NCAAF in the SEC:

From Racial Segregation to African American Majority

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**Introduction**

When you turn on the television every Saturday from late August to late December, you will find numerous National Collegiate Athletic Association Football (NCAAF)/college football games on. College Game Day starts at 10:00 a.m., and the last game of the night ends around midnight. College football takes up a big part of a given weekend. When you look at the players, and especially those playing for Southeastern Conference (SEC) schools, you will find that a majority of the players are African American. Back in the 1960’s and later, you would find the complete opposite. For a long time, African Americans who played for northern colleges could not play if their team played against a southern school. In this research project, I will explore and discuss the transition from African American college football players being completely excluded from the SEC, to being the majority of the players on most teams. I will explain how this transition happened by discussing African American players that played for colleges in the North, games where African Americans excelled, and how the integration of African Americans into northern, midwestern and western universities led to the integration of the Southeastern Conference football teams.

**A Brief History**

To understand how African Americans were involved in college football, we must understand the history of NCAAF itself. The first college football game was played in 1869, when Princeton took on Rutgers. Shortly afterwards, colleges such as Harvard, Yale, and Michigan formed their own teams. Walter Camp shaped the game of football as we know it today. He was the one who started the “snap” between the quarterback and center, the line of scrimmage, and how many points a touchdown and a field goal were worth (History Of American Football, 2004). After a while, the game progressed, more Midwest and eastern colleges formed teams, the forward pass was introduced, and teams started playing for the national championship. When the 1930’s hit, southern teams were formed and were becoming successful, but they were about 50 years behind the northern colleges (History Of American Football, 2004).

**African American Players in the North**

The first two African American college football players were teammates William Jackson and William Lewis of Amherst in 1889 (Henderson, 1939). College football was 15 years behind baseball when it came to the beginnings of integration. Bud Fowler was the first African American baseball player to play on a white team. This happened in 1872 when he joined a white team in New Castle, Pennsylvania (Yu, n.d.). The difference between the two sports and the reason why college football, and football in general, is considered to be more tolerable to different races, is because the NCAAF did not have a blackout. Baseball started their blackout in 1887, and did not officially drop it until 1947, when Jackie Robinson signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers. The year, 1947, was not only an important year in Major League Baseball, but in college football as well. On October 11, Chester Pierce, tackle at Harvard University, became the first black player to participate in a game below the Mason-Dixon Line (Miller, Chester M. Pierce made history on the field and in the classroom, 2010). For a long time, black players could not participate in games that took place at southern schools. A lot of the time, if a southern team came up to play them, African Americans still could not play out of respect to their opponent and their beliefs (Frank, 1999). In 1961, Ernie Davis, running back from Syracuse University, became the first African American to receive the Heisman Trophy, given to the best college football player every year (The Quad: Syracuse Unveils Statue of Ernie Davis, 2008). These, and many other football players, helped lead to the incorporation of blacks into the SEC, but there were certain games that assisted with the cause as well.

**Games that led to Integration**

*Harvard vs. Virginia (1947)*

For a long time, African American athletes, including college football players, could not play in the South or against a southern team. As stated earlier, Charles Pierce of Harvard University was the first black player to participate in a game below the Mason-Dixon Line. This happened when Harvard traveled south to play against the University of Virginia. The game was played because Virginia just assumed that Harvard would leave Pierce behind. When Harvard showed up with him, Virginia elected to play the game anyways. Virginia ended up beating Harvard 47-0, but the game was hardly about the score (Miller, Chester M. Pierce made history on the field and in the classroom, 2010). Peirce’s paved the way for African Americans playing in football games in the South. These games include bowl games, such as the Cotton Bowl, Orange Bowl, and Sugar Bowl. A year after Pierce made history, the [Cotton Bowl](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/139909/Cotton-Bowl) was integrated in 1948 when Southern Methodist University (SMU) was ranked third in the nation and decided they wanted to play the fourth ranked team in the country in the bowl game. This happened to be Penn State University, who had two African Americans on the team. Back then, the SWC Champion had significant input on their opponent in the Cotton Bowl (Miller, Game change: SMU set new course by playing against black athletes, 2010). Also, the [Orange Bowl](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/430899/Orange-Bowl) and Sugar Bowl were integrated in 1955 and 1956, respectively (Oriard, 2015). All three of these games are played in the South. The Cotton Bowl is in Dallas, Texas, the Orange Bowl is held in Miami, Florida, and the Sugar Bowl is played in New Orleans, Louisiana. Black players being allowed to participate in these games led to them being able to attend and play for schools in the South as well.

