

## **FRITZ POLLARD AND THE BROWN BOMBERS**

By John M. Carroll

Two recent articles by Gerald R. Gems and Thomas G. Smith, both appearing in Professional Football Research Association publication (one as a reprint from the Journal of Sport History), have renewed interest in the controversy over segregation and integration in the National Football League. In another timely essay in Coffin Corner, "Not Only the Ball was Brown," Bob Gill and Tod Maher have reminded readers that black athletes continued to participate in pro football during the years of NFL segregation, 1934-46. Maher focused attention on the New York Brown Bombers, which was the most important all-black team of the period, and noted correctly that "details of the team's history are often sketchy at best." [1]

One of the reasons for the incomplete record of the Harlem-based team is the fact that primary coverage of the Bombers was provided by black weekly newspapers which usually appeared on the street on Thursday, although they had a Saturday dateline. Since the Bombers and most pro teams played on Sunday, coverage of football games in the black press was nearly a week old before it hit the newsstands. Realizing that interested readers in Harlem and surrounding areas likely knew the score and details of the previous week's game, black sportswriters usually gave only a brief game account and occasionally failed to note the official score. The white press, of course, gave the Bombers little or no coverage except when the team played against a local white eleven.

The Brown Bombers were founded in the summer of 1935 (not 1936 as Maher states) by Herschel "Rip" Day, a black athletic promoter in Harlem. As Maher notes, the team was named in honor of the rising young heavyweight boxing contender, Joe Louis. There had been several black professional teams in Harlem of modest caliber in the early 1930s, but Day was determined to make the Brown Bombers the finest black pro eleven in the nation, on a par with Bob Douglas' famed New York Renaissance Big Five basketball team. Frederick D. "Fritz" Pollard, who had moved to New York from Chicago in 1933 and owned a black weekly tabloid newspaper by 1935, agreed to coach the Brown Bombers, at least in part, because of his concern about the failure of NFL owners to sign black players for the second consecutive season.

Pollard was a natural choice to coach the Bombers because he had a long association with pro football both as a player and coach. In 1919, while Pollard was coaching at Lincoln University, a black college near Philadelphia, he was recruited to play halfback for the Akron Indians in the informal Ohio league. Fritz would go on to become one of the brilliant runners and important gate attractions in the American Professional Football Association and later the NFL from 1920-26. He also coached NFL teams in Akron, Milwaukee, and Hammond during these years. From his experience in the pro game, Pollard was keenly aware of the hostility which some players and a number of owners felt toward black players. In 1926, for example, New York Giant management refused to allow its team to take the field in a game against Canton at the Polo Grounds until Bulldog quarterback Sol Butler, one of five blacks in big-time pro football that year, voluntarily withdrew from the game. The following year only one black player, Fred "Duke" Slater of the Chicago Cardinals, remained on an NFL roster. It was clear to Pollard that some owners would be pleased if all blacks were eliminated from the NFL. [2]

In 1928, Pollard and Dr. Albert C. Johnson organized the Chicago Black Hawks, an all-black professional team based in the Windy City, to demonstrate that black and whites could compete without racial incidents, the reason given by Giant management for excluding Butler from the game at the Polo Grounds in 1926. Pollard's Black Hawks played against white teams around Chicago, but enjoyed their greatest success by scheduling exhibition games against West Coast teams (white) during the winter months. The Black Hawks were made up of players from black and white colleges, some non-collegians, and NFL veterans Jay Mayo "Ink" Williams, Sol Butler, Duke Slater, and Pollard, himself. From 1929 until 1932 when the Depression caused the team to fold, the Black Hawks had become one of the more popular teams on the West Coast. [3]

