

BOOK REVIEW: Bob Gill

FRITZ POLLARD: Pioneer in Racial Advancement,

by John M. Carroll, University of Illinois Press, Illustrated,
\$32.95.

Despite the efforts of a number of PFRA researchers over the past couple of decades to dig up the records of the NFL's early years, our other knowledge of those days still relies heavily -- too heavily -- on sketchy accounts, often decades after the fact, from those who were there. What we need is for writers to stop accepting these often-inaccurate stories at face value and take a closer look at what really happened.

What we need is more books like this one.

PFRA member John Carroll has done an outstanding job of sorting the truth from fiction and half-truth surrounding the controversial career of Fritz Pollard, one of the most significant figures from the NFL's formative years. Combining a wealth of material from interviews with a very thorough job of newspaper research, he gives us a well-rounded portrait of a genuine pioneer.

He hits the highlights, like Pollard's All-American season at Brown University and his heyday in the NFL with the 1920 champion Akron Pros; but he's just as thorough in the lesser-known periods, like his several seasons playing in the coal region of Pennsylvania, his career as a business man, or his role in the founding of the New York Brown Bombers, the most important all-black team of its time. (Coffin Corner readers were treated to an early glimpse of Carroll's research on the Brown bombers in Vol. XII, No. 1.)

The attention to detail is impressive -- for example, the account of Pollard's odyssey to no fewer than three different colleges in the fall of 1914 (Dartmouth, Harvard, and Bates) before he finally settled in at Brown. Even more impressive is the commitment to honesty. Carroll is clearly an admirer of Pollard -- in fact, he may overstate the case a bit when he says "Pollard is denied his rightful place in the Pro Football Hall of Fame." But that's an opinion, and certainly not an outrageous one. When it comes to questions of fact, Carroll doesn't let his admiration get in the way of the truth.

For just one example, take this discussion of Pollard's poor academic record during his first year at Brown (eight D's and two E's):

"In later years, Pollard would sometimes complain that he did not receive the private tutoring and other academic benefits available to athletes who were members of fraternities. In fact, however, Pollard simply did not apply himself to his studies ... Pollard told a Providence Journal reporter the following fall that after four years at Brown he intended to enter medical school at either Harvard or Columbia. Given his dismal academic performance, one would have to consider Pollard either extremely naive or self-confident."

You won't find any gilding of the lily here.

What you will find is a detailed game-by-game rundown of Pollard's college and pro football career, plus a thorough and unbiased account of his financial dealings and family life. Perhaps more important, it's a painstaking chronicle of one high-profile black man's fight to establish himself in a white man's world -- and make it easier for others to follow.

That's a tall order for one book to fill, but this one does it, and in a well-written, very readable style, too.

We really do need more books like this.