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Seasons of Change: Football Desegregation and the University of Tennessee and the Transformation of the Southeastern Conference, 1963-67

Robert Thomas Epling
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

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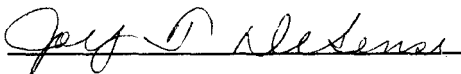
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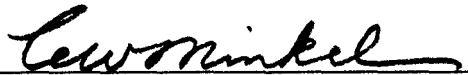
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Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor
and Dean of the Graduate School

Seasons of Change: Football Desegregation
at the University of Tennessee
and the Transformation of the Southeastern Conference,
1963-1967

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Robert Thomas Epling
August 1994

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Susan Sams Epling, my wonderful wife and friend, and to Glenda Whorton Epling (1943-1981), my late mother. I love each of you so much.

Thank you both.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Dr. Joan Paul, my major professor, for the guidance, assistance, and friendship she provided during my doctoral studies and dissertation work. I also thank the other committee members, Dr. Clint Allison, Dr. Joy DeSensi, Dr. John Finger, and Dr. Bill Morgan for their contributions to this project. Additionally, Dr. Andy Kozar served as an unofficial committee member, and I appreciate his help and friendship. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Milton Klein and his staff for transcribing the oral history interviews.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge and express thanks to several family members for their encouragement: Bill and Judy Epling; Ruth Epling and family; Bobby and Jamie Johnson; Bill and Carol Kisor and family; Melvin and Paulette Sams and family.

Abstract

The University of Tennessee football program excluded African-Americans from 1891 to 1967. During most of that span, Volunteer athletic teams competed in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), the last major intercollegiate athletic league to desegregate. Between 1963 and 1967, changes in the university athletic department, in the conference, and in society at large prompted Tennessee and several other SEC members to integrate athletics. The process of racial desegregation ranks as perhaps the least chronicled significant event in University of Tennessee football history.

In addressing that void, this dissertation examines the desegregation of the University of Tennessee football program within the context of the 1963 to 1967 time period. The lack of previous scholarly attention made imperative the use of oral history interviews, and several participants central to the desegregation process contributed. A thorough search and analysis of pertinent archival materials and contemporary newspaper accounts of the period provided additional perspective, as did a review of the existing literature on African-American sports history and athletic integration.

Albert Davis of Alcoa, Tennessee, accepted a football scholarship offer from the University of Tennessee on April

14, 1967. His signing officially ended more than seventy years of racial exclusion in Volunteer athletics. When an entrance score controversy kept Davis from attending the university, actual desegregation on the playing field fell to Lester McClain of Nashville. By earning a varsity football letter in 1968, McClain became the first African-American to do so in the Southeastern Conference. Football desegregation proceeded fairly smoothly at Tennessee, although resentments expressed by McClain near the end of his college years created a stir.

The University of Tennessee did not lead the Southeastern Conference into football desegregation, but the Tennessee case proved vital to a transformation in the conference. Member institutions of the SEC gradually accepted athletic racial integration during the late 1960s and early 1970s, in large part because of events at the University of Tennessee, and that acceptance transformed the Southeastern Conference into a more nationally recognized and respected athletic league.

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Chapter One

The Right Time

The University of Tennessee football program excluded African-Americans from 1891 to 1967. During most of that span, Volunteer athletic teams competed in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), the last major intercollegiate athletic league to desegregate. Between 1963 and 1967, changes in the university athletic department, in the conference, and in society at large prompted Tennessee and several other SEC members to integrate athletics. The process of racial desegregation ranks as perhaps the least chronicled significant event in University of Tennessee football history.

A. Albert Davis: Forgotten Pioneer

Every major college in the country sought Albert Davis during his senior year in high school. Approximately one hundred and fifty universities courted him between the autumn of 1966 and spring of 1967, with more than half offering scholarships. Notre Dame, Illinois, Purdue, Kansas, Miami, and others of a similar reputation contacted Davis. Lesser known schools did the same, including Florida A&M, Texas Western, and Tennessee A&I. Each asked Albert Davis to visit campus, to meet students and faculty, to

consider matriculating.

For an eighteen year old from a small town in east Tennessee, such offers created the opportunity to travel and Albert Davis took advantage. He visited schools from the northwest, the southwest, the midwest, and the east coast. In December of 1966 alone, he planned and took trips totalling nearly 6000 miles. Some produced more thrills than others. The University of Houston gave Davis a rousing welcome by flashing his name on the scoreboard of the Houston Astrodome. Popular professional football star Gale Sayers escorted Davis around the University of Kansas campus. In Knoxville, University of Tennessee students loudly chanted "We Want Albert, We Want Albert" at halftime of a Volunteer basketball game.¹

The adulation conferred upon Albert Davis extended beyond college recruiting efforts. In his hometown of Alcoa, he even presided over an "Albert Davis Day," given him in "regards for the recognition that Alcoa and Blount

¹Author interview with Albert Davis, 9 August 1992, 17. Also see Ted Riggs, "Albert Davis (Who Else?) Is No. 1 on Recruiting List," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 13 November 1966, D8; Ted Riggs, "Ingenuity Helps Recruiters Lure Grid Standouts," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 4 December 1966, D6; "Davis Still Shopping Among 100 College Bids," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 19 January 1967, 29; "UT Athletics Enters Game of Life," *Daily Beacon* (University of Tennessee student newspaper), 15 April 1967, 4.

The author conducted all interviews. Unless otherwise indicated, tapes and transcriptions are housed at the University of Tennessee, Office of the University Historian. Numbers following interview references refer to transcript page numbers.

County have received from the adventures of Albert Davis."² Those "adventures" that inspired distant colleges to fly in Davis for campus visits and induced a small southern town to honor one of its own teenagers with a special parade and "day" came on the football field.

Albert Davis ran with a football better than any player in Tennessee high school football history. He stood an inch or so over six feet tall and weighed nearly 220 pounds, impressive measurements for a back at any level in the 1960s, stunning size for a high school runner. Davis covered one hundred yards in just more than ten seconds, this speed enabling him to amass nearly 3000 yards and score more than thirty touchdowns by running past defenders from a backfield position, and while returning punts and kickoffs. Davis also possessed tremendous strength, allowing him to run through defensive players when he found no room to elude them.

Coaches from the high school, collegiate, and professional levels heaped praise on the budding star. Former Vanderbilt University head coach Jack Green called Albert Davis the best high school football player he had ever seen. A highlight film of the 1966 Alcoa Tornados, Davis' high school squad, spurred positive comments from professional scouts. The unusual blend of size, speed, and

²"Albert Davis Day Set for Saturday," *Maryville-Alcoa Times*, 6 April 1967, 11.

power led then-University of Tennessee head football coach Doug Dickey to compare Albert Davis to legendary National Football League star Jim Brown. Davis even wore the Brown trademark, jersey number 32.³

Accolades and awards accumulated as Davis neared graduation in 1967. State high school coaches named him the top prospect in Tennessee. Newspaper columnists from across the South designated Davis as an "All-Southern" player after both his junior and senior seasons, the first time a player earned the distinction twice. Parade Magazine named Albert Davis one of the best eleven players in the nation, an award that resulted in Davis being mentioned, along with the other honorees, on the Ed Sullivan television program. With his ability unquestioned, the only uncertainty surrounding Davis during the spring of 1967 involved his future. Specifically, where would Albert Davis play college football?⁴

The University of Tennessee appeared to be the logical choice, especially if the selection rested solely on

³Interview with Doug Dickey, University of Tennessee Athletic Director, 18 November 1992. Doug Dickey served as head football coach at the University of Tennessee from 1964 to 1969.

Also see Ted Riggs, "Davis...One in Million," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 21 October 1966, 19; "Albert Davis Day Set for Saturday," 11; Jim Brown remark from author conversation with Dickey, 13 November 1991.

⁴See "Albert Davis Waits; U-K Signs 4 in Area," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 11 December 1966, D2; "Albert Davis Repeats as All-Southern," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 18 December 1966 D5; "Alcoa's Albert Davis Makes All-America," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 22 December 1966, 18.

athletics. At home games, the school's football squad, clad in orange and dubbed the Volunteers, played before large and vociferous crowds. Nationally televised broadcasts featured the team regularly, no small enticement for a local young man with the credentials and professional aspirations of an Albert Davis. The Volunteers also boasted an energetic young coach in Dickey. After only three years in Knoxville, he had rejuvenated Tennessee football with consecutive bowl victories following the 1965 and 1966 seasons. The potential for greater successes seemed imminent and the addition of a player such as Albert Davis could conceivably mean a national championship.⁵

The University of Tennessee belonged to the Southeastern Conference, another appealing factor for a high school football player. A popular and prestigious intercollegiate league made up primarily of universities in the deep South, both individual and team achievements symbolized the strength of the SEC during the 1960s. In the

⁵Several works cover the general history of football at the University of Tennessee, see Russ Bebb, *The Big Orange: A Story of Tennessee Football* (Huntsville, Alabama: Strode Publishers, 1973); Bud Fields and Bob Bertucci, *Big Orange: A Pictorial History of University of Tennessee Football* (West Point, New York: Leisure Press, 1982); "100 Years of Volunteers 1891-1990," two volume video (Lexington, Kentucky: Host Communications, 1992).

For more specific information on Tennessee football in the 1960's, see Russ Bebb, *The Big Orange*, 311-347; Tom Siler, *Tennessee's Dazzling Decade: 1960-1970* (published by the author, all rights reserved, 1970); Mike Siroky and Bob Bertucci, *Orange Lightning: Inside University of Tennessee Football* (West Point, New York: Leisure Press, 1982).

spring of 1967, conference members boasted five of the previous ten college football national championships according to Associated Press polls. Joe Namath of the New York Jets, a former quarterback in the SEC, loomed as the most colorful and publicized player in professional football and owned perhaps the most lucrative contract in sport. Another Southeastern Conference quarterback, Steve Spurrier of Florida, won the Heisman Trophy signifying the nation's best college football player in 1966.⁶

Still, even with so many positive inducements favoring the University of Tennessee, one fact generated more publicity and overshadowed all others during the recruitment of Albert Davis. The prestige of the Southeastern Conference became secondary. The growing excitement surrounding the football program at the University of Tennessee aroused less attention. The proximity of Knoxville to Alcoa, some fifteen miles, the reputation of Davis with the local fans, the glowing words of sportswriters and coaches, these all mattered not as much as the single most memorable aspect of the recruitment of Albert Davis. Albert Davis was an African-American. A black player had never worn the orange for a Tennessee football team.

The recruiting saga concluded on April 14, 1967, when

⁶For an overview of the SEC, see John D. McCallum, *Southeastern Conference Football: America's Most Competitive Conference* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980).

Albert Davis signed a football grant-in-aid to attend the University of Tennessee. His signing officially ended the exclusion of African-Americans from athletic teams at the university. The *Daily Beacon*, Tennessee's student newspaper, applauded the athletic department for finally "enter(ing) the game of life."⁷ Coach Dickey, at the press conference announcing the signing, smiled when asked what position Davis might play, and winked that he planned to "play Albert where he can carry that ball."⁸ Davis happily proclaimed, "I have had the privilege of visiting schools all over the country . . . there is no place like home."⁹

After breaking the color line with Davis, the Volunteers signed a second black player in 1967. Lester McClain, a receiver from Nashville and a less heralded recruit than Albert Davis, agreed to scholarship terms on the 9th of May, becoming the fortieth and final prep player signed by the Volunteers that spring. Dickey and the Tennessee coaching staff, following the prevailing logic in such cases, felt it imperative to have more than one black player go through the desegregation process. In essence, the Volunteers signed Lester McClain to be Albert Davis'

⁷Tom Humphrey and Louis Gwin, "Alcoa's Davis Signs with Volunteers," *Daily Beacon*, 15 April 1967, 1; "UT Athletics Enters Game Of Life," *Daily Beacon*, 15 April 1967, 4.

⁸Ted Riggs, "U-T Signs Alcoa's Albert Davis," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 14 April 1967, B4.

⁹Ibid.

roommate, although McClain did not know it at the time and would eventually far exceed those meager expectations. The path to actual desegregation on the football field seemed clear for the Volunteers, with Davis leading the way and McClain in a supporting role.¹⁰

The pairing of Albert Davis and the University of Tennessee remained satisfactory for only a brief time as problems centering on the prep star's eligibility soon sullied the relationship. A newspaper account at the time of the signing ceremony contained what seemed a trivial note explaining that Tennessee signed Davis after he scored "surprisingly high on his college entrance exam," the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).¹¹ Controversy concerning that SAT score eventually ruined any possibility of Davis playing at the University of Tennessee.

Two weeks after the signing, Dr. Earl Ramer, a university professor, Tennessee's representative to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), and the future president of that organization, sent a letter to Tennessee athletic director Bob Woodruff suggesting that Ramer, Woodruff, and Dickey meet to discuss some "problems .

¹⁰"Vols Close '67 Recruiting Campaign With Second Negro Football Signee," *Daily Beacon*, 10 May 1967, 7.

For comments about the preference of having more than one "pioneer," see Albert Davis interview, 14-15; Doug Dickey interview, 2-4; interview with Lester McClain, 22 September 1992, 8.

¹¹Ted Riggs, "U-T Signs Alcoa's Albert Davis," B4.

. . on points of recruitment and admissions." Ramer, apparently responding to inquiries from his colleagues on the NCAA Council, expected to face questions about the eligibility of Albert Davis at an upcoming NCAA meeting.¹²

Within a month, the controversy about the Davis test score became public. Coaches from rival colleges claimed that a low score by Davis on a different entrance exam, the American College Test (ACT), kept them from pursuing the running back even more strongly. These coaches wondered how the University of Tennessee, operating under similar entrance requirements, could grant Davis admission. The university, and Davis, responded that only one test had been taken, the SAT, and that the score was satisfactory for admission. Temporarily, the situation calmed.¹³

The University of Tennessee normally recognized and accepted only the ACT, the entrance exam Davis did not take before signing with the Volunteers. Eligibility rules allowed some flexibility, however, and the Southeastern Conference approved SAT scores that converted into admissible ACT scores based on a standard correlation scale. Albert Davis' converted SAT score met the requirements for

¹²See "Letter from Earl Ramer to Bob Woodruff," 28 April 1967, in *Earl M. Ramer Papers*, AR-93, Box 4, Folder 3, University of Tennessee Archives, Knoxville. Ramer served as president of the NCAA from 1971 to 1978.

¹³Steve Clark, "Davis Stirs a Controversy," *Atlanta Journal*, 2 May 1967, 45 & 48; "Davis Didn't Take A.C.T., Coach Says," *Atlanta Journal*, 9 May 1967, 50; Davis interview, 6.

conference eligibility.¹⁴ Additionally, Davis claims University of Tennessee officials assured him the SAT score would suffice during a private meeting between the Davis family and university president Andrew Holt. Newspaper accounts verify that such a meeting did take place just days before the signing ceremony.¹⁵

Nevertheless, Earl Ramer's letter to Bob Woodruff on April 28, 1967, clearly shows that the university planned, privately at least, to require Davis to take the ACT test, even after signing him to a scholarship based on his SAT score. According to Ramer, "It will be to Albert's advantage, as well as ours, to conform as closely as possible to normal University routine in these matters."¹⁶ Davis, remembering the assurances about his SAT score and sensing that the university was renegeing on a promise, balked at suggestions that he enter summer school at the university and take the ACT test in order to be eligible for the fall term (at the time summer school was open to all Tennessee high school graduates without restriction because of smaller summer enrollment).

Amid growing controversy over the test score situation,

¹⁴See Larry Bowers, "We Want Davis, Say Dickey, Dunn," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 9 April 1967, D3.

¹⁵See Albert Davis interview, 6 and 19; Ted Riggs, "U-T Signs Alcoa's Albert Davis," B4.

¹⁶"Letter from Earl Ramer to Bob Woodruff," *Earl M. Ramer Papers*, AR-93, Box 4, Folder 3.

the University of Tennessee rescinded the scholarship offer to Albert Davis on June 15, exactly two months after the much publicized signing ceremony. The public scrutiny of the Davis affair and the refusal of Davis to take another entrance exam contributed to the decision, and the determining influence came when the Educational Testing Service, administrators of the entrance exam, investigated and then nullified Davis' SAT score. No full explanation ever appeared, but rumors that two scores existed for Albert Davis arose and continue to persist. Albert Davis disavows any knowledge of someone else taking the test in his name and asserts that he did take the exam. Doug Dickey, while expressing empathy for Davis, simply recalls a "mix-up" and that Davis "didn't qualify with the testing scores that were necessary."¹⁷

The episode embarrassed both the University of Tennessee and Albert Davis. The university handled the situation poorly by not clearly stipulating that Davis would be required to take an additional entrance exam. All of the contemporary news accounts gave the impression of Davis being fully qualified and eager to join the freshman team in

¹⁷See Albert Davis interview, 4; Doug Dickey interview, 3. For contemporary news accounts in 1967, see "Vol Signee Davis May Not Enroll," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 15 June 1967, 35; "Albert Davis May Not Enroll At UT," *Knoxville Journal*, 15 June 1967, 20; "Davis' Grid Grant Withdrawn by U-T," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 16 June 1967, 17; Ed Harris, "Davis' UT Grant-In-Aid Held Up," *Knoxville Journal*, 16 June 1967, 22; "Vols Withdraw Grant to Davis," *Atlanta Constitution*, 16 June 1967, 42; Tom Anderson, "From Up Close," *Knoxville Journal*, 17 June 1967, 6.

the fall of 1967. Deflecting criticism by merely claiming that Albert Davis failed to qualify academically oversimplified the affair considerably. Such a contention not only cast an aspersion on Davis, but also diverted attention from the athletic department's role in the controversy.

Albert Davis resented the perception caused by the recruiting debacle. More than two decades later, he commented on continuing reports that he failed a test to attend the University of Tennessee: "That's a lie. I never did take the test to go . . . the president said, 'we accept you and your SAT.'"¹⁸ In August of 1967, Davis accepted a scholarship offer from Tennessee A&I (now Tennessee State), a historically black college in Nashville.¹⁹ He participated in both baseball and football while completing an undergraduate degree, then moved on to a professional career in the National Football League and the now defunct World Football League.

Ironically, Albert Davis eventually earned a master's degree from the University of Tennessee and returned to the

¹⁸Albert Davis interview, 20.

¹⁹See "A&I May Name Davis To '67 Gridiron Roster," *Daily Beacon*, 11 July 1967, 1 and 5; "Davis Has Nashville Job, Points to A&I," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 21 June 1967, 37; "Davis Not Bitter About U-T Grant," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 1 August 1967, 12. Davis eventually took the ACT test to qualify for the scholarship at Tennessee A&I; he scored 15, which would have left him two points short of the score necessary to attend the University of Tennessee, see "Spencer Haywood Misses on ACT Test," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 29 August 1967, 12.

Knoxville area as the first black public school administrator hired from outside the local system. Although he remains the most celebrated high school football player in state history, Albert Davis has become a forgotten pioneer in the desegregation of Tennessee football. The task of integrating Tennessee football on the playing field fell to Lester McClain. He, not the more heralded Davis, would go on to become the first African-American in the Southeastern Conference to earn a varsity letter in football.²⁰

B. A General Framework

The signing of Albert Davis culminated a five year period of change in the athletic department at the University of Tennessee. The changes that occurred between 1963 and 1967 provided the foundation for the eventual desegregation of the Volunteer football program, a heretofore neglected topic of study. Considering the turbulence of the 1960s, and the passionate feelings in the South toward both football and racial integration, the omission is striking.

In addressing that void, this dissertation examines the desegregation of the University of Tennessee football program within the context of that 1963 to 1967 time period.

²⁰See Eric Vreeland, "Knox school board to vote on hiring first black out-of-state administrator," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 2 December 1991, 1 and 4.

No extensive studies on the topic exist for Tennessee, or for any other individual school in the Southeastern Conference. The members of the Southeastern Conference held the authority to act independently on the desegregation issue, thus the significant need for studies of specific institutions, as opposed to blanket studies of the entire league.

Initially, several questions served as a guide for the research. Why did the university decide to desegregate athletics? What factors influenced the time frame for desegregation? Who made the decisions? How did the process compare with other instances of athletic desegregation, if comparable at all. What ramifications did the experiences hold for the University of Tennessee and other teams within the Southeastern Conference? In addressing such questions, a case study evolved.²¹

²¹The Southeastern Conference was the last major intercollegiate conference to desegregate athletics, see Joan Paul, Richard V. McGehee, and Helen Fant, "The Arrival and Ascendence of Black Athletes in the Southeastern Conference, 1966-1980," *Phylon* 45 (December, 1984): 284-297. Several questions are posed at the conclusion of that article (p. 295), suggesting a need for further research. Those questions provided the starting point for this dissertation.

As can best be determined, one recent study attempts a complete overview of SEC football desegregation, see Raymond Hughes, "Desegregating the Holy Day: Football, Blacks, and the Southeastern Conference," unpublished doctoral dissertation, the Ohio State University, 1991.

The work contains an impressive bibliography and notes section, but is of questionable scholarly value. Factual errors tarnish the study; two examples are the mis-identifications of Lester McClain (first African-American football letterman for Tennessee and the SEC), and Godfrey Dillard (an early black basketball player at Vanderbilt). Lester McClain is mistaken for

Various sources of information proved valuable. The lack of previous scholarly attention made imperative the use of oral history interviews. Several participants central to the desegregation process expressed a willingness to contribute. The University of Tennessee housed three pertinent collections. The *Earl M. Ramer Papers* include information on university athletics between 1951 and 1978. The minutes of Athletics Board meetings beginning in 1951, provide only a highly sanitized official version of the proceedings, but do trace the important decisions and discussions that faced the athletic department over the decades, including the several years that Dr. Ramer served as president of the NCAA. The *C.E. Brehm Papers* contain material useful for background and context, especially with regard to the general integration of the student body. Brehm served as university president from 1946 to 1959. A third compilation, the *Tom Siler Collection*, features papers and correspondence of the influential long-time Knoxville

former NFL player Dewey McClain (p. 72), and seven pages of text (119-125) are committed to a discussion of Dillard's football (rather than basketball) career. These and similar errors weaken the study considerably.