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When he was asked in 1970 if he resented the fact that black kids now had it easier than it had been for him, Pollard replied that "if someone has opened the door for them, more power to them. I did everything I could to open the doors and make it easier for them. When I organized that Brown Bomber team, and there weren't any black boys in the pro leagues, I did that deliberately to show them that these teams could play against a whole black team and not have any trouble or any prejudice, and could draw a good crowd." As he had earlier attempted in Chicago with the Black Hawks, Pollard would try to showcase the best available black football talent in order to undermine the claim of some NFL owners that there was a scarcity of qualified Negro players. He was further determined to schedule exhibition games with the local NFL teams, the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants, to underscore his points. New York Amsterdam News sportswriter Artie La Mar reported before the Bombers' 1935 season began that "negotiations for night games with the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants are under way." During the season, Lewis Dial of the New York Age printed a rumor, probably started by Pollard, that the Giants had challenged the Bombers to a game in late November. Dial quoted Pollard as saying that if the November date was not acceptable, "a postseason game will be arranged." [4]

In fact, neither of New York's NFL teams was interested in playing the Brown Bombers of any other black team. Pollard's negotiation with New York Giant Owner, Tim Mara, may have been outright unfriendly in that Fritz would later list Mara along with the Chicago Bears George Halas as mainly responsible for the ban on blacks in the NFL after 1933. Despite Pollard's continuing and ultimately unsuccessful efforts in scheduling a game with either the Dodgers or Giants, he and Day were pleased with their success in putting together a first-rate pro team. Pollard brought in former Chicago Cardinal halfback Joe Lillard as the centerpiece of the bomber backfield, and signed former New York University and Brooklyn Dodger wingback Dave Meyers and ex- Morgan College star, Thomas "Tank" Conrad, to help provide a potent offense. The Bomber line was anchored by former Providence Steam Roller end, Howard "Dixie" Matthews, and consisted of former black stars from both white and black colleges as well as a few non-college men. [5]

Scheduling only white professional teams from the northeast and playing their home games at Dyckman Oval across the river from Harlem in the Bronx, the Bombers got off to a fast start. In the opening game, they humiliated a much-touted team organized by former Army All-America, Chris Cagle, (28-6) and then proceeded to demolish (27-0) an all-star eleven led by Cliff Montgomery, who had quarterbacked Columbia university to a Rose Bowl victory a few years before. As a gauge of the quality of the Bomber team, Cagle's all-stars had barely lost an exhibition game to the 1934 NFL champion New York Giants. Joe "Pop" Lillard provided a good part of the offense, but he was ably assisted by wingback Dave Meyers and 6' 3", 240 pound fullback Tank Conrad, who was dubbed the "Negro Nagurski." Meyers and Lillard continued to show their previous NFL form and the massive, but quick Conrad was nearly unstoppable on line rushes, but NFL owners showed no interest in the Bomber backfield trio. After five games the brown Bombers were undefeated, racking up ninety- two points to their opponents nine. The winning streak ended on the last day of the season when the New Rochelle Bulldogs, led by Alabama Pitts, defeated the Bombers, 7-6. Pitts, an almost legendary halfback who had played several years for New York's Sing Sing Prison team, the Blacksheep, and had been recently released by the NFL Philadelphia Eagles, scored the winning touchdown. [6]

Although the city's black newspapers gave the Bombers ample coverage and duly praised Pollard and his players, the team struggled financially. The average attendance at Dyckman Oval, where the Bombers played most of their games, was about 1,500 per game which was hardly enough to cover players' salaries. To create more excitement and help bolster attendance, Pollard instituted a number of trick plays and unorthodox formations, including one called the "aeroplane shift," which the Amsterdam News claimed baffled opponents. Midway through the season, Pollard reluctantly agreed to allow the team to sing spirituals and "truck" from the huddle to the line of scrimmage. He told a reporter that he first opposed the singing and dancing routine which the team sometimes used in practice drills, but "then it struck me all of a sudden that it might help them, and it might aid in selling the team to the public." Truckin' and singing became trademarks of the Brown Bombers, but Pollard stopped short of outright clowning antics, long a part of Negro professional sports, and most recently popularized by the black Cincinnati Clowns in baseball. The showmanship instituted by the Bombers was popular with the Harlem fans and did increase attendance, but Pollard admitted near the end of the season that "we've lost about \$5,000 so far." He added that "we're getting new capital in next year and some new players and I'm sure we'll be a big financial success." [7]