*Arkansas vs. Texas (1969 National Championship)*

Just three years after the all-black starters of Texas Western beat the all-white University of Kentucky team for the college basketball National Championship, football had their last all-white National Championship game. Most people remember this game as the game where President Richard Nixon named the University of Texas the National Champion over Penn State University, even though both schools finished with the same record. He claimed that whoever won between Arkansas and Texas would be the champion (Wogenrich, 2014). Texas won the game over Arkansas by a score of 15-14. This would be the last National Championship game in which no African Americans participated in (Stockley, 2008).

*Alabama vs. USC (1970)*

Some SEC schools were still segregated in the 1970’s, which made it difficult to find games since most teams had integrated their squad. By the Alabama vs. USC game, only Alabama, Georgia, Vanderbilt, LSU, and Ole Miss were the only SEC teams which had not played an African American (Schexnayder, 2012). It took until Sam Cunnningham, an African American man from the University of Southern California (USC) ran all over Alabama, for their fans and administration to change their mind. USC’s entire backfield was made up of black players, and blacks in Tuscaloosa, home to University of Alabama which hosted the game, rooted for the opposing players (Lewis, 2012). “The all-white Alabama defenders were no match for the size, strength, and speed Cunningham possessed.  Cunningham rushed for 135 yards and two touchdowns, both in the first quarter” (Lewis, 2012, p. 1). After this, Alabama started recruiting African Americans, realizing they needed someone with the talent of Cunningham. Alabama’s coach, Bear Bryant, told *Ebon*y magazine in 1967, “The time is coming when in this entire area, you won’t see too many of these boys (African Americans) going away” (Frank, 1999, p. 28). He probably figured that if he didn’t recruit these talented black players, someone else would, and gain an advantage over his teams. If you look at a University of Alabama team picture, you will find that probably 2/3 or ¾ of the athletes are black. Former African American Alabama stars include current NFL players Julio Jones, Ha Ha Clinton-Dix, Rolando McClain, Trent Richardson, and many more. The most well-known may be running back Mark Ingram, the 2009 Heisman Trophy winner. None of us can imagine a SEC, let alone an Alabama team without an African American, especially with the success that the program has had in recent years. The school had already had experience with blacks being enrolled in classes. In the previous decade (1963), the University of Alabama admitted its first African American student. Like the first black student at many other southern universities, she needed a court order to attend the university.

**African Americans Enrolling in White Schools**

Enrolling in primarily white colleges, such as Alabama or Auburn was hard for young African Americans because of how segregated schools were in the mid 1900’s. It was hard enough for a black man to enroll into a graduate or undergraduate program, let alone land a spot on a football team. The biggest challenge was enrolling in southern schools, especially ones who belonged to the SEC. For example, the first black student admitted to the University of Tennessee was a man by the name of Gene Mitchell Gray in 1952. Two years later, the University of Florida was ordered by the Supreme Court to admit black students into graduate programs (2015). These are just two examples of how far behind the SEC was in just only enrolling African Americans into their college. These students were not involved in the sports programs in any way; that was a completely different ball game. To put into perspective ~~on~~ how far behind southern schools were in integration, African Americans were receiving college degrees in northern schools in the 1800’s. Alexander Lucius Twilight was the first African American to graduate from college in 1823 (Titcomb, 2015). This is 130 years before Gray enrolled into Tennessee. To say that blacks in the South had to wait for opportunities that they could have had in the North 100 years earlier is truly astonishing. Schexnayder stated that, “Towards the end of the 60’s the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare began threatening to pull federal funding from schools not in compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964” (Schexnayder, 2012, p. 1). While SEC schools had to allow African American students into their university, they did not have to let them onto the football team, but the fact that blacks students were enrolled in classes could have made the transition to them playing on the field easier.

