to his race, because "he brings home the lesson to everyone that steadiness of character and quietness of manner are more attractive to well-thinking people than vulgar display in utterance and mannerism."[627] Louis, in other words, exhibited the primary characteristics black journalists sought for a new generation of respectable, black male athletes. Moreover, Louis had succeeded in demonstrating W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness" by acting in a manner that imbued racial pride among African Americans and improved white perceptions of black capability. The *Defender's* efforts to sell Louis as a symbol of black achievement, consequently, reflected the black press' broader campaign to celebrate African American athletes like Louis, Jesse Owens, and others from the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s as exemplars of black moral and physical fitness.

The dissemination of a new definition of black manhood and respectability through black sports during this period, however, resulted in disagreement among African American journalists, civil rights leaders, and black athletes over how best to embody Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness." A comparative investigation of the black press' campaign to utilize African American male athletic achievement as a means to eradicate racial discrimination in

[627] "Joe Louis a Good Example," *Chicago Defender,* July 13, 1935, 16.

sports and society at large, thus, reveals the difficulties black journalists encountered in positioning black male athletes as icons of a new notion of black manhood and respectability. Indeed, the *Defender's* insistence that Louis demonstrated "steadiness in character and quietness of manner," rather than a "vulgar display in utterance and mannerism" illustrated the black press' belief that African American athletes needed to embody specific upstanding traits.

These concerns stemmed from the legacy of boxer Jack Johnson, whose defiance of the established racial hierarchy and his confrontational approach to whites both in and out of the ring, both implicitly and explicitly influenced black journalists' definition of the new ideal black male archetype. Johnson's actions compelled African American journalists to redefine the boundaries for acceptable behavior for black sports stars during this period. On the field, athletes could not taunt or humiliate white opponents as Johnson had done; they won while demonstrating their commitment to hard work and good sportsmanship. Off the field, African American journalists wanted black athletes to project an image of respectability and economic independence. In order to achieve these goals, African American journalists urged black athletes to avoid becoming entangled in controversial issues or unnecessarily confronting white authority figures. Finally, through their athletic dominance, black journalists expected African American athletes to contribute to the broader campaign to fight racial inequality. By defining respectability in these terms, African American journalists constrained black athletes' behavior in order to position them as worthy of full citizenship.

Yet, as this dissertation has shown, in constructing and disseminating new notions of black manhood and respectability, African American journalists did not endorse a uniform definition of these characteristics; they held each athlete to different sets of standards for how they could best fulfill their obligation to symbolize black manhood and respectability. Each

sport's unique economic, political, and social factors shaped journalists' expectations for how athletes should act. Given his opportunity to compete professionally against whites at the highest level of the sport, African American journalists argued that Joe Louis would best serve as a symbol of black manhood and respectability by being a dominant winner. While this trait was desired in all African American athletes of this era, to black journalists, Louis's opportunity to become the first heavyweight champion since Jack Johnson – and win with dignity and good sportsmanship – came with the responsibility that Louis demonstrate his unyielding dedication to achieve this goal. Louis's lackluster preparation for his first fight against Max Schmeling in 1936, which resulted in his stunning loss, threatened to derail black journalists' efforts to present Louis as a dedicated, hard-working, and talented black boxer who would inspire other African Americans to act in a similar manner. The stakes of Louis's loss extended beyond impacting his boxing record, it also validated some white journalists' contentions that African Americans were inferior to whites because they lacked the dedication and mental fortitude to become the best in their field. Burdening Louis with the expectation that he had to commit himself fully to becoming a disciplined, dedicated fighter, thus, demonstrates African American journalists' belief that black manhood in sports was rooted in showcasing black athletes' ability to outperform – and out-train – white competitors.

