

# EARLY BLACK PROFESSIONALS

By Joe Horrigan

Although he is recognized today as the first professional football player, William "Pudge" Hefflefinger's pro debut in 1892 wasn't exactly headline news. In fact his accepting of \$500 to play a single game for the Allegheny Athletic Association wasn't reported – no doubt they didn't know about it – by the local press. Evidence of Hefflefinger's "first" came some 80 years later when the Pro Football Hall of Fame unearthed the AAA's accounting ledger with its notation of payment to the Yale All-America. The now historic document can be seen at the pro grid shrine in a display commemorating the birth of professional football.

In the same display is a sampling of early-day pro teams, including one from Shelby, Ohio. While not too unlike the others featured, the 1902 Shelby squad photo does have at least one noticeable difference.

Upon close examination it becomes apparent that one player is slightly offset from the rest. He is seated between and at the end of the first and second rows of the three-row arrangement. Standing rigidly behind him with his hand firmly placed on his shoulder like a protective father is the team's promoter.

This slightly odd arrangement of persons in any other photo would probably go unnoticed. However, in this case the Shelby player receiving special treatment is Charles Follis, the first black professional football player.

Like Hefflefinger, Follis' pioneering role was not known by sports historians until many years later. Unlike the Hefflefinger debut, however, Follis' professionalism was reported by the local press.

In 1975, researchers John Seaburn and Milt Roberts rediscovered halfback Follis' on-the-field-achievements while leafing through the yellowed pages of the Shelby Daily Globe. The goal of the Seaburn-Roberts research was to locate evidence that Follis had played as a professional. After hours of examining the tattered newspapers, the two were about to admit defeat when Roberts came across an article in the September 16, 1904 edition that announced Follis had signed a contract for the upcoming season.

Though the researchers knew Follis had played for the Shelby club beginning in 1902, they were unable to cite proof that the '02 team was professional. However, recent research by the Hall of Fame does indicate that the 1902 Shelby Athletic Club may indeed have been pro, which would change Follis' "first" by two years. As they say in the electronic media, "Stay tuned for further developments."

After Follis, only five blacks appeared in the play-for-pay version of football during the pre-NFL years. The next to emerge was Charles "Doc" Baker. Baker, who earned his nickname while serving as an aide to an Akron, Ohio physician, played halfback for the Akron Indians from 1906 until 1908, and a final season in 1911.

Little is known of Baker's non-football life. He was raised in the Akron Children's Home and is believed to have died in the early 1920's. However, from the Canton Repository's remarks concerning his play against the Canton Bulldogs in a game in 1911, it would appear that Baker was somewhat better known on the field. "Halfback Baker, from appearances a second Jack Johnson, was Akron's best man. He was in every play both on offense and defense and seemed impervious to injury. On several occasions he was thrown hard, with several others on top of him. But he always came up smiling. His plunges through and outside of tackle were the best ground-gainers for the Akron team," the Repository reported.

Perhaps the best known black pro during the pre-NFL years, however, was Henry McDonald. A flashy halfback, McDonald began his pro career in 1911 with the Rochester, N.Y. Jeffersons.

Born in Haiti in 1890, he came to the United States when he was five after his natural parents agreed to his adoption by an American coconut-banana importer. "He was my father's boss and just took a liking to me," McDonald recalled. "My natural parents realized it was a great opportunity for me to go to America. I didn't see my mother again for over 55 years, when I took my family back to Haiti for a visit."

After spending his early childhood in Canandaigua, New York, his family moved to Rochester. There he became the first black to graduate from Rochester's East High School. Almost immediately after graduation he began his pro football career that would last until 1917.

During his seven-year career, McDonald recalled but one negative racial incident. The unfortunate episode occurred in 1917, when McDonald and an All-Syracuse team traveled to Ohio to meet the Jim Thorpe-led Canton Bulldogs. The trouble began when Canton's Earle "Greasy" Neale threw McDonald out of bounds and made his feelings concerning the black player quite clear. Neale snapped, "Black is black and white is white where I come from and the two don't mix." McDonald, an accomplished boxer, stood ready to answer Neale's challenge, when unexpectedly Jim Thorpe intervened. "We're here to play football," McDonald recalled Thorpe sternly telling his teammate. "I never had any trouble after that," he said. "Thorpe's word was the law on that field."