For more information on the desegregation of athletics in the Southeastern Conference, see "Perry Wallace: Fear and Loathing in Oxford," in Roy Neel, *Dynamite! 75 Years of Vanderbilt Basketball* (Nashville: Burr-Oak Publishing, 1975): 166-172; Charles H. Martin, "Jim Crow in the Gymnasium: The Integration of College Basketball in the American South," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 10 (April, 1993): 68-86; Charles H. Martin, "The Integration of Southeastern Conference Athletics," unpublished paper presented to Annual Meeting of the Southern Historical Association, 3 November 1990, New Orleans, Louisiana.

sportswriter and addresses a wide range of topics, including Tennessee football. The *Siler Collection* is housed in the university's Special Collections library, while the *Ramer* and *Brehm* papers are in the university archives.²²

An exhaustive search and analysis of contemporary newspaper accounts of the desegregation process found generally sound, and reasonably thorough coverage, although critical examination of the Albert Davis affair was lacking. The two local dailies, the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* and the *Knoxville Journal*, kept a nearly incessant, but sympathetic, gaze toward the university athletic department. The University of Tennessee student newspaper, known until 1965 as the *Orange and White*, thereafter as the *Daily Beacon*, supplied useful material as well, regularly commenting on athletic desegregation, often in the form of letters to the editor from interested or concerned students.

A review and understanding of the sporting involvement of African-Americans from a historical perspective was essential. The ever-expanding literature in this particular segment of the sport history field allowed the opportunity

²²Please refer to the reference section at the end of the dissertation for a complete list of interview contributors. See *Earl M. Ramer Papers, 1951-1978*, University of Tennessee Archives, AR-93; *C.E. Brehm Papers*, University of Tennessee Archives, AR 6; *Tom Siler Collection*, MS-1886, Special Collections, University of Tennessee. The Ramer papers actually contain some information on Tennessee athletics dating back to 1908, mostly in the form of department by-laws and budgets.

Knoxville is also home to the Beck Cultural Exchange Center. The Beck Center contains an extensive array of information on the history of blacks in Knoxville and the east Tennessee region.

to develop appropriate context and background. Several general overviews proved helpful.²³ Also beneficial were the many studies examining specific individuals, events, or topics pertaining to blacks in sport. Rather than citing all of them in the form of a bibliographic essay, specific references throughout the dissertation seemed more plausible.

Two particular studies do merit attention at this point. Jules Tygiel, in *Baseball's Great Experiment*, details the well known travails of Jackie Robinson during Robinson's successful, and often stormy, reintegration of major league baseball in the 1940s and 1950s.²⁴ Tygiel explores many of the influences that surrounded the

²³For a recent overview of the history of black sporting involvement see Arthur R. Ashe, Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African-American Athlete* (New York: Warner Books, 1988), in 3 volumes (1619-1918, 1919-1945, since 1945); see also Edwin B. Henderson, *The Negro in Sports* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1939); Art Rust, Jr. and Edna Rust, *Art Rust's Illustrated History of the Black Athlete* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1985); A.S. "Doc" Young, *Negro Firsts in Sports* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1963).

See also "The Black Athlete in American Sport," David K. Wiggins editor *Journal of Sport History* 15 (Winter, 1988). This special issue is devoted entirely to African-American sporting history.

²⁴Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). The term "reintegration" is appropriate because Jackie Robinson was not the first African-American to play major league baseball in organized white leagues.

For information on early African-American baseball players, see Larry Bowman, "Moses Fleetwood Walker: The First Black Major League Baseball Player," in Peter Levine, *Baseball History*, (New York: Stadium Books, 1990): 61-75; Robert Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970): 16-51; Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The People's Game* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990): 531-609.

desegregation process. Among those influences were competitive considerations, legal ramifications, media pressures, and changing societal attitudes toward blacks within the context of post-World War II America. Such broad analysis served as a goal for examining the desegregation of athletics at the University of Tennessee. The Robinson saga remains the most famous instance of racial integration in American sport.²⁵

Ronald Marcello cited several similarities, and some differences, to the Robinson experience in researching the desegregation of the football program at North Texas State College. NTSC allowed blacks onto the squad for the first time in 1956. Also placing events into a broader perspective, in this instance the 1950s and the aftermath of the *Brown Decision* which outlawed *de jure* segregation in American public schools, Marcello provides information on one of the earliest cases of athletic desegregation in a southern (southwestern) college.²⁶

No direct comparison between the desegregation of football at the University of Tennessee, the Robinson saga, and the NTSC case would be appropriate. Too many factors

²⁵See Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment*, 30-70.

²⁶Ronald E. Marcello, "The Integration of Intercollegiate Athletics in Texas: North Texas State College as a Test Case, 1956," *Journal of Sport History* 14 (Winter, 1987): 286-316.

For a recent social history of America during the 1950s, see David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993). Specific information on the *Brown* decision may be found on pages 411-424.

preclude such a comparison: the different time spans, the different geographic regions, the different levels of competition. The use of these studies as a model, however, eased the research process, and allowed for a general framework from which to begin.

C. Outline

The dissertation proceeds chronologically for the most part. Each chapter sets up much as chapter one has, with an introductory paragraph followed by three distinct but related sections. Chapters two and three provide historical background and perspective aimed at supplying the reader information either directly or indirectly relevant to the factors that would eventually influence University of Tennessee football desegregation. More precisely, chapter two traces the background of intercollegiate football and the development of the Southeastern Conference in section A, provides an overview of African-American sporting experiences in section B, and specifically examines several racial episodes involving SEC athletic teams other than Tennessee in section C.

Chapter three begins by briefly sketching the well-documented history of football at the University of Tennessee. The second section of the chapter chronicles racial episodes involving Volunteer athletic teams prior to 1963. The chapter ends by establishing the traditional

racial attitudes embraced within the university administration and athletic department.

Those initial chapters bring the issue roughly up to 1963, just two years after black undergraduates were first allowed to attend the University of Tennessee.²⁷ Chapter four contains the most direct examination of Volunteer football desegregation to date and spans the "seasons of change," 1963 to 1967. The goal of the chapter is to analyze the influences that led the University of Tennessee to do what coach Doug Dickey called, "absolutely the right thing at the right time."²⁸ Various forces came together during the 1960s to create this "right" time.

The dissertation concludes in chapter five. Lester McClain desegregated Tennessee football on the playing field, his career successful, and occasionally controversial. Racial transformation in the Southeastern Conference occupies the second section of chapter five, and the final segment of the study is a summation and

²⁷For a general history of the University of Tennessee, see James R. Montgomery, Stanley J. Folmsbee, and Lee S. Greene, *To Foster Knowledge: A History of The University of Tennessee, 1794-1970* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984). A brief synopsis of student body integration and the integration of athletics is included, see pages 267-269. Also see, "Desegregation at UT: The Beginnings," *Context* (UTK Chancellor's Newsletter), 21 September 1989, 5; "Black Athletes at UTK," *Context*, 29 March 1990, 3.

For general information on blacks in Knoxville, see Robert J. Booker, *Two Hundred Years of Black Culture in Knoxville, Tennessee, 1791 to 1991* (Virginia Beach, VA: The Donning Company, 1993).

²⁸Doug Dickey interview, 3.

reflection. Following the text, a reference section cites interview contributors, as well as all pertinent books, archival materials, journal citations, newspaper articles, and correspondence.

Chapter Two

Southern Traditions

By 1967, when the University of Tennessee desegregated athletics, the sport of college football neared its centennial anniversary. The first intercollegiate football game pitted Rutgers against Princeton on November 6, 1869. Initially a student-led sport played in eastern colleges, football soon expanded to the West and to the South. As football came to be the dominant campus sport, organizations consisting of faculty groups, administrative bodies, and professional coaches, wrested control of the game away from students. Within this context of growth and an evolving organizational structure, athletic leagues such as the Southeastern Conference eventually developed.

A. Origins of College Football and the Southeastern Conference

Football and several other extracurricular activities originated on American college campuses in the 18th and 19th centuries.¹ At Harvard, freshmen entering school in the

¹For an extensive study of the development of intercollegiate athletics, see Ronald A. Smith, *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Early football on college campuses was a rough kicking game more closely resembling modern soccer than American football.

1730s followed some twenty-two guidelines, including a requirement that the newcomers supply sporting supplies to upperclassmen. Prior to the Revolutionary War, officials at what was then called Laws of Yale College warned of punishment for any students caught endangering a building's glass through the use of a "foot-ball." By the 1830s, students at Dartmouth College played a kicking game known as football almost daily on autumn afternoons. College students also made efforts at baseball, cricket, horse racing, wrestling, and other sports. As with football, participation was normally spontaneous and unorganized. These extracurricular activities originated among students as a response to the stifling atmosphere that prevailed on college campuses prior to the Civil War.²

One such extracurricular diversion known as the "rush," an initiation rite for college freshmen, became entrenched on college campuses in the 1800s as a class versus class ritual. Rushes took various forms, with football contests between newly arrived freshmen and their sophomore counterparts being most common. At Harvard, the annual event became known as "Bloody Monday" because the clash occurred on the first Monday of fall term. The phrase also vividly symbolizes the intensity and roughness of the

²Ibid, 3-25. College presidents, mostly clergymen, enforced strict guidelines for student behavior, usually maintaining a dim view of athletics.

See also, John A. Lucas and Ronald A. Smith, *Saga of American Sport* (Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1978): 191-249.

battles. An 1886 account of a class rush at Yale details the serious preparation: "put on our canvas jackets & old trousers, sewed the sleeves & legs tight so that no one could grab us, & then sewed our canvas jackets onto our trousers & of course wore no hats."³ These unorganized games and ritualized class struggles served as forerunners to the sport of college football.

The *intercollegiate* aspect of that 1869 Rutgers-Princeton game marks the encounter as historic. Football became the fourth intercollegiate sport, following crew (1852), baseball (1859), and cricket (1864). Rutgers prevailed over the visitors from Princeton in that initial contest by a score of 6 to 4 using soccer-type rules that called for a goal anytime a player sent the ball between goal posts situated eight paces apart. The game was hotly contested, but a relaxed atmosphere prevailed before and after the affair as teams and fans meandered around town and played billiards prior to the contest. Following the game the combatants enjoyed dinner and song together.⁴

³John F. Marszalek, "The Class Rush-A Description," *Journal of Sport History* 17 (Winter, 1990): 366-368.

⁴For accounts of the first intercollegiate football game, see Ronald A. Smith, *Sports and Freedom*, 69-72; John A. Lucas and Ronald A. Smith, *Saga of American Sport*, 229-232; Betty Spears and Richard A. Swanson, *History of Sport and Physical Education in the United States* 3rd Edition (Dubuque, Iowa: W.C. Brown Publishers, 1988): 138.

A list of the first intercollegiate contests in various sports can be found in Ronald A. Smith, *Sports and Freedom*, 219-220.

Harvard University offered a contrast to the soccer style of football in the 1870s by playing what was dubbed the Boston game. The Boston style allowed players to run with the ball (as long as the opposition pursued them), a significant difference to soccer football. Harvard students held out for the Boston style, even when several other prestigious schools sought to meet and codify soccer rules. Harvard's independence directly influenced the future of American football as soccer football eventually faded. A series of games in 1874 between Harvard and McGill University of Montreal also proved important. McGill played rugby, and the Harvard team enjoyed the style so much that they eventually adopted it, never going back to the Boston game. When Yale, craving the opportunity to compete against her most esteemed rival, agreed to play Harvard in 1875 using modified rugby rules, the ascendance of rugby-style football in America was assured.⁵

With Yale, Harvard, and Princeton, the so-called "Big Three" of intercollegiate sport, providing leadership, college football rose to great popularity between the 1880s and the early 1900s. Walter Camp of Yale, the most important figure in the early era of the game, helped put into place rules changes that gave the rugby game a distinct American style. Among the most important of the changes

⁵See John A. Lucas and Ronald A. Smith, *Saga of American Sport*, 232-235; Ronald A. Smith, *Sports and Freedom*, 74-78.

were the establishment of a scrimmage (or snapping of the ball to initiate play), the introduction of the down system for maintaining or relinquishing ball possession, and scoring changes that emphasized points for the touchdown more than for the kicked goal. These innovations helped catapult the sport into prominence and profitability. In turn, the game continued an expansion to other regions, including the South, and also attracted greater scrutiny.⁶

The first intercollegiate football game played in what was to become the Southeastern Conference area took place in 1881. Kentucky A&M (later the University of Kentucky) defeated Kentucky State (later Transylvania College) 2 to 0, in a game played before Walter Camp effected scoring changes.⁷ The expansion of the game southward followed a simple pattern at most schools; the University of Georgia

⁶On the general history of college football, see Parke H. Davis, *Football: The American Intercollegiate Game* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911); Allison Danzig, *History of American Football* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1956); Alexander M. Weyand, *The Saga of American Football* (New York: Macmillan, 1961); Guy M. Lewis, "The American Intercollegiate Football Spectacle, 1869-1917," unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, 1964; Ivan N. Kaye, *Good Clean Violence: A History of College Football* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1973); Tom Perrin, *Football: A College History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1987).

For additional information on Walter Camp, see Hartford Powell, Jr., *Walter Camp* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1926); John S. Martin, "Walter Camp and His Gridiron Game," *American Heritage* 12 (October, 1961): 50-55, 77-81; "Walter Camp" entry in Ralph Hickok, *The Encyclopedia of North American Sports History* (New York: Oxford, 1992): 90-91.

⁷See Nathan W. Dougherty, *Educators and Athletes: The Southeastern Conference, 1894-1972* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Athletic Department, 1976): 20.

serves as a typical example. Dr. Charles Herty, fresh from his Ph.D. program at Johns Hopkins, joined the Georgia faculty in 1891. Having picked up the rudiments of football as a student, and allegedly possessing the only rule book in Athens, Georgia, Herty organized the university's first squad and became the team's first coach. At schools across the South, similar circumstances applied. A student, faculty member, or administrator with a northeastern or midwestern (usually northeastern) educational background moved south and brought the fledgling sport along.⁸

The growing popularity of college football resulted in closer scrutiny for the sport. Critics turned their attention to the brutal nature of football as dirty tactics, limited safety equipment, and the rise of dangerous mass momentum plays led to high numbers of injuries. The most infamous play in football history, Harvard's "flying wedge," called for two groups of moving players in a "V" formation to converge simultaneously at the assigned point of impact. The devastating play was banned within two years of its 1892 debut.⁹ Cries for reform reached a peak in 1905. Theodore Roosevelt hosted a highly visible White House conference

⁸See Nathan W. Dougherty, *Educators and Athletes*, 23-26; John F. Stegeman and Robert M. Willingham, Jr., *Touchdown: A Pictorial History of the Georgia Bulldogs* (Athens, GA: Agee Publishers Inc., 1983): 1-22.

⁹See Scott A. McQuilkin and Ronald A. Smith, "The Rise and Fall of the Flying Wedge: Football's Most Controversial Play," *Journal of Sport History* 20 (Spring, 1993): 57-64; John A. Lucas and Ronald A. Smith, *Saga of American Sport*, 239-242.

with members of the "Big Three" that accomplished little with regard to actual reform, but did garner positive publicity. The death of a Union College player in a game with New York University in late 1905 prompted NYU chancellor Henry McCracken to call for meetings on the future of college football. The group of college representatives that met in December of 1905 formed a permanent organization that eventually came to be known as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).¹⁰

In the South, the issues of controlling and reforming college football began in the 1890s and eventually resulted in the formation of the Southeastern Conference in the 1930s. Concerns over eligibility of athletes, particularly the practice of using "tramp" athletes and "ringers" prompted the formation of the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association (SIAA) in 1894. Ringers were ineligible players brought in for specific games, while tramp athletes might use up eligibility playing at one school, then move on to compete for another college. Dr. William L. Dudley, dean of the medical school at Vanderbilt University, was the main force in establishing the SIAA, which sought the "development and purification of college

¹⁰See John A. Lucas and Ronald A. Smith, *Saga of American Sport*, 242-245; Ronald A. Smith, "Harvard and Columbia and a Reconsideration of the 1905-06 Football Crisis," *Journal of Sport History* 8 (Winter, 1981): 5-19; Ronald A. Smith, *Sports and Freedom*, 191-208; John S. Watterson, "The Football Crisis of 1909-1910: The Response of the Eastern "Big Three,"" *Journal of Sport History* 8 (Spring, 1981): 33-49.

athletics in the South."¹¹

Several members among the SIAA broke away in 1920 and 1921 to form what came to be known as the Southern Conference. The prime factor in the breakup of the SIAA ironically centered on eligibility rules, with the larger colleges seeking to tighten requirements, a measure opposed by the league's smaller institutions. By the end of 1932, the Southern Conference included an unwieldy twenty-three members, covering an area from Maryland to Louisiana. In February of 1933, the thirteen members west and south of the Appalachians founded the Southeastern Conference. Simple geography played an important part in the decision, as did the determination of the major colleges in the deep South to play football on a national level.¹²

Southeastern Conference teams would compete successfully on a national level, but they would do it without allowing blacks onto their squads for many years. The history of African-American sporting involvement began during the time of slavery. From the slave era to the

¹¹Nathan W. Dougherty, *Educators and Athletes*, 31.

¹²See Nathan W. Dougherty, *Educators and Athletes*, 59-70 and 91-100; John D. McCallum, *Southeastern Conference Football*, 31-43; 1993 Southeastern Conference Brochure, Birmingham, Alabama. A special thanks to Lane Estes for providing information from the SEC office.

The 13 original members of the SEC were Alabama, Auburn, Florida, Georgia, Georgia Tech, Kentucky, Louisiana State, Mississippi, Mississippi State, Sewanee, Tennessee, Tulane, and Vanderbilt (Sewanee withdrew in 1940, Georgia Tech in 1964, and Tulane in 1966 . . . Arkansas and South Carolina joined the conference in 1991).

modern quest for civil rights in the mid-1900s, the plight of blacks within sport often reflected broader racial themes in American society.

B. An Overview of African-American Sporting Involvement

African-American sporting experiences originated in slavery. The oppressive nature of the "peculiar institution" did not entirely eliminate opportunities for slaves to take part in recreation, sport, and play. Adult slaves typically labored in the fields or worked in the homes of slaveowners, but at certain times they controlled their own activities. Usually freed from chores after dark, slaves spent many evenings trapping game and fishing, often along with their children. These activities produced additional food for slave families, and also allowed slave parents a rare chance to teach their children a skill or craft, or to simply spend time together with the children as a family. Special work-related events such as log rollings, corn shuckings, barn raisings, and hog killings granted slaves festive affairs that supplied recreation and created some sense of community. Likewise, Sundays and holidays meant a few precious uninhibited hours for slaves and afforded them time for sporting enjoyment as well. Slaves treasured these diversions from the everyday drudgery of slave life and they "frolicked, danced, run races, played

games, and visited around" on such days.¹³ The specific amount of leisure time available to slaves depended on individual masters.

Sporting exercises and purely pleasurable endeavors were popular with slaves. Slaves boxed, wrestled, ran foot races, played ball, raced horses, and danced. Strict laws against gambling did not prevent slaves from wagering on cock fights, horse races, and other contests. Slaveowners attempted to restrict those activities deemed most disruptive or dangerous to the system, particularly gambling and hunting, but for the most part allowed at least some sport and recreation. The planters who encouraged sports largely viewed them as another tool to maintain a submissive work force. Allowing sporting participation fostered social control and helped keep slaves healthier. Historian David K. Wiggins cites a multitude of statements from former slaves, planters, and scholars acknowledging that sport and play served as an effective means to deter slave rebellion

¹³See David K. Wiggins, "The Play of Slave Children in the Plantation Communities of the Old South, 1820-1860," *Journal of Sport History* 7 (Summer, 1980): 21-39 (quote on page 30); David K. Wiggins, "Good Times on the Old Plantation: Popular Recreations of the Black Slave in Antebellum South, 1810-1860," *Journal of Sport History* 3 (Fall, 1977): 260-284.

General literature on slavery is voluminous, see John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen editors, *Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987): 1-198. The phrase "peculiar institution" comes from Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York: Random House, 1956).

and unrest.¹⁴

Slaveowners also used their most talented slaves as means of sporting entertainment. Slaves handled livestock on plantations, and many became expert horsemen. In arranging horse races with neighbors or rival landowners, the planters often entrusted the riding of the horses to those livestock handlers. This arrangement resulted not only from the riding abilities of African-Americans, but also because sporting beliefs of the day placed an emphasis on the horse; few thought the rider to be an important part of a race. The most famous horse race of the 1800s was an 1823 match between a northern horse, American Eclipse, and a southern rival, Sir Henry. That confrontation, surrounded by growing regional friction between the North and South, reportedly featured an African-American jockey aboard the losing Sir Henry.¹⁵

Boxing proved another popular sport for owners to utilize slaves. Planters commonly staged fights between their own slaves, and set up contests with other slave owners. Substantial wagering hinged on the fighting abilities of the toughest slaves on competing plantations. A famous African-American fighter of the early 1800s named Tom Molyneux supposedly earned his freedom by winning for

¹⁴See David K. Wiggins, "Good Times on the Old Plantation," 261-266.

¹⁵See Arthur R. Ashe Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory* volume 1, 43-53.

his master a lucrative bout against a rival's slave. In 1810, Molyneux gained prominence for two famous and brutal fights against English boxing champion Tom Cribb. In the first of those encounters, accounts suggested Molyneux dominated the match only to be robbed of the victory by Cribb's handlers.¹⁶

Not surprisingly blacks enjoyed success in certain sports after the Civil War. African-American jockeys dominated horse racing until the turn of the twentieth century, primarily because of the precedent established during slavery. The first Kentucky Derby in 1875 counted fourteen black jockeys of the fifteen total riders, including Oliver Lewis aboard the winning horse Aristedes. The most successful jockey of the late 1800s was Isaac Murphy, an African-American who won an astounding 44% of the 1412 races he entered. He also captured the Kentucky Derby three times. Attitudes of white racial superiority and a more glamorous and financially rewarding status toward the position of jockey drove blacks from the saddle around the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁷

Other African-American athletes also won acclaim during

¹⁶Ibid, 17-21; John A. Lucas and Ronald A. Smith, *Saga of American Sport*, 64 and 268.

