

Leveling the Playing Field: African-Americans and Collegiate Athletics

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There are numerous accounts of the African-American civil rights movement that spanned the 1950s and 1960s, nearly all of which have centered on the fight for political access and equal treatment in public facilities. What little academic attention has been paid to the area of athletics has been geared towards professional sports, specifically Jackie Robinson and his struggles toward integrating baseball in 1948. *Sports Illustrated* journalist Jack Olsen brought the issue of endemic racism in collegiate athletic programs to the fore in his 1968 series, "The Black Athlete." Student athletes' struggle for equality in collegiate athletics has received comparatively less attention, despite its effect on schools in all areas of the country. Part of the reason for this, as Jack Olsen points out, is that members of the sports community think they have done more than their share in contributing to better race relations.¹ While it is an oversimplification to say that the sports community was significantly ahead of the rest of society, the partnership that developed between athletes and activist universities represents a special relationship of cooperation between authorities and African-Americans not often found during the civil rights era.

Throughout the fifties, sixties, and into the seventies, black athletes at the collegiate level labored for representation and equal treatment in their programs. This paper will chronicle their movement for equality in collegiate athletics beginning with the integration of programs in southern universities, and then turn to a discussion of the problems encountered by African-American athletes in collegiate programs throughout the United States. Further, this paper will illustrate that the successes experienced by

¹ Jack Olsen, "The Black Athlete: A Shameful Story. Part 1: The Cruel Deception," *Sports Illustrated*, 1 July 1968, 15.

the athletes resulted in significant changes to university practices with regards to African-Americans on the playing field and in the classroom. Finally, this paper argues that the movement for integration and equality in collegiate athletics occurred outside the structure of the mainstream civil rights movement and without the assistance of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the main governing body in college sports.

Academic institutions, governments at all levels of the federal system, and the courts carried out the business of integrating collegiate sports on behalf of African-Americans starting as early as the 1940s. Institutions traditionally involved in civil rights issues such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) rarely worked on behalf of black student athletes. Collegiate athletes themselves were active in the movement for the integration of sports, not standing by and waiting for it to be done for them.

There is little question that collegiate athletes would have followed in the path of the mainstream civil rights movement and eventually begun to agitate for reforms on their own. They "had seen, all too often, the spectacle of black people demonstrating and picketing groups organizations and institutions" and used this as a blueprint for their own movement.² Fortunately for them, the athletes did not have to rely only on the blueprint left for them by the NAACP, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Within academia there already was a history of institutional activism with regards to the segregation of athletics. As early as 1940 there had been movements on college campuses to oppose segregation in sports. However, broad mainstream support of athletic integration and reform did not take root until the fifties and sixties when many northern universities began to take proactive steps in voicing their dissatisfaction with segregationist practices in athletic departments.

Despite the widespread recognition of athletics as a possible road to upward mobility, only on rare occasions did members of the mainstream civil rights movement get involved in attempts to

² Harry Edwards, "Harry Edwards Reviews the Making of the Black Athletic Revolt, 1967," from *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*, (New York: Free Press, 1969), 40-47. [Online]: <http://www.barnard.columbia.edu/amstud/resources/civil%rights/edwards.htm> [10 December 2003].

level the playing field in collegiate athletics. The national office of the NAACP, standard-bearer for the civil rights movement, never publicly expressed major concerns with the state of affairs in the NCAA and its members' athletic programs. The same is true of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Dr. Harry Edwards, a collegiate athlete and agitator for equal treatment in sports, posits that the "civil rights leaders of the day probably determined that they should not 'rock the boat' or otherwise disrupt sport's alleged progress by projecting the protest movement into that arena."³ This lack of interest from the mainstream civil rights movement left black athletes to their own devices in working towards fair treatment.

