

History's Neglected Children

High School football during the first half of the century certainly grabbed its share of headlines in the local newspapers. The stories of young men playing the rugged game and the thousands of fans, boosters and school-mates who supported them were well chronicled.

But there were many athletes whose achievements remained unaccounted for by the mainstream press. Although they played to capacity crowds at small stadiums, the handful of African-American high school teams remained anonymous to the general public. Yet, many from their ranks went on to become outstanding college and professional players. It was unfortunate for them, and for true football fans, that their achievements went unnoticed to citizens who did not subscribe to *The Louisiana Weekly*, a newspaper that has been African-American owned since it began publication in 1925.

But football in the black sectors of New Orleans began even before *The Louisiana Weekly* printed its first edition. There was a vast interest in neighborhood teams, an adult league of squads with such names as Brutes, Trojans, Scrubs, Southsiders, Hawks and Elks. And they were highly organized, having formed a New Orleans Independent Athletic Association.

These players had to be taught the game from some source. But for more than a decade of the 20th Century there was little opportunity for boys of color to learn the game. The desire was there, but the resources hardly existed.

In 1900 the Orleans Parish School Board made a decision to limit all public black education to the first five grades, and according to a book written by David E. Devore and Joseph Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools — Public Education in New Orleans, 1841-1991* (The Center of Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1991), that decision "reflected the era's deter-

mination to establish and maintain white supremacy at all costs."

The small number of local black leaders continually lobbied the school board and city leaders to improve black education. They had few avenues through which to negotiate and no political teeth with which to bite. The state constitution of 1898 had taken the vote away from the majority of Louisiana's black citizens.

The city schools operated under a segregated dual system. Surplus funds within the school board's operating budget were used to build or upgrade white education. Meanwhile, in the black community, leaders worked with smaller civic, religious and neighborhood organizations to address the growing needs of a particular school. Money was scarce, but their voices were loud. Their small fund-raising efforts did yield a modicum of success.

According to the book by Devore and Logsdon, "In addition to raising private funds, the organizations also continually attempted to get the school board to allocate to black schools a larger share of public funds. Their strategy consisted of drawing up petitions and submitting reports on the deficiencies that existed in black schools."

The leaders most instrumental in this movement, which continued over a long period of time, were Alexander P. Tureaud, Doctors Joseph Hardin and Percy Cruzat, Rev. Henderson Dunn, O. C. W. Taylor and Daniel Byrd. They

were joined by the New Orleans chapter of the NAACP and the Colored Educational Alliance.

Among the main issues in 1910 was the disparity in the number of schools. The city had just 16 black public schools, compared to 68 white schools. Most of the schools for minorities were in disrepair. White school board members and officials treated the black petitioners with respect and listened attentively to their grievances and appeals, and although there was no significant increase in funding for black education, there was a dialog



Xavier University Prep School, the old building, replaced Southern University when the college relocated to Baton Rouge.



The first McDonogh No. 35 school building was located on South Rampart and Julia streets. It opened its doors in 1917 as the first African-American public high school in New Orleans.

between the factions established.

Substandard accommodations and overcrowding aside, there was a far more fundamental problem — the absence of secondary education for African-Americans — that needed to be addressed. Devore and Logsdon wrote, "The school board's decision to limit black public schooling to the first five grades did more than eliminate the three bridge grades (sixth, seventh and eighth) between elementary and high school. The absence of those grades meant two things: first, black public school students could not get the necessary preparation to enter the high school division of Southern University, then located in New Orleans. And, second, it meant that before the New Orleans black leadership could begin to press the board to build a black high school, they had to press for restoration of the lost bridge grades. Hence, the leaders concentrated their efforts between 1900-1912 on getting the sixth, seventh and eighth grades restored."

Southern University, today located in Baton Rouge, sat at 5116 Magazine Street, the present site of Xavier Prep Catholic School for girls. Its closing and subsequent move to a former plantation site in Scotlandville in 1913 was spearheaded by its new president, Joseph S. Clark. Born in Sparta, Louisiana, in 1871, and educated in public and private schools in Bienville Parish, Clark received four degrees from three universities, including Doctorates in Philosophy from Leland College and Arkansas State. He also did post-graduate work at Chicago and Harvard Universities.