¹⁷See Arthur R. Ashe Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory* volume 1, 43-53; John A. Lucas and Ronald A. Smith, *Saga of American Sport*, 278; David K. Wiggins, "Isaac Murphy: Black Hero in Nineteenth Century American Sport, 1861-1896," *Canadian Journal of Sport History* 10 (May, 1979): 15-32.

the late 1800s. Marshall "Major" Taylor gained international fame and regularly reigned as a world champion cyclist between 1896 and 1904. Several black boxers attracted attention and won championships during the era. Joe "the Old Master" Gans became the first recognized African-American world champion by winning the lightweight boxing title in 1902. The most famous black athlete prior to 1900 was boxer Peter Jackson of the Virgin Islands, a man denied the chance to fight for the heavyweight championship because of his color. Black boxers in lighter weight divisions obtained title fights more readily than larger fighters as Americans placed more importance on the heaviest weight classes. Organized white baseball leagues featured African-Americans as well. George Stovey, Fleet Walker, Frank Grant, and others achieved some notoriety.¹⁸

Most gains made by African-Americans in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War disappeared as a renewed sense of American racism surfaced in the 1880s and 1890s. With regard to sport, this racism drove many African-Americans out of the organized white sports structures and ushered in an era of segregated competition. Segregation in sport

¹⁸See Larry Bowman, "Moses Fleetwood Walker," in Peter Levine, *Baseball History*, 61-75; Robert Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White*, 16-51; Andrew Ritchie, *Major Taylor* (San Francisco: Kampmann Books, 1988); Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The People's Game*, 531-609; David K. Wiggins, "Peter Jackson and the Elusive Heavyweight Championship: A Black Athlete's Struggle Against the Late Nineteenth Century Color Line," *Journal of Sport History* 12 (Summer, 1985): 143-168.

matched the separation of the races occurring in general society following the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* "separate but equal" Supreme Court ruling of 1896. A conspicuous example of the strong racism took place in horse racing. Black jockeys apparently have not ridden in the Kentucky Derby since 1911, this following a period that saw African-Americans win thirteen of the first twenty-seven Derbys.¹⁹

Similarly, African-Americans were driven from white baseball leagues in the 1890s, a situation not remedied for fifty years. In response, these players were forced to develop gimmicks such as performing stereotypical comic routines during games, often rendering the acts while in coat and tails. Officials in the major leagues occasionally tried to skirt the ban on black players, as with the well-known case of New York Giant manager John McGraw attempting to present black second baseman Charlie Grant as an Indian named Tokohoma. Ultimately, the dearth of opportunities for blacks in white baseball caused African-American sporting figures such as Rube Foster and Gus Greenlee to form the celebrated Negro Leagues in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁰

¹⁹See John A. Lucas and Ronald A. Smith, *Saga of American Sport*, 278. For a study of racism following the Civil War, see C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* 3rd Revised Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

²⁰For information on baseball's Negro Leagues, see Arthur R. Ashe, Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African-American Athlete* volumes one and two; John B. Holway, *Voices from the Great Black Baseball Leagues* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1975); John B. Holway, *Blackball Stars: Negro League Pioneers* (Westport, CT: Meckler Books, 1988) Robert Peterson,

Jack Johnson was one African-American who overcame the stark racism of the early 1900s to triumph in sport. The first black heavyweight boxing champion, Johnson arguably is the most influential African-American athlete in history. He struggled for years to secure a heavyweight championship fight, only getting his chance when Tommy Burns of Canada won the title and reluctantly agreed to face the black challenger. Even then, Johnson had to literally chase Burns around the globe, chastising the champion at every opportunity, before finally receiving a bout in Australia in 1908. Johnson pummelled Burns and retained the title until 1915. In addition to his color, which alone was enough to create problems during that era, Johnson pursued a flamboyant lifestyle during his reign that made him even more of a threat to white America. Johnson fled the United States in 1913 after being convicted of Mann Act violations, charges most observers now believe were simply "trumped" up to eliminate the champion. When Johnson lost the title in 1915, the color line again descended on boxing; an African-American did not have another heavyweight title shot until the mid-1930s.²¹

Only the Ball Was White; Donn Rogosin, *Invisible Men: Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues* (New York: Antheneum Publishers, 1983).

²¹For the most comprehensive account of America's first black world heavyweight boxing champion, see Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: The Free Press, 1983).

The Mann Act, or White Slave Traffic Act, forbade interstate transportation of women for "purposes of prostitution or

White attitudes toward blacks in sport became somewhat more tolerant beginning in the 1930s and early 1940s. Joe Louis and Jesse Owens helped foster the change. Louis became the second African-American to gain the heavyweight boxing title when he knocked out James J. Braddock in 1937. Louis had previously gained some measure of attention from white America, unusual for a black athlete at the time, in matches with foreign fighters. His win over the Italian Primo Carnera in 1935, shortly after fascist Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, was viewed as an embarrassment for Benito Mussolini. Louis lost a 1936 bout with Germany's Max Schmeling, but in the storied 1938 rematch destroyed Schmeling in one round, striking a blow at Adolf Hitler's notion of Aryan supremacy. Louis further endeared himself to many Americans, black and white, with patriotic gestures and military service during World War II.²²

debauchery," see Roberts (p. 144-146); and William Seagle, "The Twilight of the Mann Act," *American Bar Association Journal* 55 (1966): 641-647. The government rarely pursued cases unless profit was the clear motive, but made an exception for Johnson, whose well-known proclivities for white women made him that much more unacceptable to white America (see Roberts, 138-154).

²²See Gerald Astor, ". . . And a Credit to His Race": *The Hard Life and Times of Joseph Louis Barrow, a.k.a. Joe Louis* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1974); Dominic J. Capece and Martha Wilkerson, "Multifarious Hero: Joe Louis, American Society and Race Relations During World Crisis, 1935-1945," *Journal of Sport History* 10 (Winter, 1983): 4-25; Chris Mead, *Champion: Joe Louis, Black Hero in White America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985).

For a comparison of attitudes toward Jack Johnson and Joe Louis, see William H. Wiggins, Jr., "Boxing's Sambo Twins: Racial Stereotypes in Jack Johnson and Joe Louis Newspaper Cartoons, 1908-1938," *Journal of Sport History* 15 (Winter, 1988): 242-253.

Jesse Owens first gained national prominence at the 1935 Big Ten track championship by winning four events (breaking 3 world records and tying a 4th) in one afternoon. The Berlin Olympics of 1936 furnished a much greater stage. Owens dominated the "Nazi" Olympics, claiming four gold medals and upstaging Hitler's German athletes. In dispelling the Aryan myth once more, Owens (like Louis) gained more popularity among blacks and whites than was customary for an African-American in the 1930s and 1940s.²³ Owens and Louis both gained national stature at the beginning of a growing world crisis. Their exploits, comprising both symbolic and actual racial advancement, helped foster an increasing tolerance toward blacks in sport and society in many regions of the country.

Other factors also created a changing of American attitudes toward blacks in sport. A gradual recognition of civil rights issues outside the South beginning in the 1930s forced southerners to defend their carefully established system of segregation and white supremacy. World War II further awakened public sentiment to the reality that blacks were denied rights while living in a nation that was fighting for freedom abroad. These shifts brought greater

²³See William J. Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life* (Detroit: The Free Press, 1986); Richard D. Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1971); David K. Wiggins, "The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin: The Response of America's Black Press," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 54 (1983): 278-292.

sporting opportunities for African-American athletes after the war.²⁴

Jackie Robinson and the Brooklyn Dodgers provided the most obvious example of expanding sporting opportunities, but major league professional football and basketball also reopened to blacks between 1946 and 1950. In 1946, Kenny Washington and Woody Strode became the first blacks allowed into the NFL since the early 1930s, while Marion Motley and Bill Willis broke the color line in the All-America Football Conference, a rival football league. Nat Clifton, Chuck Cooper, and Earl Lloyd became the first black players in the fledgling National Basketball Association (NBA) in 1950. Significantly, each of these desegregation efforts preceded the 1954 *Brown Decision* that ended legal segregation.²⁵

²⁴See David Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 411-428; David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992): 297-298 and 586-591; Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). For more specific literature on blacks during this period, see Dan T. Carter, "From Segregation to Integration," in John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen, *Interpreting Southern History*, 408-433.

²⁵For information on Jackie Robinson and major league baseball generally in the 1940s, see Charles C. Alexander, *Our Game: An American Baseball History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1991): 187-216; Jackie Robinson, *I Never Had It Made* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1972); Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment*.

For information on the integration of professional football in the 1940s, see William A. Brower, "Has Professional Football Closed the Door?" *Opportunity* 18 (December 1940): 375-377; Thomas G. Smith, "Outside the Pale: The Exclusion of Blacks from the National Football League, 1934-1946," *Journal of Sport History* 15 (Winter, 1988): 255-281; Woody Strode and Sam Young, *Goal Dust* (Lanham, Maryland: Madison Books, 1990).

On professional basketball desegregation, see Robert W.

Resistance to integration remained strong in the South in the aftermath of *Brown* and this attitude affected southern collegiate sport. African-American athletes first played at predominantly white colleges and universities in the late 1800s. As intercollegiate sport, especially football, grew in popularity in the twentieth century, southern schools commonly refused to compete against integrated athletic teams. Northern institutions accommodated these demands by withholding their black players in games with southern schools, thereby perpetuating the practice. Such arrangements became known as "gentlemen's agreements." While some blacks and whites had regularly protested the agreements earlier, the changing racial climate after World War II strengthened opposition.²⁶ By the early 1960s, southern universities, including those of the Southeastern Conference, found themselves isolated with regard to segregation in athletics. Facing adversity

Peterson, *Cages to Jumpshots: Pro Basketball's Early Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990): 95-107 and 170-174.

²⁶See Ocania Chalk, *Black College Sport* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1976); Patrick B. Miller, "Harvard and the Color Line: The Case of Lucien Alexis" in Ronald Story editor *Sport in Massachusetts: Historical Essays* (Westfield, MA: Institute for Massachusetts Studies, 1991); Donald Spivey, "'End Jim Crow in Sports': The Protest at New York University," *Journal of Sport History* 15 (Winter, 1988): 282-303; Donald Spivey, "The Black Athlete in Big-Time Intercollegiate Sports, 1941-1968," *Phylon* 44 (June, 1983): 116-125; David K. Wiggins, "Prized Performers, but Frequently Overlooked Students: The Involvement of Black Athletes in Intercollegiate Sports on Predominantly White Campuses, 1890-1972," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 62 (June, 1991): 164-177.

in athletic race relations was not an unusual circumstance for the conference by that point.

C. Selected Racial Episodes Involving SEC Athletic Teams

As the University of Georgia football squad prepared to visit New York University for an intersectional game in 1929, a dilemma fairly common to such occasions arose. The New York University team included an African-American, outstanding quarterback Dave Myers. The University of Georgia, like most southern schools of the era, refused to partake in interracial contests. What was to become a familiar resolution ensued.

A couple of weeks prior to the game, the Associated Press quoted Dean S.V. Sanford of Georgia as proclaiming a "gentleman's agreement" existed between the schools, an agreement that would bar Myers from playing. Sanford went on, "the matter has been amicably adjusted and we anticipate no unpleasantness whatsoever."²⁷ These traditional gentlemen's agreements allowed southern schools to follow established racial practices of not competing against African-Americans, while also providing northern universities the continued opportunity of scheduling lucrative intersectional battles.

²⁷NAACP Administrative File, "Discrimination Education, NYU," 23 October 1929, Library of Congress. A special thanks to Dr. David K. Wiggins, George Mason University, for compiling and providing this documentation.

Most often such arrangements proceeded quietly, but the Dave Myers affair created a sizeable dispute. Students, the black press, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) all protested the decision to bench Myers. The NAACP negotiated with university officials in the days leading up to the game, with Secretary Walter White firing off several letters to the school denouncing the agreement. In the end, all the objections were to no avail, as New York University coach John "Chick" Meehan sat out Dave Myers. NYU triumphed in the game by a score of 27 to 19.²⁸ The acquiescence of northern colleges to southern racial demands, as in the Myers affair, reflected vestiges of the severe racism confronting blacks, both in sport and general society, in the early twentieth century. The withholding of Dave Myers from the 1929 Georgia-NYU game occurred within this context of racist sentiment. The controversy surrounding the affair was one of the earliest involving a college belonging to what would soon become the Southeastern Conference. While the decision by New York University officials to bench Myers during the Georgia contest clearly fit into an age of overt segregationist attitudes, the ample press coverage given the

²⁸For information on the Myers affair, see Ocania Chalk, *Black College Sport*, 186-187; NAACP Administration File "Discrimination," 23 October 1929; David K. Wiggins, "Prized Performers . . .," 169; Raymond Wolters, *The New Negro on Campus: Black College Rebellions of the 1920's* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975): 317.

incident served as a portent of evolving racial emotions. A second episode involving a Southeastern Conference football team does the same.

In a scene reminiscent of other North-South football battles, SEC member Georgia Tech travelled to Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1934 for a game with the Wolverines of the University of Michigan. The Yellow Jackets coaching staff fully expected Michigan to comply with the standard "gentleman's agreement" between intersectional rivals and thus keep end Willis Ward, an African-American, out of the ballgame. When a squabble arose concerning the benching of Ward, one of Michigan's best players, a unique arrangement followed. To ensure that the game would take place, Tech coach Bill Alexander acceded to Michigan's concerns and benched his own star player, end E. H. "Hoot" Gibson. The game went on without the two players, Michigan defeating Georgia Tech 9 to 2.

The decision to bench Ward, a popular football and track star who once defeated Jesse Owens in a sixty-yard dash, raised a furor similar to that which accompanied the 1929 Georgia-NYU game. The *Michigan Daily*, the school's student newspaper, argued that the ideals of the University of Michigan were "incompatible with the South's position on racial differences."²⁹ Again the NAACP voiced concern.

²⁹Quote from John Behee, *Hail to the Victors!: Black Athletes at the University of Michigan* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ulrich's Books, 1974) as cited in Arthur R. Ashe, Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory* vol.

Assistant Secretary Roy Wilkens wondered, "what about the feelings of Negro athletes who have carried the name and fame . . . of Michigan to the ends of the earth with Olympic victories?"³⁰ Only two years earlier, Eddie Tolan of Michigan had sprinted to Olympic gold medals in Los Angeles. However, most of these protestations took place after the event, too late to keep Ward from being withheld.

Like the Dave Myers affair before it, the Georgia Tech-Michigan controversy took place in a changing racial atmosphere. The reciprocal benching of Hoot Gibson for Willis Ward, which received substantial press coverage, came as white attitudes toward blacks in sport were becoming a bit more tolerant. While the Georgia Tech-Michigan meeting certainly was of limited national significance, and the benching of a white player a small consolation, other events in sport during the 1930s and 1940s indicated the growing acceptance of African-Americans in sports. The accomplishments of Joe Louis and Jesse Owens against the backdrop of strong global tensions are broader examples of this theme. The Georgia Tech-Michigan game of 1934, the controversy it stirred, and the rejection of previously

2, 94.

For other accounts of the 1934 Michigan-Georgia Tech encounter, see Charles H. Martin, "Jim Crow in the Gymnasium: The Integration of College Basketball in the American South," 68-86 (esp. p.70); Charles H. Martin, "The Integration of Southeastern Conference Athletics," 3; David K. Wiggins, "Prized Performers . . .," 168.

³⁰Arthur R. Ashe, Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory* vol. 2, 94.

accepted racial norms it produced, fits well in the context of such shifting attitudes. Perhaps the episode even served as a subtle harbinger of this coming change.

The expanding role of African-Americans in sport intensified in the aftermath of World War II. The three preeminent professional sports (baseball, basketball, football) all desegregated, or reintegrated, at the major league level between 1946 and 1950. In the South however, continuing resistance to integration nullified any softening of racial attitudes among Southeastern Conference football members, and assured that desegregation in SEC athletics would not occur before the 1960s.

Southern states passed laws in the late 1950s aimed at defying or circumventing integration. This legislation extended into the arena of sport. A Louisiana law preventing blacks from participating in the annual Sugar Bowl football game was enacted after a black player had competed in the game for the first time, a quirk resulting from the growing southern response to the *Brown* decision. The episode took place at the 1956 Sugar Bowl between Pittsburgh and Georgia Tech.³¹

³¹See "Segregation held Sugar back for many years," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 1 January 1984, sec. 8, p. 7.

For information on southern racial attitudes toward college sport in the 1950s and 1960s, see Ronald E. Marcello, "The Integration of Intercollegiate Athletics in Texas: North Texas State College as a Test Case, 1956," 286-316; Charles H. Martin, "Jim Crow in the Gymnasium," 68-86; Joan Paul, Richard V. McGehee, and Helen Fant, "The Arrival and Ascendence of Black Athletes in the Southeastern Conference, 1966-1980," 284-297.

The University of Pittsburgh football squad included an African-American, second team running back/defensive back Bobby Grier. Initially the Sugar Bowl's invitation to Pittsburgh generated little strife, but segregationist Georgia governor Marvin Griffin inflamed the issue by calling on his state's Board of Regents to forbid the interracial meeting. Duly riled, the New Orleans (white) Citizen's Council ridiculed the Sugar Bowl for inviting Pittsburgh in the first place. The national media jumped into the fray, depicting New Orleans "as a city bristling with guns in anticipation of a single substitute fullback."³² The uncertainty of Georgia Tech's participation ended when the Georgia Board of Regents voted 10-1 to let the team play.

Georgia Tech won the football game 7 to 0, and no racial problems occurred, although a pass interference call against Grier did lead to the game's only touchdown. Soon, new legislation preventing integrated sporting contests would go into effect across states in the deep South. In Louisiana, Act 579, which prohibited interracial athletic competition, was one of more than a dozen segregation laws passed in the state in 1956. Another African-American did not compete in the Sugar Bowl until 1965. This strong anti-integration backlash influenced Southeastern Conference

³²See "Segregation held Sugar back for many years."

athletics into the 1960s, when some cracks began to appear.³³

The laws against interracial athletic competition produced a spate of episodes involving Southeastern Conference teams in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Football teams could comply with such bans rather easily, as they controlled their scheduling and bowl appearances. Basketball tournaments created a predicament however, because pairings depended upon seedings and results. Such uncertainty caused several SEC basketball teams to decline national tournament opportunities.

The University of Kentucky usually spared conference basketball teams the decision on whether to compete in integrated tournaments by dominating the SEC. The coach of the Wildcats, legendary "Baron of the Bluegrass" Adolph Rupp, was no racial progressive, but he was willing to compete for national titles, even if it meant facing black players.³⁴ However, when other conference teams won the league title, the dilemma remained. The University of Alabama chose not to play in the 1956 NCAA tournament after winning the Southeastern Conference title. Auburn

³³Ibid; see also Joan Paul, et al, "Arrival and Ascendence," 284-285.

³⁴See Charles H. Martin, "The Integration of Southeastern Conference Athletics," 5; Charles H. Martin, "Jim Crow in the Gymnasium," 71-72.

University reached the same decision in 1960.³⁵

No school suffered more from the racial atmosphere than Mississippi State University. The basketball squad missed both the NCAA and the National Invitational Tournament (NIT) in 1959, 1961, and 1962, the last two years with outstanding teams that won 24 games and lost 1 each season. By 1963, the Bulldogs had had enough. Challenging Mississippi governor Ross Barnett, a staunch segregationist, and the state's unwritten ban on interracial competition, the team entered the NCAA basketball tournament. After virtually sneaking out of the state, Mississippi State lost 61-51 to eventual champion Loyola of Chicago, a team featuring four black starters.³⁶

The Mississippi State episode marks another step in the maturation of racial perspective surrounding Southeastern Conference athletics. The blatant hostility in southern states toward interracial competition slowly began to change. Expanding opportunities for blacks in sport, derailed in the South as the region clung to segregation, would finally reach the Southeastern Conference in the 1960s. These various episodes, ranging from the Dave Myers affair in the 1920s to the problems facing SEC basketball

³⁵For a fuller account of SEC basketball teams facing the issue of interracial competition in the 1950s and 1960s, see Charles H. Martin, "The Integration of Southeastern Conference Athletics," 5-7; Charles H. Martin, "Jim Crow in the Gymnasium," 74-77.

³⁶Ibid.

teams in the 1960s, reflect not only on athletics in the South, but also on the course of African-American sporting participation generally. The severe racism of the late 19th and early 20th century yielded to a grudging acceptance of blacks in sport in the 1930s and 1940s in most of the country. After World War II, more avenues in sport opened to blacks, with Jackie Robinson and major league baseball playing a highly publicized role. However, in the South, lingering racist sentiment, exacerbated by the end of legal segregation in the 1950s, squelched progress at most southern colleges until the 1960s.

Chapter Three

Volunteer Echoes

Events at the University of Tennessee mirrored those taking place at other Southeastern Conference institutions. Football developed into an organized sport at Tennessee in the 1890s, but the school's early squads remained mostly undistinguished until the arrival of Robert Reese Neyland in 1925. Neyland dominated university athletics for nearly four decades, his long career at Tennessee concluding when he died in 1962. Like other Southeastern Conference members, the Volunteers confronted various sports-related racial episodes during the middle decades of the twentieth century. By 1963, the prelude to football desegregation at the University of Tennessee neared an end, and the factors that would eventually lead to desegregation were falling into place.