Integrated collegiate athletic programs had existed for decades prior to the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954, nearly all of them in northern states. However, in the years following this decision, southern state governments struggled to maintain segregation in their states. Southern state governments proved particularly resistant in the area of athletics. Jim Crow laws, with regards to the mixing of the races on the playing field, were initially repealed and subsequently re-enacted in several southern states. Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi legislatures all passed laws forbidding universities in their states from playing integrated teams on their home fields. Sponsors of a bill barring integrated athletic contests in Birmingham, Alabama said the purpose of their law was "to make clear at least, how the people feel about their social traditions."⁴ The Mississippi House of Representatives took this a step further in 1956, introducing a bill that would have forbade schools in that state from playing against any schools that had integrated athletic squads, no matter the venue.

The actions of the southern states created heated debate within the collegiate athletic community, especially in 1956. Over the course of that year, many northern colleges took institutional stands against segregation in athletic departments. The intensity of this battle can be most clearly seen in the controversy surrounding the 1957 Sugar Bowl in Louisiana, which slated Georgia Tech University against the University of Pittsburgh. In

³ Ibid.

⁴ *New York Times*, 3 June 1954.

June of 1956 the Louisiana legislature introduced a bill prohibiting integrated participation in athletic contests. Despite widespread criticism of the legislation from outside the south, threats of boycott by northern schools, including the University of Pittsburgh, and a plea from the governing body of the Sugar Bowl, the bill was passed in the legislature, and Governor Earl Long signed it into law. In doing so, Long stated, "the comment I've had over the state has run about 4 to 1 in favor of it... In signing it, I'm going along with a majority that I've heard from."⁵

Immediately following passage of the bill into law, Notre Dame, the University of Dayton, and St. Louis University withdrew from the basketball tournament associated with the Sugar Bowl festivities. Additionally, many other northern schools including Wisconsin, Marquette, Cincinnati, and Harvard broke ties with and cancelled scheduled games against all segregated sports programs. Despite the widespread opposition to the Louisiana law within the collegiate athletic community, the NCAA did not take any action to encourage its repeal or relaxation. Instead, they deferred responsibility by referring to NCAA by-laws, which made no reference to segregation, and to the fact that it was the state that enforced the law in question, not the Sugar Bowl itself. In response to this controversy, the Georgia legislature countered by introducing legislation forbidding state schools from playing in contests that did not abide by the segregation laws of the state in which the game occurred.

The collegiate athletic establishment never took legal action against the Louisiana law (or others like it) despite the problems it caused. The law in question remained on the books until 1959, when a professional boxer challenged its legality in court. In *Dorsey v. State Athletic Commission*, the District Court held that Act 579 of 1956 violated the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution and opposed the Supreme Court decision in *Brown*. The Louisiana State Athletic Commission appealed the decision to the United States Supreme Court where it was affirmed.

The fight for a playing field open to all races continued after the *Dorsey* decision. While the southern states were required to obey the decision, it in no way enforced any guidelines for

⁵ *New York Times*, 17 July 1956.

universities in their practices with regards to the recruiting of players. The athletic programs of many southern schools remained completely segregated throughout the fifties and well into the sixties. This was especially true for schools in the Deep South, particularly the Southeast Conference (SEC) of the NCAA. It would be nearly a decade after the *Brown* decision and four years after *Dorsey* before many of the major southern colleges would desegregate their athletic programs.

The Texas and Oklahoma University systems took the lead and desegregated their athletic programs first, Oklahoma being the earliest in 1955. Schools in Western and Northern Texas followed suit the following year, though not always voluntarily. North Texas State College integrated their athletic programs in 1956 with the half-hearted concession of that school's president James C. Matthews. Matthews' acquiescence resulted from a Supreme Court decision against North Texas in which the school was found to be acting in opposition to *Brown*.⁶ Fearing further legal trouble, he gave in when two African-Americans expressed interest in the athletic program there. As Ronald Marcello points out in his case study, the integration of North Texas' athletic program went very smoothly; so smoothly in fact, the following year the college president gave the coaching staff permission to begin recruiting black players.⁷ The schools in the eastern most portion of the state would not follow suit until 1963 when The University of Texas, Texas Tech, and Texas A&M desegregated.