The last black to play exclusively during the pre-NFL years was Gideon "Charlie" Smith. It could be said of Smith that during his pro career he was the most important man on the field for his team. Smith, a tackle, played just one game – and only as a late fourth-quarter substitute – for the 1915 Canton Bulldogs. However, during his brief pro appearance, he made a game-saving fumble recovery that not only preserved a 6-0 Canton advantage over arch rival Massillon Tigers, but assured the Canton aggregation of the "State Championship" resulting from the win.

Finally, though both are better known as the first blacks to compete in the National Football League, Robert "Rube" Marshall, an end with the Rock Island Independents, and Frederick "Fritz" Pollard, a halfback with the Akron Pros, actually began their pro careers in 1919, one year before the birth of the NFL.

Since both the Independents and Pros were charter members of the NFL, Marshall and Pollard must share this "first." However, an argument could be made that Marshall was the first black actually to play in the NFL, since his team, the Independents, began their 1920 league season one week before Pollard's Pros.

Today black athletes star in significant numbers on every NFL team. It wasn't always that way in pro football, however, and it probably wouldn't be that way today if not for the handful of black athletes of the pre-NFL years. While they may not have smashed any "color-barriers," they did provide the first swipe at the invisible opponent, prejudice.

## **The Black Man in Pro Football**

### **Pre-NFL Years**

Charles W. Follis, Halfback

Played 1902-06 with the Shelby Athletic Club. First documented evidence of his playing for pay is for the season of 1904, although recent evidence suggests that the Shelby A.C. was professional as early as 1902.

Charles "Doc" Baker, Halfback

Played 1906-08 and 1911 for the Akron Indians.

Henry McDonald, Halfback

Play 1911-17 for the Rochester Jeffersons.

Gideon "Charlie" Smith, Tackle

Played one game (Nov. 28, 1915) for the Canton Bulldogs.

### **1920-33**

Fritz Pollard, Back

Played 1919-21, 1925-26 Akron, 1922 Milwaukee, 1923-25 Hammond, 1925 Providence.

Robert "Rube" Marshall, End

Played 1919-21 Rock Island, 1925 Duluth.

Paul Robeson, End

Played 1921 Akron, 1922 Milwaukee.

Jay "Inky" Williams, End

Played 1921 Canton, 1921-26 Hammond, 1924 Dayton, 1925 Cleveland.

John Shelbourne, Back

Played 1922 Hammond.

Duke Slater, Tackle

Played 1922 Milwaukee, 1922-25 Rock Island, 1926 Rock Island (AFL), 1926-31 Chicago Cardinals.

James Turner, Back

Played 1923 Milwaukee.

Sol Butler, Back

Played 1923 Rock Island, 1923-24, 1926 Hammond, 1924 Akron, 1926 Canton.

Dick Hudson, Back

Played 1923 Minneapolis, 1925-26 Hammond.

Harold Bradley, Guard

Played 1928 Chicago Cardinals.

David Myers, Guard, Back

Played 1930 Staten Island Stapletons, 1931 Brooklyn Dodgers.

Joe Lillard, Back

Played 1932-33 Chicago Cardinals.

Ray Kemp, Tackle

Played 1933 Pittsburgh Pirates.

## **1934-45**

No blacks played in the National Football League during this period.

## **1946**

Kenny Washington, Halfback

Played with San Francisco Clippers (PCPFL) 1944-45. Signed a contract with the Los Angeles Rams on March 21, 1946. Played 1946-48 with the Rams.

Woody Strode, End

Signed a contract with the Los Angeles Rams May 7, 1946. Played with the Rams 1946 only. Played with Calgary Stampeders (WIFU) 1948.

Bill Willis, Guard, Middle Guard

Signed a contract with the Cleveland Browns of the All-America Football Conference on August 6, 1946. Played 1946-53 with the Browns.

