

RAY KEMP BLAZED IMPORTANT TRAIL

By Bob Barnett

For black athletes, the integration of American sport and the struggle for acceptance by white teammates, coaches, and fans has never been an easy task. When Jackie Robinson integrated major league baseball in 1947 with the Brooklyn Dodgers, he faced verbal abuse, dirty play, and hostile fans. Bill Willis and Marion Motley of the 1946 Cleveland Browns in the then-new All-American Football Conference were prohibited by state law from playing against the Seahawks at Miami, Florida, and were the targets of death threats. Even Roberto Clemente, one of the first Spanish-speaking black Pirates, was vilified early in his career in the press and by the fans as being lazy and a malingerer. And every black athlete who integrated formerly all-white college teams had to deal with social ostracism and discrimination. Yet each faced these ordeals knowing that their actions would hold the door open for other black athletes to follow. Many were successful and have subsequently been honored for the price they paid.

For Ray Kemp the struggle was more difficult, the price higher, and the tangible rewards have been practically nonexistent. Kemp was a charter member of the Pittsburgh Steelers (then Pirates) when they entered the NFL in 1933. He was the only black Pirate and only one of two black players in the entire NFL. His struggle took place in the heart of the Depression when economic conditions stimulated a rising tide of racism, and blacks and whites tended to separate into their own worlds. Worse yet, Kemp's battle to maintain a foothold for black players in the NFL was a lonely struggle with few rewards in sight.

Ray Kemp graduated from Cecil High School in 1926. He worked in the coal mines around Cecil for one year before enrolling at Duquesne University.

Kemp's arrival at Duquesne coincided with that of Elmer Layden, one of Notre Dame's legendary four horsemen, who had been hired to resurrect the Iron Dukes' struggling football program. Looking back at the first day of practice Kemp recalled seeing only two other black players. Kemp said, "They were gone after my first year so I was the only black on the team. In fact, I can't remember even playing against another black player the whole four years I played at Duquesne."

Kemp, hardened and matured by his year in the mines, became a starter during his sophomore year and by the end of his senior season received honorable mention on some All-American lists. Layden's coaching also succeeded beyond expectation. His 1928 team won eight of nine games and his 1929 team finished the season undefeated. By 1931, Kemp's senior season, the Dukes had progressed to the point that they played national power Carnegie Tech in a post-season charity game.

Kemp's entry into the NFL came about because of his success at Duquesne. "Art Rooney came up to me at our athletic banquet following my senior year at Duquesne and told me that he would like for me to play for his J.P. Rooney semi-pro team, if I was going to stay around Pittsburgh," Kemp recalled. The following year Kemp enrolled in graduate school at Duquesne and served as the line coach for Layden. In his spare time he did play for both the J.P. Rooneys and the semi-pro Erie Pros, again as the only black player.

The following year, the Rooneys became the nucleus of the NFL Pittsburgh Pirates. Art Rooney, Sr., recently described the transition: "I had teams which compared favorably with most of the teams in the NFL. But we had the Blue Laws in Pennsylvania and the Blue Laws were such that you couldn't play football on Sunday and belong to an organized league. In 1933, they voted the Blue Laws out and I just took my team and went into the National Football League."

That year, when Kemp and some of his Rooney teammates were joined by a collection of NFL cast-offs to form the Pirates, there was only one other black player in the NFL, Joe Lillard, a tailback with the Chicago Cardinals. From the founding of the league in 1929 through 1931, eleven black athletes played in the NFL, but by 1932 Joe Lillard was the only black player remaining.

The Pirates opened the season on September 20 with the defending Eastern Division champion New York Giants before a crowd of 25,000 in Forbes Field. As expected, the Giants rolled over the expansion

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team 23-2, but for Kemp it was a bittersweet experience. "I can recall it as if it were yesterday, the tremendous ovation I received when they announced that I was going in at tackle," Kemp said recently. "I had my hands taped heavily because that's what we did in those days for linemen. On about the third or fourth play I was in, I broke through and their passer threw the ball right into my hands, but I couldn't hold it because of the tape. Also I remember that my style of defense didn't quite harmonize with my teammates because I stood up and used my hands, and they were very critical. I talked it over with Elmer Layden after the game and he said, 'They are crazy, Ray. I saw the game and you were tremendous.'"