The years 1963 through 1966 represent a turning point in the leveling of the playing field; integration efforts in collegiate athletics would start picking up momentum in what one journalist for the *New York Times* called the "hard core south." It is during this time period that there occurred many firsts on the fields and courts of collegiate athletes. Several southern schools enrolled their first black athletes, offering some of them scholarships. These include Wake Forest and Duke universities in North Carolina and the University of Maryland. Furthermore, 1963 saw Mississippi State University break with tradition and allow their basketball team to play against an integrated opponent; and, most

⁶ Ronald E. Marcello, "The Integration of Intercollegiate Athletics in Texas: North Texas State College as a Test Case, 1956," in *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 14, 1987, 286-291.

⁷ Ibid.

important, the University of Kentucky became the first SEC school to contemplate the integration of its athletic program.

In 1963, the University of Kentucky (UK) began to consider integrating their athletic program, prompted by an editorial in the student newspaper.⁸ Although no rule existed in the SEC by-laws requiring segregation of athletic teams, the university felt it prudent to circulate an informal poll to other conference members asking them to comment on whether there would be an adverse affect on the relationship between their schools if UK decided to desegregate. Reactions were mixed among the member schools that replied. Georgia Tech and Tulane both answered negative-ly, while Mississippi State said that it would affect their ability to schedule home games against UK. Several of the athletic directors responded in the press, shifting responsibility for making the decision to school presidents or boards of regents. Jeff Beard, the athletic director at Auburn University, told the *Atlanta Constitution* that the decision would "be a matter for the Board of Trustees, not the athletic department."⁹

Despite the mixed reaction, the University of Kentucky officially announced the voluntary integration of their athletic teams in May of 1963, one month after circulating the poll. The remainder of the Southeast Conference would maintain segregated programs until 1966 when the United States Office of Education ordered the desegregation of the athletic programs. It did so on the grounds of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits segregation in any programs that receive federal funding.

By the mid-1960s, African-Americans had effected a "significant fracturing of the total segregation that had existed... in one realm eschewed by Dr. [Martin Luther] King-sport."¹⁰ Yet there remained significant problems to be addressed in the treatment and opportunities afforded African-American athletes.

⁸ *New York Times*, 13 April 1963.

⁹ *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 April 1963. Just prior to this statement Beard stated that he could not recall, but did not think, Auburn had "ever played against teams using Negroes" and that "if the question were to materialize, Kentucky must make its own decision... Auburn or other SEC Schools shouldn't help make it for them."

¹⁰ Harry Edwards, "The Man Who Would Be King in the Sports Arena" on *ESPN.com*, 28 February 2002. [Online]: <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/print?id=1340982&type=story> [10 December 2003].

Racist coaches and teammates, institutionalization of failing academic programs and social injustices were rampant in collegiate athletics. Sports, which represented what African-Americans perceived to be the greatest area of opportunity, retained many racist practices, riddling this path to greater economic and social equity with obstacles.

As shown in Jack Olsen's five-part series for *Sports Illustrated*, black athletes had plenty of reasons to complain about unfairness in the world of collegiate athletics. Because most black athletes came from poor backgrounds, they were ill prepared socially and educationally when they arrived on predominantly white college campuses. Furthermore, the racist beliefs of their coaches and teammates hindered the black athlete's ability to integrate into the white social scene. Through interviews with black athletes, Olsen illustrates their collegiate experience as lonely and alienating. Many complained of lacking a peer group and mistreatment at the hands of their coaches. The difficulty black athletes had relating to their white peers and coaches shows that the theory of athletics being an avenue to greater integration is flawed. In his interview with Jack Olsen a University of Kansas basketball coach stated, "of all my Negro players...only one...ever became completely integrated."¹¹

With only sparse African-American representation on college campuses during the sixties, black athletes were forced to attempt to integrate themselves into the white college social scene. But the racist beliefs that still ran deep in the white community hampered most attempts. There are numerous stories of black athletes having their eligibility threatened by coaches for being seen conversing with white girls, on or off campus. Instances of this were widespread, affecting athletes on campuses from Southern Texas to Northern California and Washington. On a rare occasion in 1965, the NAACP issued a press release against the practice of coaches trying to dictate black athletes' social lives. The local chapter in Champaign, Illinois accused the University of Illinois of racial insensitivity because coaches allegedly told black athletes to "limit their social contact to fellow Negroes."¹²

¹¹ Jack Olsen, "The Black Athlete: A Shameful Story. Part 2: Pride and Prejudice," *Sports Illustrated*, 1 July 1968, 25.

