

Not Only the Ball Was Brown

BLACK PLAYERS IN MINOR LEAGUE FOOTBALL, 1933-46

by Bob Gill and Tod Maher

As most of you know, between 1933, when Joe Lillard played for the Chicago Cardinals and Ray Kemp for Pittsburgh, and 1946, when Kenny Washington and Woody Strode joined the Los Angeles Rams, the NFL had an unofficial ban on black players. But back in the 1920s, a few blacks had indeed played in the NFL, some of them very well. That raises an interesting question: Where did comparable black players of the '30s go?

Among its other virtues, Thomas Smith's fine article in the last *Coffin Corner* ("Outside the Pale") included short profiles of several blacks who starred on integrated college teams during the period. In passing, he also noted that more than one of them did play professional football (though he sometimes mislabels it "semi-pro") outside the NFL. There were black touring teams, occasional blacks playing on integrated teams, a couple of all-black teams playing in leagues with white clubs, and even one all-black league something like a lower-class version of baseball's Negro Leagues.

We're going to take a look at just what was going on "outside the pale" in those days.

The following article, by Tod Maher, concerns what Smith calls (correctly) "the most successful" all-black team of the period: the New York Brown Bombers.

The Brown Bombers

by Tod Maher

1933 was a notable year for the NFL. It was the first in which the league was divided into regional divisions. It was the first time the league held a postseason championship game.

But it was also the last season in which blacks were allowed to play. During the offseason the NFL joined major league baseball in imposing an "unofficial" color line.

One of the last two blacks to play in the NFL before the ban was Oregon State back Joe Lillard. It was Lillard, along with Fritz Pollard, who formed the Brown Bombers professional team in 1936.

Pollard, another outstanding back, was the NFL's first (and so far only) black head coach. That experience resulted in his being named head coach of the Bombers.

The Bombers were named, of course, after the great heavyweight boxer Joe Louis, the most respected and well-known black athlete of his time.

Though they nominally represented Harlem, the Bombers were primarily a road team. Thus details of the team's history are often sketchy at best.

The first known Bombers game was played September 23 at Passaic, New Jersey. A sparse crowd of only 500 fans was on hand to see the Passaic Red Devils (members of the American Association) defeat the Bombers 3-0.

The Brown Bombers would frequently play American Association teams during the next few years, compiling a 1-5-1 record against members of the league.

The Bombers played at least two more games in 1936. They lost to the New Rochelle Bulldogs (of the AA) 19-13 and tied the Providence Steamroller (of the New England Football League) 0-0.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 11, No. 5 (1989)

1937 appears to be the high point in the history of the Brown Bombers. A total of five games, four against AA teams, are known. Among them was a "home" game (the only one we can document) against the AA's Brooklyn Eagles at Dykman Oval. The Bombers led on a Joe Lillard touchdown pass until the fourth quarter, when the Eagles tied the game.

Three days later the Bombers met the Danbury Trojans of the AA in Danbury before 2,000 Connecticut fans. The Trojans scored twice for a 12-0 win.

Two weeks later the Bombers played what was probably the biggest game in the team's history, a tough 3-0 win over the White Plains Bears, another AA team.

Overall, the Brown Bombers compiled at least a respectable 2-2-1 record in 1937.

In 1938 we know of two games played by the all-black eleven. Unfortunately, both were losses to two teams going in opposite directions. The Bay Parkways (members of the AA in 1936) were on a downhill slide and nearing the end, but they managed a win over the Bombers. The Cedarhurst Giants, who would become the Wolverines in 1939 with the addition of Benny Friedman, also defeated the Bombers.

The Bombers upgraded their schedule in 1939, playing three quality teams: the Cedarhurst Wolverines, the AA's Newark Bears and the Scranton Miners (Eastern Football League members in 1938). The Bombers lost to Scranton and Newark, but split two games with the Wolverines.

After the 1939 season, the Bombers appear to have switched from playing teams in the New York area to playing clubs in the Northeast. Probably as a result of that change, reports of their games became more scarce at the same time.

In 1940 the Bombers lost to the Churchill Pros of Springfield, Massachusetts, and in 1941 the all-black team lost to the Hartford Blues, 19-6.

