

## ***Journal of Issues in*** ***Intercollegiate Athletics***

### **Benching Jim Crow: The Rise and Fall of the Color Line in Southern College Sports, 1890-1990**

By Charles H. Martin. Published 2010 by University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL. (374 pages).

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College athletics have played a significant role in shaping the sociocultural environment in the United States, and researcher Charles Martin examines the intertwined nature of college sports and society in the Southern United States. The author is an associate professor of history at the University of Texas at El Paso, an institution which helped transform the college sports landscape.

Martin notes the book's primary purpose is to provide a detailed view of college athletic programs at primarily white southern universities from 1890 to 1980 as they dealt first with segregation and later integration. A secondary purpose of the book is to frame and explore this evolution within the larger sociocultural environment. The athletic programs were analyzed alongside monumental events such as World War II, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Brown v. Board of Education* rulings, the rise and fall of Jim Crow, and other major historical occurrences.

The book provides some background about the growth of intercollegiate athletics, spurred by Ivy League schools such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. This interest in sports migrated to southern colleges and universities, which embraced football and later basketball with an unmatched fervor. Southern schools believed their northern counterparts viewed them as athletically and intellectually inferior, and they used sports as an opportunity to improve the images of their athletic programs, academic institutions, and the region.

The book focuses on colleges and universities with football and basketball teams in the southern and border states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. The author acknowledges the presence of other sports at the academic institutions. In fact, Martin notes these sports often served as integration leaders--agreeing to play integrated teams and adding African-American players to their own teams. Yet Martin focuses most of the book on football and basketball, which generated significant attention for the universities and states while creating considerable debate for athletic directors, university presidents, state legislators, community leaders, and beyond.

The author divides the book into nine chapters. The first four chapters give a comprehensive overview of three eras from 1890 to 1965, while the latter chapters contain specific details about three southern conferences--the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Southeastern Conference (SEC), and Southwest Conference (SWC)--which grappled the most with the segregation and integration processes.

The first chapter covers the era from 1890 to 1929, which introduced the "gentleman's agreement." During this time period, some northern athletic programs began recruiting African-American players. However, the integrated teams refrained from playing these students during inter-sectional games staged in the north and left their minority student-athletes at home when traveling to play universities located in the south. The agreement allowed northern and southern athletic programs to strike a pact, acknowledging the South's segregationist policies and excluding African-Americans from participating alongside their white counterparts.

The second chapter discusses the era from 1929 to 1945, which witnessed more opposition to the gentlemen's agreement spurred by personal morals and financial expediency. Northern college students, faculty, and administrators no longer felt as comfortable upholding the gentleman's agreement, and their schools began moving away from segregationist policies. Additionally, the Rose Bowl and other championship games gave athletic programs the chance to earn significant revenues, and post-season participation often meant playing integrated teams. A shift away from the gentleman's agreement occurred. Northern teams began refusing to uphold the agreement when traveling to the south, and southern teams experienced increased isolation as they declined to play integrated teams in the north or take part in post-season play against teams with black athletes on their rosters.

The third chapter addresses the era from 1945 to 1965, where more integration took place on and off the playing field. Martin attributes much of this integration to World War II. During the war, the nation rallied around its troops overseas and encouraged more patriotism at home. With these patriotic efforts, more US residents supported a unified nation and believed mixed messages existed with maintaining segregationist policies for African-Americans while expecting them to support the war efforts. Ending segregation and integrating athletic teams and sporting events appeared as logical and necessary next steps.

As integration occurred across the nation, the fourth chapter provides an extensive discussion of the historic 1966 NCAA basketball championship game between Texas Western College (TWC) and the University of Kentucky (UK). The smaller Texan school started five black players, while UK had no black players on its team. TWC won the championship game, prompting further debate about segregationist policies. College athletic programs using all-white teams wondered whether they could maintain a competitive advantage against integrated teams including African-American players plus junior college and married athletes, and southern schools began to explore integration options.

While Martin highlights the numerous benefits of integration, he also argues that integrating college sports was not an instant fix. Some schools had trouble recruiting minority players, who were reluctant to play at southern institutions deemed too deeply entrenched in their earlier segregationist ways. African-American students who did play reported negative consequences such as feeling one-dimensional in the eyes of their fellow students who believed their primary--or perhaps sole purpose--was to play sports. The athletes felt they had little interaction with their fellow players beyond practices and game day pursuits. Troubles also existed when they traveled to segregated cities where restaurants and hotels refused admittance.

The last five chapters provide more information about the teams comprising the ACC, SEC, and SWC and their transition in the 1960s and 1970s from teams solely comprised of white student-athletes to teams providing more diversity in a post-segregationist era. This integration extended to the stadiums and arenas where the athletes played. Black and white spectators previously sat in separate seating; playing “Dixie” and waving Confederate flags proved the order of the day. As teams and facilities became more integrated, many of these longstanding traditions were eventually discarded.

The first half of the book moves at an engaging pace as the author provides a comprehensive view of the college sports landscape over a ninety-year period. Placing college athletics within the larger sociocultural framework of the time helps readers understand the surrounding context and realize that the sport industry does not operate within a bubble--rather the industry is influenced by and influences the larger environment. His discussion underlines this notion while providing a chronological evolution of college sports and highlighting pioneering players such as Wade Houston and Herschel Walker who paved the way for future athletes.

Where the book falters somewhat is in the second half as the author spends more time on the three southern conferences. Martin devotes full chapters to the conferences and their football and basketball teams. The chapters allocate sections to each conference team, and he discusses at length how each team’s coaches, players, and athletic departments evolved over time as they reacted to state legislatures and community stances regarding integration on and off the playing field.

Readers may be better served with an inclusion of these conferences and schools into the larger overview of the eras. The conference teams often engaged in intersectional play, as Martin notes throughout the book. Rather than viewing each conference as a distinct unit, a developed analysis of the interplay between the schools and conferences across the southern states may have presented a more lively discussion in the book’s second half.

The book may have also benefited from a greater discussion of professional sports. The author provides some details about Major League Baseball and the National Football League with their decisions to segregate and later integrate their teams. Decisions made at the professional level have a considerable effect on those made at the collegiate level and vice versa, since the caliber of students playing at the collegiate level would later affect the caliber of play at the professional level. Granted, the book’s stated focus is college athletics, but more details about the interaction between professional and college sports would have provided useful insights.

Despite these limitations, Martin’s book provided an interesting and in-depth look at a tumultuous and transformative time period, one significantly influencing the sports and athletes we watch today.