¹² *New York Times*, 14 February 1965.

The coaches' treatment of African-American athletes on the field was in many cases equally reprehensible. Too often black athletes were seen as tools for winning games and not as student-athletes. Coaches treated their black athletes as sub-human, frequently referring to them as animals. Abuse of African-American athletes by universities and the coaches that represented them took many forms. At the University of Kansas, Olsen describes what he calls a "peculiar relationship" between an assistant coach and one of the African-American players assigned to him, which revolved around the coach kicking the player in what the coach perceived as a joking manner. Other black members of the team saw this as the coach's true colors showing. Olsen quotes Willie McDaniel as saying "it wouldn't have been the team joke if the coach had been kicking me!"¹³

While there is little question that there are many other cases like that of the player at the University of Kansas, more often coaches engaged in more subtle physical abuse of their African-American athletes. Black players were recruited for the sole purpose of winning games. In their zeal to succeed on the field, white coaches would play black athletes regardless of their physical condition. Black players were aware of the precariousness of their position on athletic teams and at universities forcing them to endure great physical hardships on the field. Olsen quotes a black basketball player as saying "they [the coaches and trainers] figure that the Negro is Superman... we can't get hurt."¹⁴ In order to maintain their eligibility black athletes suffered through injuries in the hopes that their perseverance would be rewarded with a professional contract.

African-Americans' relations with their white teammates were no better. White athletes often carried with them the same racist baggage that the coaches, or just could not relate well with the blacks. A former black athlete interviewed by Olsen says that there were two types of whites that he encountered in his time in college, the first being "the one who thinks that the way to be friendly with us is to tell the latest 'nigger' joke...to show how relaxed they are," and the second "kind of white who'll right away have to begin a deep think session on the problems of race. They

¹³ Olsen, "The Black Athlete: Pride and Prejudice," 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

are absolutely incapable of taking us as human beings. They can't talk normally to us."¹⁵

The lack of involvement of the mainstream civil rights organizations left the African-American athlete without strong leadership, resulting in a loose, decentralized movement. Harry Edwards took the mantle of leadership in the movement, speaking out on the behalf of African-American athletes and against the injustices they faced. Edwards represented the majority of African-American athletes in that he viewed his athletic prowess as a means to rise above his socio-economic condition. Following his undergraduate basketball career at San Jose State College, he enrolled in graduate school at Cornell University in the sociology program. In 1965, he began agitating for the recognition of the unfair practices of collegiate athletic programs and their treatment of African-Americans.

Edwards is best known for his involvement in the movement for a protest of the 1968 Olympic Games by black athletes. However, he was then, and remains a harsh critic of the collegiate athletic establishment and its treatment of African-American athletes. In 1965, he organized a protest at San Jose State College that resulted in the cancellation of the opening home game of the football season. In organizing the protest, Edwards and his organization United Black Students for Action (UBSA) approached the administration with a series of demands, among them reforms in the athletic department.¹⁶

Despite the lack of centralized leadership, African-American athletes were remarkably active on campus in social struggles for themselves and on behalf of the entire civil rights movement. Throughout the sixties and into the early seventies these athletes campaigned for reforms using the non-violent methods espoused by the mainstream civil rights movement. The most successful tool at the disposal African-American athletes was the boycott. Athletes threatened to boycott for a wide variety of reasons from lack of representation on coaching staffs to the racial practices of their opponents.