In 1942 the Holyoke (Mass.) Golden Bears defeated the brown Bombers 26-0. The Bombers also apparently played the New London Diesels, but a record of that game's score hasn't been found.

World War II apparently took its toll on the Bombers (as well as every other sports team), and no record of them has been discovered for the years 1943 to 1945. But the team reappeared in 1946, defeating the Hartford Blues 13-12.

That, however, is the last we hear of the Brown Bombers.

GAME SCORES

DATE	OPPONENT	SCORE	
9/23/36	Passaic Red Devils (AA)	0- 3	L
10/11/36	New Rochelle Bulldogs (AA)	13-19	L
11/4/36	Providence Steamroller (NEFL)	0- 0	T
10/3/37	Brooklyn Eagles (AA)	7- 7	T
10/6/37	Danbury Trojans (AA)	0-12	L
10/17/37	White Plains Bears (AA)	3- 0	W
10/31/37	Brooklyn Tornadoes	25- 0	W
11/14/37	Newark Tornadoes (AA)	14-28	L
10/16/38	Brooklyn Bay Parkways	??-13	L
11/6/38	Cedarhurst Giants	0-12	L
9/24/39	Cedarhurst Wolverines	14- 7	W
10/18/39	Newark Bears (AA)	0-19	L
10/30/39	Cedarhurst Wolverines	6-35	L
11/12/39	Scranton Miners	0-32	L

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 11, No. 5 (1989)

10/20/40	Churchill Pros	0- 7	L
9/7/41	Hartford Blues	6-19	L
9/13/42	New London Diesels	??-??	?
9/20/42	Holyoke Golden Bears	0-26	L
12/1/46	Hartford Blues	13-12	W

Though they were the most successful and longest- lasting, the New York Brown Bombers weren't the only black team of the period. In fact, they weren't even the only Brown Bombers.

In Chicago a team of the same name appeared in 1937. (The fact that the nation's two biggest cities both spawned teams called the Brown Bombers is testimony to the enormous popularity of Joe Louis, as Tod's article mentioned.) Since the Chicago papers were less inclined to cover non-NFL pro football than those in New York, we have even less information on this team. I've found only eight games for them over a four-year period, all but one against the Des Moines Comets. Certainly there must have been others. I also have no roster information on these Brown Bombers, but I believe Northwestern star Bernie Jefferson (mentioned in "Outside the Pale") was on the team at some point.

The most interesting chapter in the team's history came in 1938, when the Bombers joined the Northwest Football League. The NWFL had existed since 1936, and in 1937 it included two black players: Bobby Vandever of the champion Des Moines team, and Don Simmons (Ozzie's brother) on the Cedar Rapids Crushers. That was nothing unique; but the presence of an all-black team was something else again.

Unfortunately, the NWFL was on its last legs in 1938, and coverage was spotty, even in Des Moines, where the Comets were rolling to their second straight title. I know only that the Bombers were 1-0 in league play before October 23, and that they lost twice to Des Moines after that.

Still, as the first all-black team to play in an integrated league, they made pro football history that year-- not that anyone noticed.

Game Scores

DATE	OPPONENT	SCORE	
11/31/37	Des Moines Comets	0- 7	L
10/23/38	Des Moines Comets	6-28	L
11/11/38	Des Moines comets	7-14	L
	at Redwood Falls, Minn.		
	(plus 1-0 league record before Oct. 23)		
9/25/39	Des Moines Comets	13-14	L
11/19/39	Des Moines Comets	0-14	L
9/22/40	Des Moines Comets	0- 0	T
10/2/40	Kenosha Cardinals	0-35	L
10/10/40	Des Moines Comets	7- 7	T
	at Waterloo, Iowa		

Six years later, a new circuit called the Eastern Football League appeared. Apparently operating just for that one season during the war, it wasn't a very high- level league, probably closer to semi-pro-pro than professional. But it did include an all-black team, the Washington (D.C.) Lions, and another mostly black team, the Harrisburg Governors. As an independent team in 1943 the Governors had been all-black, but they added a few whites this time around. The newly integrated team made it to the EFL championship game (beating Washington in the opening round of the playoffs) before losing to the Wilmington Shipbuilders 7-0.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 11, No. 5 (1989)

Other EFL teams also included a few blacks on their rosters; and in early November another all-black team, the aptly named New York Black Yankees, entered the league, replacing the Philadelphia Yellowjackets, who folded with an 0-4 record. Unfortunately, the Black Yankees didn't improve on that, going winless in the two games I've found so far.

