

Bronx, Blacks, and the NFL

by Victor Mastro and John Hogrogian

The Bronx is one of the five boroughs which make up New York City. It is the only borough which is located on the mainland United States, as the other four are on islands in New York Harbor. The Bronx is home for Yankee Stadium and Fordham University. It formerly was home for the uptown campus of New York University, now gone. In the 1920's and 1930's, Fordham and NYU were football powers that sent several players into the pros. Staunchly middle-class in character, the Bronx now is also cursed with a plague of urban blight in its southern neighborhoods. Throughout its history, the Bronx has been ethnically and racially mixed, an incubator for upward mobility for people from everywhere.

For the past sixty years, the Bronx has been the setting for many developments in the racial integration of the National Football League. Its fields, schools, and people have all played a role in the progress of the NFL away from its segregated past and into the diverse world of the 1990's.

I The New York Brown Bombers

Black players were a small but significant presence in the NFL during the 1920's. Players like Fritz Pollard, Duke Slater, and Inky Williams were stars in the league's first decade. By 1933, however, the number of black players in the NFL dwindled to two, halfback Joe Lillard of the Chicago Cardinals and tackle Ray Kemp of the Pittsburgh Pirates. In 1934, they were gone. The NFL began twelve years of segregated, whites-only football, never officially stated, but supported by transparent rationalizations.

In 1935, a promoter in New York organized a new all-black pro football team, named after that era's most famous black athlete, boxer Joe Louis. The New York Brown Bombers were the most important of the several all-black pro football teams of this period. Former college and professional star Fritz Pollard signed on as coach. The team's backfield featured ex-NFL halfbacks Joe Lillard and David Myers, plus 240 pound fullback Tank Conrad. Myers was a former NYU star, a product of the school's Bronx campus. For a home field, the Brown Bombers secured Dyckman Oval, a small stadium in upper Manhattan. The field was so far in the northern part of Manhattan, it was closer to the Bronx than to almost any other part of Manhattan Island. Indeed, it was only two stops on the I.R.T. elevated subway from the Bronx.

Research has not yet compiled the full history of the Brown Bombers. In 1935, we know of five victories and one defeat. Attendance at Dyckman Oval averaged about 1,500 per game. The Brown Bombers used some trick plays and song and dance routines in an attempt to boost attendance, but the team's forte was good football, not comedy.

In 1936, the Brown Bombers began their season with four road games because Dyckman Oval would be occupied by black baseball until mid-October. When the team finally moved back into its home, it rang up six victories and two ties in its remaining eight games. A crowd of 3,000 fans attended the home opener, in which the Brown Bombers beat Newark 41-0. Pollard's team faced the White Plains Bears of the American Association three times during the season. The Brown Bombers lost in White Plains, played a 3-3 tie in the Dyckman Oval, and then beat the Bears 21- 0 on November 29 again in the Dyckman Oval. Against members of the AA, a strong new eastern minor league, the Brown Bombers compiled a 1-3-1 record. A new backfield star this year was Otus Troupe of Morgan College.

In 1937, Coach Pollard again fielded a strong squad. The Brown Bombers compiled 5-2-1 record and drew an average of 3,000 fans to their home games at Dyckman Oval. Against AA members, the Brown Bombers won once, lost twice, and tied once. On October 17, they beat the White Plains Bears 3-0 in White Plains. On November 14, they lost 28-14 to the Newark Tornadoes before 7,000 fans in Newark, one of the AA's largest crowds that year.

In 1938, a rival black pro football team was organized, the New York Black Yankees. Not only did the upstarts compete for the fans' patronage, they also signed a contract for the exclusive fall use of Dyckman Oval. The Brown Bombers could not secure a suitable replacement stadium. As a result, Fritz

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Pollard resigned as coach. The Brown Bombers struggled for a few more years as a road team and eventually folded shortly after World War II, just as the NFL was starting to relax its racial barriers.

II Wilmeth Sidat-Singh

In the 1930's, some of the predominantly white colleges fielded racially integrated football teams. One of the best black players for a major college was Wilmeth Sidat-Singh of Syracuse University. He was born in Washington, D.C., and he moved to New York City with his mother when he was still a young boy. His mother married an Indian doctor, Samuel Sidat-Singh, who adopted the boy and gave him his Indian name. The family lived in Manhattan, but young Sidat-Singh attended DeWitt Clinton High School in the north Bronx.