A. Early Tennessee Football and the Arrival of Robert R. Neyland

The first thirty-five years of intercollegiate football at the University of Tennessee never brought the school national acclaim, and only occasionally produced good teams. While a thorough history of early Tennessee football need not be covered here, several notable experiences and

personalities deserve attention. Tennessee entered football competition on November 21, 1891. The team lost 24-0 to Sewanee in a game played at Chattanooga. H. K. Denlinger, director of the university's YMCA athletic program and a former Princeton player, organized that first team, directed the arrangements for the Sewanee contest, and played in the game. Several members of the university team also opposed a squad from Harriman, Tennessee, that fall, but the encounter with Sewanee was the only official game of 1891.¹

Two players from the pre-1900 era of Tennessee football figured prominently in the career of Robert Neyland. Samuel Strang Nicklin helped lead the 1896 team to four wins and no losses; a University of Tennessee football team would not go undefeated again until 1914. Strang Nicklin later served as baseball coach at the United States Military Academy. There he coached young Bob Neyland, a star pitcher from Texas. In 1897, talented freshman runner Charles B. Moran arrived on Tennessee's campus. Better known as "Uncle Charley," Moran went on to a colorful playing and coaching career, including

¹For information on the early years of football at the University of Tennessee, see Russ Bebb, *The Big Orange: A Story of Tennessee Football*, 17-121; Tom Siler Collection, MS-1886, Box 6, Folders 1-3; Tom Siler, *The Volunteers* (Knoxville, TN: Published by the author, all rights reserved, 1950). *100 Years of Volunteers 1891-1990*, volume 1.

On the first UT football game, see Russ Bebb, *The Big Orange*, 23-26. On the Harriman game of 1891, see "Letter from Fred Ehme to Tom Siler," 12 December 1957, *Tom Siler Collection*, MS-1886, Box 6, Folder 1.

a stint at Texas A&M where he too coached Neyland.² College football fans best remember Moran for leading the "Praying Colonels" of Centre College to a fabled upset of Harvard in 1921. The Tennessee backgrounds of Nicklin and Moran assisted the Volunteers in the 1925 hiring of Neyland.

Incidentally, the nickname "Volunteers," first applied to the university football team by an Atlanta newspaper in 1902, originated with the traditional willingness of Tennesseans to volunteer for military duty. The school yearbook appeared in 1897 and was labelled the *Volunteer*, but Knoxville newspapers did not regularly use the term in conjunction with athletics until 1905. The popularity on campus of the 1898 Spanish-American War resulted in Tennessee students again "volunteering" eagerly and also prompted use of the expression. Prior to Volunteers, the most frequent nicknames for university football players and teams included "orange and white," "varsity," "Tennessee boys," and "Hillites."³

Football moved forward at Tennessee in 1907. The team played ten games for the first time, winning seven, and

²See Bob Gilbert, *Neyland: The Gridiron General* (Savannah, Georgia: Golden Coast Publishing Company, 1990): 16-34. Neyland attended Texas A&M in 1910/11, then accepted an appointment to West Point where he reported in June of 1912.

³See "Letter from Stanley J. Folmsbee to Julian Harriss," 11 May 1951, *Tom Siler Collection*, MS-1886, Box 6, Folder 1; James R. Montgomery, Stanley J. Folmsbee, and Lee S. Greene, *To Foster Knowledge: A History of The University of Tennessee, 1794-1970*, 350.

featured stellar performers such as Walter Leach, Roscoe "Piggy" Word, and guard Nathan Dougherty, a legendary figure at Tennessee and in the Southeastern Conference. The team also found a semi-permanent home at Waite Field, which eventually provided 2000 seats for spectators. Former coach Zora Clevenger recalled Waite as being "tremendously hard" and awash with gravel at times, while Jake Nicholson lamented playing on "the jagged concrete-like surface when it dried out . . . Oh! the scratches, charley horses, and twisted ankles." The Volunteers moved to Shields-Watkins field, where they still play, in 1920, but team members cursed that Waite playing surface decades later.⁴

By 1925, college football popularity soared as sport basked in a "Golden Age," and the nation reveled in the "Roaring Twenties." The University of Tennessee, seeking national status in football, needed an assistant coach who could enliven the program. Dr. Nathan Dougherty, at this time dean of engineering and head of the university's athletic council, led the search. He contacted Uncle Charley Moran, who suggested West Point assistant Bob

⁴See "Letter from Julian Harriss to Tom Siler," 18 April 1950, *Tom Siler Collection*, MS-1886, Box 6, Folder 1; "Letter from Zora Clevenger to Tom Siler," 11 April 1950, *Tom Siler Collection*, MS-1886, Box 6, Folder 2; "Letter from J.H. Nicholson to Tom Siler," *Tom Siler Collection*, MS-1886, Box 6, Folder 2; Russ Bebb, *The Big Orange*, 104-107.

For more information on Nathan Dougherty, see Russ Bebb, *The Big Orange*, 71-77; Nathan Dougherty, *Educators and Athletes: The Southeastern Conference, 1894-1972*.

*The former Volunteer football field is also often identified as Wait Field (as opposed to Waite).

Neyland, his former player at Texas A&M. Neyland, the man destined to be the most important figure in the annals of Tennessee athletics, accepted and arrived in Knoxville for the 1925 season.⁵

Robert Reese Neyland (pronounced kneeland) grew up in Texas. In many ways, his presence exuded the aura associated with the Lone Star state. Large, vigorous, and confident, Neyland was an imposing man. A robust athlete, Neyland excelled in various sports during his college years at West Point. He lettered in football as an end. He pitched for the Army baseball team, compiling a record of 35 wins and just five losses, including four straight victories over arch-rival Navy from 1913 to 1916. Several baseball teams later offered Neyland chances for a professional career, offers he spurned to remain a soldier. Neyland also reigned as the academy's heavyweight boxing champion for three consecutive years.⁶

Soon after graduating from West Point, Neyland settled into dual roles as soldier and coach. In 1921, after action

⁵See Bob Gilbert, *Neyland: The Gridiron General*, 61-63. For an informal history of the "roaring" 1920s, see Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday* 1st Perennial Library Edition (New York: Harper & Rowe Publishers, 1964).

⁶For information on Neyland's early career, see Russ Bebb, *The Big Orange*, 122-243; Bob Gilbert, *The Gridiron General*, 9-57; Andrew J. Kozar, "War and the Single Wing," *Tennessee Alumnus Magazine* (Fall, 1991): 40-42; Andrew J. Kozar, "And the Big Orange Caissons Went Rolling Along," *Now and Then* published by Center for Appalachian Studies and Services 9 (Fall, 1992): 40-42; Zipp Newman, *The Impact of Southern Football* (Montgomery, Alabama: M-B Publishing, 1969): 150-152.

in World War I, he returned to the academy as an aide to superintendent Douglas MacArthur. MacArthur supported athletic endeavors, and part of Neyland's duties included coaching. Neyland remained at West Point until taking the Tennessee position in 1925. The mix of coaching and soldiering continued however, as Army regulations of the era allowed Neyland to serve in the regional Corps of Engineers in Tennessee, while also coaching football. He did not retire from the military until 1936, and even then was called back to active duty during World War II. The combination proved vexing to Neyland. At West Point, he was a superior cadet to contemporaries such as Dwight Eisenhower and Omar Bradley, and as historic events unfolded, Neyland pondered whether he had passed over a broader, more important calling. Nonetheless, he attained the rank of brigadier general.⁷

Any lingering doubts about missed military opportunities did not apply to his football legacy. Neyland coached the University of Tennessee football team for twenty-one years. After a lone season as an assistant, he ascended to head coach in 1926. His tenure as head coach lasted until 1952, and consisted of three distinct stages structured around military tours. Neyland led the

⁷See Lindsey Nelson, *Hello Everybody, I'm Lindsey Nelson* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1985): 37-69 and 285-288. Nelson, the legendary sports broadcaster, attended the University of Tennessee and had a long, close friendship with Neyland.

Volunteers from 1926 to 1934, when an Army assignment in Panama forced him to resign his position for a year. He returned to coach the team from 1936 to 1940 before being called away for World War II. Finally, he resumed the helm in 1946, coached until the end of the 1952 season, then retired from coaching for health reasons. He remained as Tennessee athletic director until his death in 1962.

Neyland took football to new heights at the University of Tennessee. A master of defense and the kicking game, his teams amassed 173 wins, only 31 losses, and 12 ties. Noteworthy milestones included 2 Southern Conference titles, five Southeastern Conference championships, and a crowning moment: the 1951 national championship. His influence on college football was mammoth. The fame of Tennessee football brought attention to east Tennessee and the Appalachian region.⁸ Many modern coaches trace their methods back to Neyland coaching principles. Former Neyland players assumed coaching positions across the country; a partial list counts John Barnhill of Arkansas, Bobby Dodd of Georgia Tech, Beattie Feathers of North Carolina State, Herman Hickman of Yale, Murray Warmath of Minnesota, and Bowden Wyatt of Wyoming, Arkansas, and Tennessee.⁹

⁸On the impact of Neyland and Volunteer football to the mountain South, see Andrew J. Kozar, "And the Big Orange Caissons Went Rolling Along," 40-42.

⁹See Vince Dooley with Loran Smith, *Dooley's Dawgs: Twenty-Five Years of Winning Football at the University of Georgia* (Atlanta, GA: Longstreet Press, 1989): 85; Bob Gilbert, *Neyland:*

Neyland commanded respect from those players for life. As legend goes, Wyatt and Warmath, by then famous coaches in their own right, once stood enjoying a cigar at a bowl game. Wyatt frantically snuffed out his cigar when he saw the General approaching. "Why did you do that? You're a grown man . . . he doesn't have any control over you now," laughed Warmath. Wyatt said, "I know that, and you know that, but I'm not sure that he knows that." Warmath quickly ditched his own stogey.¹⁰ The accomplishments of Neyland are perhaps best shown by the results of a 1969 poll celebrating the centennial anniversary of college football. After 100 years of intercollegiate competition, experts at that time ranked Neyland as the sport's second greatest coach, behind only the more highly publicized Knute Rockne of Notre Dame.¹¹

An unexplored facet of the Neyland era at the University of Tennessee is the issue of race as it pertains to football desegregation. No African-American participated

The Gridiron General, 3-6; Johnny Majors with Ben Byrd, *You Can Go Home Again* (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press): 86; Lindsey Nelson, *Hello Everybody, I'm Lindsey Nelson*, 56.

¹⁰Lindsey Nelson, *Hello Everybody*, 45. The cigar story takes different forms and sometimes involves other coaches (see Russ Bebb, *The Big Orange*, 243), but the domineering charisma of Neyland remains the focal point of the tale.

¹¹For poll results, see Tom Siler, *Tennessee's Dazzling Decade*, 4.

For general statistics and information on Neyland's career, see Bob Gilbert, *The Gridiron General*, 256-258; Andy Kozar, "War and the Single Wing," 40 and 42; University of Tennessee Sports Information Department.

in athletics at Tennessee before 1967, not an unusual detail considering that blacks were excluded from all Southeastern Conference teams well into the 1960s. A recount of racial matters involving University of Tennessee athletic teams leading up to football desegregation suggests a familiar, and somewhat dubious, record on racial matters for Neyland, the athletic department, and the University of Tennessee as a whole.

B. Racial Episodes at Tennessee Prior to Football Desegregation

The 1941 Sugar Bowl matched the Tennessee Volunteers against the Boston College Eagles. Tennessee, soon to see Bob Neyland leave for World War II, headed into the bowl fresh off an undefeated regular season in 1940. For three consecutive years, 1938-1940, the Volunteers did not lose a regular season game, and only five of thirty opponents managed to score on them. The span marks the zenith of Neyland teams. Boston College also featured an unbeaten team led by coach Frank Leahy, later a legendary figure himself. Boston College upset Tennessee 19 to 13. Quarterback "Chuckin" Charley O'Rourke starred for the Eagles, and the win launched Frank Leahy to a new position at Notre Dame, where he quickly returned the Fighting Irish

to eminence.¹²

One Boston College player did not get to play in that 1941 Sugar Bowl. Lou Montgomery, a running back and the team's lone African-American, accompanied his squad to New Orleans, but then faced problems. Bowl officials "made it quite clear that a Negro would not be allowed to play" in the contest.¹³ He could not even stay in the hotel with his teammates. A local black family with ties to Boston College took Montgomery in, and sponsors of an all-star game between black players at nearby Xavier University offered him an invitation to play, which he accepted. During the Sugar Bowl, Montgomery was able to view the Eagles' win from the press box; he was given a job providing statistics to reporters. Even those meager arrangements marked improvement for Lou Montgomery. The previous season he was not allowed to make the trip to the Cotton Bowl.¹⁴

The University of Tennessee cannot be directly blamed

¹²For accounts of the 1941 Sugar Bowl, see Russ Bebb, *The Big Orange*, 198-200; John D. McCallum, *Southeastern Conference Football*, 83-88; Zipp Newman, *The Impact of Southern Football*, 73-74; Tom Siler, *The Volunteers*, 90-92.

On Frank Leahy, see Wells Twombly, *Shake Down the Thunder: The Official Biography of Notre Dame's Frank Leahy* (Radnor, PA: Chilton Publishing, 1974).

¹³"Segregation held Sugar back for many years," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 1 January 1984, sec. 8, p. 7.

¹⁴*Ibid.* Lou Montgomery holds the unenviable distinction of being excluded from more games than any black player in college football history; see David K. Wiggins, "Prized Performers, but Frequently Overlooked Students: The Involvement of Black Athletes in Intercollegiate Sports on Predominantly White Campuses, 1890-1972," 169.

for the exclusion of Lou Montgomery. The Sugar Bowl enforced the ban against blacks, and continued to do so for another fifteen years. Tennessee coaches, players, administrators, and fans probably gave very little, if any, thought to what was a well-established tradition of southern football teams refusing to compete against black players. The Knoxville newspapers paid no attention to the omission of Montgomery, even though he had been prominently alluded to in articles previewing the upcoming showdown. When Boston College sat him out of a late season game with Auburn, no mention had been made then either. Montgomery simply became an "invisible man." As detailed in the preceding chapter, the scene was not unusual.¹⁵

A more accurate indication of Tennessee athletic department attitudes came in 1946. The basketball team, coached by John Mauer, travelled to McKeesport, Pennsylvania, for a December meeting with Duquesne University. Mauer fully expected the Duquesne coaches to

¹⁵Knoxville press coverage leading up to the 1941 Sugar Bowl mentioned Lou Montgomery several times, see Harry Grayson, "Boston College-Georgetown Victor Should Tackle Texas Aggies in Bowl," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 12 November 1940, 14; Harry Grayson, "Boston College Smashed Its Strongest Opponents . . .," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 1 December 1940, B2; Frank Leahy, "Thumbnail Sketches of Boston Coach and Players," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 8 December 1940, B2.

Lou Montgomery was not in the lineup for the Auburn game, see Tom Noonan, "Boston College . . . Wallops Stubborn Auburn 33-7," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 24 November 1940, B3. No mention was made of his absence.

The "invisible man" phrase comes from Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952).

withhold forward Chuck Cooper from the game. His opponents felt no such inclination. The Duquesne staff assured Mauer that Cooper, their team's sole black player, would play only in the event of a close finish, but declined to completely rule out his participation. Duquesne thereby refused to succumb to the usual "gentleman's agreement," an act reflective of the growing disapproval for old racist standards in sport that arose in the 1940s. The game would be cancelled before Cooper would be benched. Coming just hours before the scheduled tip-off, this stern stance left coach Mauer, and the Tennessee team, in a predicament.

Tennessee refused to budge and forfeited the basketball game. According to reports Mauer polled the Tennessee team which voted not to play. Volunteer co-captain Ted Cook stressed that the squad feared breaking an unwritten code, in effect for the University of Tennessee and other SEC members, prohibiting interracial competition. Mauer sought to explain the forfeiture, saying "When there was no assurance the Negro player would not appear, my boys said they wouldn't play . . . you understand the situation which confronted me."¹⁶ That rather equivocal statement hinted at Mauer's own personal concerns. To allow his team full of southerners to take the court against an integrated opponent

¹⁶"Mauer Upholds Stand Against Playing Game," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 24 December 1946, 12. See also, Dan Daniel, "Daniel Says: Vols' Refusal to Play Duquesne Due to Negro Brings Letters of Protest to Ned Irish of Garden," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 26 December 1946, 12.

might well have endangered his coaching position.¹⁷

The Chuck Cooper dilemma arose in part because the Duquesne athletic department never responded to a letter from Mauer, sent some two weeks earlier. In the letter, Mauer "set forth our policy" and let the Duquesne coaches know that Tennessee teams did not compete against blacks.¹⁸ He also cited other instances of eastern colleges who "very graciously withheld" black players when facing Tennessee.¹⁹ Receiving no reply, the Tennessee mentor erroneously assumed Duquesne's compliance. No great uproar followed the incident. John Mauer and the Volunteer basketball team simply acted as most southern schools did during the era, only this time an opponent refused to cooperate. Chuck Cooper apparently never allowed the affair to hinder him; in 1950 the Boston Celtics made Cooper the first African-American drafted into the National Basketball Association.²⁰

In 1961, two more episodes occurred involving the Tennessee athletic department and African-American athletes.

¹⁷See "Historical Vignette-Black Athletes at UTK," *Context* (UTK Chancellor's Newsletter), 29 March 1990, 3.

For more information on University of Tennessee basketball, see Ben Byrd, *The Basketball Vols* revised edition (Huntsville, Alabama: Strode Publishing, 1980); pages 67-82 contain specific information on the John Mauer years.

¹⁸"Mauer Upholds Stand . . .," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 24 December 1946, 12.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰See Robert W. Peterson, *Cages to Jumpshots: Pro Basketball's Early Years*, 171.

The first involved a track meet. Neyland cancelled a scheduled meet during the spring of 1961, after the visiting team had arrived in Knoxville, because the opposing squad included blacks. By this time, Tennessee athletic policy was to compete against integrated teams away from home, but not to host such contests. Theotis Robinson, Jr., a university undergraduate at the time, wondered why such a fuss surrounded a simple track meet. "Nobody attended a track meet. The (athletes') girlfriends didn't even go . . . you might see twenty people . . . it was ridiculous," he remembers. Robinson understandably kept an eye on such matters; he and two other students desegregated the undergraduate student body at the University of Tennessee in January of 1961.²¹

One other blemish allegedly marred Tennessee athletics in 1961. That October, a black undergraduate named Avon Rollins tried out for freshman basketball at the university, thus becoming the first African-American to vie for a spot on any Southeastern Conference athletic team.²² Rollins

²¹See James R. Montgomery, Stanley J. Folmsbee, and Lee S. Greene, *To Foster Knowledge: A History of The University of Tennessee, 1794-1970*, 269; Interview with Theotis Robinson, Jr., 7 October 1992, 9.

²²"Austin High Guard Is Frosh Candidate," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 17 October 1961, 14; Joan Paul, Richard V. McGehee, and Helen Fant, "The Arrival and Ascendence of Black Athletes in the Southeastern Conference, 1966-1980," 284.

Austin High School served Knoxville's black community for many years, see Robert J. Booker, *Two Hundred Years of Black Culture in Knoxville, Tennessee, 1791 to 1991*, 37-57.

recalls practicing without incident for several days until General Neyland passed through the gymnasium and noticed him. According to Rollins, an ugly encounter ensued, consisting primarily of Neyland verbally lambasting Rollins outside the dressing room. After continuing to practice for a few days, Rollins was cut from the squad. Following Rollins' tryout, the possibility of blacks competing for University of Tennessee athletic teams lay mostly dormant until the Albert Davis recruitment in 1966-67.²³

C. Prelude to Football Desegregation at Tennessee

In assessing racial policy in Tennessee athletics leading to the 1960s, the importance of General Neyland to the University of Tennessee simply cannot be overstated. A visit to the Knoxville campus makes abundantly clear the special aura surrounding the Neyland name. A huge football stadium, a major thoroughfare running beside the Tennessee river, and an indoor sports complex all honor the coach. Likewise, a substantial academic scholarship, awarded on Neyland's behalf, provides educational funding for worthy students each year. Neyland is revered and exalted by

²³See Interview with Avon Rollins, 14 October 1992, 2-3 and 8-9; Theotis Robinson, Jr. interview, 9. Prior to Albert Davis signing with the Volunteers, four African-Americans tried out for Tennessee athletic teams as non-scholarship players. Apparently none of the four made a team. See "Negro Backs Join Tennessee Frosh," *Daily Beacon*, 29 September 1965, 7; "Negro Athletes May Try For Other Tennessee Teams," *Daily Beacon*, 30 September 1965, 7.

thousands of Tennesseans.

Still, the General was a man of his time and place. Born in 1892, he came of age during the early 1900s, years spanning the most vicious era of racism in America since before the Civil War. For nearly his entire life, the United States sanctioned a legal separation of blacks and whites. The South, more vehemently than any other region of the country, supported such ideology, and Neyland's heart belonged to his native Texas. "I am a Texan by birth, born of native Texans, and cherish the Texas belief that there is no place in the world to equal Texas," he boasted.²⁴ While he kept politics private, Neyland privately acknowledged conservative views, once claiming, "if you must say I have political leanings, place me as follows: Well to the Right of the Far Right."²⁵ While neither statement means Neyland was a racist, they both provide insights to his views.

Specific documentation scarcely exists concerning Neyland's views on race. In a recent Neyland biography, blacks are mentioned, only in passing, three times. The first passage cites the fact that young Bob Neyland grew up in a family that owned property which included "two cabins for black servants."²⁶ A second excerpt notes that

²⁴Andrew J. Kozar, "And the Big Orange Caissons Went Rolling Along," 42.

²⁵Bob Gilbert, *Neyland: The Gridiron General*, 202.

²⁶Bob Gilbert, *Neyland: The Gridiron General*, 11.

Neyland's first year as head coach at Tennessee, 1926, marked the arrival of J.M. Forgey, a black mute who served for many years as a sort of jack-of-all-trades and mascot for the football team. Finally, the book describes an all-star team Neyland coached during World War II. Neyland, as was his custom, refused to let a visitor address his squad at halftime of a game. That visitor happened to be heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis. "Nobody talks to my players but me," Neyland exclaimed at the time.²⁷

J.M. "Dummy" Forgey deserves mention. Several players, in correspondences with Knoxville sportswriter Tom Siler, recalled Forgey. Nickname notwithstanding, he appears to have been a popular member of the Volunteer program. Lenox D. Baker, a trainer for early Neyland teams and later a famous orthopedist, remembered the squad sneaking Forgey onto trains and hiding him on trips (presumably from railroad officials). Mostly, Baker thought "what a great spirit he [Forgey] was." Another former Volunteer, Jake Nicholson, thought Forgey had "an uncanny ability to size up a football player." Forgey was possibly the only African-American who can be considered truly a part of Tennessee athletic teams prior to 1967.²⁸

²⁷See Bob Gilbert, *The Gridiron General*, 64-65 (Forgey) and 154-155 (Louis story).