Between 1901 and 1912, Joseph Clark was president of Baton Rouge College. When he took over Southern University, Clark made the decision to

move the university. He based his judgment on the premise that its location in an urban area prevented the university from "fulfilling its mission of providing vocational and agricultural training for black students throughout the state," wrote Devore and Logsdon.

It seemed a sound decision by Dr. Clark. There were two other black universities in the Crescent City — Straight College at 2420 Canal Street, and New Orleans University uptown. But both were private schools with limited high school curricula to offer.

The Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, led by Mother Katherine Drexel, opened Xavier in 1915, utilizing the buildings Southern University had occupied. The coeducational Catholic school included both college and secondary school studies. The university moved to its present site in Mid-City fronting Washington Avenue in 1926, and Xavier Prep remained a high school coeducational school until 1970 when it became strictly a private school for girls.

The move by Southern, which deprived students who had attended that college an alternative secondary school, prompted a coalition of black citizens to petition the school board for a true high school.

The board did little until 1917. At that time, according to Devore and Logsdon's book, "The city's white leaders realized that if they were going to maintain a fully segregated society, the separate black community needed its own physicians, teachers, lawyers and clergymen; and to train such professionals, a black high school would be necessary."

It was agreed to open such a school in the fall of 1917. The school board preferred not to appropriate funds to erect a new school for "colored" pupils. Instead, it utilized an existing school for white students, McDonogh 13, located at 635 South Rampart Street (corner of Julia Street). The board



Gaudet Episcopal School's 1950 squad poses in front of the wooden structure near Chef Menteur Hwy.

moved the white children to other schools in the area and re-designated the "new" school McDonogh 35.

It remained the only four-year public high school for black students until Booker T. Washington opened in 1936.

Times were tough for the impoverished children, but many rose from the financial doldrums through necessity and pure will. Any student going to McDonogh 35 had to maintain high grades. Many failed and dropped out, but most made it through with little or no frills; just hard work.

"Most of the boys who went to high school with me were like me - very poor," said former Orleans Parish Schools Athletic Director and one of the city's coaching legends, Felix James, who attended '35 in the mid-1930s. "So we started banding together because we didn't have the money for nice clothes or to do the things most of the kids in New Orleans were able to do.

There were four of us and who pooled our resources.

"We could go to the *Pelican* and get a plate of beans and rice, some corn bread and a glass of water for a nickel. If you paid a dime, you'd get a dessert," James recalled. "We'd pool our money, and if we wanted to get a soft drink (there was a big drink called a 'Jumbo') we called the Jambo. We'd take a regular Coke bottle, wash it out and pour in the Jambo and we could all have a drink for a nickel."

Those friends included Peter Thornton, who emerged from a family of five living in a one-room house to become a Professor Emeritus at Texas Southern University; and Walter Collins, a former immigration officer for the U.S. Coast Guard whose duty was to certify every ship that entered the mouth of the Mississippi. They were also athletes.

More African-American schools began to open as the population growth of the inner city increased. Seven years after Martin Behrman opened in Algiers, Lord Beaconsfield Landry (1938) was built to accommodate black high school aged students in that west bank community. In 1947, Joseph S. Clark opened to serve the students of color along the Esplanade corridor. That was followed by Walter L. Cohen



A montage of Gilbert Academy players in the late 1940s.

in 1949. It would be another nine years before George Washington Carver (1958) was constructed to provide a secondary school for African-American youngsters of the Ninth Ward.

All would field football teams.

The origins of the high school game, played by predominantly African-American schools, are sketchy. However, it is known that McDonogh 35 and Xavier Prep were the earliest rivals, with games dating back to the 1920s.

McDonogh 35 became known as the Panthers, then, in the mid 1930s, changed its nickname to Ironmen. Xavier Prep chose the moniker it maintains today, Yellow Jackets, true to its black and yellow colors.

Gaudet School (pronounced god-det), administered by the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Louisiana and the American Church Institute for Negroes, was opened in 1901 by its founder, Mrs. Frances Joseph

Gaudet. Mrs. Gaudet ran the boarding school for homeless boys, located on the east side of the Industrial Canal on Gentilly Road, until 1921, when her advanced age made it difficult to maintain a rigorous schedule to keep the school prospering. She then turned it over to the Episcopal Church. It became a coed school until it closed in 1951. Its athletic teams were known as the Blue Streaks.

The third oldest African-American private school in New Orleans was Gilbert Academy, located on St. Charles Avenue, bounded by Bordesque, Valmont and Leonaire Streets, the present site of De La Salle High School.

