

Prologue

Behind God's Back

In the tumultuous moments after the 2007 Super Bowl ended, the two contending coaches met at midfield. Standing only inches apart, the bills of their hats nearly touching, they exchanged words of congratulation and respect. Then they embraced. Tony Dungy of the Indianapolis Colts and Lovie Smith of the Chicago Bears had been colleagues for five earlier years on the staff of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. They were friends who spoke by phone almost weekly. They shared a fervent Christian faith. And what ultimately bound them together on this rainy February night was the force of history itself.

Dungy and Smith were the first African-American coaches ever to lead a team into the Super Bowl, the most-watched game in the nation's most popular sport, virtually a civic holiday for tens of millions of Americans. While there were necessarily a winner and a loser in the game—Dungy's Colts had beaten Smith's Bears 29–17—the adversaries were allies in the urgent and ongoing endeavor of bringing racial equality to sports and through sports to American society.

The road to their landmark achievement, however, was one little known in white America and shrouded by the passage of time even to many blacks. It started in 1837, when a group of Quakers founded a school in Philadelphia called the Institute of Colored Youth, which was subsequently expanded into a college and renamed Cheyney University. Over the succeeding decades, more than one hundred other colleges and

universities for black students arose in the United States, with the vast majority of those institutions springing up in the South after the Civil War. Some of them were founded by white philanthropists or liberal religious denominations with an idealistic commitment to educating and elevating a formerly enslaved people. Many others, however, were created by governors and legislatures in the South as a means of preserving the iron rule of segregation and inequality in public schools.

Despite that cynical design, these black colleges subverted the Jim Crow regime. They served as the agency of black achievement and the epicenter of black pride, a kind of secular equivalent to the African-American church. Decades before a hip-hop entrepreneur titled a clothing line FUBU—meaning “For Us, By Us”—those words could have been the slogan for black colleges. On their campuses, black PhD’s taught black students, black presidents and black provosts and black deans held sway. For more than a century, these colleges turned out the vast majority of America’s black doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, ministers, teachers, musicians, librarians, and accountants; to this day, the black colleges and universities that form 3 percent of America’s total number enroll 16 percent of African-Americans in higher education. Black campuses gave birth to the marching bands, step shows, and fraternities and sororities that were and still are cherished institutions of African-American life.

The civil rights movement depended on the racial pride, leadership skills, and academic prowess developed by black colleges and universities. As one of their most illustrious alumni, W. E. B. DuBois, wrote in the NAACP’s magazine, *The Crisis*: “It is the race-conscious black man cooperating together with his own institutions and movements who will eventually emancipate the colored race.” Black colleges produced

such civil rights leaders as Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, Andrew Young, Diane Nash, and Jesse Jackson. Black colleges groomed the young vanguard of the Freedom Rides and lunch-counter sit-ins. In their commitment to self-determination, to uplifting the race, to not waiting for the white man to do it for them, only asking the white man not to stand in the way, black colleges manifested a strain of African-American life that was at once traditional and radical. It is the strain of Booker T. Washington and Zora Neale Hurston, of Malcolm X and August Wilson.

The road to Tony Dungy, Lovie Smith, and the 2007 Super Bowl ran through the market town of Salisbury, North Carolina, on the afternoon of Tuesday, December 27, 1892. Twenty-three years after Rutgers and Princeton had played the first college football game in American history, Livingstone College and Biddle University became the first black colleges to take up the sport. Far from being the sort of well-born gentlemen whom Rutgers and Princeton educated, the players on Livingstone had to fashion their own cleats from work shoes and patch and pad their old clothes for uniforms.

Yet when Biddle bested Livingstone by the unlikely score of 4–0, because a touchdown was accorded four points, a heritage was born. As both college and pro football remained almost entirely segregated for decades, as they integrated only fitfully in the years after World War II, as the conventionally prejudiced opinion of the time held that blacks were not intelligent enough to be coaches or quarterbacks, a parallel universe of black excellence in football flourished in the black colleges strewn across the border states and the South. That universe had its own black sportswriters and black publicists and black all-America teams and black bowl games.

All of it went virtually unnoticed by white America. In the heyday of radio, stations almost exclusively broadcast the games of white colleges. From the mid-1950s through the late 1960s, peak years of civil rights activity, the National Collegiate Athletic Association and the major networks colluded to tightly limit the number of televised games, which invariably featured teams that were mostly, if not entirely, white. Even after the US Supreme Court declared public school segregation unconstitutional in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954, even after state universities in the South admitted a handful of black students under the protection of federal troops, football powerhouses such as Alabama, Georgia, Texas, and Louisiana State pointedly preserved all-white football teams. In a part of the country where college football functioned almost as a religion, the success of those teams was eagerly construed by segregationists as proof of white supremacy.

The most gifted black players and coaches were both nurtured and trapped within their separate domain. With a mixture of bravado and bitterness, they called the all-black athletic conferences “the chitlin’ circuit,” a term borrowed from the string of ghetto theaters plied by black musicians and comedians. Ignored most of the time, slighted the rest, the men of black football tempered their skills and forged their reputations, as one college coach put it, “behind God’s back.” Until the mid-1960s, not even colleges in the North would hire a black coach, and when they finally did so, it was only as an assistant. The modern NFL did not draft a black player until 1949, have a black assistant coach until 1957, appoint a black head coach until 1989. Black quarterbacks from black colleges, if they were selected at all by pro teams, were routinely switched to other positions—wide receiver, defensive back. Sometimes those reassignments came

suspiciously soon after that black quarterback had shown promise at his original position.

The road that started in Philadelphia in 1837 and passed through Salisbury in 1892 made its way during 1967 to the campuses of Grambling College in northern Louisiana and Florida A&M in Tallahassee and finally to the Orange Bowl stadium in Miami on the night of December 2. Then and there, the Grambling Tigers and the Florida A&M Rattlers met in the Orange Blossom Classic, the black college championship game, and for many years the largest annual gathering of any kind of black Americans.

Grambling and Florida A&M were the most storied teams in all of black college football. Their respective head coaches, Eddie Robinson and Jake Gaither, were legendary within their world. Their quarterbacks, James Harris and Ken Riley, were the best ever to have played the position at each school. All around the coaches and players, in that eventful year, swirled the crosswinds of civil rights activism, black nationalism, white backlash, growing integration, slum insurrection, soaring hopes, and dashed expectations.

Competitive athletics are inextricably part of America's national culture. Sports are an arena in which our values and mores, and too often our biases and bigotry, are literally played out. For most of their careers, Robinson and Gaither had held themselves at a cautious remove from the freedom movement. In private, they had supported it; in public, they had watched their words, lest they endanger the tenuous acceptance, the provisional status, that the Jim Crow South had granted them for their gridiron success. For a long time, they trusted that the sheer quality of their teams would speak for itself and provide their most persuasive argument for racial equality.

Over the course of four months in the summer and fall of 1967, as their teams headed for a showdown in black football's title game, a game played in the same city as that groundbreaking Super Bowl some forty years later, Eddie Robinson and Jake Gaither stepped off the political sideline and took a stand. In the tradition of Paul Robeson, Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, and Jackie Robinson, they put their sporting achievements in the service of social change. What happened when they did is an essential chapter of sports history and black history and, most of all, American history.