After receiving his high school diploma in the Bronx, Sidat-Singh starred in both football and basketball for Syracuse University. In 1937, he started at quarterback as a junior. He was one of the finest passers in the nation. Many sportswriters compared him favorably to Benny Friedman, Sammy Baugh, and Sid Luckman. When Syracuse played in the South, however, Sidat-Singh was benched. On October 23, 1937, unbeaten Syracuse traveled to Maryland to face the Terrapins. Local custom kept Sidat-Singh off the field. Maryland won by a score of 14-0.

In 1938, Sidat-Singh and the Orangemen had their revenge over Maryland. Meeting in Syracuse, the Orangemen crushed the Terps 51-0, with Sidat-Singh leading the offense. In the same season, Sidat-Singh showed his greatness in a game against heavily-favored Cornell. With nine minutes to go, Syracuse trailed by a score of 10-0. Sidat-Singh then unleashed his passing arm and engineered a stunning, come-from-behind 19-17 victory for Syracuse. In the final nine minutes, Sidat-Singh threw three touchdown passes. Famous sportswriter Grantland Rice called Sidat-Singh's performance "one of the most amazing exhibitions of machine gun fire I've ever seen, where the odds were all the other way."

Despite his heroics, the wire services did not honor Sidat-Singh with All-American nominations. As expected, no NFL team bid for his services. The closest he came to NFL action was on September 7, 1939, when he played on the Eastern All-Star college squad which faced the New York Giants in the Polo Grounds in a then-annual charity benefit game. The Giants won 10-0. While teammates Sid Luckman, Bill Osmanski, and Marshall Goldberg reported to NFL teams after the game, Sidat-Singh's football career was over. He played pro basketball for a while. When World War II broke out, he joined the Army and became a fighter pilot in an all-black unit based in Michigan. On May 9, 1943, he died when a plane he was piloting crashed into Lake Huron. He was 25 years old. When the NFL again allowed black players on the field in 1946, he would have been only 29 years old. He was about the same age as the two black players who played with the Rams that year, Kenny Washington and Woody Strode.

III After World War II

After World War II, doors of opportunity began to open for blacks in American society. One such door was the opportunity to play pro football at the highest level. Even before the War, some writers and fans had protested against racial segregation in pro football. The War itself put a greater emphasis on the ideals of democracy and equal opportunity for all. Laws against discrimination were being passed throughout the nation. In late 1945, the Brooklyn Dodgers of major league baseball signed Jackie Robinson to a minor league contract, the first step in a long road away from injustice.

In 1946, pro football took its first step in dismantling racial barriers. The Cleveland Rams, the 1945 NFL champions, moved to Los Angeles. They moved into the Los Angeles Coliseum, a municipal stadium with a seating capacity of 100,000. Anti-discrimination laws were already in force in California. Rams' owner Dan Reeves decided to hire black players, both to abide by the law and to woo black customers to his team. Reeves hired the first two black players in NFL since 1933, halfback Kenny Washington and end Woody Strode, both UCLA graduates.

Another league took the field in 1946 in competition with the NFL. The All American Football Conference fielded eight teams, directly challenging the NFL in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The AAFC Commissioner was Jim Crowley, one of the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame in the 1920's and coach of the Fordham Rams in the 1930's. Crowley had led the Bronx school to some of its most successful seasons. Crowley stated publicly that the AAFC had "no rule that bars a Negro athlete from playing." He told a black newspaper that the AAFC "is just what the name implies; it is All American in every respect." In 1946, however, only the Cleveland Browns fielded black players in the AAFC. The Browns signed

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fullback Marion Motley and guard Bill Willis, both of whom would have Hall of Fame careers. In their first pro season, however, Motley and Willis encountered a persistent manifestation of racial discrimination. When the Browns traveled to Miami to play the Seahawks, a state segregation law kept Motley and Willis off the field. The Browns nevertheless trounced the Seahawks 34-0.