Although Owens had little trouble demonstrating that he was a winner after his dominant performance at the 1936 Summer Olympic Games in Berlin, throughout his career, he struggled to negotiate the black press' expectations that he act in a manner that contributed to the broader struggle for racial equality while attempting to satisfy his own personal needs and obligations. Prior to the Olympics, African American journalists challenged Owens to use his unique position as a talented black athlete to draw attention to institutional racial discrimination in sports. Yet, in

calling for Owens to not attend Ohio State University to protest the school's legacy of racial discrimination, and to later boycott the Olympics in response to the American Olympic Committee's failure to support African Americans' struggle with racial inequality, black journalists prioritized the symbolic value of Owens's actions ahead of his own interest in becoming the best track star in the world. These tensions escalated following the Olympics as many black journalists took issue with Owens's efforts to profit off of his fame. While African American sportswriters initially supported Owens's attempts to cash in because it demonstrated his desire to serve as a upstanding breadwinner for his wife and family, *how* he attempted to do so by endorsing Republican presidential candidate Alf Landon exposed the boundaries to what they deemed acceptable behavior for athletes like Owens. Consequently, this conflict reveals how African American journalists burdened African American athletes with expectations that prioritized their symbolic value for the broader cause of eradicating racial inequality ahead of their personal needs. Black journalists, therefore, believed Owens needed to sacrifice his personal goals to assist the communal goal of fighting racial injustice.

The tension between black journalists and Owens regarding the expectation that he fulfill their notion of exhibiting upstanding behavior, even if it conflicted with his desires, existed in a similar manner for African American college football players. Many black journalists believed that African American players on integrated teams had to do more than simply help their teams win; they also had to actively challenge the Gentleman's Agreement's culture of inequality as part of a broader initiative to eradicate racial injustice in the sporting world. Black college football players, therefore, were burdened with the heightened expectation of balancing attempting to win on the field of play with also leading the attack on university officials that acquiesced to the Gentleman's Agreement. The African American press' treatment of black

college football players stuck in the middle of this broader struggle between journalists and white school officials upholding the Gentleman's Agreement represented a marked departure from its belief that athletes like Owens and Louis competing in individual sports like boxing and track and field were better served in *avoiding* controversy on the field of play.

In these three sports, African American journalists understood that the integrated competition available to black athletes in each sport – albeit on a limited basis – was central to their broader philosophy that black athletes best demonstrated their manhood and respectability against white competitors. Major League Baseball's segregationist policies, however, forced African American journalists to celebrate the Negro Leagues as an *institution* that excelled in developing highly talented black players in the absence of integrated competition. In selling the Negro Leagues in this manner, African American journalists aimed to pressure MLB officials to integrate the sport. However, in leveraging the respectability of the Negro Leagues and its players to help aid in the desegregation of MLB, African American journalists criticized Negro League officials who acted in a manner they believed threatened to derail the campaign to integrate MLB. Once Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, tensions between the two institutions escalated. Whereas the two institutions initially collaborated to improve the quality of the Negro Leagues to pressure MLB officials to accept black players, following MLB's integration, many African American journalists struggled to come to terms with the continued presence of the Negro Leagues. In their eyes, the Negro Leagues served as an uncomfortable reminder of the legacy of segregated baseball. Furthermore, some black journalists believed that trying to keep the Negro Leagues afloat following Robinson breaking MLB's color barrier might stymie efforts to increase opportunities for blacks in MLB in the future. The difficulty black journalists experienced in reconciling the continued existence of the Negro Leagues following

MLB's integration highlights the broader challenge African Americans encountered when transitioning from a segregated environment to an integrated one.

The challenges African American athletes – and the black journalists who covered them – experienced from the 1920s to the 1950s were reflective of the political, social, and cultural realities of that time, and were shaped by the legacy of Jack Johnson. Yet, in widening our historical lens to examine black athletes' experiences across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this investigation represents one chapter of a broader story chronicling African American athletes' difficulties to balance attempting to achieve their athletic goals with also contributing to the broader struggle for racial justice. This evolution was not linear, but rather reflected contemporary attitudes regarding manhood and black activism. Consequently, whereas many African American journalists and civil rights leaders advocated that Owens and Louis avoid sparking controversy in the 1930s and 1940s, many black athletes in the 1960s – such as Bill Russell, Muhammad Ali, Curt Flood, John Carlos, and Tommie Smith – rejected this non-confrontational approach. Indeed, as scholar and activist Harry Edwards argues in *The Revolt of the Black Athlete,* "the black athlete has left the façade of locker room equality and justice to take his long vacant place as a primary participant in the black revolution."[628] Although Owens, Louis, and Robinson had done much to break barriers and integrate major professional and collegiate sporting environments, Edwards believed that it had done little to help African Americans escape their second-class status.[629] Edwards, furthermore, contended that the previous generation's accommodationist approach had hampered African American athletes' ability to attain true equality. Their non-confrontational strategies, Edwards states, led many whites to

[628] Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete,* (New York: Free Press, 1969), xvi.