Marion Motley, Fullback

Signed a contract with the Cleveland Browns of the All-America Football Conference on August 9, 1946. Played 1946-53 Cleveland Browns, 1955 Pittsburgh Steelers.

**“Firsts” by Blacks in the Modern Era**  
(Post-World War II)

First Black Drafted by an NFL Club

George Taliaferro, HB (Indiana). Picked by the Chicago Bears in the 13th round of the 1949 draft but elected to sign with the Los Angeles Dons of the AAFC.

First Black Draftee to Play in the NFL

Wally Triplett, HB (Penn State). Picked by the Detroit Lions in the 19th round of the 1949 draft.

First Name Star from a Predominantly Black College

Tank Younger, FB (Grambling), Los Angeles Rams 1949.

First Black Quarterback in the NFL

Willie Thriver (Michigan State), Chicago Bears, 1953.

First Black Official

Burl Toler (San Francisco Univ.), Field Judge, beginning in 1965.

First Pros from Predominantly Black Schools

Ezzret Anderson, E (Kentucky State), Los Angeles Dons, 1947.  
John Brown, C (North Carolina College), Los Angeles Dons, 1947.  
Elmore Harris, HB (Morgan State), Brooklyn Dodgers, 1947.

First Black Lineman to Win All-League Honors

AAFC: Bill Willis, G (Ohio State), Cleveland Browns, 1946.  
NFL: Bill Willis, G (Ohio State), Cleveland Browns, 1950.

First Black Back to Win All-League Honors

AAFC: Marion Motley, FB (Nevada), Cleveland Browns, 1946.  
NFL: Marion Motley, FB (Nevada), Cleveland Browns, 1950.

First Black to Win Individual League Statistical Championship

AAFC: Marion Motley, FB (Nevada), Cleveland Browns, 1946 (rushing).  
NFL: Marion Motley, FB (Nevada), Cleveland Browns, 1950 (rushing).

### First Black to Become Pro Football Hall of Fame Member

Emlen Tunnell, DB New York Giants, Green Bay Packers (elected 1967).

### First Blacks on Each NFL Team

#### Baltimore Colts

Melvin Embree, E (Pepperdine), 1953  
George Taliaferro, HB (Indiana)\*, 1953  
Buddy Young, HB (Illinois)\*, 1953

#### Chicago Bears

Eddie Macon, HB (College of the Pacific), 1952

#### Chicago Cardinals

Clifton Anderson, E (Indiana), 1952  
Ollie Matson, HB (San Francisco), 1952  
Wally Triplett, HB (Penn State), 1952

#### Detroit Lions

Melvin Groomes, HB (Indiana), 1948  
Bob Mann, E (Michigan), 1948

#### Green Bay Packers

Bob Mann, E (Michigan)\*, 1951

#### Los Angeles Rams

Kenny Washington, HB (UCLA), 1946  
Woody Strode, E (UCLA), 1946

#### New York Giants

Sherman Howard, HB (Nevada)\*, 1950

#### New York Yanks

Sherman Howard, HB (Nevada)\*, 1950

#### Philadelphia Eagles

Ralph Goldstein, HB (Youngstown), 1952  
Donald Stevens, HB (Illinois), 1952

#### Pittsburgh Steelers

Jack Spinks, G (Alcorn A&M), 1952

#### Washington Redskins

Ron Hatcher, FB (Michigan State), 1962  
Bobby Mitchell, HB (Illinois)\*, 1962

### First Blacks on Each AAFC Team

#### Brooklyn Dodgers

Elmore Harris, HB (Morgan State), 1947

#### Chicago Rockets

Bill Bass, HB (Nevada), 1947

#### Cleveland Browns

Marion Motley, FB (Nevada), 1946  
Bill Willis, G (Ohio State), 1946

#### Los Angeles Dons

Ezzret Anderson, E (Kentucky State), 1947

John Brown, C (N. Carolina College), 1947  
Bert Piggott, HB (Illinois), 1947

New York Yankees  
Buddy Young, HB (Illinois), 1947

San Francisco Forty-Niners  
Robert Mike, T (UCLA), 1948  
Joe Perry, FB (Compton JC), 1948

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