In 1947, several AAFC teams signed black players. The New York Yankees, based in Yankee Stadium, hired Buddy Young, a small but extremely elusive halfback. More fans watched the Yankees in the Bronx this year than watched the Giants in the Polo Grounds in Manhattan. The two outstanding AAFC games of 1947 took place in the Bronx. When the Browns came to Yankee Stadium, the Yankees led 28-0 after three quarters. With Otto Graham going to the air, the Browns came back to earn a 28-28 tie. On December 14, the Browns returned to Yankee Stadium to face the Yankees in the AAFC championship game. A league record crowd of 60,103 watched the Browns beat the Yankees 14-3. The two rushing leaders in the game were Marion Motley and Buddy Young, both black athletes.

IV The Integration of the NFL

Pro football took on a new look in 1950, when the NFL absorbed the three best franchises of the AAFC. In the newly consolidated league, the New York Yanks played in Yankee Stadium in 1950 and 1951. The team then moved to Dallas for 1952 and on to Baltimore in 1953 for a long stay. Starting in 1952, Yankee Stadium would not host NFL football for four years. When the Polo Grounds in Manhattan became unattractive because of limited parking and rough conditions in the surrounding Harlem neighborhood, the football Giants looked to leave their ancestral home. In 1956, the Giants moved to the Bronx, joining the baseball Yankees in Yankee Stadium.

The last NFL team to hire black players was the Washington Redskins, who held to a policy of segregation after all other teams had integrated by the mid-1950's. In 1957, the Redskins came to Yankee Stadium for an October game against the Giants. This game in the Bronx was the first at which protesters demonstrated against Washington's racial policy. By 1962, after much political pressure, the Redskins were finally ready to integrate. One of the last straws was a 53-0 beating at the hands of the Giants in the Bronx during the 1961 season. The Redskins embarked on a new path by drafting Syracuse halfback Ernie Davis, the 1961 Heisman Trophy winner and the first black player to win that award. The Redskins promptly traded Davis to the Cleveland Browns for halfback Bobby Mitchell, one of four black players who played for Washington in 1962. Mitchell went on to a Hall of Fame career and is involved presently in Redskin management. Although integration immediately helped the Redskins, the team would not enjoy a winning season until 1969, when Fordham graduate Vince Lombardi coached the team for his only season before his untimely death just before the start of the 1970 season.

V The Giants in Yankee Stadium

The Giants moved to the Bronx for the 1956 season. They celebrated the move by winning the NFL championship, the team's first since 1938. Defense was the Giants trademark in 1956 and for the good years that followed. In 1956, the Giant defense was the first defensive unit to be announced in pre-game introductions at home games.

The Giant defense rose to its greatest heights when facing Jim Brown of the Cleveland Browns. Perhaps the best running back ever, Brown starred in the Cleveland backfield from 1957 through 1965. In 1958, he ran for a record 1,527 yards and 17 touchdowns in a 12 game schedule. On December 21, 1958, the Browns and the Giants met in Yankee Stadium in a playoff game to break their tie for the Eastern Division title. In a defensive classic, the Giants beat the Browns 10-0. The New York defense held the potent Cleveland offense to a meager total of 86 yards. Unbelievably, the Giants limited Jim Brown to only eight yards rushing for the entire game.

With that playoff victory, the Giants went on to the 1958 NFL championship game. On December 28, 1958, the Baltimore Colts came to the Bronx to fight the Giants for the title. This would be the first championship decided in a sudden-death overtime period. A short touchdown run by Alan Ameche gave the Colts a 23-17 victory at 8:15 of the first ever overtime period. This game was later hailed as "The Greatest Game Ever Played." This game ignited public interest in pro football, which became the favored sport of television viewers. The legend of Johnny Unitas, the young Baltimore quarterback, was born that day. The Baltimore Colts themselves were descendants of the New York Yanks, who played in Yankee Stadium in 1950 and 10-51, moved to Dallas in 1952, and finally settled in Baltimore in 1953.

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The Giants stayed strong through the 1963 season, then dropped into mediocrity. In 1965, the Giants hosted another great runner, Gale Sayers of the Chicago Bears. On November 28, 1965, Sayers and the Bears beat the Giants 35-0 at Yankee Stadium. In the 1970's, the movie "Brian's Song" featured the story of Sayers and his running mate Brian Piccolo. The leading role of Brian Piccolo was played by James Caan, an actor from the Bronx.