In 1968, the year of greatest protest for many social and political movements, black athletes in growing numbers protested,

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *New York Times*, 21 September 1965.

on and off field, racial injustices. Issues as disparate as lack of representation on coaching staffs to cheerleading squads were the onus behind African-American athletes threatening to boycott practices and games until their complaints were taken seriously. Of the many large American universities—including Colorado State, University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and Stanford—where athletes were protesting racial injustice, three of the student groups were fighting for reforms to remedy institutional racism within their respective departments. Black student athletes at Michigan State University, San Jose State College and the University of California banded together and issued demands to their schools. In these instances the grievances of the athletes were not merely regarding the cosmetics of the coaching staffs, but academic as well. They demanded that the practice of placing athletes in curriculums solely to maintain their eligibility be ended to facilitate their ability to graduate.

In 1968, UTEP, a school known for its recruitment and exploitation of African-American athletes, became embroiled in racial turmoil. It became the first school where black athletes gave up their scholarships due to racism on the coaching staff. African-American athletes were upset over the double standard exhibited with regards to black and white athletes in terms of educational opportunity and family assistance. Additionally, they protested the incessant use of the word “nigger” by the coaching staff, after repeated pleas by the African-American members of the team for it to stop.¹⁷

In response to racism on coaching staffs, African-American student athletes utilized threats of boycott in order to persuade university athletic departments to hire black coaches would better understand them and their needs. Such tactics were successfully utilized at Marquette University, the University of California and the University of Washington. At Marquette members of the faculty joined in the protest, threatening to walk out if the athletes demands were not met. In all three cases the Universities acquiesced.

One of the most widespread protests by collegiate athletes occurred from 1968 to 1970 involving athletes in the Western

¹⁷ Jack Olsen, “The Black Athlete: A Shameful Story. Part 3: In An Alien World,” in *Sports Illustrated*, 15 July 1968, 31.

Athletic Conference (WAC). Black athletes protested in unprecedented numbers against taking the field against Brigham Young University (BYU) due to the racist policies of the Mormon Church, which operates Brigham Young. At the heart of their complaint was that the Mormon Church effectively kept African-Americans from full membership in the church by refusing to bestow priesthood upon them.¹⁸

Black athletes from San Jose State College, Colorado State University, University of Arizona and University of Washington mobilized campus protests against athletic department ties with BYU.¹⁹ The student protests took different forms, some organized student rallies against the policies of Brigham Young while other athletes refused to participate in games involving BYU. At the University of Arizona black student athletes agreed to play in a game for fear of losing funding, but asked that a conscience clause be added to athletic scholarships allowing them to refuse to play in games against schools that practiced, or were affiliated with institutions that practiced segregationist principles. Another University of Arizona student asked WAC to expel Brigham Young due to the racist policies of the church.

Student protests against Brigham Young University were successful in that they opened a dialog within the Mormon Church. In December of 1969, the church released a statement to their congregations explaining the reasons for the protest of their university's athletic schedule and the church's position with regards to African-Americans and the priesthood. However, the students did not effect a change in the practices of the Mormon Church, which stated, in no uncertain terms, that they would not be dictated by worldly protests, only by revelation from God.²⁰

¹⁸ *New York Times*, 1 December 1968, 6 December 1968, 5 November 1969, 6 November 1969, 13 November 1969, 24 December 1969, 9 January 1970, 6 February 1970, and 12 February 1970.

¹⁹ Athletes from UTEP were cut from their track team after they went to their coach to ask permission to not compete against BYU. In a little poetic justice, it is believed that UTEP did not win the national title because of the loss of these athletes.

²⁰ *New York Times*, 9 January 1970. The Mormon Church would not change its position until 1978 when new leadership in the church reported that they had received a revelation from God stating that the time had come for full membership to be bestowed upon African-Americans.

Black student-athletes led many of the above-mentioned protests themselves for the purpose of reforming the system for those that would follow in their path. However, many coaches and fans looked upon these forward-looking students as ungrateful, compromising the opportunity for those that might succeed them. Harry Edwards answers these critics saying, "the cliché that sports has been good to the Negro has been accepted by black and white, liberal and conservative, intellectual and red-neck. And the Negro athlete who has the nerve to suggest that all is not perfect is branded as ungrateful, a cur that bites the hand."²¹ Anthony Ripley of the *New York Times* speculated in a 1969 article that "there is an element of self destruction in [black student militancy]. It has led to dismissals and a cutback in recruiting, and for many blacks from poor families a college education means a football scholarship. At stake for a few...are lucrative professional contracts later on."²² To substantiate this claim he cited the commissioner of the Western Athletic Conference as saying many schools are rethinking their practices of recruiting heavily in the African-American community.

This proposed recruitment boycott of African-American athletes never materialized. Collegiate athletic programs continued the practice of using black athletes for their own prestige, only on rare occasions facilitating a quality education. The vast majority of black athletes recruited were not ready for a college level education. In order to keep their "hired guns" eligible, black athletes were pushed into "easy" programs of study. In forcing students into "watered down" course loads the collegiate athletic establishment had effectively prevented their black athletes from reaching their academic potential and gambled with the lives of their players.

Graduation statistics for athletes were not kept during the time period in question, but evidence presented by Olsen coupled with statistics from a *Chronicle of Higher Education* study of athletes entering college during the 1984-85 academic year illustrate the point well. African-Americans represented twenty-five percent (835 of 3288) of athletes that entered college athletics in the mid-

²¹ Olsen, "The Black Athlete: The Cruel Deception," 15.

²² Anthony Ripley, "Irate Black Athletes Stir Campus Tension," in *New York Times*, 16 November 1969.

eighties as compared to their twelve percent representation in the overall American population. Of the 835 black athletes only 26.6 percent graduated as compared to 52.3 percent of their white counterparts.²³ The numbers are even more striking when only males are factored into the equation. These statistics illustrate that the vast majority of black athletes failed to graduate despite their disproportionately high re-presentation.

The practices of grade inflation in haphazard programs of study led to the creation of the academic environment in which the disparities above could occur. Athletes who were not offered a professional contract were left on their own when their eligibility ran out. With financial and academic aid no longer available, black athletes departed college with a transcript of disjointed coursework and no degree. An unnamed white sociologist told Gary Olsen “there is nothing in the world so forlorn and useless as a Negro college athlete who has used up his eligibility....If he’s going into the pros, of course, that’s something different. But how many of them will make it with the pros? One in a hundred?”²⁴

In the waning years of the 1960s and into the 1970s, this final issue, that of academic opportunity, became the central issue for African-American athletes in their fight for equity. Students from California to Michigan agitated for reforms in this area and were largely successful. Their protests resulted in increased African-American representation on university faculties and the addition of African-American Studies courses in curricula.

In 1968, at the University of California, black student leaders called a meeting with the athletic director leaving him with a list of grievances stemming from their perception that they were treated as second-class citizens. Included in the list were many of the issues mentioned above, including reforms in academic advising and counseling, removal of quotas on scholarships, and a need for greater understanding from coaches. Highest on their priority list were demands regarding the last point of contention

²³ D. Lederman, “Academic Outcomes of Division I Athletes Entering College, 1984-85,” in Audwin Anderson and Donald South, “Racial Differences in Collegiate Recruiting, Retention, and Graduation Rates,” in Dana Brooks and Ronald Althouse, eds., *Racism in College Athletics: The African-American Athlete’s Experience* (Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology, Inc., 1993), 93.

²⁴ Olsen, “The Black Athlete: The Cruel Deception,” 16.

mentioned above: The hiring of a black trainer to prevent injured black players from being returned to action too soon, and hiring black assistant coaches to facilitate better communication between African-American athletes and the white coaches.²⁵ At Michigan State a similar situation arose in 1972, when black athletes requested continued financial and academic aid after their athletic eligibility ran out.

