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Robert “Bobby” Marshall

This article was written by Bill Johnson.

Given his achievements, Bobby Marshall is one of the most underappreciated athletes of the twentieth century. In 1903, Marshall became the first African-American football player to play for the University of Minnesota. He also starred for the school’s baseball team, and later became the first Black semipro hockey player in the nation’s history. After several seasons with one of the best Negro baseball teams of the dead ball era, the 1909-1910 St. Paul Gophers, he became the first Black high school football coach in Minnesota’s history. Eventually, at age 40, along with Fritz Pollard, Marshall became one of the first two Black athletes to play in the American Professional Football Association (APFA) in 1920. Two years later, in 1922, the APFA was rechristened the National Football League. Marshall and Pollard were the elder Black statesmen of the organization.



Marshall played in the NFL through the 1925 season before finally retiring from professional sports at the age of 45, and in 1971 was elected to the College Football Hall of Fame. In the twenty-first century, the name of Fritz Pollard is – rightly – well known throughout the ranks of professional sports historians and is enshrined in the Professional Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. The NFL and other sports professionals even created the Fritz Pollard Alliance to educate the public about equal opportunity in sports, and to provide scholarships to “aspiring sports industry professionals of color.”^{vi} The



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name of Robert Marshall, Pollard's NFL contemporary, however, has been consigned to undeserved obscurity in that same sporting world, at least outside of the upper Midwest.

Robert Wells Marshall was born on March 12, 1880, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. His father, Richard Marshall, worked in a lunchroom as an attendant and as an apprentice blacksmith. At the time, that low level of employment was normal for Black men, but it paid just well enough to support his family. Bobby Marshall's mother, Symanthia (née: Gillespie) was the daughter of Ezekiel Gillespie. Marshall's maternal grandfather had been born into slavery in Tennessee and after buying his freedom he moved to Wisconsin. There he sued the state to allow him to vote. In winning that lawsuit, he became a de facto civil rights leader in the state for the remainder of his life.

The young family moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, when Marshall was a child, and it was there, at Central High School, that Bobby revealed his immense athletic talent. Almost at his adult height of 6'2" by the time he was a sophomore, the righthanded Marshall helped lead Central High School to three state football titles and two baseball pennants, all while also starring in track, wrestling, basketball, and tennis. He was also a standout in that northern sport of choice, ice hockey. His life became more challenged when his 49-year-old mother died while Marshall was still a student, so in addition to his athletic endeavors, he took a part-time job as a janitor to help pay the bills.ⁱⁱ

After graduating from Central, he enrolled at the University of Minnesota in 1903 and continued his athletic dominance. Primarily playing offensive and defensive end, and occasionally kicking, Marshall was not only the first Black football player in the school's history, but he led them to two Western Conference (later renamed the Big-Ten Conference) championships, and was also a unanimous selection to the All-Conference squad in 1906. Marshall was, as writers later observed, "a fast and rangy end, and famed for the trickery which drew opponents into traps. He made a study of the business of playing end..."ⁱⁱⁱ

This was an era in football's history that was so violent, at least in contrast to the modern version of the game, that it would lead to the intervention of President Theodore Roosevelt [1906] to cause rule changes to reduce serious injury and even fatalities on the field. In 1905, in the midst of Marshall's time at Minnesota, nineteen high school and college players died and 137 were severely injured in the course of playing football.^{iv}

ⁱ Online: <https://fritzpollard.org>

ⁱⁱ Steven Hoffbeck. "Bobby Marshall: Pioneering African American Athlete" *Minnesota History*, Winter 2004-2005; 159. Online: <http://collections.mnhs.org/mnhistorymagazine/articles/59/v59i04p158-174.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Dick Cullum. "Cullum Picks All Time Minnesota Grid Team" *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, August 28, 1949; 103

^{iv} "Football Claims a Heavy Toll in Lives" *San Francisco Call*, November 27, 1905; 1.