The Giants left Yankee Stadium in September of 1973, when the old ballpark closed for renovation. The Giants would never again play in the Bronx, moving instead to a new stadium in New Jersey in 1976.

VI The Modern Era

Since 1973, Pro football has not been played in the Bronx. Nevertheless, the Bronx continues to contribute to the sport. At the end of each season, the San Francisco 49ers give the Len Eshmont Award for inspiration and courageous play. Len Eshmont was a star halfback for Fordham in 1940 and a member of the original 49ers squad of 1946. Another Fordham graduate, Wellington Mara, has owned and operated the Giants for decades, through good years and bad.

Eugene Klein owned the San Diego Chargers for a number of years during the 1980's. He once was a car salesman in the Bronx. Bill Polian, a Bronx native, is the general manager of the Buffalo Bills. His keen eye for talent has boosted the Bills to the top of the AFC.

Fordham no longer has a nationally ranked football team, but the Rams still send an occasional player onto pro football. Kurt Sohn was a useful receiver and special teams player for the Jets from 1981 to 1988. Sam Bowers played tight end for the USFL New Jersey Generals from 1983 to 1985 and for the 1987 NFL Chicago Bears as a strike replacement. As the Fordham football program improves, one can hope that another NFL player will soon again come off the Bronx campus.

VII Major Black Stars with Bronx Connections

Fritz Pollard coached the New York Brown Bombers from 1935 through 1938. The Brown Bombers played in Dyckman Oval, located in upper Manhattan, almost in the Bronx. In 1916, as a member of the Brown University team, Pollard was the first black player to play in the Rose Bowl and the first black player named to Walter Camp's All-American team. He turned professional with the Akron Pros in 1919 and led that team to the APFA Championship in 1920. He played in the NFL through 1926. In 1954, he was elected to the College Football Hall of Fame. He has some support for election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Buddy Young scored 13 touchdowns in his senior year at Illinois in 1944. He thus equaled a Big 10 Conference record set by Red Grange in 1924. Both Grange and Young played halfback for Illinois, then played professionally for the New York football Yankees in Yankee Stadium. Buddy Young was 5'7" and 170 pounds, blessed with a sprinter's speed and elusive moves. He was one of the pioneering black players in both the AAFC and the NFL in the post-war years. As a member of the 1952 Dallas Texans, he was the first black player on the Baltimore Colts. After his playing days, he served as NFL Director of Player Relations from 1964 to 1983. During the 1970's and 1980's, he also worked closely with Dom Preziosa, coach of DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, in establishing scholarships and college programs for Bronx minority students.

Emlen Tunnell starred as a defensive back for the Giants between 1948 and 1958. During those years, he resided at the Concourse Plaza hotel, just up the street from Yankee Stadium. His 79 lifetime interceptions rank second in lifetime rankings. When Fordham grad Vince Lombardi became head coach of the Green Bay Packers in 1959, he brought Tunnell with him as a player and assistant coach. He was the NFL's first black assistant coach. He returned to Yankee Stadium in the late 1960's and early 1970's as the defensive secondary coach. In 1967, he was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, the first black player and the first defensive specialist to win that honor.

Calvin Hill starred at Riverdale Prep, a high school in the Bronx, in the 1960's. After graduating from Yale, he had a productive pro career between 1969 and 1981. He was the NFL rookie of the year in 1969. He enjoyed 1,000 yard rushing seasons for the Dallas Cowboys in 1972 and 1973. In the 1972 playoffs, Hill was part of Dallas' great 30-28 victory over the 49ers, with the Cowboys scoring 17 unanswered points in the fourth quarter. In 1986, the Cleveland Browns made Hill the director of the team's drug abuse program. He remains a part of the Cleveland management.

VIII Summary

Whenever a team wins the Super Bowl, it receives the Vince Lombardi Trophy, named after an illustrious product of the Fordham campus on Rose Hill in the Bronx. Everytime the Lombardi Outland trophy is awarded to the best college lineman of the season, another Bronx connection exists. When the Heisman Trophy is awarded to the best college player of the season, yet another Bronx connection exists. The model for the sturdy ballcarrier on the trophy was Ed Smith, a halfback for NYU in the 1930's, when that school had a major football team and a campus on University Heights, in the Bronx.