Despite these developments, there is very little evidence of black student-athlete protest in the schools of the Deep South, particularly in the Southeast Conference and the Atlantic Coast Conference. This is attributable to two underlying factors, the first being that the schools were very late in the integration of their programs. It would be five years after the Office of Education mandate for an end to segregation in the SEC before the last school would be integrated (Mississippi State in 1971). The second factor is that many schools placed quotas on the number of African-Americans that could be on the team, subtly enforcing it through the practice of “stacking.” Stacking entails only allowing black athletes to play at certain positions at which they are perceived to excel (wide receiver and tailback in football, guard in basketball), thereby limiting the number of roster spots available to them.

It would be easy to characterize the victories of the athlete-activists as insignificant because many of the issues they fought against persist to the present time. College athletic departments continue to recruit African-Americans in numbers exceeding their representation in society and on college campuses. However, the rate of failure is slowly being closed in important areas, including graduation rates. Currently, African-Americans represent 28.9 percent of Division I collegiate athletes that receive financial aid (scholarships/grants-in-aid), as compared to 16.6 percent of black students overall. Fifty-three percent of these students fail to graduate college within six years of entering as compared to thirty-six percent of their white counterparts and forty-three percent of overall students. The numbers become only slightly more skewed when broken down by gender and sport, where in basketball and football combined African-American males represent sixty-eight percent of the athletes in those sports, 58.1 percent of which fail to

²⁵ *New York Times*, 25 January 1968.

graduate.²⁶ When placed in comparison to the 1984-85 data shown above there is a dramatic improvement.

Furthermore, great strides have been made in awareness of issues that affect African-American athletes. Since the mid-eighties, black athletes have not had to struggle alone to prevent discriminatory practices. By raising issues at the national level, the student athletes of the sixties and seventies forced the authorities that govern collegiate athletics to take notice and become active. In 1984, the NCAA began keeping graduation statistics in an attempt to ensure un-drafted athletes who desire it, receive a complete education. In the 1990s, the NCAA also began tracking African-American representation on collegiate coaching staffs.

All of these achievements are directly attributable to the work of the athlete-activists of the sixties and seventies. Despite the failure of the mainstream civil rights movement to assist in addressing the problems of African-American collegiate athletes, many great accomplishments were achieved. Moreover, the students within the movement did not reserve their protests for issues that only affected them or their sport. To the contrary, black athletes followed the lead of Arthur Ashe who in 1968 called on black athletes “to champion the causes of their race” and used their position of power within the collegiate athletic community to push for reforms outside of sports as seen in the controversy over BYU.²⁷

It is now the dawn of the twenty-first century and the movement for equality in collegiate athletics is still alive, and as long as there are still major “firsts” occurring it will continue. Most recently, in December of 2003, a member school of the Southeast Conference hired an African-American as head coach of their football team, the first in conference history. Ironically, Mississippi State University, the longest hold out for integration of its athletic program, broke with tradition in doing so. However, a chorus of “too little, too late” began immediately showing that the movement for equality in collegiate sports is far from over.

²⁶ National Collegiate Athletic Association, “2003 NCAA Graduation Reports,” on *NCAA.org*, 1 August 2003. [Online]: http://www.ncaa.org/grad_rates/2003/d1/d1_aggregate/DI.html [11 December 2003]. This data represents the four-class average up to and including the 1996-97 school year.

²⁷ *New York Times*, 16 September 1968.

Washington Post columnist Michael Wilbon summed up the tardiness of the moment this way: “Well into the first decade of the 21st century, the SEC joined the 20th century yesterday.”²⁸ Black student-athletes are no longer alone in their struggle for fair representation in collegiate sports. Mainstream organizations that carry the torch of the civil rights movement have taken a greater interest in the area of athletics. Jesse Jackson and his Rainbow Push Coalition and the NAACP have been at the center of the drive for greater diversity on coaching staffs, as well as getting colleges to graduate greater numbers of student-athletes.

²⁸ Michael Wilbon, “Another First, This One on SEC Football Sidelines,” *Washington Post*, 3 December 2003. [Online]: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A29785-2003Dec2.html> [5 December 2003].