²⁸See, "Letter from Lenox D. Baker to Tom Siler," 23 July 1969, *Tom Siler Collection*, MS-1886, Box 6, Folder 4; "Letter from J.H. Nicholson to Tom Siler," *Tom Siler Collection*, MS-1886, Box 6, Folder 2.

The athletic department record on racial issues during the Neyland regime is not good, but is comparable to other SEC members. Volunteer teams refused to compete against integrated opposition. They even forfeited a game when challenged on the stance. Neyland personally cancelled a scheduled event against an integrated track squad, and allegedly blasted a black student verbally for simply trying out for the Tennessee basketball team. For those failures, Neyland, the athletic department, and the University of Tennessee share blame and deserve condemnation.

However, such events did not take place in a vacuum. Between 1901 and 1954, the state of Tennessee prohibited the mixing of races in public and private schools. Moreover, the University of Tennessee fought the desegregation of its graduate and undergraduate student bodies for decades. Early efforts to desegregate the university came in the 1930s when William B. Redmond sought admission to the School of Pharmacy at the university, but was denied.²⁹ The state of Tennessee then made a preemptive move against such efforts by establishing scholarships that called for black Tennesseans to attend out-of-state institutions if black

²⁹*William B. Redmond II v. University of Tennessee, et al* in "Tennessee Supreme Court Decision- September 1942," AR 6, Box 9 (AR denotes University of Tennessee Archives); "Letter from H.B. Williams to J. H. Moore," 21 October 1938, AR 8, Box 21, Folder 209; James R. Montgomery, Stanley J. Folmsbee, and Lee S. Greene, *To Foster Knowledge*, 199, 228-230, 267-268.

colleges within the state did not offer a needed program.³⁰

A similar response followed a 1939 attempt to desegregate the university. Soon after six African-American applicants failed to gain admittance to Tennessee, the state passed legislation requiring "instruction for negro citizens of Tennessee equivalent to that provided at the University of Tennessee for white students." This pronouncement meant additional funding for black colleges in the state, not the integration of the University of Tennessee.³¹

The state and the university could stall, but not stop, desegregation. Gene Gray and three other African-Americans were denied graduate school admission in 1950 and filed suit. Judge Robert L. Taylor ruled in their favor in U.S. District Court, but failed to strike down state segregation laws generally. The prospective students appealed to the United States Supreme Court seeking to overturn those broader laws, but lost the appeal when University of Tennessee attorney John J. Hooker announced that the university would admit the students.³² As the rulings

³⁰*Public Acts of 1937*, chapter 256.

³¹*Public Acts of 1941*, chapter 43. For quote, see letter from Tennessee Attorney General Roy H. Beeler to Governor Gordon Browning and University of Tennessee President C.E. Brehm, 25 September 1950, page 4, in "Negro Lawsuit 1950-52," AR 8, Box 21, Folder 209. This lengthy letter (21 pages) provides a thorough account of the state's position in the 1930s and 1940s toward desegregation in higher education.

³²*Gene Mitchell Gray et al v. University of Tennessee et al*, U.S. District Court No. 1567 (20 April, 1951); *Gene Mitchell Gray et al v. The Board of Trustees of the University of Tennessee et*

applied only to the specific circumstances of the four students in question, university administrators and attorneys viewed the decision as at least a partial victory.³³ Gene Gray became the first African-American student to attend the University of Tennessee in January of 1952.

The final step in student body desegregation came in 1961. Since 1955, the university had kept the issue of undergraduate desegregation bottled up, in the guise of a special committee, for fear that integration might offend the state legislators who controlled educational funding. However, again facing the threat of legal action, the university abruptly changed course in late 1960 and voted to admit black undergraduates. On January 3, 1961, three African-Americans registered for winter quarter classes and the final restriction blocking blacks from attending the University of Tennessee ended.³⁴

Racial matters in athletics changed also, but more slowly. General Neyland's health, waning for years, deteriorated greatly. The impending end of the Neyland

al, U.S. Supreme Court No. 120 and No. 159-October Term 1951 (3 March 1952).

³³See correspondence between Hooker and C.E. Brehm in "US Supreme Court Decision," AR 6, Box 9.

³⁴See AR 9, Box 12. Those initial African-American undergraduates were Theotis Robinson Jr., Charles Edgar Blair, and Mrs. Willie Mae Gillespie, all of Knoxville. By the fall of 1961, thirty-five blacks had been admitted.

regime carried strong ramifications for the eventual desegregation of football at the university. The admittance of Theotis Robinson, Avon Rollins, and other black undergraduates in 1961 indicated coming modifications in race relations at the university during the 1960s, another factor impacting upon the football program. These themes, and others, provide an analytical basis for the following chapter.

Chapter Four

Seasons of Change at Tennessee

Why did the University of Tennessee athletic department decide to desegregate the football program in 1967? What factors surfaced in the 1960s to create this opportunity and did these factors influence the decision to desegregate? Who were the decision makers? Did the university take a leading role in Southeastern Conference football desegregation? Three broad themes emerged in seeking answers to such questions. First, a new regime took command of the athletic department in late 1963, allowing for a more tolerant attitude toward desegregation. Second, the stigma of athletic desegregation subsided between 1963 and 1967 when Southeastern Conference teams initially broke precedent and accepted integration. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, times simply changed during the 1960s, and the changes touched many areas, including college sport and national racial attitudes.

A. A New Regime in Tennessee Athletics

Robert Reese Neyland died on March 28, 1962. Neyland spent the latter part of 1961 planning an expansion of the Tennessee football stadium, his dominance of university athletics extending to the end. Shortly before he passed

away, the university honored Neyland by naming the football stadium after him. Bowden Wyatt, Tennessee's head football coach since 1955, bid his mentor an emotional farewell proclaiming, "General Robert Reese Neyland now becomes a legend."¹

Bowden Wyatt began his tenure as Tennessee head coach by replacing Harvey Robinson, the man given the unenviable task of succeeding Bob Neyland. Robinson lasted only through the 1953 and 1954 seasons before he and his coaching staff were dismissed. During those two seasons, Tennessee quickly fell from among the elite in college football. Wyatt, a charismatic, popular, and handsome man, seemed the perfect choice to restore Tennessee to football prominence.

Wyatt hailed from east Tennessee and had captained the 1938 Volunteer team to an undefeated season and a trip to the 1939 Orange Bowl, Tennessee's first bowl visit. His coaching career before returning to Knoxville included stints as head coach at Wyoming and Arkansas, where he coached teams at both schools to conference championships. Wyatt completed his tenure at Arkansas by leading the Razorbacks to the 1955 Cotton Bowl. Shortly after that game, he accepted the head coaching position at Tennessee. With his credentials as a former Volunteer star player, a winning collegiate head coach, and a local-boy-made-good, the hiring of Wyatt aroused universal acclaim from Tennessee

¹Bob Gilbert, *Neyland: The Gridiron General*, 210.

supporters when he took the helm in 1955.²

Bowden Wyatt's earliest seasons as football coach at Tennessee did bring renewed success to the program. His first year resulted in a promising six victories, and then in 1956 expectations soared with a Southeastern Conference championship. That 1956 team, led by tailback Johnny Majors, achieved a ranking of second in the nation by marching through an undefeated regular season. A thrilling 6-0 victory over Georgia Tech in November, with Tech ranked second and Tennessee third at the time, remains one of the most celebrated encounters in Volunteer football history. The team lost to Baylor in the Sugar Bowl, but Majors finished second in balloting for the 1956 Heisman Trophy and Bowden Wyatt was named national coach of the year. A return to the glory days of sustained Volunteer football excellence appeared imminent.³

Ironically, the burden of high expectations expedited the firing of Wyatt, as Tennessee football teams never again reached such heights under his direction. After a solid eight win season and Gator Bowl victory in 1957, the rest of the decade saw Tennessee gradually slide toward mediocrity.

²For more information on Bowden Wyatt, see Bowden Wyatt File, University of Tennessee Sports Information Department; "Bowden Wyatt" entry in the forthcoming *Biographical Dictionary of American Sports, 1992-1994 Supplement* David L. Porter ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994).

³For information on Tennessee football teams during the Bowden Wyatt era, see Russ Bebb, *The Big Orange*, 251-305; Johnny Majors with Ben Byrd, *You Can Go Home Again*, 45-87.

Spectacular triumphs, such as a 1959 victory over defending national champion LSU, were overshadowed by inconsistent play and a growing number of losses. The most embarrassing defeat in Tennessee football history occurred in 1958 when Chattanooga came to Knoxville and beat the Vols 14-6, afterward the first clamors about Wyatt's coaching abilities were sounded.⁴ Wyatt's insistence upon using the single-wing offensive formation exemplified the decline of Tennessee football. Virtually all major college football teams and most high school squads used some variation of the more open and aggressive "T" alignment by 1960, but the Volunteers stuck with the single-wing. As a result of substandard play and what to the common fan seemed an outdated style, both Wyatt and Tennessee football began to seem antiquated, an image that soon carried over to the entire athletic department.

Problems away from the playing field combined with those lackluster seasons to reinforce the perception of an embattled athletic program. By the time of General Neyland's death in 1962, many in the university community resented the independence and absolute power that Neyland wielded, and sought to bring the athletic department under more direct university control. Knoxville columnist Tom Siler acknowledged the need for a better rapport between athletic department and faculty, but admonished that

⁴See Russ Bebb, *The Big Orange*, 287.

"unfortunately the athletic department has never gone in for rapport on any level."⁵ Neyland himself confided to a long-time friend that the Neyland era was deteriorating and "on [the] way down" unless changes occurred.⁶

The dispute over athletic department independence reached a head when Bowden Wyatt approached individual members of the university's Board of Trustees to complain about interference and tightening academic scrutiny from the administration of university president Andrew Holt. At a climactic, but unpublicized board meeting, a tense debate pitted those supporting Holt against trustees sympathetic to the athletic department. According to Dr. Edward Boling, then a vice-president and later president of the university, a strong speech in favor of greater university control by a previously wavering trustee turned the meeting in Holt's favor and eventually resulted in a new balance of power between the athletic department and the University of Tennessee administration.⁷

⁵Tom Siler, "Neyland, Still the Boss, Must Lead Athletic Staff in Big Housecleaning Job," in *Tom Siler Collection*, MS-1886, Box 6, Folder 14. Box 9, Folder 24 of the Siler papers contains a substantial amount of correspondence from those concerned about the athletic department during the early 1960s.

⁶See "Letter from W.H. Britton to Tom Siler," 25 June 1969, *Tom Siler Collection*, MS-1886, Box 7, Folder 4. Bill Britton was a classmate of Neyland's at West Point and his long-time assistant at Tennessee.

⁷Interview with Dr. Edward Boling, 6 November 1992, 2-4. Boling served as president of the University of Tennessee from 1970 to 1988; during the 1960s, he was vice-president for development and attended Athletics Board meetings.

Those critical of the athletic department also scorned the dominating position of the football program and the minimal emphasis placed on other sports. They hoped for a more well-rounded athletic program with excellence in all sports. Tom Siler again summed up the problem succinctly: "The track team is a travesty on the sport. The golf team brings up the rear. So does the tennis team. It's been painful to watch the baseball team. There is no swimming team at all."⁸ Bowden Wyatt, to his credit, heeded the concerns about football dominance and began the process of upgrading other sports during his brief time as athletic director, but the impression of a waning, stale athletic department remained.⁹

Wyatt, still popular with influential Tennessee supporters, might have survived those criticisms, but alleged bouts of alcohol abuse finally caused the university to dismiss him in 1963.¹⁰ In a temporary solution,

⁸Tom Siler, "Neyland Still the Boss, . . .," *Tom Siler Collection*, MS-1886, Box 6, Folder 14.

⁹See James R. Montgomery, Stanley J. Folmsbee, and Lee S. Greene, *To Foster Knowledge: A History of The University of Tennessee, 1794-1970*, 361-363.

For complaints from Tennessee fans about athletic department apathy toward sports other than football, see various letters in *Tom Siler Collection*, Box 6, Folder 14.

¹⁰Montgomery, Folmsbee, and Greene, *To Foster Knowledge*, 362. Alcohol problems allegedly plagued both Wyatt and Neyland, see "Letter from Bobby Dodd to Tom Siler," 27 October 1962, *Tom Siler Collection*, MS-1886, Box 9, Folder 17; "Letter from W.H. Britton to Tom Siler," 25 June 1969, *Tom Siler Collection*, MS-1886, Box 7, Folder 4.

Tennessee promoted assistant coach Jim McDonald to interim head coach and Bob Woodruff to acting athletic director. Under difficult circumstances McDonald led the 1963 Volunteers to a season of five wins and five losses. He and Woodruff also travelled across the state seeking to restore enthusiasm among the disgruntled Tennessee faithful. At the end of the 1963 season, a bitter struggle ensued between factions of the athletic board wishing to retain McDonald and those seeking a clean break from the past. A compromise resulted in the university retaining McDonald as an assistant athletic director, hiring Woodruff as permanent athletic director, and naming Doug Dickey as new head football coach.¹¹

Those maneuvers marked the beginning of a new era in the athletic department at the University of Tennessee, and represent one of the major changes that eventually led to football desegregation in 1967. The decline of athletics at the university in the late 1950s and early 1960s allowed the fresh administration more latitude in regaining respectability, and the new head football coach appeared less bound by past inhibitions with regard to race. Doug Dickey arrived in Knoxville at only thirty-one years of age, but possessing a personal and athletic background more conducive, when compared with previous department leaders,

¹¹See "Minutes of Joint Meetings of the Athletics Board and the Athletics Committee of the Board of Trustees," 30 November-2 December 1963, *Earl M. Ramer Papers*, AR-93, Box 2, Folder 23.

to guiding the football program through desegregation. Among those in the Tennessee athletic department, Dickey played the most prominent role in the football desegregation process.

The son of a university professor, Doug Dickey grew up in the southern college towns of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Gainesville, Florida. Although he recalls being "around black people all my life," Dickey first entered a true integrated setting when he enlisted in the Army in 1955.¹² In addition to training with African-American soldiers, he coached a service football team made up of roughly an even number of black and white players. Dickey later worked as an assistant football coach at the University of Arkansas from 1957 to 1963, notable because of events in Arkansas during that time period. In 1957, Arkansas governor Orval Faubus attempted to block public school integration in Little Rock by using the Arkansas national guard, prompting the Eisenhower administration to send in federal troops.¹³ Unlike previous Tennessee football coaches, Doug Dickey came of age as America grappled with racial integration, and he was much better prepared to handle the issue than were his

¹²Interview with Doug Dickey, 18 November 1992, 1. On Dickey, see also Russ Bebb, *The Big Orange*, 311-316.

¹³Doug Dickey interview, 1-2. On the Little Rock situation, see Daisy Bates, *The Long Shadow of Little Rock* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1962); David Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 667-692; Elizabeth Huckaby, *Crisis at Central High: Little Rock, 1957-58* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1980).

predecessors.

Dickey quickly changed the image of the football program. Under his guidance, the Volunteers established or renewed symbolic gestures that fans admired. The team wore orange jerseys at home for the first time in several years, Dickey placed a "T" on helmets and had the players dramatically enter Neyland Stadium by running through a giant "T" formed by the marching band. The end zones of the football field soon acquired the unique look of an orange and white checker board. In 1968, Tennessee installed "Doug's Rug," one of the nation's first artificial turf playing surfaces, a decision scorned decades later (Tennessee replaced the artificial turf following the 1993 football season), but one considered progressive by many at the time. Most importantly, University of Tennessee football teams improved on the field.¹⁴

Dickey shelved the single-wing formation and opened up the Volunteer offense. The 1964 team struggled to only four wins against five losses and a tie, but observers sensed an improvement in overall performance. Steve DeLong earned All-American honors and won the Outland Trophy as the nation's best lineman, and the defense only once allowed more than nineteen points. In 1965, the team won eight games, including the Bluebonnet Bowl, Tennessee's first bowl

¹⁴See *One Hundred Years of Volunteers, 1891-1990* video, volume 2 (Lexington, KY: Host Communications, 1992).

trip since 1957. By 1966, the Volunteers were solidly back among the upper tier of college football teams after another season of eight wins, this time capturing a Gator Bowl victory.

The transformation of the athletic department involved more than just a rejuvenated football program as the changes earlier implemented by Bowden Wyatt began to have an impact in other sports. Energetic and flamboyant basketball coach Ray Mears arrived in 1962 and immediately transformed a moribund program into a consistent winner with an exciting blend of showmanship, salesmanship, and splendid teams. He coined the phrase "Big Orange Country," which quickly caught on among Tennessee supporters. Chuck Rohe, nearly as flamboyant as Mears, began churning out championship track teams soon after his arrival in 1962. Bill Wright came aboard as baseball coach and academic counselor, producing solidly in both realms. The football team remained the focal point of the athletic program, but a new sense of invigoration existed across Tennessee athletics.¹⁵

This theme, the change from an older, more traditional athletic department to a younger, more energetic regime offered an increased opportunity for the University of Tennessee to desegregate its football program. Nonetheless, a change in leadership alone did not spur immediate football

¹⁵See Montgomery, Folmsbee, and Greene, *To Foster Knowledge*, 359-363. For more on Ray Mears, see Ben Byrd, *The Basketball Vols*, 135-142.

desegregation. The university followed a cautious course, perhaps even an overly cautious course, and did not take the lead in football desegregation in the Southeastern Conference.

B. Athletic desegregation comes to the Southeastern Conference

The University of Kentucky broke the SEC's long-standing tradition of racial exclusion in December of 1965 by signing two African-Americans to athletic scholarships. Greg Page of Middlesboro, Kentucky, and Nat Northington of Louisville both played on the Wildcats' freshman team in the fall of 1966 (freshmen were ineligible for varsity teams at the time), and looked as if they would break the color barrier in varsity competition the following year. Tragically, just before his sophomore season, on August 22, 1967, Greg Page, the more heralded of the pioneering duo, suffered a freak injury. During limited contact drills, with the team in shorts and helmets, Page severely injured his neck and died from complications shortly thereafter. Nat Northington played briefly for the Wildcat varsity in 1967, but soon quit the team and withdrew from school. Those circumstances eventually resulted in Tennessee's Lester McClain becoming the first African-American to earn a varsity football letter in the Southeastern Conference in

1968.¹⁶

According to historian Charles H. Martin, Kentucky president Frank G. Dickey initially proposed recruiting black athletes as early as 1961, the same year Avon Rollins tried out for basketball at Tennessee. The Kentucky president believed integration to be inevitable and wished to see his university take the lead in the process, but felt that a "joint movement" of several Southeastern Conference teams would be necessary to overcome the opposition to desegregation prevalent among some conference members in the deep South.¹⁷ The prospect of the league splintering or breaking apart created a real fear, and SEC universities regularly cited that possibility as a reason to avoid integration or to proceed deliberately. The threat of a split also provided the more reluctant schools with an excuse not to act decisively on the issue of athletic desegregation. When desegregation finally reached the conference the feared split never materialized.¹⁸

¹⁶See "U-K's Greg Page Is Critically Injured," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 23 August 1967, 34; Charles H. Martin, "The Integration of Southeastern Conference Athletics;" Joan Paul, Richard V. McGehee, and Helen Fant, "The Arrival and Ascendence of Black Athletes in the Southeastern Conference, 1966-1980," 284-297.

¹⁷For an overview of the University of Kentucky's actions, see Charles H. Martin, "The Integration of Southeastern Conference Athletics," 7-9.

¹⁸The prospect of "deep South" schools abandoning the Southeastern Conference on account of athletic desegregation received frequent attention in contemporary news accounts, see Randy Neely, "Mint Julep Giant Awaken," *Daily Beacon*, 18 May

Vanderbilt University became the second Southeastern Conference school to desegregate athletics. The Commodores signed highly-touted basketball player Perry Wallace of Nashville's Pearl High School to a scholarship in May of 1966, and another black player, Godfrey Dillard of Detroit, joined Wallace on the Vanderbilt freshman team during the 1966/67 academic year.¹⁹ Perry Wallace went on to start and letter during his sophomore, junior, and senior seasons at Vanderbilt, while Dillard played that freshman season, sat out his sophomore year with an injury, then dropped from the team.²⁰

During his basketball career at Vanderbilt, Wallace endured the taunts, threats, and trauma commonly associated with desegregation efforts. He remembers particularly cruel trips to Mississippi State, Ole Miss, and the University of Tennessee, the latter site featuring a group of rowdies underneath the goal "constantly bait[ing] him" with racist

1965, 4; Jack Topchik, "Tennescene," *Daily Beacon*, 26 January 1967, 5-6; "Integration No Threat To the SEC," *Atlanta Constitution*, 25 May 1967, 35; Ron Speer, "SEC Ready for Negroes, Say ADs," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 25 May 1967, 38; Tom Siler, "Big Indy and Big Golf Day," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 29 May 1967, 16.

¹⁹Tommy Giles, "Pearl's Wallace Inks With Vandy," *Daily Beacon*, 4 May 1966, 7; Rex Sanders, "Wallace May Be First Negro Player In SEC Hoop Action," *Daily Beacon*, 18 February 1966, 7.

²⁰See "Perry Wallace: Fear and Loathing in Oxford," in Roy Neel, *Dynamite! 75 Years of Vanderbilt Basketball*, 166-172; "The Black Athlete at Vanderbilt," Vanderbilt University Sports Information Department (1978). A special thanks to Tony Neely, Vanderbilt Sports Information Director, for providing this information.

slurs.²¹ After the final game of his career, Wallace publicly discussed the isolation and loneliness he suffered as a barrier-breaking athlete, an account similar to later comments by Tennessee's Lester McClain.²² Perry Wallace's experiences garnered more publicity than those of other African-American athletes who helped desegregate Southeastern Conference athletic teams in the 1960s, and he remains the most well-known "pioneer" in the SEC.