Finally, in 1946, black football took the ultimate step: the formation of an all-black league. The Virginia Negro Football League included teams in Richmond, Norfolk, Portsmouth and Newport News, making it in essence a scaled-down black version of the Dixie League. It seems to have lasted only the one season, but all four teams had played as independents for several years, and they may have continued to do so. Besides playing each other, they played games against local black colleges like Virginia Union and Norfolk State.

The Richmond Rams won the title in 1946, beating out the Norfolk Brown Bombers. (There's that name again!) The Rams' most recognizable player was fullback Fred "Cannonball" Cooper of Virginia Union (well, I recognized him). In 1949 Cooper became the first black member of the Richmond Rebels and led the American Football League in rushing and scoring as his team won the league's regular season and the playoffs. He also starred for the Rebels in 1950, the AFL's final season.

1946 Standings	W-L-T	Pct	Pts	Opp
Richmond Rams	4-0-1	1.000	58	14
Norfolk Brown Bombers	3-1-1	.750	44	16
Newport News Lightharts	1-4-0	.200	29	70
Portsmouth Swans	1-4-0	.200	27	58

None of the black teams from the days of segregation achieved much success, but they did provide an opportunity for blacks to play postgraduate football--a chance that was sadly lacking elsewhere.

Some short sketches of notable black players in minor league or independent pro football during this period:

Ezzrett and **Chuck Anderson** were teammates in 1945 and '46 with the Hollywood Bears in the PCFL. They were also the two ends on the 1944 AFL second all-star team. Ezzrett, the bigger star of the two, repeated on the 1946 PCFL second team. He played briefly in the AAFC in 1947. *Pro Football: The Early Years* says he went to the CFL in 1948, and maybe he did start the season north of the border, but he finished it back in the PCFL with the L.A. Bulldogs. In that season the Bulldogs developed a special end-around pass play, and Anderson threw at least two long touchdown passes that way. Both Andersons made the all- West team in Canada, Chuck in 1948 (at center) and Ezzrett in 1949.

The other all-West end in 1949 was **Woody Strode**, a repeater from the '48 team. Strode was also an all-PCFL end in 1941 as a member of the Hollywood Bears. He entered the service in 1942, played three years at March Field with the 4th Air Force Flyers, then returned to Hollywood in 1945 before breaking the NFL's color line with the Rams in 1946.

The more publicized barrier-breaker was Strode's teammate **Kenny Washington**. Washington played four years of pro football out west, and he was the best player on the coast every year, leading leagues at various times in rushing TDs, TD passes and scoring (probably rushing and passing yardage too, but there are no figures to prove it). He hurt his knee late in the 1945 season and wasn't the same player afterward, but he still averaged 7 yards a carry with the Rams in 1947. If he'd gone right into the NFL after college, Washington would have been a star from day 1. As a player he was in the same class as Ace Parker, Parker Hall and Frankie Sinkwich, and he may have been better than all three.

While we're on the subject of the PCFL, we can't forget **Mel Reid** of the Oakland Giants, another outstanding triple-threat back. After Washington, he and Steve Bagarus were the league's biggest stars. Reid was a first-team all-star in 1944 and '45, and was named the league's MVP in the latter year. While he was no Kenny Washington, Reid was clearly good enough to play in the NFL.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 11, No. 5 (1989)

From 1943 to '46 the Oakland starting backfield also included **Bull Lewis** and **Bernie Remson**, two other blacks who had long careers on the West Coast. Remson's began back in 1938 with the Oakland Cardinals of the short-lived California Football League. With the Giants he was usually a receiver, and also handled the passing when Reid was on the sidelines. Lewis, a hard-driving fullback, was a 1944 all-star along with Reid.