[629] Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete,* 7.

believe "for years that the professional black athlete was actually genetically predisposed to being non-violent, always inclined to turn the other cheek."[630] Such an attitude, thus, had prevented African Americans from demanding and receiving the rights they deserved.

The Revolt of the Black Athlete, consequently, marked a new chapter in black athlete activism that rejected non-confrontational, accommodationist strategies; instead, star African American athletes actively challenged systemic racial inequality, and political, economic, and social unrest by confronting individuals and institutions that continued to tolerate or perpetuate racial injustice and racial violence.[631] Their efforts to politicize sports represented a marked departure from how Louis, Owens and athletes of an earlier generation aimed to let their ability to win on the field with dignity and good sportsmanship, coupled with their upstanding behavior off the field, serve as a symbol of racial pride and African American moral and physical fitness.

This dissertation's investigation of the development of a new notion of ideal black manhood in sports from the 1920s to the 1950s also has relevance to a range of contemporary scholarly and public conversations about race, racism, manhood, and popular culture. The development of the Black Lives Matter movement in response to police brutality, the rampant racial discrimination in America's criminal justice system – what scholar Michelle Alexander terms "the New Jim Crow" – and the resegregation of African American communities across the country, has compelled many African American athletes to become politically active to draw attention to these issues and fight racial injustice. These athletes – ranging from basketball star LeBron James to football player Colin Kaepernick – have sparked a new round of debate among

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[630] Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete,* 26.

[631] See Douglas Hartmann, *Race, Culture and the Revolt of the Black Athlete: The 1968 Olympic Protests and Their Aftermath,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Abraham Iqbal Khan, *Curt Flood in the Media: Baseball, Race, and the Demise of the Activist-Athlete,* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2012); and Brad Snyder, *A Well-Paid Slave: Curt Flood's Fight for Free Agency in Professional Baseball,* (New York: Viking, 2006).

black and white journalists over their efforts to politicize sports and use their fame to enact change. Indeed, the division over these athletes' actions echoes the difficulties black athletes and sports officials experienced when attempting to use black athleticism to demonstrate black moral and physical fitness from the 1920s to the 1950s.

The generational differences between how Owens and Louis, Russell and Ali, and James and Kaepernick utilized their fame to affect change in the struggle for racial equality should not suggest that African American male athletes from the 1920s to the 1950s erred in endorsing a less confrontational approach in attempting to change white perceptions of black manhood and capability. The actions of the athletes during each era – and the black and white community's response to their actions – developed in response to specific social, political, and economic factors in each era. Thus, given the legacy of Jack Johnson, African American journalists' efforts to develop a new black male athlete archetype in the 1930s and 1940s reflected their belief that black athletes would best exhibit Du Bois's notion of "double-consciousness" by serving as symbols of racial pride while also appeasing whites who remained fearful of widespread African American participation in mainstream sports. Indeed, Johnson's subversion of the racial hierarchy in the 1900s and 1910s resulted in whites restricting opportunities for black athletes in major sports for the following 30 to 40 years. As a result, the repercussions of Johnson's actions influenced how black journalists attempted to sell a new generation of African American athletes to a white audience that would break down those racial barriers.

This dissertation's investigation of the black press' efforts to disseminate a new notion of black manhood and respectability to escape Johnson's shadow highlights an overlooked moment in African American history. Specifically, African American journalists' debates over what constituted acceptable behavior illustrate how tensions among civil rights leaders regarding

the politics of respectability in the 1910s and 1920s evolved in African American sports in the 1930s and 1940s. Yet in emphasizing that black athletes best showcased their respectability through integrated competition, this study broadens our historical understanding of the evolution of the politics of respectability by placing it in environment that required confronting the challenges associated with furthering racial integration in sports. Furthermore, the actions of athletes in the 1960s, as well as the resurgence of black athlete activism today, underscore the necessity to trace the roots of their actions to black journalists' debates over acceptable behavior for African American athletes in the 1930s and 1940s. As a result, this study highlights how African American athletes have attempted to use their fame and athleticism to affect change to improve African Americans' everyday lives.

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