At the University of Tennessee, an independent Athletics Board and an Athletics Committee of the university's Board of Trustees provided guidance on athletic matters in the 1960s, but the decision making chain of command essentially consisted of the head football coach answering to the athletic director, the athletic director answering to the university president, and the university president answering to the Board of Trustees. The topic of African-American athletic participation had been discussed among those various parties on several occasions prior to the hiring of Doug Dickey and the desegregation efforts of Kentucky and Vanderbilt.

Harvey Robinson, the hard-luck coach who followed Bob

²¹Roy Neel, *Dynamite! 75 Years of Vanderbilt Basketball*, 169-170.

²²*Ibid*, 171-172. For accounts of Lester McClain's career at the University of Tennessee, see chapter five of this dissertation.

Neyland, broached the issue in 1954.²³ Robinson reported on the possibility of scheduling a series of games with Ohio State University, with the games alternating between the two campuses. "Question was raised on whether or not there would be a problem if colored players appeared on the [Ohio State] squad. It was the general consensus of the Board that no problem would be raised."²⁴ That the discussion took place reinforces the fact that the university had traditionally not competed against integrated teams, and also points out that the policy seemed to be changing. The games never took place, but based on the minutes of the board meeting racial considerations probably played no major role in thwarting them.

A similar situation arose in 1959 when Bowden Wyatt complained to the Athletics Board and some trustees about the difficulty of scheduling football games with universities "likely to have Negroes on their teams."²⁵ Wyatt, like Robinson before him, sought assurance that no repercussions would result from scheduling such contests. Wyatt mentioned that the board's executive committee did not believe the issue should bar the scheduling of the games, and asked for the board's support to proceed. Again, just

²³See "Athletics Board Meeting Minutes," 4 February 1954, *Earl M. Ramer Papers*, AR-93, Box 1, Folder 28.

²⁴Ibid, 3-4.

²⁵"Athletics Board Meeting Minutes," 11 April 1959, *Earl M. Ramer Papers*, AR-93, Box 2, Folder 13.

as in 1954, the board voiced no objection to proposed integrated contests.

General Neyland's subsequent cancellation of a 1961 track meet, discussed in the previous chapter, seems even more curious since the possibility of interracial football games met with no outward opposition in the Athletics Board meetings. Board member Sam Venable, probably responding to the track meet cancellation, raised the question about athletic department policy once more in April of 1961. Venable wondered what policy the department followed with regard to participating in interracial competition. This time the Athletics Board neatly avoided any substantial declaration by agreeing that the matter be left to the more powerful Board of Trustees for a final decision.²⁶

As for the University of Tennessee actually including African-Americans on its athletic teams, Bowden Wyatt provided significant insight in May of 1963. Wyatt told an Athletics Board gathering that if blacks "are enrolled in school, they are certainly entitled to be on our teams."²⁷ By this time, four African-Americans had apparently tried out for Volunteer athletic teams beginning with Avon Rollins in 1961. Wyatt then spelled out the problem: "If they are on our teams, we cannot play them in some Southeastern

²⁶"Athletics Board Meeting Minutes," 28 April 1961, *Earl M. Ramer Papers*, AR-93, Box 2, Folder 16.

²⁷"Athletics Board Meeting Minutes," 4 May 1963 (page 7), *Earl M. Ramer Papers*, AR-93, Box 2, Folder 20.

Conference games because of restrictions imposed by the other institutions they would be able to play in only three or four games."²⁸ His comments echo those expressed near the same time by Frank Dickey of Kentucky. Board members suggested that the university act very cautiously, not taking the lead but moving toward a solution gradually. Perhaps the definitive statement of university strategy came when a motion won approval stating "that on the matter of racial desegregation, the University of Tennessee should follow policy established by the Southeastern Conference."²⁹

That empty rhetoric carried no weight since the Southeastern Conference did not sanction an official policy on racial desegregation, but the motion betrayed the league's private convictions on the topic and demonstrated the approach taken by the University of Tennessee. The Volunteers proceeded warily, a trait that carried over from the old athletic department regime to the new leadership which assumed control in 1963. The University of Tennessee refused to take the lead in desegregating Southeastern Conference football, monitored the racial climate, and waited until others within the conference acted before moving forward.

These occasional references to athletic department

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

policy at the University of Tennessee certainly did not dominate board meetings. Each instance, ranging from 1954 to 1963, constituted only a portion of the board's agenda, and no raging debate accompanied the mention of Tennessee teams competing against or including black athletes. The word "policy" might even be too strong. Much like the unofficial ban that kept African-Americans off Southeastern Conference teams, the University of Tennessee's "policy" simply followed the old conference custom of racial exclusion.

Any discussions about interracial competition soon became a moot point. Apparently, the first African-American to compete against a University of Tennessee football team in Knoxville was Warren McVea of the University of Houston in 1965. Boston College, integrated since the time of Lou Montgomery (see chapter three), visited Tennessee in 1964, but if a black played in the game no great amount of coverage accompanied the event. However, the game between Tennessee and McVea's Houston team on October 23, 1965, did generate publicity and a minor stir among some of those in attendance.

Former university professor Richard Marius characterizes the fan behavior directed at Warren McVea as awful, and recalls hearing McVea called "every name in the book."³⁰ A few days after the game, letters to the

³⁰Interview with Dr. Richard Marius, 20 July 1992, 3-5.

University of Tennessee's student newspaper, the *Daily Beacon*, also condemned the taunting and overall fan conduct toward McVea.³¹ While the unruly treatment given McVea warrants attention, other circumstances overshadowed Tennessee athletics during the week of the 1965 Houston game. On the Monday morning prior to the game, a tragic train-car accident claimed the lives of Volunteer football coaches Bob Jones, Bill Majors, and Charlie Rash. Understandably, the pall that enveloped the University of Tennessee community eclipsed any events on the football field.³²

The fatal accident happened on the heels of a satisfying 7-7 tie with national power Alabama, a game that proved the Volunteers competitive on a national scale. The breakdown of racial barriers at the University of Tennessee, and the integration of athletics at other conference schools, was facilitated by just such competitive considerations. The Volunteers and other conference members operated with a self-imposed handicap prior to athletic

³¹See "Reader's Eyes 'Open Again' At Stadium," *Daily Beacon*, 27 October 1965, 4; "Immaturity Stuns Reader," *Daily Beacon*, 27 October 1965, 4. Others fans argued that Warren McVea received the same treatment as any opposing player, see "Disrespect at Houston Game Draws More Comment From Readers," *Daily Beacon*, 3 November 1965, 2.

³²See Walt Smith, "Tragedy At Railroad Crossing," *Daily Beacon*, 19 October, 1965, 1; Russ Bebb, *The Big Orange*, 320-322, Johnny Majors with Ben Byrd, *You Can Go Home Again*, 105-107. (Johnny Majors' brother Bill was one of the coaches killed in the accident)

desegregation because the best black players in the South were forced to play at either predominantly black universities or migrate to schools outside the South. Once Kentucky and Vanderbilt opened their athletic teams to African-Americans, a larger recruiting pool became accessible to them, an unappealing scenario for their rivals. Significantly, both schools represented traditionally fierce Tennessee adversaries. Coaches, administrators, and fans of all Southeastern Conference teams recognized the competitive advantage gained by being able to recruit both black and white athletes, and the quest to remain competitive certainly enhanced subsequent efforts to integrate athletics in the Southeastern Conference.³³

Several conference football teams were actually very competitive and successful in the 1960s, but the issue of integration did hinder SEC teams. Perhaps the most telling example occurred when the Rose Bowl reneged on overtures toward the University of Alabama at the end of the 1961 season. The Crimson Tide featured a team destined to win the national championship that season and the next, and also boasted the renowned Paul "Bear" Bryant as coach.

³³The competitive advantages of being one of the first teams or schools in a league to include African-Americans has regularly been cited as a reason for desegregating, see Paul W. Bryant and John Underwood, *Bear: The Hard Life and Good Times of Alabama's Coach Bryant* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974): 316-324; Ronald E. Marcello, "The Integration of Intercollegiate Athletics in Texas: North Texas State College as a Test Case, 1956," 286-316; Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment*, 47-70 (esp. 52).

Nevertheless, once complaints about Southeastern Conference racial policies received prominent media coverage, the Rose Bowl shied away. "I heard the Los Angeles papers were making it out to be an invitation to the Ku Klux Klan," grumbled Bryant years later.³⁴

In addition to athletic desegregation by other Southeastern Conference members, events in high school and professional sports during the 1960s also had an impact on football desegregation at the University of Tennessee. High schools in the upper region of east Tennessee began to desegregate in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Knox area schools surrounding the University of Tennessee integrated during 1963 and 1964, and by 1965 desegregation extended to athletics in much of the state. The 1966 high school basketball tournament provided a dramatic example of the change. For the first time, the Tennessee state athletic association permitted interracial competition in the tournament and an all-black squad from Pearl High School in Nashville (featuring Perry Wallace) swept through an undefeated regular season and then won Tennessee's first integrated high school state championship.³⁵

³⁴See Bryant and Underwood, *Bear*, 317; "Tide Rose Bowl Vote Brings Criticism," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 15 November 1961, np; Tom Siler column, *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 27 November 1961, C4.

³⁵Author telephone conversation with Bob Polston, Knox County Athletics Director, 11 June 1993; Doug Dickey interview, 2-3; Roy Neel, *Dynamite! 75 Years of Vanderbilt Basketball*, 167-168; Ted Riggs, "Pearl Takes Top Honor," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 11 December 1966, D5.

At the professional level, long integrated major league sports arrived in the South on a permanent basis during the 1960s. The Milwaukee Braves shifted their franchise to Atlanta in 1966, the team featuring several well-known black players such as Rico Carty, Mack Jones, and future homerun champion Hank Aaron. Atlanta gained another major league team that year when the National Football League awarded the city a franchise, the Falcons beginning play in 1966. The Atlanta teams, especially the Braves, actually represented the entire South; the nearest major league baseball franchises were in Cincinnati and St. Louis. One example of this regional quality comes from Hank Aaron, who later faced relentless racism when chasing Babe Ruth's career homerun record. Aaron recalls that the crowds were mostly well-behaved, but remembers that the biggest cheer at the Braves' first home game "came when they flashed a message on the scoreboard: April 12, 1861: Fire Shots on Fort Sumter . . . April 12, 1966: The South Rises Again."³⁶

So, by the mid-1960s blacks and whites competed with and against each other in the South at the high school, collegiate, and professional sports levels. Integrated high school sporting events not only put students of different colors on the field or court at the same time, but also put black parents and white parents together in the bleachers

³⁶Hank Aaron with Lonnie Wheeler, *I Had A Hammer* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991): 181-182.

watching them. At the collegiate level, the University of Kentucky and Vanderbilt University broke Southeastern Conference precedent and accepted African-Americans onto their sports teams, and the move did not result in conference members withdrawing or the league splintering and perishing. At the professional level, major league franchises arrived in the deep South, and the reality of black and white adults playing beside each other created more cheers than jeers. The cumulative effect of these circumstances was to lessen the stigma associated with athletic desegregation for Southeastern Conference schools, including the University of Tennessee.

A final broad theme also influenced football desegregation at the University of Tennessee between 1963 and 1967. Times simply changed. Civil rights struggles captured widespread attention and reached a climax with passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Opposition to the Vietnam War fostered a growing spirit of unrest and activism on college campuses, extending even to the usually restrained University of Tennessee student body. The social upheaval that occurred in the 1960s affected many areas of life, and southern college football teams did not escape the change.

C. Social Change in the 1960s

The modern campaign to advance civil rights for African-Americans reached Knoxville and upper east Tennessee in 1960. Five years earlier Rosa Parks had refused to surrender her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus, a refusal credited with sparking the modern civil rights movement and catapulting a youthful Baptist minister named Martin Luther King, Jr. to national prominence. The movement entered a new phase in February of 1960 when black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, initiated "sit-ins" of local restaurants that refused to serve them. The Greensboro sit-ins quickly spawned a wave of similar actions across the South, including protests in Knoxville.³⁷

Historically, race relations in Knoxville and upper east Tennessee had stayed on a relatively civil keel. During slavery, the mountainous terrain of the region was not conducive to sprawling plantations or field crops, thus minimizing the need for large numbers of slaves. Consequently, the region exhibited no great sentiment for slavery, and kept strong Union ties during the Civil War. The nature of the slave system in Knoxville also called for

³⁷See Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-65* (New York: Penguin Press, 1988).

On the Knoxville sit-in movement, see Merrill Proudfoot, *Diary of a Sit-In* (Urbana, Il: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

a high percentage of slaves to labor at domestic chores such as cleaning and cooking, a pattern that produced more personal contact and interaction than normal between slaves and slaveowners.³⁸

Even with this background of basic civility, blacks in east Tennessee faced oppression. Knoxville's most infamous incident occurred in 1919, the year a wave of racial strife engulfed America. Racial tensions erupted in Knoxville over the alleged murder of a white woman, Bertie Lindsey, by a black man, Maurice Mayes. A mob charged the county jail to lynch Mayes, but the local sheriff anticipated such an action and hustled the prisoner away before the mob arrived. The irate crowd then drank up the large quantity of confiscated liquor on hand, trashed the jail, and set out on a destructive rampage of downtown promising to "kill some niggers."³⁹ Mayes, reputedly the illegitimate son of Knoxville's white mayor, carried a reputation for dating white women and many suspect that trait as the primary reason he was charged with the murder. Mayes died in the

³⁸See Robert J. Booker, *Two Hundred Years of Black Culture in Knoxville, Tennessee, 1791-1991*, 11-14; Lester C. Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee, 1791-1970* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981): 26-53; Benjamin Muse, *Ten Years of Prelude: The Story of Integration Since the Supreme Court's 1954 Decision* (New York: The Viking Press, 1964): 93; Merrill Proudfoot, *Diary of a Sit-In*, xli-xliv.

³⁹Robert J. Booker, *Two Hundred Years of Black Culture in Knoxville*, 137.

electric chair in 1922.⁴⁰

In the late 1950s, another racial altercation left a scar on east Tennessee race relations. The high school at Clinton, some fifteen miles from Knoxville, faced a court order to desegregate. Students, faculty, and parents, while perhaps not pleased with the order, resigned themselves to the inevitable and sought to proceed with the process peacefully. Then John Kasper, sort of a roving instigator of racial trouble, arrived in town and stoked Clinton's more racist element into action. The Clinton incident from that point unfolded in sordid, but almost cliché-like fashion with mob violence, verbal and physical abuse of black students, the beating of a pro-integration white minister, a call-up of the Tennessee national guard, and finally the bombing of Clinton High. By 1960, a new high school stood in Clinton and the fourteen black students enrolled attracted little notice.⁴¹

When the Greensboro sit-ins started on February 1, 1960, and quickly spread to other cities, black students in Knoxville responded almost immediately. At the time, segregation ruled the city; blacks could not eat in white-owned restaurants or freely attend theaters, and they had only limited access to Knoxville hospitals. Under the

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹For a complete account of the Clinton affair, see Benjamin Muse, *Ten Years of Prelude*, 92-104.

leadership of Robert Booker, students from Knoxville College, a predominantly black private school, joined with local African-American leaders and entered into negotiations aimed at ending the practice of segregated lunch counters in the city. Most Knoxville lunch counters served blacks food on a to-go basis, but did not allow mixed dining. After several months of negotiations, local merchants continued to stall, prompting the start of organized sit-ins on June 9, 1960.⁴²

The lunch counter protests aroused some blatant opposition, but for the most part remained peaceful. Many of the initial targets of the sit-ins agreed to serve blacks that July. The tactic of direct, non-violent action, espoused nationally by King, continued in Knoxville with students turning attention to local theaters. Using "stand-ins" in front of theater box offices, the protesters marched in a circle past the box office "extend[ing] money with the words, 'Ticket Please.'"⁴³ The struggle eventually succeeded with restaurants and theaters announcing full desegregation in July 1963; the next month Knoxville hospitals changed policy and started admitting patients

⁴²A complete, day by day account of the Knoxville sit-in movement is found in Merrill Proudfoot, *Diary of a Sit-In*.

⁴³"51 Theater Pickets Jailed," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 10 October 1961, 1-2; "4 Arrested in New Theater Picketing," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 11 October 1961, 1.

without regard to color.⁴⁴

Several of the early African-American undergraduate students at the University of Tennessee actively participated in civil rights issues. Theotis Robinson, Jr., one of three black undergraduates to enter the university in January of 1961, later won election to the Knoxville City Council in 1970. Jimmie Baxter entered the university in the fall of 1961, found the environment on campus too hostile, and left for military service. He returned in the late 1960s, winning a race for student government president in 1969. Baxter eventually became an assistant United States Attorney in Knoxville.

Avon Rollins, who allegedly incurred the wrath of Bob Neyland by trying out for basketball in 1961, worked as an assistant to Martin Luther King, Jr., served as a leader in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and co-founded a branch of the Urban League in Knoxville. Future Washington D.C. mayor Marion Barry spent 1963 as a graduate student in chemistry at the University of Tennessee on his way to becoming a well-known, and controversial, national figure. Barry, who had previously gained experience in civil rights issues while a student at Fisk College in Nashville, served as the first elected chairman of SNCC, and while in Knoxville he edited a black newspaper

⁴⁴See Robert J. Booker, *Two Hundred Years of Black Culture in Knoxville*, 79 and 135-143.

called the *Crusader*.⁴⁵

From a national perspective, the civil rights movement reached an apex with the passage of legislation in 1964 and 1965. The 1964 Civil Rights Act outlawed discrimination in employment and public accommodations, while the Voting Rights Act of 1965 authorized federal supervision of voter registration. One particular section of the 1964 law posed a potential threat to segregated college football programs. Title VI of that act, effectuated in July of 1965, prohibited discrimination in institutions receiving federal funding. Since virtually every major southern university received such funding, discrimination on the basis of race, even in awarding football scholarships, could feasibly constitute a violation of Title VI.

Whether coincidental or not, the University of Tennessee athletic department soon announced that blacks were trying out for the football team.⁴⁶ Crawford Daniels and Willie Moore tried out for the freshman team in September of 1965, evidently not making the squad. "It is our policy, and we have publicly said so many times, to

⁴⁵On Marion Barry and SNCC, see Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). For information on black-owned newspapers in Knoxville, contact the Beck Cultural Center. See also Theotis Robinson, Jr. interview; Avon Rollins interview; Interview with Jimmie Baxter, 20 August 1992; Robert J. Booker, *Two Hundred Years of Black Culture in Knoxville*.

⁴⁶See, "Negro Backs Join Tennessee Frosh," *Daily Beacon*, 29 September 1965, 7; "Negro Athletes May Try For Other Tennessee Teams," *Daily Beacon*, 30 September 1965, 7.

allow any student at the University of Tennessee to try out for our athletic teams," said athletic director Bob Woodruff.⁴⁷ Irrespective of the questionable accuracy of that statement, the episode set off a spate of letters, articles, and complaints to the student newspaper publicizing the fact that the university did not offer athletic scholarships to African-Americans. By February of 1966, the *Daily Beacon* applauded an announcement that the athletic department would "begin recruiting qualified Negro athletes to athletic scholarships."⁴⁸

Federal officials actually conducted visits to each Southeastern Conference school between 1965 and 1967 in a preliminary check on whether SEC teams were in compliance with Title VI. The visits proved amicable and seemed to have served two purposes. In one way, the federal legislation loomed as a potential threat to SEC programs, thus providing a stimulus for schools to take athletic desegregation seriously. On the other hand, federal officials also privately acknowledged that the same potential threat of violations gave SEC members cover against southern political segregationists who might condemn

⁴⁷"Negro Athletes May Try For Other Tennessee Teams," *Daily Beacon*, 30 September, 1965, 7.

⁴⁸See Randy Neely, "Mint Julep Giant Awaken," *Daily Beacon*, 18 May 1965, 4; Jack Topchik, "First Move Awaits UT In Getting Negro Athletes," *Daily Beacon*, 8 October 1965, 3; "Observations Of A Newcomer," *Daily Beacon*, 21 October 1965, 4; "The Face of Progress," *Daily Beacon*, 10 February 1966, 4.

the move. "Schools [are] ready to comply, but want to use federal pressure as an excuse," claimed an Office of Education official.⁴⁹

Interest in football desegregation at the University of Tennessee did not subside after the athletic department announcement, and comments continued to appear regularly until the Volunteers signed Albert Davis in April of 1967. An especially persistent student from the English department named Larry Yates wrote frequently, criticizing the administration and coaching staff for failing to move forward and desegregate athletics. Generally, other comments agreed with Yates' position and chastised the athletic department, although a few students defended Tennessee teams and cited traditional reasons for proceeding cautiously.⁵⁰

The University of Tennessee officially desegregated athletics, and the football program, by signing Albert Davis to a scholarship on April 14, 1967, then added Lester McClain to the roster the next month. The track team soon welcomed James Craig and Audry Hardy. Ray Mears

⁴⁹Jim Minter, "Tech Gets Federal Visit," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 2 April 1967, 56.

⁵⁰See "Editor's Mailbag," *Daily Beacon*, 10 January 1967, 4; "Editor's Mailbag," *Daily Beacon*, 17 January 1967, 4; "Editor's Mailbag," *Daily Beacon*, 24 January 1967, 4; Jack Topchik, "Tennescene," *Daily Beacon*, 26 January 1967, 5-6; "Athletic Integration," *Daily Beacon*, 31 January 1967, 4; "A Flaw in Our Athletes' Feat," *Daily Beacon*, 7 February 1967, 4; Tim Capps, "Time Out," *Daily Beacon*, 8 February 1967, 7.

successfully recruited outstanding basketball prospect Spencer Haywood of Detroit only to lose him much as the football team lost Davis. Haywood went on to lead the United States to a gold medal in the 1968 Olympics. Wilbert Cherry, a non-scholarship player from Knoxville, competed on the freshman basketball team in 1970-71, then Larry Robinson, a transfer from Ferrum Junior College in Virginia, became the first black varsity basketball player on athletic scholarship to play at the university in 1971-72.⁵¹

The signings of Albert Davis and Spencer Haywood, considered the top high school players in America in their respective sports, signified a major coup for the University of Tennessee athletic department. Unfortunately, the department's futile handling of Davis' academic questions overshadowed the feat and very few people today realize that Haywood signed with the Volunteers, and even fewer outside the Knoxville area know Davis at all.⁵² The outstanding talent of the duo, especially with regard to Albert Davis because he was more well known locally, cannot be overlooked

⁵¹Interview with Larry Robinson, 10 July 1992. For a roster of black athletes who had competed on University of Tennessee sports teams prior to 1980, see "Black Participants On Varsity Level," courtesy of Bud Ford, Sports Information Director, University of Tennessee Athletic Department.

