Black Athletes disrupting White Supremacy

Athletic competition is finite and measurable. The stopwatch, finish line, and scoreboard are not theoretical.

The history of race in America is defined by the early establishment of white supremacy and subsequent struggles for racial equity. Through both religion and pseudo-science, white racial superiority was rationalized as justification for white political and social domination.

Although American society initially attempted to maintain rigid segregation in sports arenas, athletes of color integrated athletic competition and played powerful roles in the pursuit of racial justice and equity.

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First Black Football Players

The first African Americans to play football for the University of Oregon were Charles Williams and Robert Robinson. They joined the team in 1926, having played for Portland high schools.

During the 1929 regular season, halfback Chuck Williams (L) and quarterback Bobby Robinson (R) helped lead their team to a 7-2 record, outscoring opponents 230-71. The season-ending game was played in the national spotlight in Miami, against the Florida Gators, who told the Ducks their African American players would not be allowed to take the field. Williams and Robinson were left behind, and the Ducks lost 20-6.

At the time, Oregon was a hotbed of Ku Klux Klan activity. Williams and Robinson’s presence and excellence on the football field provided a counterpoint to the vision of racial affairs advocated by the Klan.
By the 1960s, civil rights gains led to increased numbers of black student athletes in higher education.

Fred Milton (left) later recalled the 1969 incident that made OSU history, saying: “In those times, a young black man grew a mustache and a little goatee just as soon as he was able. . . . It was a cultural part of me. . . . [But Coach Andros] had this thing about being clean shaven.”

Athletic hierarchies, especially in football culture, were disrupted by a rapidly evolving generation of young black student athletes who were more militant, more assertive, and more confident. Fred Milton challenged the appearance regulations of football coach Dee Andros, leading to an angry confrontation between black students and the university.
Part of Stratten’s legacy is the passing attack system called “run and shoot,” developed at PSU by coach Mouse Davis, hired by Stratten.

Continued progress around racial issues allowed significant “firsts” in multiple fields, including athletics. In 1972, Portland State University hired Ron Stratten as head coach for the football team. He became the first African American to hold that position at a major, predominantly white university.