Gilbert actually began in 1865, shortly after the end of the Civil War, when the Louisiana Conference of Methodist Episcopal Church was established. The Board of Christian Education of the Methodist Episcopal Church had a mandate to provide educational opportunities for the large number of illiterate former slaves in Louisiana. There were also many Negro children who were orphaned when their fathers were killed while fighting with the Union Army, and others whose parents were separated from them during the confusion caused by the retreat of the Confederate armies and the hasty

removal of slaves to Texas or elsewhere as the armies of freedom arrived.

According to a summarized history of the school adapted from Jay S. Stowell's book *Methodist Adventures in Negro Education*, (New York: 1922), orphans were temporarily quartered in the Soule' Mansion, a confiscated Confederate residence at Esplanade and Rochablave Streets. A subsequent court order returned the mansion and all confiscated holdings to their rightful owners, thereby evicting the children. The children were relocated to a plantation purchased by Rev. John P. Newman and a wealthy Frenchman on Bayou Teche in St. Mary Parish. The home also became LA Teche Seminary. It underwent many changes, including political conditions of the state, natural disasters and a depression.

To get the school back on firm financial footing, a wealthy Connecticut philanthropist, W. L. Gilbert, used large sums of money. The school's headmaster renamed the school Gilbert Academy.

In 1874, Dr. Joseph C. Hartzell, who would later become an Episcopal bishop, bought a parcel of land on St. Charles Avenue, which became New Orleans University. In 1919 Gilbert Academy moved from its location 100 miles west of New Orleans to merge with New Orleans University. The university enlarged its secondary education program under the shortened name of Gilbert Academy and discontinued most of the trade and vocational operations of the school.

Although overshadowed by the university, Gilbert Academy maintained its own separate administration and faculty. When Dr. O. E. Kriege became president of New Orleans University, he reorganized the system toward a four-year curriculum resulting in a bachelor of arts degree in education. This resulted in Gilbert Academy's college preparatory curriculum becoming carefully structured with degreed teachers being hired.

With the Methodist Board of Education funding and focus directed toward higher education for black students, the merged schools thrived. Then, in 1928 a study by the board resulted in the recommendation that funds for Negro colleges be concentrated in several key urban locations in the south, and that smaller colleges in these cities be strongly encouraged to consolidate their resources and facilities.

New Orleans University and Straight College of the Congregational Church were rivals on and off the athletic fields, but both were experiencing financial difficulties. The circumstances brought the boards of both schools together to seriously negotiate a merger that founded Dillard University on June 6, 1930.

According to *Gilbert Academy High School Bulletin*, (September - June, 1939-40), by Merrill J. Holmes, the merger of the two local colleges did not make provisions for either the secondary

school affiliate of Straight College or New Orleans University's Gilbert Academy. The high school classes at Straight were closed, but members of the black Methodist churches fought vigorously to have the dormitories at New Orleans University continue to educate students. The board agreed with the condition that the school proceed with its education program until the property could be sold and legal matters concerning the Gilbert endowment fund be worked out.

Hired as principal to keep Gilbert moving forward in this time of turmoil was a young, energetic woman, Margaret Davis Bowen. Her father-in-law, Rev. Wesley Bowen Sr., was the first person to graduate from New Orleans University with a B.A. degree. Mrs. Bowen retained the best of the faculty, began a campaign of support for the school, upgraded the curriculum to the highest academic standards of the day and led the successful effort to make Gilbert Academy the first standard four-year high school for Negro youth to be accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools.

The school continued to prosper academically, and its football teams were also successful as members of the New Orleans Colored High School Athletic Association. The Gilbert Tigers of 1945, coached by Jesse Blakely and Leonidas Epps, unseated Xavier Prep as league champion. They drew upwards of 3,000 fans at their games. Gilbert's 13-0 victory over Booker T. Washington that year was seen by 6,000 spectators at Pelican Stadium.

Led by William "Booty Boy" Harris, the Tigers followed the win over Washington with victories over McDonogh 35, 46-0; Landry, 19-0; Gaudet, 20-2; then won the city championship by defeating "Zack" Priestley's Xavier team, 19-6. The Tigers extended the season with a 26-13 victory over Eureka High of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, then took on, and



This magnificent red brick building that housed Gilbert Academy was torn down in 1948 to build De La Salle.