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Those injuries included rib and spinal fractures, broken shoulders, legs, arms and collar bones, and concussions. Such was the nature of the game just after the turn of the century, violent and often brutal, and a mirror for much of the wider society. Despite the brutality of the game, Marshall was a terrific player. For Marshall to be specifically called out by football writers for his willingness to hurl his body into the on-field fray, to be highlighted in an age of routine mayhem, underscored his courage and, perhaps, his desperate desire to win. He was, clearly, a tough man in an age of tough men.

The young player also took advantage of the opportunity to play for one Minnesota assistant coach, “Pudge” Heffelfinger, the first acknowledged professional football player. Although Marshall began play in the era when ends could not catch passes, he still earned the sobriquet of “the most gifted Minnesota football player.”^v In one game, against Carleton College, he ran for two touchdowns, including one of 70 yards, returned kickoffs, and kicked all the Gopher extra points.^{vi} In 1906, after the rules were changed to permit forward passing on a wider scale, Marshall became an even more potent weapon. Even with his football success, though, the brilliant athlete found other sports in which to excel. On the baseball diamond, he flashed a similarly brilliant set of skills, playing first base for the 1907 Western Conference champion Gophers, a team that posted impressive wins over regional foes like the University of Notre Dame and the University of Chicago.

As a graduate in 1907, and in addition to studying law, Marshall took over the Central High school football team, thus becoming the first Black head coach in Minnesota scholastic history. He also served as an assistant coach at his collegiate alma mater, and thus became the first Black coach in what is now Big Ten history. Marshall loved playing games even more than coaching them, and he continued to hone his baseball skills each summer. After he filled in for one game as catcher for the St. Paul Colored Gophers, a new semiprofessional segregated team that barnstormed throughout the Midwest, he signed on to play that summer on a town team in nearby Lamoure, North Dakota. The Colored Gophers were an outstanding amalgamation of talent, and won over 90 games that year, mostly against white and mixed-race teams.

The Minneapolis Colored Keystones were established in 1908, another Black team to counter the rival Colored Gophers, and Marshall played first base, outfield, pitched a few games, and even caught. In 1909, Marshall moved over to the St. Paul Colored Gophers, and the team posted a 95-28-1 record.^{vii} Marshall started the 1910 pre-season with the

^v “Bob Marshall is Perennial Star of the Gridiron.” *Minneapolis Journal*, December 19, 1920; 58.

^{vi} O’Loughlin. “Carleton’s Game Fight Did Not Check Gophers,” *Minneapolis Journal*, October 3, 1904; 45.

^{vii} Todd Peterson. “Can You Hear the Noise? The 1909 St. Paul Gophers” *Society of American Baseball Research Journal*, 2007. Online: <https://sabr.org/journal/article/can-you-hear-the-noise-the-1909-st-paul-gophers/>



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Chicago Giants, and he joined them for their southern tour in April and May. He returned to Minnesota in June and rejoined the Colored Gophers for what proved to be their final season.

Instead of remaining with the St. Paul Colored Gophers' during their slow demise, Marshall started a smaller, touring team named the Twin Cities Gophers. Ostensibly, this allowed the now-thirty-year-old to try to build his law practice, but in reality, Marshall was more focused on playing baseball. In 1911, Marshall surrendered the dream of becoming a successful attorney when he accepted an appointment to the Minnesota state grain offices.^{viii} He would work there for the next 39 years.

His recreational outlet remained sports, and his athletic gift hardly seemed to fade with time. In addition to running, and starring for those Twin Cities Gophers, he also played semipro football with the Minneapolis Marines. There, his undeniable football skills earned him a tryout with the larger Rock Island Independents. Marshall used some interesting tactics to compensate for his age, such as wrapping a padded piece of metal around his ribcage to protect bones and vital organs.^{ix}

In 1918, the extra money came in handy when he married Irene Knott. She was just 18 at the time, but the couple ultimately welcomed four children, including Robert Jr., William, Donald, and daughter Bette. The marriage would ultimately end in divorce, but at the time the demands of fatherhood fueled Marshall to even greater athletic heights.