During the late summer of 1936 after Pollard welcomed his son, Fritz, Jr., home from the Berlin Olympic games where the young Pollard had won a bronze medal in the 110 meter high hurdles, Fritz, Sr., made preparations for a second season as coach of the Brown Bombers. Once again, he was unable to schedule an exhibition game with local NFL teams and was forced to start the season on the road with a series of warm up games because Dyckman Oval, which was also used by Negro League baseball teams, was not available until mid-October. Starting with a makeshift lineup, the Bombers lost their first four contests. But, when the regulars arrived for the home-opener against the Newark Bears of the newly organized American Professional Football League (considered one of the top minor leagues), it became apparent that Pollard had once again put together one of the best minor league professional teams in the country. In addition to the mainstays of the 1935 team, Lillard and Conrad, Pollard recruited former Morgan College triple-threat sensation, Otis Troupe, who would share season scoring honors with Lillard. Pollard also brought in backs Hallie Harding and Oland Dial, who had played with him on the Chicago Black Hawks during the 1931-32 season. The Bombers humbled the Bears, 41-0, before 3,000 fans at Dyckman Oval, and proceeded to dominate the opposition for the rest of the season, recording six wins, no defeats, and one tie. Considering the rout of the Newark Bears of the upstart American League and a 29-0 whitewash of the still highly regarded Frankford Yellowjackets, Pollard could legitimately claim that he had demonstrated that there were a number of black players who were capable of playing in the NFL. Yet, as before, the league owners showed no interest in either scheduling, or recruiting players from the Brown Bombers. [8]

Pollard stayed on for another season as coach of the Bombers, but became increasingly pessimistic about the prospects of altering what more clearly seemed to be a ban against blacks playing in the NFL. The Bombers enjoyed another successful season by posting a 5-2-1 record, including a 29-0 victory over the Jersey City Giants of the American Professional Football League. Pollard continued to showcase some of the best available black football talent from both the Negro and white colleges. With Lillard and Conrad sidelined with injuries around mid-season, Pollard inserted former Hampton Institute wingback, Charlie Paige, into the backfield and he became one of the Bombers' running sensations of the 1937 campaign. On the line, Pollard added former Brown University tackle Vernon Beaubien and center Al Harris, a recent Greensboro A & T standout. The Bombers played before relatively large home crowds in their third season (averaging more than 3,000 per game) and drew more than 9,000 in Newark in a 28-14 loss to the Newark Tornadoes of the American Professional Football Association. Pollard was prepared to coach the Bombers for another season before a challenge from a rival group of black sports promoters caused him to change his mind. [9]

Prior to the opening of the 1938 Brown Bomber training camp at Verplanck, New York, Amsterdam News sports columnist J. Wayne Burrell announced that James Semler, manager of the Black Yankees Negro National League baseball team, was organizing a "big time" black professional football team by the same name. In an interview with Burrell in which Semler conspicuously failed to mention the Brown Bombers, the Black Yankees' manager remarked that "with the exception of one or two players appearing with white professional elevens, there is no place on (sic) the 'big time' for our stars of color." Semler said he was "appealing to the magnates in the two Negro (baseball) leagues and other sports-minded business men to cooperate with him in trying to create a place in the Sun for these Negro gridiron heroes." The implication of Semler's remarks was clear: he was challenging Pollard's team for supremacy among New York's black fans and obviously did not consider the Brown Bombers "big time." In a section devoted to notes and trivia following the interview, Burrell had "FRITZ POLLARD casting a watchful eye toward James Semler's Black Yankee Grid machine." [10]

Semler's remarks must have hurt Pollard, who had organized and coached black all-star teams since the early 1920s and whose Bombers were clearly the outstanding black team in the country. What was worse, it soon became apparent that Semler had made a deal with Cuban-born Alessandro "Alex" Pompey, owner of the Negro National League's Cuban Giants baseball team and a convicted numbers racketeer, to gain exclusive use of Dyckman Oval, which Pompey owned. When Pollard learned that the Bombers would not be allowed to use Dyckman Oval for their home games and realized that no suitable stadium close to Harlem was available, he promptly resigned as coach. He simply stated to the press that he was "no longer connected with the Brown Bombers football team nor any other in any capacity." The Brown Bombers struggled on for several more years as a road team, but could not afford to pay the best black players, and never recaptured their past glory before the wartime mobilization forced the team