⁵²See "Tennessee Signs First Negro Cager," *Atlanta Journal*, 20 May 1967, 11. "Spencer Haywood Misses on ACT Test," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 29 August 1967, 12.

For more information on Spencer Haywood, see Spencer Haywood with Scott Ostler, *Spencer Haywood: The Rise, The Fall, The Recovery* (New York: Amistad, 1992). See pages 94-97 for information on his recruitment by the University of Tennessee.

when searching for clues to the timing of Tennessee's decision to desegregate. It might still have been an easier path for the athletic department to delay football desegregation in 1967, but Volunteer supporters certainly wished to see Albert Davis wearing orange for the football team.

The factors influencing football desegregation at the University of Tennessee fit roughly into the three previously identified themes. The change from the Neyland era to a new regime within the Volunteer athletic department increased the opportunity to desegregate. A breakdown of racial barriers in the South at the high school, collegiate, and professional sports levels also precipitated change. The actions of the University of Kentucky and Vanderbilt University, two of Tennessee's Southeastern Conference foes, proved especially important when those schools defied precedent and desegregated. Conference integration brought into focus competitive considerations on and off the field for SEC members. Finally, social changes in the 1960s, most directly the drive for African-American civil rights and a rise in campus activism also facilitated football desegregation at Tennessee.

None of these changes directly caused the University of Tennessee to move forward with football desegregation, but all of them increased the likelihood of just such an outcome. When asked to discuss desegregation, most of the

people involved at the university downplayed football desegregation as a minor topic and apparently recalled few of the details. Tom Elam, an influential trustee and longtime chair of the Athletics Board, remembered nothing unusual taking place. Bob Woodruff, Tennessee athletic director at the time, recalled that racial desegregation happened with no major problems.

Doug Dickey acknowledged discussing the topic a few times with Woodruff and university president Andrew Holt, but summed up his feelings by proclaiming simply, "it was absolutely the right thing at the right time [and] I think Albert and Lester were the right people at the right time."⁵³ Dickey's assessment, while essentially correct, perhaps missed the point. Between 1963 and 1967 a substantial number of changes took place at the university, in the conference, and on a broader scale in society at large. These changes provided the University of Tennessee athletic department that opportunity to do the "right" thing at the "right" time with the "right" people.

⁵³Doug Dickey interview, 3. Recollections of Tom Elam and Bob Woodruff based on telephone conversations with the author.

Chapter Five

Aftermath

Few University of Tennessee partisans expected Lester McClain to be the "right" person in desegregating the school's football program. McClain proved his detractors wrong, however, and in 1968 became the first black football player to letter in the Southeastern Conference. On the field, football desegregation proceeded fairly smoothly at Tennessee, although resentments expressed by McClain near the end of his college years created a controversy. The Southeastern Conference slowly accepted racial integration in athletics in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in part because of the events at the University of Tennessee. Racial integration transformed the SEC into a more nationally recognized and respected athletic league.

A. Lester McClain: Not Just Somebody's Roommate

With so much attention focused on the continuing saga of Albert Davis during the spring and summer of 1967, the other African-American scheduled to desegregate University of Tennessee football attracted little notice. Lester McClain hailed from Nashville and during most of his high school years the prospect of playing football for Tennessee remained remote. Like Davis, he longed to play at the major

college level where the teams drew thousands of spectators, received considerable newspaper coverage, and appeared on national television. Unlike Davis, most major colleges, including the University of Tennessee, showed only limited interest in Lester McClain.

The youngest of eight children, McClain grew up just southeast of Nashville, but "very much in the country."¹ He attended segregated schools until his senior year in high school. The local public schools had planned desegregation on a gradual basis by integrating one grade level at a time, beginning with first grade and then adding a level each year until integration reached all twelve grades. By the spring of 1966, fear of the process subsided enough for all grades to open up, and McClain transferred to Antioch High that fall, becoming the only black male in the junior and senior classes.

McClain believed in his ability to play football on the Southeastern Conference level and he found an important advocate in Bill Garrett, a loyal Tennessee supporter who apprised the Volunteer coaching staff of promising prospects in the middle Tennessee region. Garrett recommended McClain to the Tennessee staff, and McClain eagerly warmed to the idea of matriculating in Knoxville. However, Tennessee coaches remained skeptical. At one point, when McClain

¹For information on McClain's background, see interview with Lester McClain, 22 September 1992, 1.

publicly stated his intention to attend Tennessee, Volunteer assistant Doug Knotts admonished him: "He [Knotts] didn't want me to continue to say that I was interested in the University of Tennessee because the University of Tennessee was not interested in me. They were going to integrate but I just wasn't good enough to play."²

In reflecting on his recruitment, Lester McClain credited Bill Garrett for never letting up on the Tennessee coaches during the recruiting process, and the persistence shown by both McClain and Garrett ultimately paid off. Tennessee tried to sign other black football players to join Albert Davis in desegregating Volunteer football, most notably star running back Tommy Love of North Carolina, but as those attempts failed McClain remained available. Finally, on the day of Tennessee's spring football game in 1967, Doug Dickey asked to see the visiting McClain and offered him the long-awaited scholarship. Lester McClain's signing on May 9, 1967, created little commotion. He became the second African-American to receive an athletic scholarship from the University of Tennessee.³

In the aftermath of the Albert Davis affair, Lester McClain found himself the lone black on the Tennessee

²Lester McClain interview, 9.

³See Albert Davis interview, 14-15; Lester McClain interview, 8-9; Marvin West, "Love Is Classed Best Since Justice," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 26 January 1967, 24; "Vols Close '67 Recruiting Campaign With Second Negro Football Signee," *Daily Beacon*, 10 May 1967, 7.

football squad. The limited expectations that accompanied him to Knoxville lessened the ordeal he faced. Instead of a highly publicized, local running back desegregating the program and perhaps lifting the team to new heights, a low-profile receiver from middle Tennessee would be the "pioneer." Lester McClain was simply supposed to be Albert Davis' roommate and Albert Davis was not at Tennessee. Such circumstances allowed the desegregation process to commence with less scrutiny and pressure, and fostered a more placid atmosphere. McClain made his first varsity appearance for the Volunteers at Neyland Stadium on September 14, 1968, in a nationally televised contest with the University of Georgia. Much of the crowd gave him a standing ovation when he entered the game.⁴

McClain enjoyed a successful football career at Tennessee. After spending the 1967 season on the freshmen team, he became a solid receiver and runner at the wingback position from 1968 to 1970. During his three varsity seasons he caught seventy passes accounting for more than eleven hundred yards, with thirteen touchdown receptions. At the end of his playing career, McClain ranked as one of the top ten receivers statistically to ever play for the Volunteers, and his thirteen touchdown catches topped the school's record book. By earning a varsity football letter in 1968, he made history as the first African-American to do

⁴Lester McClain interview, 12.

so in the Southeastern Conference. Tennessee teams were excellent during his career, winning twenty-eight games, losing five, and tying one.⁵

McClain did face racial difficulties, although his perceptions of those problems changed considerably over the course of time. Reflecting on the experience after a quarter of a century, McClain, and his former teammates, emphasized the positive aspects of the process. "I could probably go back and pull out, here and there, a negative thing that happened, but that really has very little to do with the true story," recalled McClain, "I think it was one of the smoothest transitions . . . that took place in the South."⁶

Lester McClain's demeanor and his ability eased the process. Tim Priest and John Rippetoe, former Tennessee players, vaguely remembered a childish prank or two directed at McClain by teammates, but stressed how well McClain handled the situations. In their estimation, McClain gained acceptance fairly easily within the team, an assessment shared by McClain himself. Former Volunteer receiver Gary Kreis thought McClain "was well accepted . . . did a super job of handling the situation," and even wondered whether

⁵For Lester McClain's statistics, see Mike Siroky and Bob Bertucci, *Orange Lightning: Inside University of Tennessee Football*, 186; University of Tennessee Sports Information Department. On Tennessee teams from 1968-1970, see Russ Bebb, *The Big Orange*, 327-355.

⁶Lester McClain interview, 17.

the team and coaching staff might have "bent over a little backwards to . . . see that he was accepted."⁷ Kreis' sentiments echo to some degree similar statements from former University of Georgia football coach Vince Dooley. Dooley believed that he "tried to be overly sensitive to the black players, and consequently did more harm than good . . ." when his Georgia Bulldog football program desegregated.⁸

Lester McClain earned respect not only by maintaining an even disposition off the field, but also by performing well on the field. Asked to comment on McClain's acceptance by the team, former defensive back Priest emphasized performance, "in the world of athletics, if you are good at what you do, your acceptance is quicker . . . it helped that Lester was a quality player." According to Rippetoe, a quarterback and also a roommate of McClain's, his friend "was a talented athlete, good . . . just a good ballplayer." McClain himself believed that "it ceased to be a racial issue once you [went] to the field . . . respect is gained there [and] hopefully you are a good person too."⁹

McClain, again in retrospect, concluded that a sense of

⁷See interview with Gary Kreis, 30 September 1992, 4-5; interview with Tim Priest, 16 September 1992, 3; interview with John Rippetoe, 23 September 1992, 5.

⁸Interview with Vincent J. Dooley, Athletic Director, University of Georgia, 16 October 1992, 4. Dooley served as head football coach at Georgia from 1964 to 1988.

⁹Lester McClain interview, 13; Tim Priest interview, 16 September 1992, 3; John Rippetoe interview, 23 September 1992, 5.

loneliness and isolation affected him more adversely than anything else, especially during his early Tennessee career. In addition to the typical pangs of homesickness experienced by first year college students, he dealt with the strain of being a novelty. Although Tennessee continued to recruit African-Americans onto the football team after the 1967 signings, Lester McClain did not have a black teammate joining him on the same level of competition until Jackie Walker and Andy Bennett ascended to the varsity in 1969.

Isolation caused him the greatest grief at the Cotton Bowl following the 1968 season. In Knoxville, McClain could merely drive to see friends in the local black community when feeling isolated, but at the bowl game in Dallas, Texas, no similar option existed. "It's not anything that anyone [did] . . . but the places you go and things you do [are in] a predominantly white environment. You have one black guy . . . what do you do with him?"¹⁰ In contrast to that Cotton Bowl visit, McClain thoroughly enjoyed a Volunteer trip to the Sugar Bowl two years later. By that time he was joined on the varsity by Bennett, Walker, and a third African-American, Kevin Milam.¹¹

Lester McClain's rather temperate thoughts toward his pioneering experiences came more than two decades after he

¹⁰Lester McClain interview, 18-19.

¹¹See "Black Participants on Varsity Level," compiled by Bud Ford, Sports Information Department, University of Tennessee.

desegregated University of Tennessee football on the playing field. In 1971, however, with his college football career freshly completed, McClain issued very strong statements condemning the Tennessee athletic department and coaches for racist attitudes that affected his performance. He also lamented the social constraints faced by African-American athletes on the predominantly white Tennessee campus. McClain made the remarks to the *Daily Beacon* student newspaper in a two-part series in May of 1971.¹²

Most of McClain's criticisms centered on the Tennessee coaching staff. Doug Dickey left the university after the 1969 season to become head coach at the University of Florida, and receivers coach Bill Battle replaced him as Volunteer head coach. McClain accused both Dickey and Battle of restricting his career in order to keep the university from looking bad for not recruiting him heavily in the first place. "Maybe Albert [Davis] would have been great, but I was just supposed to be here . . . I think the university got themselves in a spot when they found out I could start for them," McClain complained.¹³

The coaching staffs also treated other African-American

¹²See Rob Christensen, "McClain Blasts Athletic Dept." *Daily Beacon*, in *Tom Siler Collection*, MS-1886, Box 7, Folder 6; "McClain Says Bill Battle Discriminated," *Daily Beacon*, 28 May 1971, 3. McClain's plight as a pioneer football player in the Southeastern Conference was profiled in Peter Schrag, "Tennessee Lonesome End," *Harper's Monthly*, March 1970, 59-67.

¹³Rob Christensen, "McClain Blasts Athletic Dept.," 1.

athletes differently, and thus unfairly, according to McClain. He specifically mentioned the lack of respect and publicity given to linebacker Jackie Walker, who started as a sophomore in 1969 alongside Jack "Hacksaw" Reynolds and Steve Kiner, a trio that formed perhaps Tennessee's greatest linebacker corps. "Jackie was the center of the [1969] defense, he's what made the defense click, but he didn't get credit . . . in his sophomore year he had a better season than Steve Kiner, but you never knew it."¹⁴

The treatment afforded basketball player Rupert Breedlove also rankled McClain and other black athletes at Tennessee. Breedlove, a transfer from the University of Cincinnati, left Tennessee after being suspended from the basketball team for shoplifting a tape cartridge. "I don't stand up for him doing it, he was wrong, but . . . I know lots of situations like that, that never did hit the papers," McClain said.¹⁵ The insinuation that a double-standard existed between treatment of black and white athletes, as expressed in this instance by McClain, seems to have been a common feeling among African-American athletes at the University of Tennessee during the period.¹⁶

¹⁴"McClain Says Bill Battle Discriminated," *Daily Beacon*, 28 May 1971, 3.

¹⁵Ibid. See also "Racial Discrimination in Sports," in 1971 Football file, *Tom Siler Collection*, MS-1886, Box 7, Folder 6.

¹⁶See "The Black Athlete at UT," a four part series in the *Daily Beacon*, 18 May 1971 to 26 May 1971. The "1971 Football File," Box 7, Folder 6 of the *Siler Collection* also contains the

In the articles, McClain also cited social constraints he faced as an African-American on a mostly white campus. At social functions, "a lot of guys who were nice normally, were not that way when they had their girls with them," he said, and when McClain occasionally danced with a white co-ed "they [white teammates] figure . . . you're up to something, and I get sarcastic remarks about it."¹⁷ His most serious complaint in this realm was against a Tennessee coach who demanded that McClain shave off his moustache, embarrassing him before a home football game in the crowded lobby of the athletic dorm. "First it was a 'hey boy' . . . then he called my name and as I turned around everybody stopped and stared. He pointed and called to me and said, 'cut your moustache off now boy!'"¹⁸

The allegations from McClain provoked little support from the local press and drew immediate rebuttal from the athletic department. Within days of the articles, McClain distanced himself from the furor, and claimed the *Daily Beacon* writer had purposefully arranged quotes to make the athletic department look bad. Tennessee head coach Bill Battle, after meeting with McClain about the controversy, said McClain told him, "he was grateful for the good things which have happened to him at Tennessee and he apologized

four articles.

¹⁷See Rob Christensen, "McClain Blasts Athletic Dept.," 2.

¹⁸Ibid.

for hurting us. I told him I felt he had hurt himself . . . that doors he had worked hard to open were now closed."¹⁹ Tom Siler shrugged off McClain's complaints as a common occurrence among disgruntled former players and maintained that "if he had been white nobody would have paid much attention to what he said."²⁰

Lester McClain's controversial remarks are best understood only when placed within their original context. Just a few days before McClain made his charges, the *Daily Beacon* ran a four part series entitled "The Black Athlete at UT."²¹ Based on interviews with three black track team members, the series cited a litany of problems frequently associated with African-American athletes on traditionally white college campuses in the 1960s. A lack of understanding among white coaches, a shortage of black coaches, pressures against interracial dating, limited social opportunities in the surrounding community, less sympathy from athletic department medical staffs toward blacks with injuries, all of these problems afflicted black athletes at the University of Tennessee, much as they did other athletes in similar settings in the 1960s. Dozens of

¹⁹"Lester Visits Coach," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 1 June 1971, 12.

²⁰"Hey Coach Put Me In," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 2 June 1971, 40.

²¹See "The Black Athlete at UT," a four part series in the *Daily Beacon*, 18 May 1971 to 26 May 1971.

protests and revolts by black athletes occurred on college campuses between 1968 and 1972 in response to such complaints.²²

Sociologist Harry Edwards led an attempted boycott of the 1968 Mexico City Olympics to protest many of the same demeaning circumstances mentioned by the Tennessee athletes. The protest took its most dramatic form when Tommy Smith and John Carlos raised gloved fists in a display of black unity on the victory stand after the 200 meter dash. Edwards also wrote an influential book, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* published in 1969, detailing the discrimination suffered by many black college athletes. In the aftermath of those conditions, which heightened awareness of bigotry and likely created an atmosphere more conducive to the airing of such grievances, the articles about African-American athletes at the University of Tennessee surfaced, followed closely by the McClain accusations.²³

The willingness of Lester McClain to speak up about racial problems in athletics also took place during a period of continued, and growing, campus activism. Students and more outspoken faculty members challenged the University of Tennessee administration on a number of issues during the

²²See David K. Wiggins, "The Future of College Athletics is at Stake: Black Athletes and Racial Turmoil on Three Predominantly White University Campuses, 1968-1972," *Journal of Sport History* 15 (Winter, 1988): 304-333.

²³See Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York: The Free Press, 1969).

late 1960s in a quest for greater "student power." Among the issues which garnered the most attention were a dispute over the university's policy toward guest speakers, the quest for a greater awareness of the plight of African-American students at Tennessee, and finally a 1970 campus visit by Richard Nixon, indirectly linked of course to the most prominent campus cause of the era, the debate over the Vietnam War.

The "open speaker" controversy emerged in 1968 when the university, represented by chancellor Charles Weaver, denied black comedian and activist Dick Gregory the opportunity to make a paid speech on the Tennessee campus. At the time, a student committee supposedly maintained the authority to invite speakers of the committee's choosing. Weaver received most of the flak for the decision although he simply fronted for the administration. In his own words, Weaver "inherited" the issue, and later contended the problems arose because well-meaning trustees and others of influence "could not believe that we were not still in a mode where people in the university could do any damn thing they wanted to the students."²⁴ Professor Richard Marius and three others eventually sued the administration over the speaker policy, and Marius years later still believed the

²⁴Interview with Charles H. Weaver, 9 December 1992, 15.

incident "came about because Gregory was a black person."²⁵
The university ultimately adopted an open policy.

A drive to add more African-American based courses to the university curriculum was one of several racial issues that captured some attention at Tennessee in the late 1960s. Ralph Boston, a long-jump bronze medalist at the 1968 Olympics, was hired as an assistant dean of students shortly after the Mexico City games. A Black Students Union was formed, and pushed unsuccessfully for an "Afro-American" major. A few black history courses were added and provoked much discussion in the university community. The playing of "Dixie" by the Volunteer marching band prompted protest, resulting in several black band members quitting and the band abandoning the song. When a black woman tried out for the cheerleading squad, she was incorrectly told that her grades were too low, prompting her to file a complaint and receive a new tryout. Jimmie Baxter, one of the more visible African-American students on campus, was elected

²⁵Richard Marius interview, 11. On the open speaker debate, see various articles in the *Daily Beacon* during 1968 and 1969, including Jim Duncan, "Gordon To Rule On Speaker," *Daily Beacon*, 21 September 1968, 1; Jim Duncan, "Students Concerned About World: Weaver," *Daily Beacon*, 24 September 1968, 1; James Bennett, "Booker 'Shocked' By Gregory Veto," *Daily Beacon*, 25 September, 1968, 1; James Bennett, "SPEECH CANCELLATION," *Daily Beacon*, 28 September 1968, 1; "President's Support All Open Policy Needs," *Daily Beacon*, 16 October 1968, 2; Martin S. Ochs, "Editor Says UT Heading for Trouble," *Daily Beacon*, 21 February 1969, 2; Alan Carmichael, "Present Speaker Policy 'Unconstitutional,'" *Daily Beacon*, 19 April 1969, 1.

president of the Student Government Association in 1969.²⁶

The most famous case of campus activism in Tennessee history resulted from a protest against a Richard Nixon visit to Neyland Stadium. Nixon came to the campus during a Billy Graham religious crusade on May 28, 1970.²⁷ Just weeks before the president arrived in Knoxville, National Guardsmen shot and killed four Kent State University students who were protesting Nixon's decision to bomb Cambodia. The Graham crusade marked the first public appearance for Nixon since the Kent tragedy, and many local anti-war leaders resented his selection of the Tennessee campus. Three University of Tennessee professors organized a protest of the event, and at one point protesters planned on moving en masse toward the stage during Graham's time of invitation. The organized efforts faltered for the most part, but in the aftermath forty-seven people, including two

²⁶Again, articles on these topics appeared very frequently in the *Daily Beacon*. A sampling of the articles includes, Coye Baker, "70 in 2nd Negro History Course," *Daily Beacon*, 11 January 1969, 1; James Lessenberry, "Black History Course 'Tokenism' Says Boston," *Daily Beacon*, 12 February 1969, 4; Glenda Elkins, "Four Members Leave Band, 'Dixie' Insulting to Pride," *Daily Beacon*, 22 February 1969, 1; Jeff Schenkel, "Black Students To Submit Proposal For Minorities Studies Program," *Daily Beacon*, 1 March 1969, 1; "Baxter Enters Presidential Race," *Daily Beacon*, 29 April 1969, 1; Alan Carmichael, "Officials Hear Demands of Picketing Black Students," *Daily Beacon*, 9 May 1969, 1; James Lessenberry, "Black Coed Says Pep Club Unfair," *Daily Beacon*, 3 May 1969, 1; James Lessenberry, "New Cheerleader Tryouts Ordered For Adawayhi," *Daily Beacon*, 20 May 1969, 1.