Booker T. Washington and Xavier Prep clash in this LIALA game before a packed Xavier University Stadium.

defeated, Alabama Negro champion Tuskegee, 18-12, on Thanksgiving Day. Gilbert then won the Louisiana Interscholastic Athletic and Literary Association (LIALA) championship with a 40-7 win over McKinley of Baton Rouge.

Three years later in 1948, Mrs. Bowen's husband became a Central Jurisdiction Bishop and she had to resign her position at Gilbert to move with him to Atlanta. When her influence left, the local Methodist authorities moved to sell the site to the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Part of the funds raised by Catholic school children that netted nearly \$3 million in 1948 went toward the purchase of the site for De La Salle. The stately Victorian four-story red brick buildings and the mansion with its balcony over a columned entrance, built in 1833, were razed to construct the single story Catholic school.

Gilbert's students were transplanted. Those whose families could afford a meager tuition matriculated to nearby Xavier Prep or Gaudet School. Others attended McDonogh 35 or Booker T. Washington.

The African-American schools that enabled their students the same privileges afforded all high school aged students have their own storied past. The schools provided many outstanding athletes to the colleges and the NFL. Though they lacked the resources of training facilities, the athletes did have the benefit of great men behind them. Coaches like Alfred Cromwell "Zack" Priestley, Bob Braden, "Splinter" Perkins, Blakely (named in 1946 as Commissioner of the LIALA), Felix James, Willie "Buller" McKee, Warren Braden, George

"Nick" Connor, Eddie Flint, LeBaron Kennedy and Harold Millon, were well versed in football tactics.

"As soon as integration came in, the black coaches were allowed to attend coaching clinics, so a group of us — Nick Connor, myself, Bullet McKee, Leon Jackson, Kenny Saunders, Curtis Miller, Alex Johnson and Ralph Haynes — chipped in our money and drove to Florida A&M. The clinic featured the greatest coaches of the day, like Bear Bryant, Duffy Daugherty,

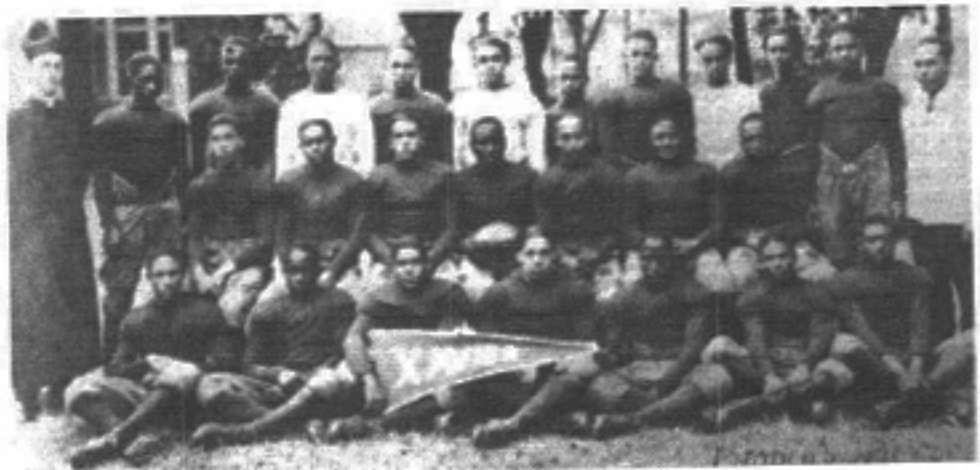
Darrell Royal, Bump Elliott and Jake Gaither. Gaither (the Florida A&M coach and athletic director) ran the clinic at no cost to the coaches. We just paid for our meals and lived in a dormitory," James said.

"We didn't believe a coach like Bear Bryant would come to Florida to talk to us, but there he was," James remarked. "Bear just loved to talk football with coaches, and we found out that he gave a little black school in Atmore, Alabama, all their equipment."