**Southeastern Conference (SEC) Integration**

The last conference to integrate was none other than the Southeastern Conference (SEC). Their first African American player was a defensive end named Nat Northington, who debuted for the University of Kentucky in 1967 (Schexnayder, 2012). Within five years, every team in the SEC had been integrated, with Ole Miss being the last in 1972. Since then, every conference and team in NCAA Division 1 college football was integrated. It has been 43 years, which may seem like a long time, but it has been 126 years since William Jackson and William Lewis of Amherst first broke the color barrier in college football, showing just how behind the SEC truly was. After African Americans broke into SEC football, the next step that is still ongoing today, is playing blacks in positions such as quarterback, a position where the player is supposed to be intelligent and able to read a defense, something that African Americans are falsely accused of not being able to do.

**Facts and Figures**

During the 1999-2000 season, 40.8% of Division 1 college football players were African American. During the 2009-2010 season, this number had jumped to 47.4% (Zgonc, 2010). This is a 20% increase in just a ten year period. Ever since the first wave of African Americans started playing for southern schools, the number of blacks participating on a Division 1 football team have risen to a point where there are more African American players than white players. A more interesting set of data is the distribution of African American players in “central” and “peripheral” positions. Richard Lewis Jr. did a case study on racial position segregation in the Southeastern Conference. Lewis identified the central positions as the offensive guards, quarterback, center, and middle linebacker. He identified the peripheral positions as the tight end, wide receivers, running back, fullback, defensive tackle, defensive end, outside linebackers, defensive back, and safeties. In the study, distributions of players by race were studied for the years 1978 and 1989. In 1978, there were 243 African American players starting for SEC teams. Only 13.6% of them were playing in central positions. By 1989, that number had risen to 19.1%. This is not a very big jump when considering an 11 year gap. Even now though, you do not see many black players in those central positions. There are not many non-white starting quarterbacks in NCAAF. This is shown in the study as well. 47.3% of white starters in 1978 were in central positions. This number actually dropped to 45.5% in 1989. These numbers may continue to close in on each other, but it could take a while until they are equal. This is because society sees white players as “intelligent” and “able to read a defense.” This is a perfect example of how Peyton Manning is described. African American players are usually described as “fast” and “powerful,” hence putting them in running back and defensive back positions. The SEC had a hard enough time allowing blacks to even play on their teams, and now, to this day, they continue to struggle with recruiting central position-playing African Americans.

**Conclusion**

African American players that played for colleges in the North, games where African Americans excelled, and the integration of African Americans into universities led to the integration of the Southeastern Conference football teams. Notable black players that led paved the way for African Americans to join SEC teams were William Jackson and William Lewis, the first two African American players in college football, Chester Pierce of Harvard, who was the first African American who played in a game below the Mason-Dixon line, and Ernie Davis, the first black Heisman Trophy winner. Chester Pierce’s game, in which Harvard played at Virginia University in 1947 was very important because it was the first time that a southern school had ever played against an African American. The Alabama vs. USC game in 1970 was integral to the SEC’s integration because Alabama got run over by USC’s running back Sam Cunningham, leading Alabama to integrate their squad the very next season. The final thing that led to the integration of SEC football, was the integration of SEC universities themselves. Gene Gray was the first African American to attend an SEC university, 15 years before Nat Northington became the first African American to play in the conference. Closer to the end of the all-white era of the SEC football days, the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare started telling schools that if they did not allow African Americans to enroll in their universities, their federal funding would be pulled. Now that the SEC is integrated, try to imagine a University of Alabama or a University of Florida team without a black player. Imagine a college football world without Herschel Walker or Bo Jackson; it is probably not fathomable to any of us, and we can only think this way because of the journey that the NCAA took to get to this place where blacks and whites can play on the same teams together. Someday, because of how much has changed and is changing, we could potentially live in a country where we cannot find a white player on a football field.

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