The following week, the Chicago Cardinals with Joe Lillard came to Forbes Field. Lillard, a triple-threat back, played a tremendous game completing a touchdown pass and kicking one of two extra points. Kemp recalled the halftime talk by Pirate coach Jap Douds. "We were in the locker room and Jap said, 'We have to stop that nigger.' However, he apologized to me for that remark on the way back out to the field."

The Pirates did stop Lillard in the fourth quarter when he and Pirate Bernie Helm were ejected from the game for fighting, a problem which followed Lillard throughout the season. Kemp said, "Joe (Lillard) was an angry young man and the players on the other teams knew what would set him off. I could take care of myself pretty well in the line so I never had those kind of problems." With Lillard out of the line-up the Pirates stormed back for a 14-13 victory, their first in the NFL.

The next week however, the Pirates lost 21-6 to the Boston Redskins and the Monday after that game, Ray Kemp was released from the Pirates. "I received a letter saying I had been dropped from the roster," Kemp said. "I talked with Art Rooney and I can recall his exact words. He said, 'Ray, I feel you are as good a ball player as we have on the club but I am not going over the head of the coach. You know how I feel about you personally.' I didn't talk to Douds personally, but he was a player-coach at my position -- tackle -- and he had a lot of cronies on the team. I just think it was a combination of things."

Kemp went back to his job in the steel mill and the Pirates went 2-5 over the next seven games. But on December 1 he received a phone call from the Pirates asking him to return to the team. "I guess I could have felt humiliated about being cut earlier and said no. I didn't need the money -- I only got \$60 a game. But I felt someone had to keep the door open. You have to pay a price for being a pioneer," Kemp said.

Strangely enough, Kemp was named to the starting lineup after only two days of practice and played the entire game at tackle against the New York Giants. Unfortunately for the Pirates, the Giants were on their way to the Eastern Division championship and romped over the Pirates 27-3 at the Polo Grounds. It was before this game in New York that Kemp paid more of that price he spoke of.

"We arrived in New York very late Friday evening and the hotel was jammed with fans looking forward to attending the Army-Navy game the next day. They assigned the Pirate players to their rooms and I was standing there. The traveling secretary said, 'Ray, I want to introduce you to the assistant manager of the hotel.' We were in New York and my guard was completely down. This man said, 'Ray, it seems we have a problem. We are sorry, we just don't have any room. We were wondering if you could stay at the YMCA, the Harlem branch of the YMCA.' Well I had no alternative but to say, 'Yes, I imagine I can.' That was one of the longest walks of my life -- to walk from that desk to the front door of the hotel."

The following morning Kemp was contacted by Walter White of the NAACP who suggested he file a discrimination suit. Kemp recalls, "I told him I wasn't being an Uncle Tom or anything, but I didn't want to file a suit which might hurt Rooney. He had given me a chance."

That game in New York was the final game of Kemp's brief career in the NFL. The next season he was hired as the head football coach at Bluefield (WV) State College. "The Pirates didn't ask me to come back," recalls Kemp, "but I wouldn't have anyway because I really wanted a coaching job."

In Kemp's first season at Bluefield State he led the Blues to an 8-0-1 record. That year was the first of a thirty-nine-year career as a successful coach and athletic director at Bluefield, Lincoln (MO) University and Tennessee A&I College.

Joe Lillard did not return to the Cardinals in 1934 nor were any black rookies signed. The 1935 season began a string of twelve seasons in which the NFL had no black players. In 1946 the Los Angeles Rams reintegrated the NFL with the signings of Woody Strode and Ken Washington. The brand new All-

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American Football Conference open its first season with black players Bill Willis and Marion Motley of the Cleveland Browns.

Ray Kemp, a soft-spoken, articulate, and gentle man is retired now and lives with his wife in a comfortable apartment in the Bellevue section of Pittsburgh. "I am invited to all of the Steeler alumni functions and am still good friends with Art Rooney," he said recently. "A writer for the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* interviewed me for a story (published July 31, 1981) but not many people really know who I am."

As he paused and jiggled his car keys, a sharp edge came to his voice. He added, "It wasn't too bad in the sense that everywhere I went I had white people befriend me -- like Elmer Layden and Art Rooney. I always felt that someone had to pay the price for being a pioneer, and I tried."

For black pioneers like Jackie Robinson, there is a postage stamp in his honor and a place in history books. For other black pioneers like Ray Kemp there are only bittersweet memories of a price honorably paid.