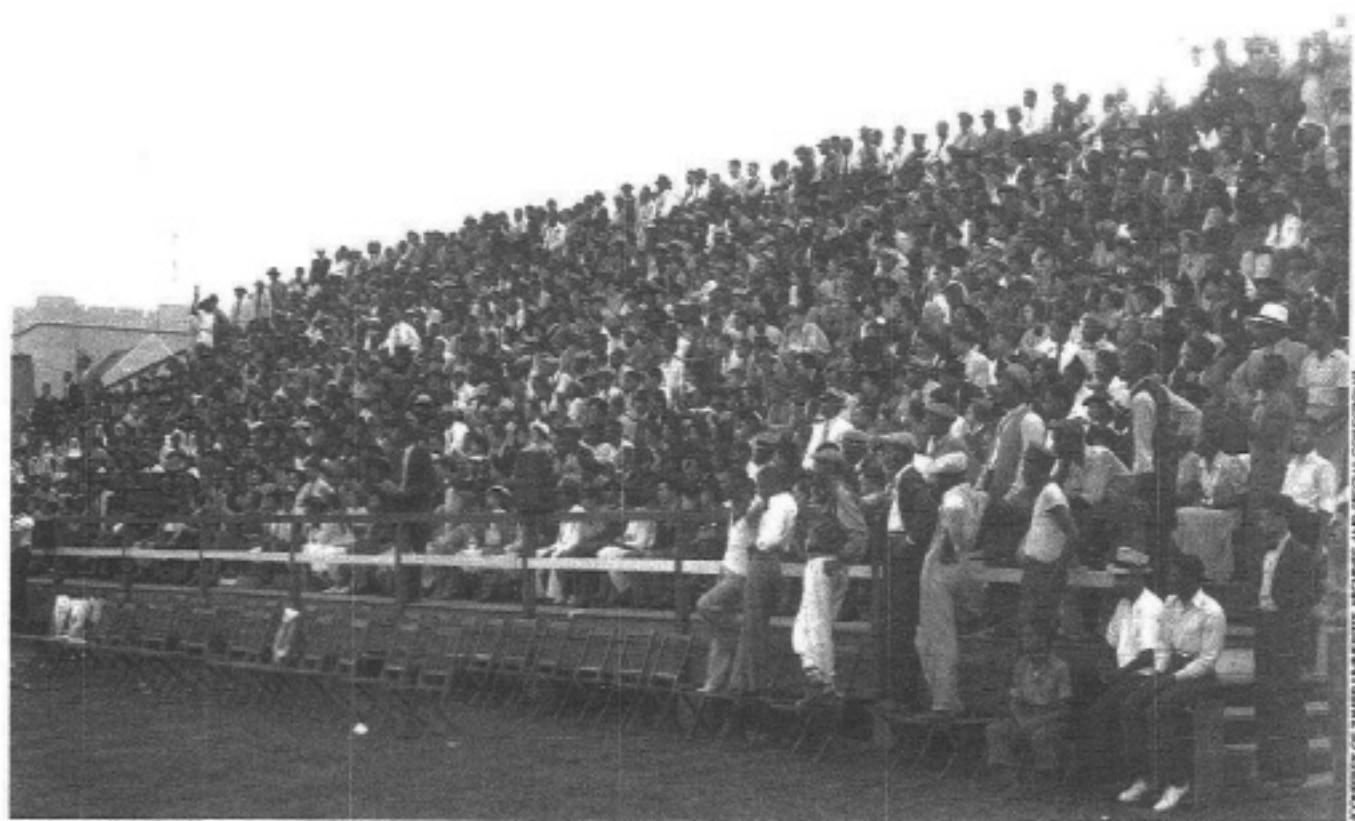
Through that connection, the predominantly white universities began to recruit African-American athletes.

"I'd send them a dossier on my kids and the white schools would take some of them," James said. "We didn't have any film to show them. College coaches had to take our word for it that the kids were good athletes. Once they established a rapport with us, they would take our word on anything."

The LIALA was created as a state rally for African-American high school students to compete in a variety of activities in Baton Rouge. Part of its name, "Literary" is significant in that the association included English, chemistry, math, woodworking and other academic competition among the Louisiana's black high schools in the 1940s. The events



An early Xavier Prep football team, photographed between 1916 and 1929.



Xavier University Stadium was usually filled with enthusiastic football fans for high school and college games.

took place on the Southern University campus. The winners proudly returned home with plaques proclaiming their academic achievements.

Prior to 1950, the state football championships were not associated with the organization. Then the LIALA was restructured in 1950. It changed the last letter to an O for Organization.

The new LIALO, based at Southern University, developed a football playoff system similar to that of its Caucasian counterpart, the LHSAA. Both athletic systems, owned by the member schools, operated in a like manner. The main exception was that the LHSAA had a strict age limit, while the LIALO did not. The inherent goals of all African-American schools were to educate their students, and, although adults were not allowed to compete against youngsters, it wasn't always easy to obtain birth records on all students.