One final note about Oakland: For a few games in 1943 the Giant started an all-black backfield, with a fellow named **Tex Washington** joining Reid, Remson and Lewis.

Joe Lillard, whose release after the 1933 season heralded the onset of the NFL's color line, kept playing pro football into the next decade. In addition to his time with the New York Brown Bombers, Lillard played in minor leagues on both coasts. In 1934, with the Westwood Cubs in an early-day PCFL, he led the league in TD passes and finished second in rushing TDs. Later he saw action in the American Association with the Clifton Wessingtons, the Union City Rams and the Brooklyn Eagles, plus a brief stint in 1941 with a hapless road team called the New York Yankees. A second-team all-star in 1938, Lillard shone in the AA as a ball-carrier, a passer and a punter, but game reports make it clear that he was usually a marked man. Accounts of his exploits often end something like this: "...but on his next carry he was roughed up and had to be helped from the field."

As far as I know, only six blacks played in the AA. Lillard's presence notwithstanding, the most successful was **Ozzie Simmons**, a second-team all-star in 1937 and a first-teamer in '39 with the Paterson Panthers. (He didn't play in 1938.) Simmons was a scatback in the mold of Dick Todd and Steve Bagarus, two stars with the Redskins in the '40s. A breakaway runner, he did most of his damage catching passes and returning kicks. While he might not have been an all-pro, he obviously had NFL ability.

Ozzie's brother **Don** didn't do anything of note in 1937 with Cedar Rapids, but his presence made the Simmonses one of two black brother combinations to play in the minor leagues of the time. The others were **Billy** and **Tommy Mills**, teammates with the L.A. Bulldogs in 1944. Another member of the Bulldogs that year (though for only a couple of games) was **Jackie Robinson**, who had played a little with the team in 1941 before entering the service. With the growth of his stature as a sports legend, Robinson's football ability may have been overstated over the years, but there's no question that he was good--a bit below Reid and Simmons, but probably NFL material.

Another noteworthy AA player was **Dolly Kind**, who played with the Long Island Indians in 1941. Actually, King did little with the Indians; his real claim to fame was basketball. After starring for Clair Bee's powerhouse teams at Long Island University, King played pro basketball for years. He did time in the National and American basketball leagues, but achieved his greatest notoriety with two all-black independent teams, the New York Renaissance (Rens for short) and the Washington Bears. He's still a viable candidate for the Basketball Hall of Fame.

One last player who deserve mention is **Bobby Vandever**, a sparkling breakaway runner who starred for years with the Des Moines Comets, leading them to Northwest League championships in 1937 and '38. From 1936-38 he scored 21 touchdowns in 21 league games. And in 1944 Vandever showed up as a part-timer with Kenny Washington's San Francisco Clippers in the AFL.

A final note: The list of black players given here is probably incomplete. It includes only those for whom I found specific references that they were black. There may have been quite a few more, particularly in the PCFL. For instance, in "Outside the Pale" Thomas Smith said 12 blacks played for the Oakland Giants in 1944, but if you check this list you'll find only four: **Carl Hancock**, Lewis, Reid and Remson. Most of the documented blacks, you'll notice, were backs or ends--that is, ballhandlers, who tended to get more notice in newspapers. It's not at all unlikely that there were a good many linemen out there as well. Granted, in most cases the discrepancy isn't as glaring as it is for the Oakland team, but there were certainly other players who should be listed here--maybe a dozen, maybe more.

It's fitting to end with those anonymous black linemen. Today's linemen are often called "forgotten men"; and what better term could we find for blacks in pro football during the years of the color line?

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 11, No. 5 (1989)

If the name of the game in football is acquiring talent, the Washington Redskins' 1964 offseason should go down in history. That year Bill McPeak, their coach and general manager, picked up four Hall of Famers, trading for Sonny Jurgensen and Sam Huff, and drafting Charley Taylor and Paul Krause. (OK, Krause isn't in the Hall yet, but at some point they'll have to make room for the all-time leader in interceptions.) Has any team ever done better? Still, despite outstanding play from the four new stars, plus another Canton enshrinee, Bobby Mitchell, the 'skins went 6-8 in 1964. Altogether the five Hall of Famers (including Krause) played together in Washington through 1967. Their combined record: 24-29-3. Has any other chronic loser ever put such a star-studded lineup on the field?