²⁷The description of the Nixon visit comes from David Arwood and Milton Klein, "Billy Graham, Richard Nixon, and the Vietnam War Protest on the UTK Campus," *Context*, 5 March 1992, 5-8.

of the professors, were arrested for violating a state law against disruption of a religious ceremony. Dr. Charles Reynolds, one of the faculty members, appealed his conviction and twenty dollar fine all the way to the United States Supreme Court, arguing that his right to freedom of speech had been violated, but the high court failed to grant him a hearing.

Against the backdrop of such strong campus activism, Lester McClain remarked about his plight as the first African-American football player at the University of Tennessee. His complaints echoed those of other black students of the age who participated in athletics on predominantly white college campuses. More than two decades later, McClain presented a more mellow and understanding attitude toward the university athletic department. "As I get older, I realize what so many other people put on the line. Bill Garrett put his reputation on the line. Doug Dickey put his on the line too . . . a lot of people went out of their way to make things work well . . . we were not the first [southern] university to have black players on the football team . . . but we were the first to make it work as well as it did."²⁸

²⁸Lester McClain interview, 17-18.

B. A Transformation in the Southeastern Conference

That the University of Tennessee successfully managed football desegregation proved significant to the Southeastern Conference. The two factors most immediately apparent to this significance are the time frame of the process, and the relative mildness with which desegregation advanced at Tennessee. The Volunteer program achieved athletic desegregation in 1967, earlier than all but two other SEC members, and the football team actually ranked behind only Kentucky. Additionally, no major problems emerged at Tennessee, a reassuring fact for the rest of the conference. As important as those two factors were, other elements of the Tennessee case proved even more vital to the racial transformation of the Southeastern Conference. Specifically, the prestige of the University of Tennessee football program, and the prominent stature of the school's initial black recruit, Albert Davis, served to enhance Southeastern Conference desegregation after 1967.

Kentucky and Vanderbilt deserve credit for launching athletic desegregation in the Southeastern Conference. Neither of those universities, however, equalled the clout and eminence held by the Tennessee football program within the conference. The University of Kentucky had traditionally ruled conference basketball courts, but the Wildcats desegregated their football program first. Vanderbilt University, a well-respected member of the

conference, normally attracted more attention for academic endeavors than for athletic exploits. Additionally, the Commodores integrated basketball, not football, an important distinction when examining the Southeastern Conference.

Historically, the Tennessee Volunteers stand behind only the University of Alabama in SEC football excellence, and the *football* aspect of that excellence cannot be overestimated. In the twentieth century, football has always been the dominant southern collegiate sport, especially in the Southeastern Conference. The conference actually originated in order to better administer football, and since the SEC's inception football has provided conference members the majority of their sport-produced publicity and revenue. Consequently, football desegregation at the University of Tennessee would arguably produce a greater impact among conference members than a similar move by Kentucky, or by basketball desegregation at Vanderbilt.

The aura surrounding the heralded Albert Davis also added significance to the Tennessee experience. Nat Northington and Greg Page of Kentucky, along with basketball pioneer Perry Wallace of Vanderbilt, during their respective high school careers did not garner the same acclaim given Davis. When the projected "superstar" Davis agreed to attend Tennessee, his decision marked a coup for the conference. Typically, African-American athletes of such stature matriculated to northern or western colleges, or

went to the top football programs at predominantly black colleges. The recruitment of Davis proved that the Southeastern Conference, often maligned on racial matters, could attract the best high school football players, black or white. Davis never played for Tennessee, but he was the first truly exceptional black recruit to sign with an SEC conference member.

So, while Kentucky and Vanderbilt acted earliest, the events at the University of Tennessee arguably proved more significant. Rather than triggering a surge, however, athletic desegregation at the three schools merely expedited a gradual integration of Southeastern Conference athletic programs. SEC athletic teams made no great rush to sign African-American students to athletic scholarships following the efforts of Kentucky, Vanderbilt, and Tennessee; instead conference members proceeded at a moderate pace, and "integration remained minimal in the SEC prior to the 1970s."²⁹

By 1970, the ten Southeastern Conference colleges numbered only forty-one African-Americans on team rosters in all sports combined, with three schools (Florida, Kentucky, and Tennessee) accounting for thirty of that total. Blacks were not represented on at least one athletic team at every university in the SEC until the 1971-72 academic year, six

²⁹Joan Paul, Richard V. McGehee, and Helen Fant, "The Arrival and Ascendence of Black Athletes in the Southeastern Conference, 1966-1980, 285.

years after Kentucky first signed Nat Northington and Greg Page to break the conference color barrier.³⁰

Once reluctance to desegregation waned, Southeastern Conference football teams began signing significant numbers of blacks to athletic scholarships. The autumn of 1972 marked the first season that every SEC varsity football team included black players. Over the ten year span that followed, the percentage of blacks on SEC football squads rose from only eight percent to more than forty-one percent. The extent of the transformation became ironically clear in the days leading up to the 1984 Sugar Bowl between Auburn University of the Southeastern Conference, and the University of Michigan from the long-integrated Big Ten Conference.

Head coaches Pat Dye of Auburn and Bo Schembechler of Michigan found themselves trying to explain why Auburn, the southern school led by sensational running back Bo Jackson, had so many black players compared to its northern counterpart, Michigan. Accurately, the laconic Dye answered, "The area we recruit in probably has more black athletes than there are in Michigan."³¹ Dye's statement

³⁰See *ibid*, 284-297.

³¹"Dye: Football Helped South to Integrate," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 31 December 1983, sec 3, 2.

For more on athletic desegregation at Auburn University, see Dwayne Cox interviews with former Auburn president Harry M. Philpott on 18 May 1990 (158-159) and 21 March 1991 (325-327), Auburn University Archives. A special thanks to Dwayne Cox, Auburn University archivist, for providing this information.

would have been just as true if the teams had met fifty years earlier, but prior to the transformation of the SEC in the 1960s the makeup of the two squads would not have reflected the fact.

As football desegregation spread among SEC schools, the process assumed no particular or typical model, but varied from institution to institution. The lack of a central policy from the conference partly caused the variations, as did the traditional racial beliefs among the states encompassed by the SEC, the attitudes of powerful head football coaches in the conference, and sheer happenstance. Former Georgia head coach Vince Dooley, possessor of a graduate history degree, rightfully noted, "as an old historian . . . [I] recall [that] Kentucky was a border state and Tennessee was the first state to go Republican after the Civil War . . . here in the deep South, change was slower to come."³² That schools in Kentucky and Tennessee led conference integration did not surprise Dooley.

Vince Dooley's football program at the University of Georgia desegregated at the varsity level in 1972, joining Ole Miss as one of the last two conference members to make the move. Unusual circumstances prevented Georgia from integrating earlier. A non-scholarship black football player tried out for the team as early as 1968, but transferred to Vanderbilt before playing at Georgia. In

³²Vince Dooley interview, 5.

1970, Georgia actually signed John King, Jr. of Huntsville, Alabama, to a non-binding conference "letter of intent," but King opted to attend the University of Minnesota instead, whose team incidentally was coached by former Volunteer Murray Warmath. Georgia finally successfully recruited five black players in 1971, and the Bulldog varsity team featured an integrated squad in 1972. Such happenstance might well have affected other conference attempts at desegregation; recruiting and coaching black players was a new experience for SEC colleges and coaches.³³

At the University of Florida, Doug Dickey took over as head football coach for the 1970 season after resigning at Tennessee, and holds the unique distinction of leading two Southeastern Conference schools through the desegregation process. Willie Jackson and Leonard George, signed in 1969, ascended to the Gator varsity during Dickey's first year at the helm in 1970. In comparing the Florida and Tennessee situations, Dickey remembered "significantly more in dirty mail [and] nasty comments" at Florida, and more of a positive reaction at Tennessee.³⁴

The two most well-known SEC head football coaches in the 1960s, Johnny Vaught of the University of Mississippi and Paul "Bear" Bryant of Alabama approached football

³³Vince Dooley interview, 1-4; *University of Georgia 1993 Football Media Guide*, 148-154.

³⁴Doug Dickey interview, 5.

desegregation differently. By most accounts, Vaught cared little for the prospect of adding blacks to his Ole Miss Rebel teams. The Associated Press quoted Vaught telling a group of southern sportswriters in 1966, "By the time we find one (a Negro athlete) good enough, I'll be gone" [parenthetical is part of the quote].³⁵ Vaught retired at the end of the 1970 season, the year before defensive lineman Ben Williams became the first black football player at Ole Miss. The political ramifications of coaching in Mississippi probably affected coach Vaught's attitude to some degree, but at any rate the once hugely successful Rebel program faltered in the 1970s, and the school's slowness to desegregate undoubtedly contributed to the decline.³⁶

At Alabama, the legendary Bryant supposedly wanted to recruit blacks during the 1960s, but the political situation

³⁵Jim Minter, "Tech Gets Federal Visit," *Atlanta Journal & Constitution*, 2 April 1967, 56; David M. Moffit, "Good Negro Athlete Can Get in Big Ten, but Not SEC," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 2 April 1967, D5.

³⁶Johnny Vaught accumulated an excellent won-loss record of 190 wins, 61 losses, 12 ties. He came out of retirement during the 1973 season, compiling a 5-4 record on an interim basis. See Bert Randolph Sugar, editor, *The SEC* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1979): 145-168. A special thanks to Charles "Sid" Belflower of Athens, Georgia, for compiling and providing the information on Vaught.

On "Gentle" Ben Williams, see Rick Cleveland and Billy Watkins, "It took rare type to integrate college football," *The Clarion-Ledger/Jackson Daily News*, 1 July 1984, 12H; Ben Williams file, University of Mississippi Sports Information Department. A special thanks to Joel Schuchmann, Ole Miss Sports Information Intern for compiling and providing information on Williams and Rebel football desegregation.

in the state stymied him. "For years I had to hold off trying to recruit blacks," Bryant later claimed.³⁷ Albert Davis recalled shaking hands with coach Bryant prior to a Tennessee-Alabama game in Knoxville. "Albert . . . if they would allow me [to recruit you], you would be at Alabama," Bryant told the highly-publicized prospect.³⁸ An incident involving Bryant provides insight into the stigma of coaching at a southern school in a segregationist state. Bryant recalled that the incident occurred at the time Alabama governor George Wallace made his infamous "stand at the schoolhouse door" to protest integration at the University of Alabama: "I was in Chicago, eating at a fancy restaurant . . . I left a tip that was more than I could afford . . . the waiter said, 'I don't want your money' and walked away."³⁹

Bryant's most memorable comment concerning race relations came in response to a prodding newspaper reporter. Just after Alabama desegregated its football squad, the reporter tried to bait the Bear by asking how many black players the Crimson Tide had on the team. Bryant replied slowly, with a lengthy pause emphasizing his point, "I don't have any black players . . . I just have football

³⁷Paul W. Bryant and John Underwood, *Bear*, 319.

³⁸Albert Davis interview, 13 and 18.

³⁹Paul W. Bryant and John Underwood, *Bear*, 319.

players."⁴⁰ Wilbur Jackson was the first African-American to sign with the Tide football team, in 1970, and junior-college transfer John Mitchell came aboard to start for the varsity the next season. In contrast to the University of Mississippi, Alabama teams excelled following football desegregation, winning an astounding 103 games during the 1970s. While the arrival of black players facilitated that success, the introduction of the wishbone offense in 1971 perhaps had a more immediate impact.

A famous 1970 game between Alabama and the University of Southern California, played in Birmingham, is often cited as a factor in accelerating SEC football desegregation. Sam Cunningham, a black fullback, piled up yardage and scored three touchdowns for Southern Cal as the Trojans crushed Alabama 42-21. The fact that the game was even played in Birmingham prompted columnist Jim Murray of the *Los Angeles Times*, a provocative critic of Alabama and the SEC in past years, to write that "the bedsheet-and-burning cross conference is coming out in the daylight of the twentieth century."⁴¹ A similarly exaggerated statement, from the opposite political spectrum, came from former Alabama assistant coach Jerry Claiborne who supposedly said "Sam Cunningham did more for integration in the South in sixty

⁴⁰Ibid, 321.

⁴¹As quoted in Charles H. Martin, "The Integration of Southeastern Conference Athletics," 14.

minutes than Martin Luther King did in twenty years."⁴²

By the early 1970s, all Southeastern Conference football teams had desegregated, and athletic integration naturally ceased to be a major topic. Other, more subtle racial concerns arose, none capturing the public attention that accompanied the early desegregation efforts. The University of Tennessee boasted the SEC's first African-American quarterback in Condredge Holloway, voted the conference "Sophomore of the Year" in 1972. A black quarterback was unusual on integrated teams, especially as early as 1972, because teams commonly "stacked" black players into peripheral playing positions.⁴³

Holloway provided one of the most memorable scenes in Volunteer football history during the opening game of the 1974 season. Injured in the first half, Holloway was not on the field as UCLA took a 17-10 fourth quarter lead over Tennessee. Dramatically, Holloway emerged from the locker room tunnel and jogged to the sideline as ABC television cameras captured the moment and the Neyland Stadium crowd went into a frenzy. Holloway led a late drive to tie the

⁴²See Paul W. Bryant and John Underwood, *The Bear*, 322.

⁴³On the concept of "stacking" in the Southeastern Conference, see Richard V. McGehee and M. Joan Paul, "The Racial Makeup of Central, Stacking, and Other Playing Positions in Southeastern Conference Football Teams," in *Psychology and Sociology of Sport: Current Selected Research* (New York: AMS Press, 1988): 177-189.

game, scoring the touchdown himself on a dazzling run.⁴⁴

The absence of African-American coaches, like the concern about stacking, was another of the racial issues that surfaced after conference athletic desegregation, and continued to be an issue well into the 1980s. The University of Tennessee broke the coaching racial barrier in major sports by hiring Wade Houston in 1989 to coach the Volunteer basketball team. Houston grew up in Alcoa, but attended college at Louisville because no Southeastern Conference teams accepted blacks when he graduated in 1962.⁴⁵

At just about the time Wade Houston had to leave his home state in order to play major college basketball, the University of Tennessee entered a five year period of transition. The university turned away from seventy-five years of racial exclusion and accepted African-Americans onto Tennessee athletic teams for the first time. Those "seasons of change" from 1963 to 1967 altered the course of Volunteer football history and significantly enhanced the racial transformation of the Southeastern Conference.

⁴⁴See Russ Bebb, *The Big Orange*, 348-367.

⁴⁵See Gary Lundy "Racial about-face was long time coming at UT," *Knoxville Journal*, 22 May 1989, 1A. This article is part of a six-part series entitled "The Black Athlete at UT: Pride and Prejudice" that ran in the *Knoxville Journal* from May 22 to May 27, 1989. Wade Houston was dismissed as Tennessee basketball coach in 1994.

C. Epilogue: A Summary and Reflection

In examining football desegregation at the University of Tennessee some limitations inherently affected the study. Two themes come immediately to mind. First, the topic of athletic desegregation in the Southeastern Conference remains a relatively unexplored phenomenon, complicating the task of placing events at Tennessee into a complete context. Secondly, the traditional controversy associated with racial issues in the South caused wariness among some of those who discussed the Tennessee case.

The vast majority of information currently available on African-American athletes in the Southeastern Conference comes from the sports information departments of the various SEC institutions, or from newspaper articles. Such accounts provide accurate documentation and answer basic questions of the who, what, when, and where type. This type of standard information does not, however, contain much in the way of analysis or scholarly examination. Understandably, athletic departments publicize their athletes and the athletic history of their particular schools. The results are mostly popular and positive descriptions of desegregation.

While a handful of historians have clarified certain aspects of Southeastern Conference racial integration, the need for additional historical studies of conference football desegregation is a fertile area awaiting, and

deserving, more attention.⁴⁶ One recurring theme, not addressed in this dissertation, is the belief that SEC football integration played a strong role in lessening racial tensions in the South.⁴⁷ More analysis is needed to answer that assertion. The process of football desegregation at the University of Tennessee is but one story among several in the conference. Unfortunately the other stories remain untold at this time.

The controversial nature of racial issues in the South also had an impact on the study. Commonly, potential subjects wondered about the motivations behind such an inquiry, and some important figures either completely refused to participate or so consistently put off efforts to discuss the project that they had to be excluded. The problem was not that these reluctant observers necessarily felt anything bad or unscrupulous had taken place, instead most of them believed the topic was so benign at Tennessee that it did not warrant serious study. Explanations that the dissertation would not focus solely on negative or sensational incidents usually failed to convince the hesitant skeptics of the viability of the study.

⁴⁶See bibliographic citations for Charles H. Martin, Richard V. McGehee, Joan Paul, and David K. Wiggins. Martin, McGehee, and Paul have given direct attention to the Southeastern Conference, while Wiggins has written extensively on racial topics in college athletics generally.

⁴⁷On this theme, see Vince Dooley interview, 4; "Dye: Football Helped South to Integrate," sec. 3, p. 2; Paul W. Bryant and John Underwood, *Bear*, 316-324.

The wariness of a few did not extend to everyone. On the contrary, all Southeastern Conference athletic departments contacted eagerly offered assistance and promptly mailed pertinent records and articles. Bud Ford of the University of Tennessee sports information office unflinchingly responded with interest and a genuine willingness to help. Dr. Andy Kozar, a former Volunteer football star and an expert on Bob Neyland, was invaluable, as was Albert Davis. Finally, not one former Tennessee student or student-athlete, black or white, refused to take part, only time constraints on the author limited their numbers.

Doug Dickey politely discussed athletic desegregation at the University of Tennessee, but remained aloof on certain issues. Two factors probably caused his consternation. Just days prior to Dickey's interview, Tennessee dismissed head football coach Johnny Majors and replaced him with Phillip Fulmer. The move created considerable commotion and Dickey's thoughts during the interview justifiably might have been on that turmoil. Also, Dickey had previously received negative publicity for comments he made when Wade Houston was hired as Tennessee basketball coach in 1989. At that time, some white coaches at the university received membership privileges at the exclusive Cherokee Country Club in Knoxville, and Dickey

indicated that Houston might not get the same benefit.⁴⁸

These limitations should not diminish the significance of the study. This comprehensive examination of Tennessee football desegregation marks the first such attempt to cover an individual institution in the Southeastern Conference. It also represents the only complete compilation of facts on the topic for the University of Tennessee, combining interviews, newspaper accounts, magazine and journal articles, archival material, and scholarly analysis. The remarks from Albert Davis are the most candid and thorough that he has issued in the twenty-five odd years since the recruitment and test score controversy of 1967.

As importantly, those African-Americans with early ties to the University of Tennessee found an outlet to speak about Volunteer football desegregation and Tennessee athletics on the whole. At the risk of generalizing, a leery, if not disdainful, attitude toward the university athletic department characterized the thoughts of several contributors. They remembered Lester McClain, Condredge Holloway, Larry Robinson, and other prominent black athletes at Tennessee. However, interspersed with those popular memories were more pointed thoughts on Albert Davis, Bob Neyland, and the decades when Tennessee's black fans had to

⁴⁸See contemporary news accounts in April of 1989, and "Pride and Prejudice," the four part series on black athletes at the University of Tennessee. On Dickey's comments, also see Charles Weaver interview, 5.

sit in Section X (segregated bleachers) to view a Volunteer football game.

The University of Tennessee did not lead the Southeastern Conference into football desegregation. The athletic department record on racial matters prior to 1963 was occasionally sordid, seldom or never progressive. Between 1963 and 1967 the athletic department and the university experienced "seasons of change" which facilitated football desegregation and furthered the racial transformation of the Southeastern Conference. Tennessee officials proceeded in a deliberate, usually responsible, but rarely forceful fashion. Perhaps Lester McClain summed up University of Tennessee football desegregation best with his previously mentioned quote, "we were not the first . . . but we were the first to make it work as well as it did."⁴⁹

⁴⁹See note 28.

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* Walker tape was inadvertently damaged while being transcribed, thus is not housed at the university.

Correspondence

Valerie Bonnette, Office of Civil Rights, United States
Department of Education

Robert J. Booker, Beck Cultural Exchange Center

Wilbert Cherry, former University of Tennessee basketball
player

Dwayne Cox, Auburn University Archivist

Lamar Daniel, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare,
Atlanta, Georgia

Bill Douglas, former University of Tennessee student

Tom Elam, University of Tennessee Board of Trustees, Chair
of Athletics Board

Lane Estes, Southeastern Conference Office

Harris "Bud" Ford, University of Tennessee Athletic
Department

Camille Hazeur, Director, Affirmative Action-Programming,
University of Tennessee

Andrew J. Kozar, University Professor, Human Performance and
Sport Studies, University of Tennessee

Charles "Gus" Manning, University of Tennessee Athletic
Department

Tom Mattingly, University of Tennessee Athletic Department

Charles H. Martin, University of Texas at El Paso

Tony Neely, Vanderbilt Sports Information Director

Bob Polston, Knoxville/Knox County Athletics Director

Pat Robinette, former University of Tennessee basketball
player

Joel Schuchmann, University of Mississippi Sports
Information Intern

Bobby Scott, former University of Tennessee football player

Mrs. Tom Siler, Knoxville, Tennessee

Jack Topchik, *New York Times* photographer, former *Daily Beacon* sportswriter

David K. Wiggins, George Mason University

Bob Woodruff, former University of Tennessee Athletic Director

Bill Wright, former University of Tennessee Academic Advisor for athletes, baseball coach, freshman basketball coach

Dhyana Ziegler, Associate Professor, Broadcasting, University of Tennessee

* Includes meetings, written correspondence and/or telephone conversations; no direct quotations or citations in text of dissertation.

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Vita

Robert Thomas Epling was born in Dover, Delaware, on November 18, 1959. He attended public schools in the Atlanta, Georgia, metropolitan area, graduating from R.L. Osborne High School in 1978. He received a Bachelor of Science in Education degree, with a major in Physical Education, from the University of Georgia at Athens in 1984. He reentered the University of Georgia in September of 1987, obtaining a Master of Education degree in Physical Education in June of 1989.

In August of 1989, he enrolled at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, and earned the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education in August of 1994, in the Department of Human Performance and Sport Studies. His emphasis area was sport history and socio-cultural foundations of sport. In September of 1994, he was to begin work as an Assistant Professor of Physical Education and Recreation at West Georgia College in Carrollton, Georgia.