When James coached at Gaudet in the late 1940s, he scheduled a game at Bogalusa Central High School. "In the first half our team was leading, 6-0," James said. "Crown Zellerbach had a paper plant in Bogalusa. Well, at halftime, it was about 4 o'clock, and we heard a whistle blew. It was quitting time at the plant. All the Bogalusa kids in the stands started clapping their hands and yelling.

"I'm on the sidelines with my little 16 boys. I'm wondering what the hell are they cheering about? We're ahead of them," James continued. "Well, I want to tell you, there were guys running down over the hill behind the field toward us.

These were 200-pound men who looked to be 20 to 25-years old. There was a little shed on the other side of the field. They ran in there and came out wearing the black and gold jerseys of their school."

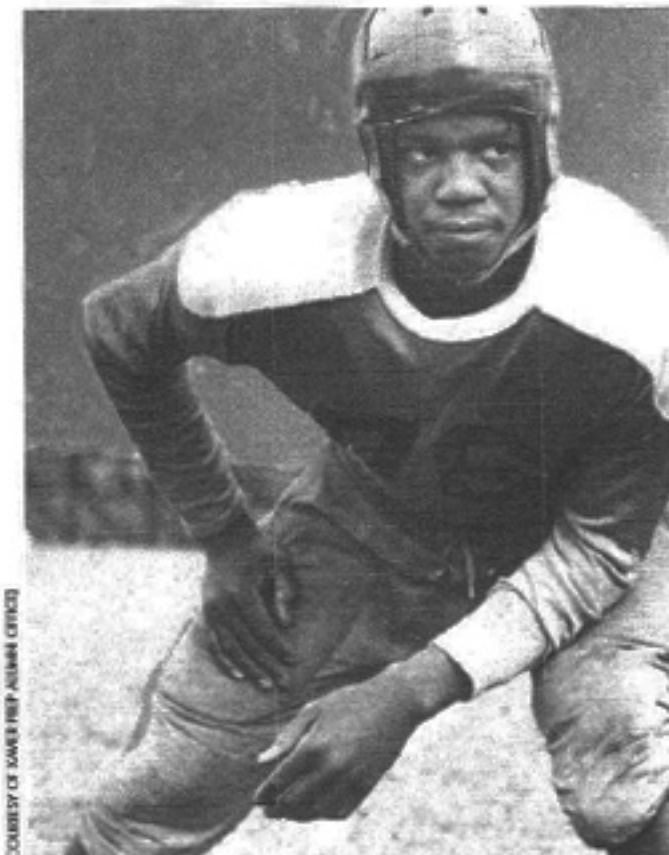
James quickly approached the Bogalusa Central coach. "I asked him, 'What the hell's going on here?' He said, 'That's our team.' I said to him, 'These can't be school kids.' He said, 'Oh, yeah. They go to school. They go to technical school.' Well, when we left Bogalusa, the score was about 60-6, and the six belonged to us. That was it, brother."

Incidents similar to James' story were not remote. There was the story at Second Ward in which players from an opponent, losing at halftime, formed a circle in the end zone to hide alumni, who quickly changed into uniforms to play the second half.

"Things like that just didn't happen in the city," James said. "Everyone knew each other, and Ernest O. Becker, the commissioner of the Greater New Orleans Colored High School Athletic Association, would never have allowed it.

"When the LIALO was first started, there weren't enough schools to form districts," James said. "Districts began in late 1948 where there was a splurge of new schools to accommodate the post-war 'baby boom.'"

By 1950, the LIALO and LHSAA began to have dialog about comparative rules. LHSAA Commissioner "Muddy" Waters was helpful to his counterpart Hamp Williams by giving him detailed eligibility records in an effort to develop



An unidentified Xavier Prep player stretches before going into battle.

a sound system of recording birth and academic records.

Still the newspapers continued to ignore games that featured LIALO schools. In 1956 *New Orleans Item* Sports Editor Hap Glaudi broke the media taboo. "I credit Hap for being the first white reporter to write about black schools. His newspaper was the first (daily) to publish pictures of an All-LIALO team," James noted.