The Redskins didn't post a winning season until the arrival of Vince Lombardi in 1969. Two years later the George Allen era began, and Washington made the playoffs five of the next six years, despite the presence of "only" three Hall of Famers--Jergensen, Taylor and Ken Houston.

Tonight's lesson in the value of leadership, from the Highlight Zone.

Blacks in Integrated Pro Football, 1933-45

PLAYER	POSITION	COLLEGE	TEAMS
Chuck Anderson	E	Ohio State	1943 LA Mustangs PCFL 1944 LA Wildcats AFL 1945-46 Hollywood PCFL 1947 LA Bulldogs PCFL
Ezzrett Anderson	E-HB	Kentucky State	1944 LA Mustangs AFL 1945-46 Hollywood PCFL 1948 LA Bulldogs PCFL
George Burgwin	HB	Western Reserve	1937 Brooklyn Bushwicks AA
Ted Floyd	FB-HB	NYU	1944 LA Mustangs AFL, San Diego AFL
Carl Hancock	E	none	1943 Alameda PCFL 1943-44 Oakland PCFL 1945 San Jose PCFL 1946 Sacramento PCFL
Clem Hooks	E	Santa Barbara St.	1943 LA Bulldogs CFL 1944 LA Wildcats AFL 1944-46 LA Bulldogs PCFL
Bill King (Dolly)	E	Long Island U.	1941 Long Island AA
Clarence Lee	E	Howard	1932 Mt. Vernon EFL 1936-37 Mt. Vernon AA
William Lewis (Bull)	FB	San Jose State	1942 San Francisco PCFL 1943-46 Oakland PCFL 1946 Sacramento PCFL
Joe Lillard	HB	Oregon State	1934 Westwood PCFL 1938 Clifton AA 1939 Union City AA, Brooklyn AA 1941 New York AA
Clarence Mackey	HB	UCLA	1942 LA Bulldogs PCFL

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 11, No. 5 (1989)

			1943 LA Mustangs PCFL LA Bulldogs PCFL 1944 LA Wildcats AFL 1945 LA Bulldogs PCFL
Everett Marcell (Sam)	E	Southern	1944,46 LA Bulldogs PCFL
Billy Mills	HB	Xavier	1942,44-45 LA Bulldogs PCFL 1945 Hollywood Rangers 1947 LA Bulldogs PCFL
Tommy Mills	QB	Xavier	1944 LA Bulldogs PCFL
Earl Minneweather	HB	Humboldt State	1941-42 San Francisco PCFL
John Moody	FB	Morris Brown	1943 LA Mustangs PCFL
Dave Myers	FB	NYU	1933 Clifton IFL
Ernie Provost (Gene)	HB	Sacramento J.C.	1944 Oakland AFL 1945-46 San Francisco PCFL
Mel Reid	HB-QB	USF	1943-46 Oakland PCFL 1946 Sacramento PCFL 1947 San Francisco PCFL 1948 LA Bulldogs PCFL
Bernie Remson	HB-QB	Puget Sound	1938 Oakland CFL 1941-42 San Francisco PCFL 1943-46 Oakland PCFL
Jackie Robinson	HB	UCLA	1941, 44 LA Bulldogs PCFL
Don Simmons	E	Iowa	1937 Cedar Rapids NWFL
Ozzie Simmons	HB	Iowa	1937, 39 Paterson AA
Woody Strode	E	UCLA	1940-41, 45 Hollywood PCFL
Bobby Vandever	HB	Drake	1936-38 Des Moines NWFL 1939-40 Des Moines Comets 1944 San Francisco AFL
Hugh Walker	HB-E	Hampton Inst.	1941 New York AA 1942 Long Island Clippers
Kenny Washington	HB	UCLA	1940-41 Hollywood PCFL 1944 San Francisco AFL 1945 Hollywood PCFL
Tex Washington	HB	East Texas State	1943, 45 Oakland PCFL
Ed Williams	FB-HB	NYU	1940-41 Churchil Pros 1942 Long Island Clippers