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to fold. Pollard remained a vocal advocate of integration in the NFL mainly through his newspaper, the Independent News, but his on-field association with professional football as a player and coach which dated back to 1919 came to an end. [11]

As the nation moved closer to war and the Brown Bombers struggled as a road team, fewer black New Yorkers remembered the pioneering integrationist efforts of Fritz Pollard. But in the days after Pearl Harbor when rumors of the impending integration of big-time professional football and baseball were rife, and black sports commentators praised the latest leaders in the movement, former Brown Bomber manager Rip Day paid Pollard a tribute in a testy letter to Amsterdam News columnist Dan Burley, who had been celebrating the recent efforts to integrate professional football as if the movement had begun yesterday. "I still say," wrote Day, "that Fritz Pollard did more to advance the idea of the best-against-the-best-regardless-of-color than any single man in the business." [12]

Day might have added that Pollard was a one man gang in his effort to integrate American football, both college and professional. In 1916, he was the first black player to participate in what became known as the Rose Bowl. The same year he became the first black to be named to a backfield position on Walter Camp's All-America team. He also became the first important Afro-American player to participate in "big-time" professional football beginning in 1919, and was one of the outstanding gate attraction in the early NFL. Pollard is still widely celebrated as the first black coach in the NFL. Few know, however, that he organized the first black professional all-star team in Chicago at the end of the 1922 season. Pollard organized the Chicago Black Hawks and Brown Bombers in the late 1920s and 1930s to first try to maintain integration in the NFL and later to attack the insidious color ban. He was also the first professional coach to showcase the multitude of talent at the nation's black colleges, which NFL teams failed to tap until the early 1950s. The college football hall of fame recognized Pollard's talent and extraordinary pioneering efforts by inducting him in 1954; the Pro Football Hall of Fame has yet to accord him a similar tribute.

### ENDNOTES

1. Gerald R. Gems, "Shooting Stars: The Rise and Fall of Blacks in Professional Football," P.F.R.A. Annual 1988, 1-22; Thomas G. Smith, "Outside the Pale: The Exclusion of blacks from the National Football League, 1934-1946," Journal of Sport History 15 (Winter 1988), 255-81; Bob Gill and Tod Maher, "Not Only the Ball Was White: Black Players in Minor League Football, 1933-46," Coffin Corner, vol. 11, no.5, 12-16.
2. Chicago Defender, November 6, 1926.
3. See the Chicago Defender, 1928-32.
4. Jay Barry interview with Pollard, July 1970, in the Brown University Archives; New York Amsterdam News, August 31, and September 21 and 28, 1935; New York Age, October 26, 1935.
5. Barry interview with Pollard, July 1970; New York Amsterdam News, September 21, 1935.
6. New York Amsterdam News, October 19 and 26, November 2, 9, 16, and 26, and December 7, 1935.
7. New York Amsterdam News, November 9, 1935; Providence Journal, December 6, 1935.
8. New York Amsterdam News, September 26, October 10, 17, 24, 31 November 7, 14, 21, and December 5, 1936.
9. New York Amsterdam News, September-December 1937. See esp. September 25, October 9, and November 13 and 20.
10. J. Wayne Burrell, "Sports Whirl," New York Amsterdam News, July 30, 1938.
11. New York Amsterdam News, August 7, 1938; Barry interview with Pollard, July 1970. On Pompey and the connection between black professional sports and crime figures see Donn Rogosin, Invisible Men: Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues (New York: Atheneum, 1983), 105-08, 110-13.
12. Letter from Herschel "Rip" Day to Dan Burley, New York Amsterdam News, January 10, 1942. Also see the New York Amsterdam News, December 6, 1941.