The New Orleans Recreation department, created by white and black city leaders, had just a few playgrounds to accommodate African-American children. In 1946, newly appointed head of NORD, Lester Lautenschlaeger, solicited the city for funding to upgrade the playgrounds with up-to-date equipment and responsible adult supervision. What was once just empty lots were converted into well-equipped play areas. The youngsters now had a venue in which to learn the game of football at a younger age.

But black high schools were denied the use of City Park Stadium. Although some of the big games drew 3,000 to 6,000 spectators at fields with limited seating capacity like Xavier and Dillard stadiums, Shakespeare and Pontchartrain Park, City Park was off limits. The first game at the municipal stadium pitting black schools matched Xavier and Southern universities. It drew a crowd of 12,000 fans.

The outcome prompted *The Louisiana Weekly* Sports Editor, Jim Hall, to write an impassioned plea to the City Park Board in his December 9, 1950, column:

"If the CPS Board members could have been on hand, perhaps they could see why the 'Iron Rule' policy which bars Negroes from City Park Stadium should be changed. Frankly, not at any time before, during or after the game, did this writer see or hear of anyone trying to pull up the seats or knock down the concrete structure which supports the stadium. The estimated 12,000 Negro football fans present in the Municipal Stadium were there primarily to enjoy the football game and not destroy the stadium.

"In New Orleans, we do believe that the Negro citizens want to enjoy, not destroy City Park Stadium, just the same as the white citizens of the city. Other Louisiana cities such as Shreveport, Ruston, along with Baton Rouge, municipal stadiums are used by Negro high schools and universities, while New Orleans, the 'Cosmopolitan City' of the south, still refuses to allow Negroes to use City Park Stadium. Perhaps the intelligence of the board members of the above mentioned cities is a little higher than those of our city when it concerns the use of these sites for Negroes."

Whether Hall's words had any effect is conjecture. The ban on football games for competing African-American high schools in City Park was lifted four years later.

As the Fifties and integration slowly progressed, the LIALO's years became numbered. The organization folded in 1970 with the consolidation of all Louisiana schools with the LHSAA.

During those years, St. Augustine joined in 1952, and Jefferson opened two schools — Lincoln in Marrero, and John Martyn in Metairie. In its heyday, the LIALO New Orleans districts had 10 high school football teams. Four of them — Booker T. Washington (1950), Landry (1956, 1959), St. Augustine (1963, 1965, 1966), and Lincoln (1967) — won state championships.

African-American high schools in New Orleans produced many great players. One of the first was McDonogh 35 back John Bissant. As a senior in 1933, he led the state in scoring, which included 30 points in one game, a 60-0 rout of Gaudet. Warren Skinner starred on the 1946 Washington squad as a halfback. Quarterback "Tuttie" Pierre was the scourge of Gilbert Academy's 1946 championship team. Xavier Prep's Tarlton Connor led the 1934 squad to 5-1 record.

One of the greatest men produced by the era was McDonogh 35's Warren "Jug" Braden. His achievements as a player and coach earned him a spot in the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame. He was a two-time All-American quarterback, who, in his four years at Southern University, led the football team to a combined 40-4-1 record. Braden was named the Most Valuable Player in the first integrated bowl game (Fruit Bowl) in 1948 by leading the Jaguars to a 30-0 victory over San Francisco State.

Another favorite son of the LIALO was Clark's brilliant all-around star of the early 1950s, Roosevelt Taylor. "Rosey" was so gifted as a prep player and collegian at Grambling State University, the Chicago Bears drafted him as a defensive back and kick returner. He played on the Bears NFL championship team in 1963. Then after stints at San Diego

and San Francisco. Taylor played in the 1973 Super Bowl. He was named to the NFL All-Pro team six times and elected to the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame.

A third member of the state's elite is Richard "Tombstone" Jackson, a Landry product, who gained All-Pro honors with the Denver Broncos. Jackson was a big kid with a larger heart. When a Landry sprinter beat Jackson in a 100-yard dash, then chided him, "You're too big to beat me." Jackson spent the entire school year working on his speed. When

track season came around, Jackson convinced the Landry coach to match him against his best sprinter again. Jackson out-raced him to the finish line and earned a spot on the Buccaneers' relay team. His name is among other greats in the Denver Broncos' Ring of Honor.

Today, the high school athletes enjoy open play against any school of comparable size in Louisiana. No longer relegated to the shadows of exclusion, all athletes now play under the same sets of rules and before an objective media.