Between 1917 and 1919, the aging end and kicker sustained his excellent play, so when in 1920, with the formation of the American Professional Football Association (APFA) and Rock Island's entry into the league, 40-year old Bobby Marshall became the first Black player in professional football history. On September 6, 1920, he helped the Independents blank the St. Paul Ideals 48-0.^x His Minnesota coach, Pudge Heffelfinger, was already the first professional player in the history of the game, and now one of Heffelfinger's proteges became the first Black pro. Two weeks later, Fritz Pollard would make his professional debut as well, the second Black in what soon became the NFL, but Marshall will forever be the first.

The place and time, Minnesota in 1920, was not as violent as America's deep south, but there were still lynchings, including those of three men in Duluth that year.^{xi} That same

^{viii} "Mr. Bobby Marshall has received an appointment..." *St. Paul Appeal*, September 2, 1911; 3.

^{ix} Hoffbeck, 169.

^x Mark Craig. "A Century Ago Bobby Marshall Made History Playing in NFL's First Game" *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, December 25, 1999; S7.

^{xi} Katie Gailoto and Brooks Johnson. "A Century of Shame" *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, June 17, 2020; online: <https://www.startribune.com/in-duluth-a-century-of-racial-shame/571188312/>



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year, prior to a Sunday club game against a team from New Prague, Marshall had been ordered by the visitors to leave the field or the game would be cancelled. He refused, and the game was played, but Bobby Marshall was no stranger to the harsh reality of racism. Marshall's grandson Bill told writer Mark Craig in 2020 that, "... my grandfather always carried himself as a complete gentleman. He stressed education first. His general attitude was people respected you if you were educated. The racists, in his opinion, were unbelievably stupid."^{xii}

In that 1920 campaign, Marshall started seven of the nine games in which he played, on a team that eventually posted a 6-2-2 record. From 1921 through 1924, Marshall rejoined the Minneapolis Marines, now formal members of the NFL, and in 1925, his final year of professional sports, he played end for the Duluth Kelleys. The team failed, and Marshall did not catch on with another team for the 1926 season.

Marshall had continued to play baseball during the summers, and in 1925, despite being 45 years old, he was still playing baseball regularly for teams like the Potts Motor Company club, along with smaller teams throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin. It seems there were few limits as to how far Marshall would go to play. In 1940, well after his football days had ended and at age 60, he was still catching on the Minnesota Grain Commission team.

Bobby Marshall's later life – he retired from the Grain Commission in 1950 – included his active role with the St. Peter AME church in Minneapolis, as well as speaking to groups and coaching some of Minneapolis' young athletes in football and boxing. On August 27, 1958, Marshall passed away due to complications arising from Alzheimer's disease. He is buried at the Lakewood Cemetery in Minneapolis.

In view of his vital contribution to the game, he was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1971. In 1999, the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* named him the 10th greatest football player in Minnesota history, and the 51st greatest athlete overall.^{xiii} But it was his life beyond the athletic fields and rinks and rings, though, that better defined the man among those who knew him best. Steven Hoffbeck, a St. Paul deputy police chief, labeled Marshall the "outstanding man of the Minneapolis African American community." Local writers and activists agreed. Terry McConnell wrote in his 2021 biography of Marshall that the man's "greatest contributions may not have been on the field of play...[he] stood as a reminder to all Minnesotans that African Americans had integrity and ability on and off the playing field during decades when African Americans were banned from professional sports and many other opportunities."^{xiv} It is high praise, indeed, yet may

^{xii} Craig.

^{xiii} Craig.

^{xiv} Terry McConnell. *Breaking Through the Line*. Minneapolis: Nodin Press, 2021; 171.



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well still fall short of properly describing Marshall and capturing the breadth of his humanity.

End Notes: