MORE THAN JUST A GAME: THE IMPACT OF SPORTS ON RACIAL SEGREGATION IN ONE SOUTHERN TOWN

by

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ABSTRACT

The research examines the impact of sports in the Civil Rights Movement, particularly addressing school desegregation during 1965–1971 in Valdosta, Georgia, based on interviews with nine Black football athletes who played for Valdosta High School during that period. The Valdosta High School football team had a tradition of excellence that was recognized throughout the state of Georgia. Valdosta and most of Lowndes County had a clear history of racial violence and bigotry. However, when the community was faced with mandated desegregation of the high school, instead of resorting to violence, the citizens focused on football. The outstanding success of African American football players and the entire time under the leadership of their head coach built a bridge between the White and Black communities. What could have been a period of intense brutality and community upheaval became a time of championships and glory.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is respectfully dedicated to my children, Ambree K. Robinson and Langton R. Robinson. It is my hope that this dissertation serves as evidence to them that the impossible is possible through hard work, perseverance, determination, and faith.
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Words cannot express the level of gratitude and appreciation that I have for Dr. Natalie Adams, my advisor and mentor. I came to her with a vague idea; thanks to her leadership, motivation, inspiration, and knowledge, I have completed research of which I can be proud. I would have never gotten here without her.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For many people, sports form an integral part of childhood memories. Sports provide a way for children to build a relationship with their parents, family, and friends by going to sporting events together or playing the sport together (e.g., just playing catch). For many African American boys, sports take on an even more significant meaning. Their coach may be their first father figure, given the high rate of single-parent homes headed by African American women (Staples, 1985). These boys may have played sports in their neighborhoods with their friends, emulating their favorite sports heroes. They may have played in humble locations—empty sandlots, open fields, or neighborhood streets—any place accessible for children to play. Some of the luckiest children would have had the chance to leave the sandlots behind for multimillion-dollar stadiums (Quirk & Fort, 1997; Rosner & Shropshire, 2010; Walsh & Giulianotti, 2007).

Organized sports have evolved from free amateur exhibitions to profit-driven businesses (Quirk & Fort, 1997; Rosner & Shropshire, 2010; Walsh & Giulianotti, 2007). The business of sports is one of the leading industries in the world, generating astronomical profits (Quirk & Fort, 1997; Rosner & Shropshire, 2010; Walsh & Giulianotti, 2007). For example, “In 2007, the annual turnover of world soccer was reckoned at some $250 billion, a figure equivalent to the gross national income of the Netherlands. At the college level, American football generates around $5 billion annually” (Walsh & Giulianotti, 2007, p. 1). Forbes Magazine staff writer Badenhausen (2014) described the worldwide financial phenomenon; in analyzing the top 50 sports franchises in the world, he found that the “top 50 is worth $1.34 billion, up 8% over last
year. There are 38 teams worth $1 billion, versus 33 last year. There weren’t any teams worth $2 billion three years ago; now there are six” (para. 9).

In fact, organized sports is more than just a business. It is a phenomenon with a global influence. The power wielded by organized sports lies not just in the money that it generates but in its influence on society (Edwards, 1969; Eitzen, 1998; Gerdy, 2002; Grundy, 2001; Wenner, 1989; Zirin, 2005). Sports has become a formative part of the human experience for both players and spectators. Sports games remind players of their weaknesses, their strengths, and their victories and defeats. Sports serves as a microcosm of the human experience (Eitzen, 1998). This is well illustrated by Eitzen 2009:

Sports elaborates in its rituals what it means to be human: the play, the risk, the trials, the collective impulse to games, the thrill of the physicality, the necessity of strategy; defeat, victory, defeat again, pain, transcendence and, most of all, the certainty that nothing is certain—that anything can change and be changed. (p. 9)

For many African Americans, sports became more than just a human experience. It was a way to develop a cultural identity that had been lost during the many years of slavery (Wiggins & Miller, 2003). Even before the end of slavery, prominent African American athletes, such as boxer Tom Molineux, received international acclaim fighting for the British heavyweight championship (Wiggins & Miller, 2003). African American athletes served as a source of great pride to the African American community. This connection between the African American community and its athletes is illustrated in Maya Angelou’s 1971 autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The primary location of this coming-of-age story is Stamps, Arkansas, in the 1930s. One pivotal moment in the book takes place at Angelou’s grandmother’s general store, where a large portion of the African American community has gathered to listen to a Joe
Louis fight on the radio. The scene vividly depicts this unspoken connection within the African American community and how African American sports heroes contributed to this sense of communality. As the small crowd listens to Joe Louis being punched numerous times,

It was our people falling. It was another lynching, yet another Black man hanging on a tree. One more woman ambushed and raped. A Black boy whipped and maimed. It was hounds on the trail of a man running through slimy swamps. It was a White woman slapping her maid for being forgetful. . . . We didn’t breathe. We didn’t hope. We waited. (Angelou, 1971, p. 113)

Other prominent African American writers also saw Joe Louis as a pivotal icon. Richard Wright (1935) described the symbolic value of Louis’s victory over the German Max Schmeling: “It was a refutation—a decisive, smashing one—of the theory that Negroes are inferiors who inevitably fail when they match skill or knowledge with Whites” (p. 18).

Maya Angelou and Richard Wright are not the only African American writers to examine the connection between African American communities and their athletes. Wiggins and Miller (2003) wrote, “We have scant knowledge of any athletic prowess that W. E. B. Du Bois . . . may have possessed, yet Du Bois made sporting accomplishments a substantial part of The Crisis coverage under his editorship” (p. 4). Other authors, such as Edwards (1969), Grundy (2001), and Rhoden (2010), have alluded to the powerful influence of organized sports on society, particularly as it relates to race relations in America. For instance, in Sports: The All-American Addiction, Gerdy (2002) stated, “Sports also has a history of shattering social stereotypes and thus has been hailed as an important vehicle for positive social change” (p.16). Zirin (2010) described sports as an instrument for social change, recognized as such not just by historians but by the participants in the Civil Rights Movement. For evidence, Zirin (2010) turned not just to
any civil rights activist but to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. At first glance, a connection between sports and Dr. King seems surprising, but King supported Mohammed Ali’s refusal to be drafted for the Vietnam War. King also convinced Hank Aaron to remain with the Milwaukee Braves baseball team as they relocated to Atlanta. Aaron had had serious reservations about returning to the South, but he did as King urged him.

I don’t mean that King was any kind of a star athlete. The only sport that the young, roundish “Mike” King was known to excel at was pocket billiards, which isn’t exactly a sport (the golden rule: anything that you can gain weight or smoke cigarettes while doing is not a sport). But Dr. King understood with remarkable acuity the political and symbolic power of sports. He understood that the athletic field—and athletes—could be a powerful megaphone for civil rights and racial justice. (Zirin, 2010, para. 2)

Zirin (2010) discussed how the teenage King was enamored with Jackie Robinson’s breaking the racial barrier in major league sports, forever changing America. Although Robinson himself was reluctant to take an active role in agitating for desegregation due to the delicate line that he was already walking, King viewed Robinson as a great athlete and, more important, a catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement. Robinson’s ability to withstand verbal assaults and physical abuse foreshadowed King’s methods of nonviolent resistance. King viewed Jackie Robinson as “a pilgrim that walked on the lonesome byways toward the high road of freedom. He was a sit-inner before sit-ins, a freedom rider before freedom rides” (as cited in Zirin, 2010, para. 3). King’s esteem for Robinson adds a level of legitimacy to the concept of sports being influential in the Civil Rights Movement.

Zirin is not alone in considering sports a catalyst for social justice, nor was Dr. King the only civil rights icon to recognize this influence. John Carlin, author of Playing With the Enemy:
Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than government in breaking down racial barriers. (cited in Carlin, 2008, p. 4)

Mandela was a political prisoner for 27 years and, upon his release, was elected President of South Africa. Mandela’s election escalated the civil unrest in South Africa, putting the nation on the cusp of civil war. Mandela planned to use the 1995 rugby championship as a way to unite the country (Carlin, 2008). The South African team, the Springboks, adopted his theme as the team motto: “One Country, One Team” (Carlin, 2008). The problem with this plan was that many Black South Africans considered rugby the sport of the oppressor; they had no interest in supporting the team’s championship goals. However, Mandela convinced Black South Africans that to support the team was to support the nation. The Springboks beat New Zealand in the finals to win the Rugby World Cup Championship in 1995. However, what people most remember is Nelson Mandela wearing a Springbok jersey at the game before a crowd of 65,000 that was 95% White (Carlin, 2008). The crowd, appreciating the symbolism of Mandela wearing the jersey and embracing one of the old symbols of oppression, shouted his name, “Nelson! Nelson! Nelson!” (Carlin, 2008).

Mandela’s use of sport as a bridge was crowned when South Africa defeated the All Blacks [the New Zealand team, so named because they play in all-Black uniforms] to win the World Cup. Mandela wearing a Springbok jersey joined Pienaar [the Springbok team
captain] in the celebrations. Under apartheid, the Springbok emblem was reserved for White people. Black people had always hated the emblem, but Mandela in a special concession had allowed the rugby authorities to retain it. Now by wearing a jersey with that emblem he was showing that for all the wrongs the apartheid regime had done, he could forgive and forget. (Bose, 2013, para. 5)

President Mandela’s transformation of a symbol of oppression into a symbol of hope demonstrates the impact that sports can have on society. Once considered an enemy of the state, Mandela was now cheered by a predominantly White crowd. This became a legendary moment, and John Carlin’s book became a movie called Invictus (Warner Brothers, 2009), starring Morgan Freeman as Mandela. It would not be the first time that Hollywood romanticized the relationship between sports and racial equality.

One Hollywood example of the relationship between sports and racial equality is the Disney movie Remember the Titans (Walt Disney Pictures, 2000). The movie is loosely based on the desegregation of T. C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. The essential theme of the movie is how the integrated high school football team successfully led to a less violent desegregation and unified the community. The current research examines how, like the story of T. C. Williams, Georgia’s sports culture, especially high school football, was essential in overcoming massive resistance to school desegregation and how sports ultimately contributed to a smoother, more peaceful desegregation of Georgia’s public high schools.

To understand the importance of sports during the desegregation of public schools, it must be remembered that White segregationists had for years used massive resistance and violence in an effort to avert desegregation (Bolton, 2005). Groups such as the White Citizens’
Council, the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, and others refused to accept that the dual system of education could not be saved (Bolton, 2005). Many southern legislatures passed constitutional amendments giving their governor the authority to close public schools rather than comply with desegregation orders (see Appendix A for a copy of Valdosta’s desegregation order). In the midst of this turmoil, many communities were desperately looking for ways to heal the scars of racial segregation and control the violent elements of the White communities’ reaction to forced desegregation of the public schools (Bolton, 2005). Many communities looked to their high school sports programs to ease them into desegregation.

The story of the desegregation of Valdosta High School (VHS) is indispensable in understanding the important role of sports in achieving a relatively smooth desegregation in Georgia. The VHS Wildcats were formed in 1913 and ever since have been among the very best high school football programs in the nation. This team has been recognized by ESPN, the New York Times, Sports Illustrated, and many other media for its tradition of sports excellence. The Wildcats have more than 800 wins, 23 state championships, and six national championships, with only five losing seasons.

In 1965 VHS began to accept some African Americans as a result of the “freedom of choice” policy, which was the state of Georgia’s response to the two Brown v. Board of Education decisions. Valdosta’s football coach at that time, August Bazemore, accepted African American players on his team in 1966, even though statewide mandated desegregation of schools did not take place in Georgia until 1968 (see Jubera, 2012). After court-enforced desegregation in 1969, many Black athletes joined the VHS football team and helped to continue the long tradition of winning football championships. In many ways, sports at Valdosta High, particularly football, helped to ease the transition to desegregation with no violence and little fanfare.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to explore the role of sports during the desegregation of public schools by focusing on one of the most successful high school football teams (VHS) in Georgia, indeed in the nation. In particular, this research focuses on the Black athletes during this time. Although this research is fundamentally a historical case study rooted in the past, it is the researcher’s intention that this study be used by current and future education practitioners. Aside from the high-technology classrooms and tools, the schools of today are shockingly similar to those of the segregated 1950s and 1960s as resegregation is becoming increasingly more commonplace.

Approximately 77% of Black students and 55% of Latino students attended public schools that were comprised of [sic] 50% to 100% racial minorities. In 2009–2010, more than 55 years after the Brown decision, the country’s public schools reflected an overall school segregation with about 74% of Black students and 80% of Latino students attending schools that were 50% to 100% minority, and more specifically, more than 40% of Black and Latino students were attending schools that were 90% to 100% minority. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012, para. 4–5)

We are approaching a new era of school segregation in America. In fact, America has been re-segregating itself for more than a decade (Orfield, 2001). “While segregation is far from the only problem facing American schools, it makes the other problems worse and takes away an important tool for teaching people of differing backgrounds how to live and work and run communities together” (Orfield, 2001, p. 53). It is the researcher’s hope that this study can be used now and in the future to demonstrate how schools can use sports to encourage desegregation.
Significance of the Study

Many leaders in the Civil Rights Movement were mature men and women, but many young people were involved, as well. From the Birmingham protest to the lunch counter sit-ins organized by the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to the Freedom Riders, history has looked well on the bravery and courage of the youth involved in these protests (Grundy, 2001). However, many African American high school athletes found themselves in situations just as dangerous and confrontational as those faced by other civil rights activists. Grundy (2001) described the pressure on these young athletes:

The uncertainty and alienation that many Black students experienced had a definite effect on their interests in athletics. Becoming a high school athlete required considerable sacrifice and commitment, a dedication that was sometimes hard to muster in such uncertain circumstances. Black athletes at times worried about their own safety. (p. 270)

Furthermore, many White coaches put themselves in danger to protect their African American players. Grundy (2001) wrote about a White coach who received a threat from a spectator, “There’s a man that’s going to blow your head off if you keep playing all the niggers on your basketball team” (p. 269). The threats were not only from the wider community; sometimes they came from the players’ own White teammates. Grundy (2001) quoted a White basketball player as saying, “We’ve never played with a Black, and we ain’t going to play with one now” (p. 269). Many White coaches had to develop a delicate diplomacy to protect the safety of their African American players from internal and external threats.

Many coaches were able to maneuver through dangerous situations based on their status within their community. Coaches command a great deal of respect in many communities, particularly in the South (Grundy, 2001). Many White coaches used their influence and prestige
to assure the White community that desegregation was not as detrimental as they imagined. The importance of White coaches cannot be underestimated; in many situations, they were the only barrier between African American athletes and those who wanted to hurt them, be they violent segregationists or disgruntled White teammates (Grundy, 2001).

This study is significant because it recognizes the role of African American athletes and their African American and White coaches in the Civil Rights Movement. Many of these African American athletes and White coaches have never been recognized with monuments, had their stories chronicled in books, or received any other form of well-deserved recognition. It is hoped that this study will demonstrate that Black and White high school athletes and their White coaches were essential in bridging differences between White and Black communities, as well as in lessening acts of violence associated with desegregation. It is intended that this research will lead to these people finally receiving due recognition for their contributions to the Civil Rights Movement.

**Research Design**

Historical case study formed the basis of this research. The case study allows the researcher to examine complex phenomenon from multiple angles (Merriam, 2001). This approach allows the researcher the opportunity to explore data from primary sources and to interview participants. The intriguing part of this research design is that it mandates that the researcher became a detective who is searching for clues.

Writers of social history are often involved in exhaustive research efforts and find themselves doing a kind of detective work tracking down original documents, objects and records (such as census tracts, court records and newspaper indexes) to describe what few people, if any, have thought worthy of historical attention before. (Danto, 2008, p. 16)
This paper focuses primarily on VHS because of the significant role that sports played in its successful desegregation. The researcher contacted and visited the Lowndes County Historical Society and Valdosta Touchdown Club for contact information for former VHS players who were active when the school was integrated. Both had in-depth archival information to be investigated. The Valdosta Daily Times, the local newspaper, was a worthy source of information, including high school yearbooks, school board minutes, and other pertinent data.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. The first chapter contains the introduction, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, and the research design. Chapter Two comprises the review of the literature in the following subsections: desegregation of Atlanta public schools (an overview and discussion of the impact of desegregation), professional sports in the desegregation of Atlanta, college sports and desegregation, high school sports and desegregation, and Black masculinity and sports. Chapter Three presents the methodology, with historical case study, data collection, and data analysis as subsections. This chapter also contains a section presenting background information on the city of Valdosta. Chapter Four provides the historical context of school desegregation in Valdosta and profiles of the nine participants. Chapter Five presents a cross-case analysis of the interviews, organized around themes. The dissertation ends with recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2
AN OVERVIEW OF THE BIRTH OF PUBLIC EDUCATION FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE SOUTH

Southern states did not support public education prior to the Civil War. “White leaders never embraced the notion that one of the state’s duties was to provide free public education for its children” (Bolton, 2005, p. 4). Many White leaders in the South had no need for public education. Wealthy White southerners, many of whom were plantation owners, simply paid for private tutors to educate their children. The majority of wealthy White southerners preferred that the poor Whites and the African American slaves not be educated. Public schools did not exist in the South prior to the Reconstruction Era (1863–1877). In order to re-enter the Union, Confederate states were required to comply with several demands from the federal government, one of which was to implement public education (Urban & Wagoner, 2014). When teachers from the North began to educate the newly freed African Americans, they quickly discovered that many of the poor Whites were just as illiterate as the slaves. A new economic paradigm emerged after the Civil War that created the need for an educated White middle class trained for the emerging manufacturing economy that had replaced the old plantation system.

After the Civil War, the Congress adopted the Reconstruction Amendments to the U.S. Constitution: The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment granted citizenship to former slaves and their descendants, and the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited states from denying voting rights on the basis of race or skin color. These new freedoms gave African Americans hope and optimism for full equality and provided one of the things that they
desired most: education. As African Americans rose up from slavery, their greatest desire was not for land or other material possessions. What they truly wanted was literacy for themselves and their children. “They cried for spelling-books as bread and pleaded for teachers as a necessity for life” (Anderson, 1988, p. 5).

The majority of White southerners were growing ever more fearful of an educated African American citizenry, but they were constrained from preventing it by federal intervention and Republican control of state houses (Anderson, 1988; Morris, 1981; Urban & Wagoner, 2014). In the early 1870s, African Americans and liberal White Republicans enacted several laws to create and integrate school systems. However, the Reconstruction period ended in 1877 for a number of complex political and economic reasons, including lack of federal support and protection. Democrats violently assumed control of many southern statehouses and quickly dismantled desegregation efforts, especially in public education. By the 1890s, White supremacy in the South had, in the name of states’ rights, eliminated all progress that African Americans had achieved during Reconstruction (Anderson, 1988; Morris, 1981; Urban & Wagoner, 2014).

Many of the reasons White southerners opposed educating former slaves arose from preconceived notions of racial stereotypes and deep-rooted prejudice. African Americans were considered unable to learn; therefore, any money spent on educating African Americans would be wasted. In addition to such racial ideology, many Whites felt that education for African Americans would result in loss of the pure economic value of slave labor (Anderson, 1988; Bolton, 2005). For example, Methodist Minister Edward Fontaine argued that a “learned Negro is a nuisance; for while he is ignorant, stupid, and loutish he may be compelled to labor, but as soon as he comes to know something, the White people cannot make so profitable use of him” (as cited in Bolton, 2005, p. 6). Beyond the monetary motivations, many White southerners
feared that the existence of educated African Americans would lead to miscegenation (Anderson, 1988; Bolton, 2005). Thus, the South insisted that, if African Americans must be educated, they would be educated in segregated schools. Segregation was a Southern custom (de facto) that soon became law (de jure).

During Reconstruction, many African Americans regarded the federal government as providing protection and freedom from the cruelty of the unjust South. Unfortunately, as Reconstruction failed, the U.S. Supreme Court became, in essence, a new slave master. As early as the 1890s, many southern legislative bodies, especially those in Louisiana, passed laws that allowed African Americans to use the railroad; however, all accommodations had to be “separate but equal” (Klarman, 2004). Homer Plessy, a light-skinned African American man, sued the state of Louisiana for violating his Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendment rights by barring him from the Whites-only railroad car and arresting him on charges of violating state segregation laws. Louisiana state judge Ferguson ruled that the state was within its rights to deny Plessy access to the Whites-only compartment. Plessy appealed his case to the Supreme Court. On May 18, 1896, when the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, segregation became the law of the land (Klarman, 2004). *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalized and legitimized the philosophy of segregation in America (Cozzens, 1995). It created the policy of “separate but equal,” a phrase that would haunt generations of African Americans. Although “separate but equal” may have masqueraded as a fair policy, many states, including Georgia, had no intention of creating anything equal for African Americans, especially in public education. As a result of Supreme Court decisions such as *Plessy*, African Americans would be subjugated as second-class citizens for decades.
In Georgia and throughout the South, the doctrine of “separate but equal” did the most damage to African Americans in the area of education. Throughout the South, African Americans were struggling against the U.S. Supreme Court and southern legislators to maintain the rights given to them during Reconstruction. African Americans were determined to maintain their educational opportunities at the primary, secondary, and postsecondary levels, fighting to get under, over, and around countless obstacles placed before them (Anderson, 1988; Bolton, 2005; Rucker & Jubilee, 2007). The battleground for “separate but equal” in education was fought in Augusta, Georgia, in the Supreme Court case of Joseph W. Cumming, James S. Harper, and John C. Ladeveze v. The County Board of Education of Richmond County, State of Georgia (1899). This lawsuit was not an attempt to integrate the local all-White public schools; rather, the African American community, under the leadership of Joseph W. Cumming, James S. Harper, and John C. Ladeveze, was simply trying to reopen the Blacks-only Ware High School and retain equal funding for the school. The all-White Richmond County government had closed and refused to fund Ware High School with tax dollars, even though many of those tax dollars were coming from the African American community.

Ware High School had historic and practical significance for African Americans in Augusta. In 1880, Ware High School had been one of perhaps four public high schools for Blacks in the 11 ex-Confederate states; in 1915, it was the only such school in Georgia (Connelly, 2002). Anderson (1988) described the impact of the Cumming ruling: “The U.S. Supreme Court ruling in Cumming transformed the promise of equal protection into a ‘derisive taunt.’ More specifically, the particular ruling meant that southern school boards did not have to offer public secondary education for Black youth” (p. 192).
The *Cumming* decision was the U.S. Supreme Court’s first ruling on racial discrimination in education and, like *Plessy*, would have a devastating effect on African Americans for decades (Anderson, 1988; Bolton, 2005; Rucker & Jubilee, 2007). African Americans of Richmond County would have to wait until 1945 to have another 4-year public high school (Anderson, 1988). For many African American communities throughout the South, the struggle for even segregated public secondary education would prove to be a long battle, not won until after World War II (Anderson, 1988).

Another key result of the *Cumming* decision was its empowerment of southern states, in that it “also established the proposition that tax-supported state schools are within the purview of the states and must not be disturbed by the federal government except in cases in which federal rights are involved” (Connelly, 2002, p. 72). The *Cumming* decision made possible the quick redistribution of education monies to White schools, shifting all but the barest minimum away from African American schools. “Black children were excluded from this emerging system of public secondary education. . . . At that time Georgia had no four-year public high schools for its Black children, who constituted 46% of the state secondary school age population” (Anderson, 1988, p. 196).

The redistribution of funding allowed much-needed facility improvements to White schools, but the lack of funding made African American schools deficient educational environments. Anderson (1988) stated, “This was not merely a condition of inequality but a process of racial oppression extended throughout the South” (p. 196). The additional funds directed toward all-White schools still were not enough to lift Georgia schools to national standards. According to Rucker and Jubilee (2007), “Yearly (1900s) state expenditure for Black children was about 7% the amount allocated to White children. By the 1914–1915 academic
year, Georgia’s per capita expenditure on public education was $2.08 per Black child and $10.30 per White child” (p. 159). By the late 1920s, Georgia had the distinction of being the lowest-paying employer of African American teachers anywhere in the South (Rucker & Jubilee, 2007).

Even though they were poorly paid, many African American teachers were motivated and inspired to achieve more with less (Anderson, 1988; Bolton, 2005; Rucker & Jubilee, 2007). They were given charge by the state to provide only fundamental education for their students, but many African American teachers went well beyond those limits. Many teachers worked extended hours to address the needs of the students. “They applied, often with incredible perseverance and self-sacrifice, their talents to the task of improving the lives of Black youth” (Bolton, 2005, p. 31). Many African American teachers worked persistently to find ways to compensate for the inadequate resources (Siddle Walker, 1996). Authors such as Fairclough described the strength required of a Black teacher during the era of segregation: “Being a Black teacher during the age of White supremacy demanded faith in the future when the present often seemed hopeless. It asked for patience and self-possession when interactions with White people entailed ritual humiliation” (2007, p. 4). Many African Americans did not pursue teaching for financial rewards because, before the 1940s, many of them were paid as if they were simple laborers, yet they had the additional financial responsibility of paying for their own educational materials (Fairclough, 2007; Siddle Walker, 1996). “Others regarded teaching as a missionary calling and devoted their lives to unselfish service” (Fairclough, 2007, p. 4). Because of this sense of calling and devotion, many African Americans took demeaning side jobs just so they would be financially able to teach (Anderson, 1988; Bolton, 2005; Fairclough, 2007; Foster, 1997; Siddle Walker, 1996).

The majority of African American teachers believed that it was their responsibility to instill a sense of racial pride and self-worth in their students. These ideals were extremely
dangerous, and many teachers conducted programs outside of school settings, such as local church ministries.

Aaron Henry [a renowned Mississippi civil rights leader] remembered that his teachers never attacked segregation directly or advocated integration; rather, “their aim was to instill in us racial pride, and they led us to believe in our personal worth and made us understand that we were equals to any other man. They tried to show us that racial superiority was a myth.” What the White Mississippians failed to realize was that any education, even an inferior one, was inherently subversive of their White separatist agenda. (Bolton, 2005, p. 32)

Even with dedicated teachers, segregated schools were inadequate for a host of reasons, from outdated textbooks to poor facilities. There were separate White and African American schools, but they were never equal. In the 1930s, intentionally or not, President Roosevelt’s New Deal initiatives to combat the Great Depression increased opportunities for African Americans to work and earn a decent living (Klarman, 2004). World War II brought even more job opportunities as soldiers or factory workers for the war effort. Long fed up with inferior schools, African American families were for the first time in a better position to fight for better schools.

This economic growth in the African American community did not go unnoticed. Southern companies either ignored the question of segregation or supported it; however, the buying power of African Americans could not be ignored. “Another factor in the changing attitude of business leaders must be the growing purchasing power of African Americans. . . . The number of Black consumers in the United States is equal to the entire Canadian population” (Roche, 1998, p. 65). Also, President Harry S. Truman’s administration not only provided equal employment opportunities for African Americans in federal jobs but also started progress toward
full equality by desegregating the military by executive order in 1947. African American soldiers returned to the South more committed to achieving freedom at home after fighting for freedom overseas. These initiatives increased the African American middle class and gave them a new sense of empowerment. As Michael Klarman (2004) stated, “Demographic shifts, industrialization and the dislocative impact of World War II had produced an urban Black middle class with the education, disposable income and lofty expectations conducive to involvement in social protest” (p. 291). The birth of the Black middle class gave African Americans economic power to challenge discrimination and deploy its newest weapon: boycotting businesses (Klarman, 2004; Roche, 1998). Although the Black middle-class economic power was opening some doors, the reality of segregation was inescapable. Georgia and the rest of the South’s refusal to accept desegregation, particularly in education, would soon be tested by the ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954).

The Supreme Court, which once cemented segregation in America with Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) and other rulings, now began the long road toward dismantling segregation with the Brown decision (1954). That ruling began a slow removal of the iron collars of “separate but equal” from the throat of every African American. The Court ruled that segregated schools were inherently discriminatory, had a negative psychological effect on African American children, and violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Brown II decision a year later was decisive, but it allowed Whites one loophole by ruling that desegregation should proceed with “all deliberate speed.” African Americans in the South would suffer 15 long years of “deliberate speed.”

Massive resistance became the final tool used by White segregationists in an effort to avert desegregation groups such as the White Citizens’ Council, Georgians Unwilling To
Surrender (GUTS), and others who refused to accept that the dual system of education could not be saved (Bartley, 1999; Bolton, 2005; Kluger, 2011). White segregationists in the South used fear, intimidation, and violence in a last-ditch effort to save segregated schools (Bartley, 1999; Bolton, 2005; Kluger, 2011; Roche, 1998). “After the two Brown decisions, resistance in the South slowly gelled into a recognizable form. From 1954 to 1964 the former states of the Confederacy had more than 450 laws to abort the court decision” (Roche, 1998, p. 29).

Georgia implemented a private school system as an alternative to public education and as its primary weapon of massive resistance to desegregation, as private institutions could legally remain segregated. However, supporters of public education within the state of Georgia would not settle for the private school solution, which began to divide Georgians and other southerners into two factions: those who wanted to save public education in the South and those who supported segregation at any cost (Bolton, 2005; Roche, 1998; Tuck, 2001). In 1960, the Atlanta public school system was ordered by federal court mandate to desegregate all schools under its authority by September 1961, which placed Georgia’s government in the precarious position of ending public education in the state or allowing some form of desegregation (Roche, 1998; Tuck, 2001).

**Desegregation of Georgia Public Schools**

By 1958, the South was changing, and Georgia was changing. The once impenetrable wall of massive resistance to school desegregation in Georgia was starting to crack. The federal court case *Calhoun v. Latimer* (1960), which ordered desegregation of Atlanta public schools, sent shockwaves throughout the state. Many White Georgians feared the end of public education in the state. In response, a community-based organization called Help Our Public Education (HOPE) was formed in 1958. This organization consisted exclusively of White Georgians, and
the majority of the members were women (Roche, 1998; Tuck, 2001). HOPE advocated for saving public education within the state, not desegregation. Their stance was to save public education by any means, which in this case meant allowing desegregation. Organizations such as HOPE quickly discovered that they had a powerful ally in the fight to save public education: the business community. “Plants expanded their operations at an average value of almost one million dollars per expansion. By 1960, virtually every Fortune 500 company had an Atlanta office” (Roche, 1998, p. 64). The majority of Georgia business leaders supported public education as a way of maintaining growth and expansion of the state. Beyond their own political ideology, they viewed closing public schools as an economic risk that they did not want to take.

Many White Georgians looked at the situations in other southern states as depicted in the newspaper and on television and feared that massive resistance to desegregation could turn their cities into battlefields. The Georgia General Assembly was pressured on both sides to make a decision. The Governor and the Assembly decided to give the responsibility for this decision to a special commission. In 1961, the Sibley Commission was formed to address Georgia’s response to desegregation of public education. The commission was chaired by John Sibley, one of Georgia’s most prominent business leaders. The commission was painstakingly thorough, making a point of going to every legislative district in the state and giving thousands of constituents an opportunity to voice their opinion regarding saving public education or maintaining segregation (Roche, 1998; Tuck, 2001). “Sixty percent of witnesses preferred absolute segregation to public education when forced to choose between them. However, when the commission submitted its report in May, it recommended that the state abandon massive resistance” (Roche, 1998, p. xiv). The Sibley Commission hearings were more symbolic and
therapeutic than true fact-finding sessions. Governor Vandiver’s appointment of Sibley as chair of the commission set the tone that desegregation would be decided by business interests.

The Sibley report represented a realistic, corporate style decision. Massive resistance was bad for business: threats to public schools slowed investment. Sibley and his associates were segregationists, but they were businessmen first. Regardless of his motives, when the school situation reached a point of critical mass, Sibley, representing the “powers that be in Atlanta,” a designation he did not deny, stepped in and preserved public education. (Roche, 1998, pp. xiv–xv)

The Sibley Commission offered an olive branch to segregationists by recommending the Freedom of Choice Policy, which was adopted by the Georgia General Assembly. Although it was initially created to allow White students to transfer out of a formerly White but now desegregated school, the Freedom of Choice Policy inadvertently gave African American students the freedom to choose to apply to and enroll in White schools if they passed the rigorous admission requirements. Thus, this policy became the first public desegregation plan in Georgia (Roche, 1998; Tuck, 2001).

One of the main events to lead to end statewide resistance came with the desegregation of the University of Georgia. According to Sokol (2006), “Few Georgians foresaw that this showdown over the state’s public schools—previously waged between Atlanta parents and supporters of Governor Vandiver—might be settled on the Athens campus, the jewel of Georgia’s public education system” (p. 60). Agreeing with this sentiment, Roche (1998) stated, “In January 1961, the University of Georgia, rather than the Atlanta public schools, became the site for the state’s first defense of massive resistance” (p. 161). Governor Vandiver, who, like his
predecessor, was a strong champion of massive resistance, vowed to close any Georgia school before it was allowed to desegregate.

Vandiver later explained his segregationist stance of the time in a legal context: “My campaign platform at the time was to preserve the county unit system, to preserve segregation, which we had been brought up with all our lives, to give the legislature independence and not to raise taxes . . . . When you are inaugurated, you swear to uphold the Georgia law—whether [or not] it is the law of the United States. Georgia laws at that time—you know what it was. They [the schools] should be closed rather than integrated.” (Daniels, 2013, p. 68)

However, the first school to be involved in testing the Governor’s and the General Assembly’s commitment to massive resistance would be no ordinary school. It would be the University of Georgia, arguably the most prestigious school in the state. It is the oldest land grant college in the nation, founded in 1785, and a stepping stone to power for Georgia’s elite. Once accepted into the University of Georgia, one has access to political connections and influential friends. The University’s alumni lists read like a Who’s Who of the Georgia elite, including several governors, U.S. and state representatives, judges, U.S. and state senators, and members of the University System of Georgia Board of Regents (Daniels, 2013).

Governor Vandiver and the General Assembly were confident that the judiciary would support massive resistance and maintain segregation throughout the state, especially for the University. However, times were changing, starting with the legal defense team of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) headed by Thurgood Marshall, which already won several victories in desegregation cases in higher education. Also, there was a changing of the guard in Georgia when Donald L. Hollowell became the chief civil rights
attorney, replacing less aggressive, if not passive, predecessors. Hollowell was an ideal attorney to tackle massive resistance in Georgia. He was personally selected by Thurgood Marshall to address the Georgia civil rights cases as a representative of the legal defense fund team of the NAACP.

Beyond excellent legal representation, one still needed a strong case, and for that, one needed strong plaintiffs. The desegregation of the University of Georgia was made possible because Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter were exceptional students. Both Holmes and Hunter had applied for admission to the University of Georgia beginning in 1959 but had been denied. The governor’s faith in the judiciary proved unfounded when this case came before Judge William A. Bootle. Attorneys Constance Baker Motley and Donald Hollowell argued that the two defendants were denied admission on the grounds of race, not academic ability, and Judge Bootle agreed on January 6, 1961. Bootle said, “Had . . . [the] plaintiffs been White applicants to the University of Georgia, both would have been admitted to the University no later than the beginning of fall quarter, 1960” (as cited in Daniels, 2013, p. 79).

Governor Vandiver and the General Assembly were now facing an unwinnable battle. They could solidify their stance on segregation by closing the University of Georgia—and the Governor was willing to close some schools in the name of segregation—but Vandiver did not want to be remembered as the Governor who closed the University of Georgia. Even though there was unquestionably support for segregation, there was minimal to no support for closing the University. According to Hornsby (1991), “House floor leader Frank Twitty summed up a feeling of many legislators when he declared that there was ‘too much money and too many lives at stake to think of closing the University. The people I’ve come in contact with endorse almost unanimously the idea of keeping the University open’” (p. 24).
On January 9, 1961, when Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter arrived on campus, they were bombarded with hateful racial epithets. Over the next two days, the antisegregationists reacted with small acts of vandalism, such as a few rocks thrown through windows, but University and Athens police contained the violence. Although it was not an easy desegregation by any means, it was far less violent than the desegregation of the University of Mississippi in 1962, which proved Twitty’s assessment to be true. With all legal options exhausted and without the fear of violence engulfing the UGA campus, Governor Vandiver had no choice but to rely on the Sibley Commission for political cover. According to Roche (1998), “Georgia’s political leaders turned to the Sibley report to avoid closing the University, and the General Assembly, following Governor Vandiver’s suggestion, disassembled the state’s elaborate resistance program” (p. 161).

Atlanta public schools soon followed the university’s example.

On August 30, 1961, nine Black children entered four previously all-White high schools in Atlanta, Georgia. Atlanta police watched nervously, as did an entire city, but at the end of the day the first public school desegregation in Georgia below the college level had been achieved without violence. (Hornsby, 1991, p. 21)

The desegregation of Atlanta public schools started a domino effect throughout the state, and other Georgia cities began the process of desegregation. By the end of 1961, Georgia’s political leadership abandoned massive resistance as a direct tool to stop desegregation. Instead, “They [the General Assembly] and the governor shifted their stances and accepted Sibley’s reconstructed resistance that enabled them to defy the spirit of the Brown decision much longer than massive resistance could possibly permit” (Roche, 1998, p. 188). In Georgia, the implementation of the Sibley Commission findings marked a new era of school choice. This
would be the first wave of desegregation throughout the state until mandated federal desegregation started in 1968.

**The Impact of Desegregation**

Desegregation brought the loss of jobs for African American teachers, coaches, and administrators (Fairclough, 2007; Foster, 1997; Siddle Walker, 1996; Watkins, 2001). However, for many African Americans, school desegregation was a clear and important victory. For the first time, they were guaranteed that their children would be educated in decent classrooms and receive proper textbooks. For many African Americans, however, this victory was bittersweet. While they gained material possessions, they lost one of the cornerstones of the Black community: the Black school. For many African American communities, their schools were a source of pride and identity. Many schools had ancient traditions of sporting championships, award-winning choirs, renowned bands, and prestigious alumni. It is no wonder that many African American communities struggled for a new identity after their schools closed. After desegregation, many African American communities lost the closeness and sense of community that they had experienced in their segregated educational institutions. “They welcomed the passing of Jim Crow but also mourned the loss of institutions that boasted long histories and proud traditions. Alongside the church, the school had been the institutional and emotional anchor of Black life under segregation” (Fairclough, 2007, p. 5).

Segregated schools were not just a place for learning; they were hubs of the African American community. Like the Black church, the Black school was essential to maintaining a unified African American community that otherwise could be easily divided by socioeconomic class (Fairclough, 2007; Foster, 1997; Siddle Walker, 1996; Watkins, 2001). Black schools were cultural centers where one could often see professional African American performers or a
Christmas pageant with a school choir singing Black spirituals. The African American educational institution was a nurturing and inspiring extension of the family environment. The teachers were the key component of this family dynamic. African American teachers served as surrogate parents and role models (Fairclough, 2007; Foster, 1997; Siddle Walker, 1996; Watkins, 2001). They were the glue that bonded the community and inspired young people. Desegregation forever changed the role of African American teachers in the Black community (Fairclough, 2007; Foster, 1997; Siddle Walker, 1996; Watkins, 2001).

No group of people felt the closure of Black schools more keenly than Black teachers. . . . Ever since Reconstruction, Black teachers acted as community leaders, interracial diplomats, and builders of the Black institution. Integration undermined those functions and diminished the relative status of the Black teachers. For some Black teachers, integration brought demotion or dismissal. (Fairclough, 2007, p. 5)

**Professional Sports and the Desegregation of Atlanta**

When the major league Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team selected Jackie Robinson as a player in 1947, they became one of the first major American institutions to be integrated. According to ESPN, in the 1960s, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Muhammad Ali (boxing), Wilma Rudolph (track and field), Jim Brown (Cleveland Browns football), Bill Russell (Boston Celtics basketball), and Willie Mays (San Francisco Giants baseball) were the most prominent icons in their respective sports in the 1960s (as cited in Mucci, 2010).

One factor that differentiated Georgia from the rest of the Deep South was its early introduction of professional teams in the 1960s (Bryant, 2011). Georgia’s acquisition of professional teams was not easy, but it was critical for the success of desegregation within the state.
Georgia’s path to desegregation was also greatly influenced by the city of Birmingham, Alabama. Birmingham appeared to be the city destined to be the jewel of the South. Birmingham, like Pittsburgh, was one of the great steel-producing cities in America. Soon, Birmingham became known for more than just producing steel; it became a Mecca of industry, a true rival to Atlanta for the capital of the South. Although Birmingham had the infrastructure and economic resources to become a world-class city, it was unable to resolve its biggest problem: the issue of desegregation. During the height of the civil rights battles in Birmingham, images of children being water hosed, attacked by police dogs, and beaten by police were on the front pages of every major newspaper in the world (McWhorter, 2001). Birmingham business leaders kept silent as political leaders chose the path of supporting segregation, isolating Birmingham from the global community (Bryant, 2011).

The civil unrest in Birmingham at the time provided Atlanta the opportunity to establish itself as the premier city of the Southeast. The police violence in Birmingham, especially toward children, exposed to the nation the ugly face of segregation in America. “It was the [Atlanta] business leaders, Coca-Cola especially, that decided that it would have been to our political and economic disadvantage to fight civil rights with fire hoses and dogs and more segregation, the way they did in Birmingham” (Bryant, 2011, para. 5). This was a turning point in American history, when major southern businesses decided that it was not in their best interest to support segregation.

By the 1960s, many Atlanta business and political leaders were trying to make the transition out of the stereotypical images of southern cities such as Birmingham and into being a great metropolis like New York and other major northern cities (Bryant, 2011). The common opinion was that Atlanta needed professional sports teams to be recognized as a major city.
Many of the major sports had been integrated by the 1960s, which would mean supporting teams with African American players. The mayor of Atlanta at the time was Ivan Allen. Allen was balancing these concerns, some of which constituted enforcing segregation, with the needs of the growing city. Allen also needed the support of both a predominantly Black urban population and a primarily White business community.

The new owner of the Milwaukee Braves was interested in relocating his team, and Atlanta wanted a team. A major obstacle was that the team’s All-Star outfielder, Hank Aaron, who grew up in Alabama, did not want to return to the segregated South. In 1963, Aaron was acknowledged as one of the game’s greatest players, and his consent to relocate was important. The Braves needed him to sell seats and increase the team’s chances of winning a championship.

Many civil rights leaders knew that Aaron and the Braves could be the catalyst for the change that Atlanta and the South needed. Because the city of Atlanta needed the support of civil rights leaders to convince Aaron to relocate with the team, the city made tremendous concessions. “One of the first concessions [Mayor] Allen made with the backing of the city’s corporate leaders was to prohibit segregated seating and facilities for sporting events” (Bryant, 2011, para. 6). The civil rights community sent various emissaries to convince Aaron to remain with the team. Leaders such as Miles Smith (President of the local NAACP) and Whitney Young (President of the National Urban League) assisted, but it was a meeting with legendary civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that finally convinced Aaron. King told him that “success in Atlanta would be as important as any protest” (Bryant, 2011, para. 10). Aaron’s superlative abilities contributed to the Braves’ playing in sold-out, integrated facilities, which opened the door to a new South and helped Atlanta to evolve into a major metropolis.
Atlanta welcomed the Braves in 1965 (play began in 1966), the National Football League Falcons in 1966, and the National Basketball Association Hawks in 1968. All of these franchises played in integrated facilities during the turbulent 1960s. It is easy to overlook the impact of these teams on the Civil Rights Movement (Bryant, 2011). Andrew Young, chief lieutenant to Martin Luther King, Jr., and former mayor of Atlanta, said,

People always talk about the marches and the protests, but what they don’t talk about is how big a part sports played in the economic part of the movement, in changing the perception of what the South was. . . . We had no professional sports teams, and the mayor, Ivan Allen, believed attracting pro sports and big pro events would be critical to proving to business leaders around the country that we did believe in a “new South.” (as cited in Bryant, 2011, para. 4)

These sporting events would be the first time many African Americans and Whites would share the same facilities, eat together, use the same restrooms, and, more important, cheer for the same team (Bryant, 2011). Sports was becoming one of the factors that were slowly changing Atlanta into a more diverse city.

**College Sports and Desegregation**

Not only professional sports moved the Civil Rights Movement forward; college sports had an impact as well. One must also examine college sports in order to understand Georgia’s sports culture. The desegregation of southern colleges and universities was a slow process, and football was just as difficult to integrate as the lunch counter. Northern colleges and universities were the first to allow African Americans admission to the classroom and the gridiron. William Henry Lewis joined Massachusetts’s Amherst College football team in 1889 (Demas, 2001;

In the South, the story was much different; desegregation would be a long and difficult process. The Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) was the first southern conference to integrate when Darryl Hall in football (in 1963) and Billy Jones in basketball (in 1966) became the first African American athletes at the University of Maryland (Demas, 2001; Martin, 2001; Paul et al., 1984). The ACC also supported the desegregation of sports in the Deep South, when the University of Miami awarded a football scholarship to Ray Bellamy in 1967. Another southern conference, the Southwest Conference (SWC), was integrated in 1965 when, at Texas Christian University, James Cash became the first African American athlete in basketball (Demas, 2001; Martin, 2001; Paul et al., 1984). At Baylor University in 1966, John Westbrook became the first African American athlete in SWC football. The Southeastern Conference (SEC) was the last holdout, and SEC schools’ refusal to recruit African American athletes in the early 1960s directly benefited many northern football programs (Demas, 2001; Martin, 2001; Paul et al., 1984), who snapped up talented Black players. It also created a golden era for football at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). After desegregation, HBCU football would never again have such unchallenged access to such a large pool of elite African American athletic talent (Hurd, 2000).

The University of Kentucky was the first SEC school to integrate its varsity football team when Nat Nortington played his first game in 1967 (Demas, 2001; Martin, 2001; Paul et al., 1984). The University of Alabama integrated its teams in 1971, one of the last SEC universities to do so. Georgia’s two major universities, the University of Georgia and the Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech), both integrated their student populations by 1961. Georgia Tech
integrated its football program in 1969; the University of Georgia in 1971. Georgia Tech takes
great pride in the fact that they were one of the few southern public universities to integrate
without a court mandate.

Georgia Tech exemplified some southerners’ belief that winning was more important
than racial separatism. Georgia Tech’s participation in the 1956 Sugar Bowl proved to be pivotal
in ending segregation.

In December 1955, Gov. Marvin Griffin of Georgia, a segregationist, demanded that
Georgia Tech not play in the Sugar Bowl against Pittsburgh because the Panthers’ team
included a Black player, Grier. Griffin wrote in a telegram to Georgia’s Board of
Regents, “The South stands at Armageddon.” He detailed in his request that teams in the
state’s university system were not to participate in events in which races were mixed on
the field or in the stands. Griffin ran for governor on a platform of segregation “through
hell or high water.” In his telegram to the Board of Regents, he went on to say, “One
break in the dike and the relentless seas will push in and destroy us. We are in this fight
100 percent. . . . The battle is joined. We cannot make the slightest concession to the
enemy in this dark and lamentable hour of struggle.” (Thamel, 2006, p. 1)

However, university officials wanted to play the game, contending that their players
deserved the opportunity to play in the Sugar Bowl. The Georgia Tech students were irate and
marched before the governor’s mansion. In fact, the majority of Georgians supported the team
playing in the Bowl, regardless of whether an African American played for the opposing team.
This was one of the first times in the Deep South that a majority of Whites openly opposed a
segregation law. Historically, when a southern governor enforced segregation, the people
cheered instead of protesting. But southern culture was steeped in competitive sports just as much as it was steeped in racism.

**High School Sports and Desegregation**

African Americans increasingly staked their hopes for racial equality on educational achievement. Sports became a beneficiary of this education movement. In the Jim Crow South, separate but equal did not exist. According to Grundy (2001), “School offered a tangible example of Jim Crow inequality. In many communities, dilapidated, drafty buildings, secondhand textbooks and lack of bathroom facilities served as daily, painful reminders of the racial divide” (p. 161). Many African American high schools were so lacking in resources that they could barely afford books, much less equipment for sports. Sports teams, for many African Americans, were a luxury. What equipment the Black schools could obtain was restricted to old equipment and uniforms passed down from White schools, which, while substandard, did gradually grant segregated schools accessibility to sports (Grundy, 2001).

The importance of high school sports for successful desegregation cannot be ignored. Even before desegregation, the wider community was noticing the talent level of many African American high school players. In 1966, *The Atlanta Journal* and *The Atlanta Constitution* covered Black high school sports for the first time (Holcomb, 2006). Carver High School’s tight end Roy Stanley and Archer High School’s guard Larry Brown (both from Atlanta) were the newspapers’ first Black all-state players in 1966 (Holcomb, 2006, p. 1). Also in 1966, the Georgia High School Association integrated, which allowed African American schools to join the association. This meant that all-White teams could compete against all-Black teams for one championship. The hope of many was that the more exposure the White coaches and White crowds had to African American athletes, the more stereotypes would disappear.
Wallace Davis, who retired in 2004 after 29 seasons as head coach of Carver [a high school in Columbus], was a star player in the all-Black Georgia Interscholastic Association before integration and was an assistant coach in the first game between Blacks and Whites in Columbus in 1968. “If it hadn’t been for high school football, integration would’ve been a big failure,” Davis said. “People forgot all about Black and White when it came down to winning. It was the greatest thing that could’ve happened for White and Black relations.” (Holcomb, 2006, p. 1)

Because of Supreme Court decisions such as *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* and other court rulings, the majority of public high schools in Georgia and their football programs were fully integrated by 1968 (Demas, 2001; Martin, 2001; Paul et al., 1984).

The success of these high school athletes, especially in football, was essential to the success of desegregation (Demas, 2001; Martin, 2001). Particularly, the story of the desegregation of VHS is indispensable in understanding the importance of sports to overcoming discrimination.

VHS is to high school football as the University of Alabama is to college football. It is the standard by which all high school programs are measured. VHS’s football greatness exists not only in the minds of the Valdosta faithful; ESPN has recognized them as outstanding. In 2008, ESPN was in search of “Titletown, U.S.A.,” a town that exemplified winning and success. ESPN selected Valdosta over Boston, New York, Green Bay, and even Tuscaloosa. Even before ESPN gave Valdosta the title, many people in the state called Valdosta “Winnerville.” Their team “had won more football games than any other high school in the country” (Jubera, 2012, p. 8). Valdosta’s record is even more impressive considering that it plays in one of the most competitive football regions in America, often called the Southeastern Conference of high school
football (Jubera, 2012). Driving into the city limits, visitors are welcomed to the city with a sign commemorating the team’s 23 state championships and six national titles. The community’s support of VHS football borders on being a religion. “Off the field, season tickets inside the 11,349-seat stadium were handed down in wills and quarreled over in divorce settlements” (Jubera, 2012, p. 8).

There is no greater testimony to the community’s commitment to this team than its spectacular stadium. “In 2005, the stadium received renovations at a cost of $7.5 million, once again with the assistance of the Touchdown Club. Cleveland field now boasts a better facility than many colleges in the state” (Geier, 2010, p. 57). The football field itself is named for Dr. A. G. Cleveland, who was the foremost superintendent for the school system (Geier, 2010), but the stadium is named for Coach August Bazemore and Coach Nick Hyder. Any sports program would consider itself lucky to have one legendary coach; VHS has had two. The complexity of this phenomenon requires that it be seen not only from the coaches’ point of view but also from the perspective of African American athletes, particularly through the prism of Black masculinity.

**Black Masculinity**

To understand the phenomenon of desegregation requires examination of other influences, beyond coaches, that may have shaped the African American athlete. One of these influences is Black masculinity. Slavery had a strong impact on shaping the myth and the reality of Black masculinity in America (hooks, 2004). In examining slavery’s impact on Black masculinity, we must first look at the origins of American slavery. James Baldwin (1984) said, “No one was White before he or she came to America. It took generations and a vast amount of coercion before this became a White country” (p. 1). America invented race to justify its
capitalist needs for free labor. Race was simply a tool to enslave others for profit and to maintain a socioeconomic caste system. Poor Whites would never be given all the rights and privileges of the rich, but they were pacified by knowing that they were at least superior to African Americans. This is well illustrated by McLaren and Torres (1999):

 Poor Europeans were sometimes indentured and were in some sense de facto slaves. They occupied the same economic categories as African slaves and were held in equal contempt by the lords of the plantation and legislatures. So poor Europeans were invited to align themselves with the plantocracy as “White” in order to avoid the most severe forms of bondage. This strategy helped plantation owners form a stronger social control apparatus as hegemony was achieved by offering “race privileges” to poor Whites as acknowledgment of their loyalty to the colonial land. (pp. 52–53)

 White masculinity was truly anchored in belief in the inferiority of others, and slavery provided White men with the fuel for the fire of White supremacy. White masculinity was further empowered by the status of the majority of southern White women, who were taught at an early age to be submissive first to their fathers and then to their husbands (Fox-Genovese, 1988). Southern White women, bowing to cultural pressures, relinquished their independence and autonomy to give White men the feeling of absolute power (Fox-Genovese, 1988). For the majority of southern White men, having submissive wives was not enough; they wanted the power that comes with owning a person altogether.

 Edward Baptist and Walter Johnson similarly insist that slave-owning men defined manhood through sexual violence against Black female bodies, especially as the domestic slave system increasingly resembled a “sex trade” where southern men bartered in sexual
fantasy and reality by buying slave women for personal gratification. (Rindfleisch, 2012, p. 859)

Slavery was an institution built on the foundational belief that White men were superior to all others, especially African Americans (Friend & Glover, 2004). Kipling (1940) described this sense of superiority in his 1899 poem “The White Man’s Burden”: Whites are obligated by a higher power to control inferior people for their own good. The U.S. government supported this concept in various ways, one of which was the Three-Fifths Compromise, which for census purposes counted a slave as three fifths of a White citizen. This 1787 decision empowered southern states by increasing their legislative numbers and intensifying their political influence in the nation (E. S. Morgan, 1970). Beyond that, it forever ingrained the inferiority of African Americans in the U.S. Constitution.

It was not only the legislative branch of government that enforced the concept of inferiority of African Americans; the judiciary did so as well, with the Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) decision. Homer Plessy, a light-skinned African American man, purchased a railroad ticket and sat in the Whites-only section of the train. Mr. Plessy was asked to move to the Blacks-only section; upon his refusal, he was arrested (Klarman, 2004). Plessy v. Ferguson legalized and legitimized the philosophy of segregation in America, creating the “separate but equal” policy that would haunt generations of African Americans (Klarman, 2004). This was a landmark case, reinforcing segregation as the law of the land until Brown in 1954.

Women, both Black and White, were not the only victims of southern White men’s need to prove their manhood and superiority. African American men were also victims in that southern White men denied them the privilege of masculinity in a culture in which manhood was highly valued. According to Friend and Glover (2004), southern White men’s rationale for not
considering African Americans to be men was that Blacks were willing to subjugate themselves to the institution of slavery instead of accepting what was considered the most honorable alternative: death. Therefore, in the eyes of Whites, “A slave can’t be a man” (Friend & Glover, 2004, p. 139). The emasculation of African American men was southern White men’s means of protecting the institution of slavery, as well as securing their supremacy. If African Americans were actually men, then slavery was morally wrong and could not be accepted by a Christian community. However, if African Americans were inferior, childlike, even subhuman, then southern White men were obligated to support these inferior beings regardless of the level of brutality required to maintain control over them.

Southern White men perpetuated the stereotype of the weak Black man who not only was willing to subjugate himself to slavery but enjoyed it. The myth began with the happy darkies singing and dancing on the plantation. The notion that African American men were innately subservient and weak shaped the concept of Black masculinity for generations. Southern White men perpetuated this image in books, plays, newspaper articles, and minstrel shows, but this notion did not receive academic support until Ulrich B. Phillips’s books, *American Negro Slavery* (1918) and *Life and Labor in the Old South* (1929), contended that slaves were submissive, subservient, and benefited from the institution of slavery. Both books were highly acclaimed and became the foundation of scholarship regarding African American slaves.

This myth of weak Black masculinity would be shattered by later historians, especially Stampp, whose 1956 book *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* provided the definitive counterargument to all of Phillips’s notions about the submissive slave. Stampp (1956) wrote that African American slaves, particularly the men, were “troublesome property” (p. 86). Slaves were in a constant state of discontent and unrest. Stampp (1956) portrayed slaves
as a people who refused unreasonable commands and, when the opportunity presented itself, ran for freedom. Other historians also rejected the myth of the submissive slave. Blassingame’s 1972 book *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* explicitly declared that the majority of slaves were rebellious and not submissive. Franklin and Schweninger (1999) made the argument in *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* that, for the majority of slaves, particularly males, running away was the strongest form of protest. In *American Negro Slave Revolt*, Aptheker (1979) contended that history has underestimated African Americans’ willingness to fight for their freedom and has ignored many slave uprisings. Great examples of slaves’ willingness to fight back come from two of the greatest slaves narratives of all time: Douglass’s (1845) *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, and Northup’s (1853) *Twelve Years a Slave*. Both gentlemen, no longer able to tolerate being beaten by their overseers, fought back in acts that could have led to their deaths. In 1998, historian and activist Hendrick Clarke suggested that Black masculinity must be re-examined from a different perspective:

> Those who say that we are lacking in manhood must ask the question, if I was in their position could I have possibly done with all the odds against me as were against them, could I have possibly survived and done what they did? If that was put forth, then the idea is not to question Black masculinity, the real question then is White masculinity. (as cited in Jones & Hurt, n.d., n.p.)

Regardless of the facts, the portrayal of African American men as lesser beings would eventually evolve into four distinct stereotypes or caricatures in the slavery and post-slavery eras (Riggs, 1987). The first was the “Uncle,” an older, asexual, nonthreatening African American man. The Uncle is a simple, dimwitted character with a heart of gold (Richardson, 2007). He is
nurturing and full of wisdom to impart to White children but seems to have no real attachment to any African American children (Riggs, 1987). One might mistakenly assume that the Uncle characterization originated with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s character in her 1852 abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. However, the characteristics of the Uncle stereotype are distinctly different. Richardson (2007) made this point, stating that this stereotype “grossly contradicted Uncle Tom’s original literary characterization . . . as a strong, masculine man. Moreover, the several young children in his famed cabin made his virility quite evident” (p. 3).

One famous personification of the Uncle is the trademark image of “Uncle Ben” on boxes of Uncle Ben’s brand rice. According to the company’s website (Uncle Ben’s.com, 2015), the Uncle Ben name and image, which debuted as a marketing tool in 1946, is a combination to two African American gentlemen with distinct characteristics. One was known throughout Texas as one of the best rice producers; his nickname was Uncle Ben. The other, whose image is portrayed on Uncle Ben products, was Frank Brown, a well-known Chicago chef and waiter (Uncle Ben’s.com, 2015).

Another famous personification of this stereotype is Uncle Remus, the creation of Joel Chandler Harris (1848–1908), who was considered one of the great writers of his time, particularly by southerners. Harris was adored by the likes of Mark Twain and invited to White House dinners by President Theodore Roosevelt (Cochran, 2004). However, regard for Harris has diminished over time, at least in certain circles. “Harris’s work was at best ridiculous idealization of a slave-based plantation society and at worst a bald exploitation of African American culture” (Cochran, 2004, p. 22). Bone also presented a harsh analysis of Joel Chandler Harris: “Uncle Remus . . . is one of many masks employed by the plantation school for the restoration of White supremacy” (as cited in Bickley, 1981) p. 139). As it happens, the writer
Walker (1988), like Harris, came from Eatonton, Georgia, but their shared birthplace has not softened her opinion of him. Walker contended that Harris pilfered African American culture for his own profit: “As far as I’m concerned, he stole a good part of my heritage” (p. 32).

To truly understand Joel Chandler Harris, one must understand his origins. He was a fatherless child given the opportunity to apprentice at Joseph Addison Turner’s Turnwold plantation (Cochran, 2014). It was there that young Harris first heard the stories of Brer Rabbit (Brother Rabbit) from the African American slaves (Cochran, 2014). The stories of Brer Rabbit were essential for African Americans as a way of teaching young children how to adapt and use their wits to survive in dangerous situations. By the 1870s, Harris had evolved from his humble beginnings to become the editor of the most prominent newspaper in Georgia, *The Atlanta Constitution*; it was there that he created his trademark character, Uncle Remus (Cochran, 2014). The Uncle Remus character was an older African American man who loved to tell stories to young children. The protagonist of Uncle Remus’s stories is Brer Rabbit. Harris’s character was a big success for the newspaper, and soon he adapted the character for books. The Uncle Remus stories were simply the same African American tales that he had heard from the slaves in his youth. Now, marketed with the splendor and glory of southern tradition, his embezzled version of African American folklore and culture was fully accepted as an American original (Cochran, 2014). The widespread acceptance of the Uncle Remus stories is particularly illustrated by Disney’s adaptation of the Uncle Remus character in the film *Song of the South*. The film is laced with the same racial and stereotypical images present in the original literary character. The Uncle embodies the inherent weakness of African American men; he is no longer a threat because the institution of slavery and the strength of White men have broken him into a
domesticated servant. All that makes him a man no longer exists; he has no children and no wife, and the sole purpose of his existence is to serve.

The second of the pre-Civil War caricatures of Black men was “Sambo.” According to legend, in the early 1800s, a White man named Thomas Dartmouth Rice witnessed a crippled Black slave singing and doing a dance called the Jim Crow. Rice blackened his face and hands, tore his clothes, and created a musical comedic character whom he called Jim Crow (Riggs, 1987). Jim Crow was a false representation of the Black man, forever creating the image of the ignorant fool. The Jim Crow character rapidly grew in popularity (Riggs, 1987). Soon, there were hundreds of Jim Crow character performers adding music and dance to their shows. These Jim Crow shows came to be called minstrel shows, and the Jim Crow character was given a new name: Sambo (Riggs, 1987). Sambo is a juvenile figure who simply wants to avoid work so that he can dance and play music all day. The Sambo stereotype was essential to the pre-Civil War narrative that many slave masters wanted the world to believe—that African American adults were essentially children (Riggs, 1987). This follows the philosophy of the White man’s burden to govern inferior people for their own protection. Wynter (1979) illustrated this: “By constructing Sambo as the negation of responsibility, the slave master legitimated his own role as the responsible agent acting on behalf of the irresponsible minstrel” (p. 151).

White men legitimized their authority and power through reducing African American men to nothing more than “boys.” “By representing the identity of Sambo as childlike, by instituting processes of infantilization, the slave master constituted himself as Paternal Father. The ideology of paternalism could then seem to be grounded on empirical fact” (Wynter, 1979, p. 151). The Sambo represents the ultimate justification for slavery because (according to southern propaganda) the Sambo is unable to survive without his benevolent slave master.
The third pre-Civil War caricature of African American men was Zip Coon or Coon (Riggs, 1987). Coon is a foolish character who, although always pretending to be equal to Whites, is not able to adapt to White society (Riggs, 1987). J. Stanley Lemons (1977) described the Zip Coon as follows: “He put on airs, acted elegant, but was betrayed by his pompous speech filled with malapropisms” (p. 102). The Zip Coon caricature was created to delegitimize African American men in the North. Sambo, in his cartoon-like actions, was not taken seriously enough in the North because many White Northerners interacted with African American men and recognized that the characterization was inaccurate. However, Zip Coon provided an image of African American men as having adopted an elegant façade in an effort to assimilate into White society but who inadvertently revealed themselves to be incapable of maintaining dignified behavior. Zip Coon is Sambo in disguise.

After emancipation in 1865, the fourth caricature of the African American man, the Black Savage, emerged, shifting the stereotype from playful and childlike to sinister and dangerous (Riggs, 1987). The myth of the happy slave was needed to protect the industry of slavery from sympathetic Whites. However, after African Americans had obtained freedom, White southern society wanted to portray African American men as beasts with uncontrollable sexual impulses and a tendency toward violence. This new myth “cast Black men as sexually pathological, hyperbolized their phallic power, and constructed them as inherently lustful and primitive” (Richardson, 2007, p. 4).

White slaveholders’ guilt from centuries of raping African American female slaves projected their insecurity onto newly freed African American men. The Black Savage was portrayed during this era in literature and in movies such as Birth of a Nation as something animal-like that, if not stopped early, would become an uncontrollable beast. Post slavery, the
Black Savage stereotype “reflected the region’s obsession with protecting White womanhood to ensure the purity of the race, and served as a primary rationale for lynching in the region” (Richardson, 2007, p. 4). The Black Savage could be stopped only by brutal tactics and overwhelming force. This stereotype has been the rationale for subjecting African American males to obsessive and brutal force for well more than a century and could explain the upward trend in murders of unarmed African American boys and men by armed White male civilians, as exemplified by the death of Trayvon Martin.

The killing of unarmed African Americans by White civilians is not the only problem; a national crisis has been caused by unjustified killing of Black men by those who took an oath to protect all citizens: the police. According to The Washington Post (Somashekhar, Lowery, Alexander, Kindy, & Tate, 2015), over the course of the year 2015, “24 unarmed Black men have been shot and killed by police—one every nine days . . . and] Black men [are] seven times more likely than White men to die by police gunfire while unarmed” (para. 6). In 2015, the high-profile killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, and Freddie Gray led to rioting, nationwide protests, and creation of the Black Lives Matter movement. Somashekhar et al. (2015) reported that Black men accounted for 40% of the 60 unarmed deaths, even though they make up just 6% of the U.S. population. The frequency of these killings and the diversity of geographical locations in which they occurred indicates an institutional problem with policing in America, one that is predicated on the fear of African American men.

Fanon’s “The Fact of Blackness” is helpful in understanding how America sees African Americans: “Not only must the Black man be Black; he must be Black in relation to the White man” (Fanon, 1992, p. 110). Fanon argued that African Americans, or any minority group, will always be considered the “other” in comparison to the dominant White culture. Casting them as
the “other” allows society to disconnect itself from seeing the obvious racism and prejudice that one group of people is suffering at the hands of another. This disconnect has been a long-festering problem stemming from America’s inability to deal with prejudice. America has a history of being unable to see its racist past.

Beyond the stereotypes, African American men are dealing with social issues stemming from centuries of institutional discrimination (Staples, 1985). This point is clearly illustrated by Majors and Billson (1992):

The statistics show a clear disadvantage to being born Black and male in America: Black males have higher rates than White males of mental disorders, unemployment, poverty, injuries, accidents, infant mortality, morbidity, AIDS, homicide and suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, imprisonment, criminality; they have poor incomes, life expectancy, access to health care, and education. We prefer to define the social problems as social symptoms of a history of oppression. (p. 12)

Among all of these disadvantages, none has crippled African American men and, therefore, the African American community more than high incarceration rates (Alexander, 2011). Alexander’s (2011) groundbreaking book The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness addresses the issues and consequences of mass incarceration. “No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its Black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid” (p. 7).

Beyond these social issues, the passage to manhood may be particularly difficult for some young African American men because many are making the journey without a male role model in the home. “Probably the most significant change in the Black family during the last 30 years
has been the proliferative growth of female-headed households” (Staples, 1985, p. 1006). Given the absence of male role models, these young men search for their masculine identity, often being manipulated by such cultural influences as rap music, drugs, or gangs. Unfortunately, there are far too few positive cultural influences. Yet, the impact of the election of President Barack Obama was significant. For the first time in U.S. history, an African American man has led the most powerful nation in the world. Even so, hopes that a new era was beginning for the acceptance of Black masculinity were quickly extinguished. This point is clearly illustrated by Alexander.

I was beyond thrilled on election night. Yet when I walked out of the election night party, full of hope and enthusiasm, I was immediately reminded of the harsh realities of the New Jim Crow. A Black man was on his knees in the gutter, hands cuffed behind his back, as several police officers stood around him talking, joking, and ignoring his human existence. People poured out of the building; many stared for a moment at the Black man cowering in the street, and then averted their gaze. What did the election of Barack Obama mean to him? (2011, pp. 2–3)

It can be difficult for young African American men to navigate these obstacles of social injustice. Beyond these issues, young men must be able to find out what it means to be a man, as well as what it means to be a Black man, in this society. This process is complicated by the fact that one mistake could lead to lifetime incarceration or death.

**Black Masculinity and Sports**

Before examining the relationship between Black masculinity and sports, it is helpful to examine the relationship between White masculinity and sports. The North’s victory over the South left southern White men searching for ways to restore their sense of masculinity. “Honour
and mastery, therefore, could no longer be assumed to be an adequate measure of masculinity for the vast number of Whites who did not own land and slaves” (Lussana & Plath, 2009, p. 6). Sports became a natural expression for a post-Civil War generation eager to prove their manhood (Demas, 2001; Grundy, 2001; Martin, 2001). Grundy described the emergence of sports as a criterion of manhood as an adaptation of the “philosophy of Social Darwinism, which cast human history in terms of competition not between individuals but between entire races” (p. 27).

By the early 1900s, no sport reflected this hypermasculinity more than college football (Demas, 2001; Grundy, 2001). College football in its physicality allowed men to determine who was the better man and provided a sense of community pride (Demas, 2001; Grundy, 2001). In the early years, college football was a brutal and dangerous game. For example, “In 1897, a young man named Von Gammon died from injuries received in the contest [a football game in Atlanta, Georgia] between the University of Georgia and the University of Virginia” (Grundy, 2001, p. 27). By the early 1900s, Von Gammon’s death was not an isolated incident but an unhappily common occurrence, with more than a dozen young college men losing their lives for football. Gammon’s death sparked a movement in Georgia to ban college football, and the Georgia Legislature quickly passed a bill that was vetoed by then-Governor William Yates Atkinson (Grundy, 2001). The main opponent of the bill was Rosalind Burns Gammon, the mother of the deceased. Rosalind wanted to save the sport that her son loved, “arguing that her son would want the game to continue” because of his support for “all manly sports, without which he deemed the highest type of manhood impossible” (Grundy, 2001, p. 27).

Defenders of college football also included some of the great minds of the era, such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. In Holmes’s view, football deaths were “a price well paid for the breeding of a race fit for headship and command” (as cited in Grundy, 2001, p. 27). Football not
only gave southern White men the opportunity to show their athletic prowess but also to relive the glory of the Confederacy. According to Grundy (2001), “Football games were frequently awash with Confederate symbolism, as officials and spectators alike asserted both racial and regional manhood by flying Confederate flags, singing Confederate songs, and punctuating the action on the field with well-practiced rebel yells” (p. 31). Southern White masculinity was becoming defined by a blend of athletic and Confederate ideals. The strength and athleticism exhibited by White men through sports were proof for many of them that they were justifiably superior to women and other races. Coincidentally or not, this began a new era of Jim Crow laws and segregation throughout the South for African Americans. Ironically, the sense of superiority that came with their success in sports was achieved in segregated competitions.

If sports rekindled southern White masculine identity, then sports ignited Black masculine identity. Regardless of White men’s propaganda regarding their physical superiority, African American men found success in sports early on. Even before slavery ended, African American men were becoming recognized around the world for their athletic prowess. In the early 1800s, Tom Molineaux was one of the first African Americans to fight for the world boxing championship in England (Ashe, Branch, Harris, & Chalk, 1988; Wiggins & Miller, 2003).

After the Civil War, many professional sports organizations reached a gentleman’s agreement to ban African Americans from competition. The only exception was professional boxing, which had restrictions but no official ban. Jack Johnson, an African American man, won the world heavyweight championship in 1908. To hold the title of world heavyweight champion has always been the quintessence of masculinity. When Johnson earned that title, that view of masculinity had to be expanded to include a Black man.
Most of White America was shocked by Johnson’s victory. “At the time there was a prevailing stereotype, and it was that African Americans not only didn’t have the mental acuities to succeed in sports, but they also didn’t have the physical acuity” (Zirin, as cited in Marracino, 2013, p. 4). Beyond his fighting ability, Johnson’s extravagant lifestyle and his many affairs with White women made him one of the most hated men in White America. Some African American leaders, such as Booker T. Washington, also felt that Johnson, as many newspapers stated, was a poor example of a champion (Wiggins & Miller, 2003). However, W. E. B. Du Bois stated that “it was not Johnson’s personal life that has caused boxing to fall in disfavor among respectable journals of opinion; it was simply Johnson’s undeniable greatness combined with his ‘unforgivable Blackness’” (as cited in Wiggins & Miller, 2003, p. 81).

There arose a loud outcry in the White community for a “Great White Hope,” someone to restore the proper order of White supremacy. The White community overwhelmingly wanted retired champion Jim Jeffries to be that Great White Hope. The “Fight of the Century” was scheduled for July 4, 1910 (on, perhaps ironically, Independence Day). The Fight of the Century did not live up to its billing, as Johnson knocked Jeffries out of the ring. “That Mr. Johnson should so lightly and carelessly punch the head of Mr. Jeffries,” observed the New York World in 1910, “must have come as a shock to every devoted believer in the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon race” (as cited in Wiggins & Miller, 2003, p. 79). Harris (1997) also wrote about the impact of this victory on the American community:

For he had knocked down an important wall of segregation; he had defeated the notion of Black athletic inferiority; he had challenged the widely held belief that, amazing as it seems now, African Americans lacked the physical wherewithal to compete with Whites.
The African American community’s feelings regarding Johnson’s victory were exemplified by the Reverend Reverdy Ransom. Ransom, a leader in the community, claimed that, “like Jack Johnson, African American musicians, poets, artists and scholars were fully capable of keeping ‘the White race busy for the next hundred years . . . in defending the interests of White supremacy’” (as cited in Wiggins & Miller, 2003, p. 80). The White community’s response to Jeffries’s loss was swift and violent, leading to lynch mobs all over the country assaulting African Americans (Marracino, 2013). Through sports and icons such as Jack Johnson, the era of the new Black masculinity could begin, its identity no longer in the shadow of White superiority.

White superiority in sports started to crumble as many sports became integrated (Miller & Wiggins, 2004). It became increasingly difficult to support the notion that Whites were superior athletes when African Americans were accomplishing impressive feats of athleticism and being elevated to the status of American heroes (Miller & Wiggins, 2004). African American athletes made significant progress in the years after Jack Johnson. By the 1930s, the question of White men’s superiority over African American athletes was clearly answered by Joe Louis and Jesse Owens. The elevation of these two men to internationally recognized champions and American heroes forever changed perceptions of African Americans:

The campaign for equal rights and sports drew, at one level, on the status of Joe Louis and Jesse Owens as national heroes, especially after their symbolic victories over fascism in the late 1930s at the Berlin Olympics, and the second Louis-Schmeling bout drew attention to the fact that in highly visible international arenas, America’s foremost representatives were Black men. (Miller & Wiggins, 2004, p. xi)
From the 1930s to the modern era, African American male athletes have been reshaping not only opinions about Black masculinity but also White masculinity. African American male athletes started to be regarded in most of the world as the standard for American manhood (Miller & Wiggins, 2004). Miller and Wiggins (2004) addressed this point: “For the last two decades, the most powerful people internationally—it might be said—have been American presidents. However, the most recognizable to many young people, White or Black, have been Muhammad Ali and Michael Jordan” (p. x).

The influence and impact of African American athletes cannot be underestimated, particularly that of Muhammad Ali and Michael Jordan. Michael Jordan’s athletic accomplishments have been an inspiration for generations of youngsters who wanted to “Be Like Mike,” according to the famous Gatorade campaign of the early 1990s. However, it was Jordan’s partnership with another company, Nike, that elevated him to iconic status. Jordan and Nike’s partnership began in 1984 with the introduction of Michael Jordan’s first shoes, Air Jordan I. Thirty-two years after the first Air Jordan shoes were released and 13 years after Michael Jordan stopped playing professionally, his shoes are still being worn by athletes and entertainers. In part because of the exorbitant price tag, Air Jordans have evolved from athletic footwear to status symbol. Gatorade, Nike, Hanes, and McDonald’s (to name just a few of the companies that chose Jordan as a spokesperson) did not invest just in an African American athlete but in something much larger. Michael Jordan was the embodiment of athletic excellence.

Jordan was not the only African American athlete to become a cultural icon as well as a personification of masculinity. The 1979 Coca-Cola® ad featuring legendary Pittsburg Steeler defensive lineman “Mean” Joe Greene was consistently voted one of the greatest commercials of all time (Moye, 2014). The commercial begins with Greene (an African American) limping
through a tunnel while headed for the team locker room. Suddenly, a boy (who is White) appears, holding a Coca-Cola. The child offers to help but Greene declines the offer. The boy tells Greene how much he admires him but Greene is unmoved by the words. Then, the boy offers Greene his Coca-Cola. Initially, Greene rejects the offer, but then he accepts. As Greene is drinking the Coca-Cola, the boy starts to walk away, looking sad. Unexpectedly, Greene smiles and throws the boy his football jersey. The boy is excited to have this moment with his hero. The commercial “reshaped Greene’s public persona and expanded his fan base. Before it aired, people were intimidated by him. Afterward, they wanted to hug him” (Moye, 2014, para. 3)

“Mean” Joe Greene not only reshaped his image but also made Black masculinity more acceptable to mainstream America. Other African American athletes who became icons, such as Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos, did not have the luxury of Fortune 500 companies and marketing directors to shape their vision of masculinity. They reshaped masculinity simply by having the courage of their convictions.

According to Zirin (2005), “Never has an athlete been more reviled by the mainstream press or more persecuted by the U.S. government, or more defiantly beloved throughout the world than Mohammed Ali” (p. 53). Ali’s willingness to lose his heavyweight championship title and possibly his freedom for refusing to be drafted into the U.S. military inspired a great many other men to refuse the Vietnam draft. At the height of the war, Ali’s defiance started a trend of nationwide protests. Once portrayed as a traitor to his country, Ali today is viewed as a hero by liberals and conservatives alike. Ali represents a symbol of courage and fortitude that helped to end the Vietnam War.

For many men, particularly those who were draft eligible in the 1960s, Ali served as a symbol of their masculinity: “The establishment embraces this Ali as a walking saint” (Zirin,
A great example of Ali’s elevation to legendary status in mainstream America was his selection as the lighter of the Olympic flame for the opening ceremony of the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. Although Atlanta and the state of Georgia are home to several prominent former Olympians, Muhammad Ali from Louisville, Kentucky, was selected. Even in the most conservative circles, Ali is seen as embodying the American values of determination, strength, sacrifice, and greatness. Ali continued to bridge the cultural divide in America. In 2016, in the midst of the political campaign with heightened anti-Muslim sentiment being freely expressed by political candidates and television personalities, President Obama pointed to Muslim African American athletes such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and the great Ali as examples of the positive impact of the Muslim community on American society.

Another iconic moment in sports history occurred when Tommie Smith and John Carlos gave the Black Power salute on the podium at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City (Zirin, 2005). This moment was not a spontaneous act on behalf of social justice but rather an orchestrated attempt by the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR), which was primarily organized by Dr. Harry Edwards. The OPHR contended that the U.S. government was manipulating African American athletes into being metaphoric window dressing to convince the world that the United States had resolved all issues regarding race equality (Zirin, 2005). Smith and Carlos were willing to accept the challenge proposed by OPHR’s call to “reclaim manhood” for the African American male athletes participating in the Olympics. Smith took the gold medal in the 200-meter race and Carlos took the bronze. As the U.S. national anthem played, these two African American elite athletes raised their black-gloved fists in the air and gave the Black Power salute. Smith explained the meaning behind the symbolism:
My raised right hand stood for the power in Black America. Carlos’s raised left hand stood for the unity of Black America. Together they formed an arch of unity and power. The Black scarf around my neck stood for Black pride. The Black socks with no shoes stood for Black poverty in racist America. The totality of our efforts was the regaining of Black dignity. (as cited in Hartmann, 2003, p. 6)

Like Ali, Smith and Carlos went from being enemies of America to being symbols of America’s freedom (Zirin, 2005). “Pictures of Smith and Carlos have been used to illustrate American high school textbooks and posters of the image have provided inspiration and strength for generations of college students” (Hartman, 2003, p. 7).

As African American males were moving from slavery to citizenship, desperately searching for a way to counter the centuries of negative stereotypes perpetuated by those supporting slavery, the African American athlete provided one of the first counterarguments to many of these stereotypes (Miller & Wiggins, 2004). African American male athletes’ shattering of stereotypes and modeling positive pride made them beloved within their community. However, the modern-day African American athlete, unencumbered by segregation and restricted salaries, has, in some cases, perpetuated stereotypes rather than dismantling them. Athletes such as Ray Rice (temporarily suspended from the NFL after a video surfaced showing him knocking unconscious his then fiancée), Greg Hardy (arrested for domestic violence), and others have painted a picture of African American men as violent toward women. Of course, O. J. Simpson became the embodiment of a great athlete’s fall from grace. Other African American athletes have been arrested for a host of criminal activities. Images of African American athletes being celebrated as a hero one moment and in another moment being handcuffed as criminals are prominent in the media.
For better or worse, it is undeniable that African American athletes are still playing a prominent role in shaping the essence of Black masculinity. This is evident through the impact of African American athletes on the marketing of products such as sport shoes. “Black athletes are now among the hottest properties on Madison Avenue, successfully pitching everything from McDonald’s cheeseburgers to Rolex watches to mainstream audiences” (J. Morgan, 1998, para. 4). Modern African American athletes have reached the pinnacle of media exposure, which has led to great wealth and fame for them. But does their success benefit the rest of the African American community? This question will be the subject of scholarly debate for years to come.

In conclusion, the evolution of African Americans from property to citizens was a bitterly difficult journey, aided by various entities inside and outside of the African American community. However, it would be remiss not to recognize the leading role of African American athletes on the path to legitimacy. African American athletes were among the first to achieve success and the standing required to shatter stereotypes for a group of people who were desperate for heroes. African American athletes’ abilities to withstand the physical and mental abuse heaped on them shone a light on the prevalence and ignorance of racism. These African American athletes took simple games and made them a platform for social change.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

The purpose of this research was to explore the role of sports, particularly high school football, in the school desegregation process by focusing on one of the most successful high school football teams in Georgia: VHS. In particular, this research focuses on the athletes involved in football during the implementation of desegregation.

Research Setting

The primary site for this research was the city of Valdosta, Georgia. Even before the high school football championships, before Valdosta State University was chartered, and before Moody Air Force Base was established, Valdosta had humble beginnings. According to the Valdosta city website (Valdosta, 2015), “Beginning with the Creek and Seminole Indians, the Spanish missionaries and the American pioneers, the fertile and beautiful land of this area has enticed people to make their homes here” (para. 1). Even though the land was beautiful and plentiful, settlement of this area was slow. Like many cities in the early 1800s, the railroad was an important factor in Valdosta’s development. Initially, Atlantic and Gulf Railroad had planned a station in the city of Troupville, which at that time was the Lowndes County seat (Jubera, 2012). However, the railroad company decided to bypass Troupville, which had an immediate impact on the community. The citizens of Troupville, not wanting to miss out on the financial opportunities provided by the railroad, merely relocated to what soon would be called the city of Valdosta (Jubera, 2012). The town’s rather exotic name “is a kind of Italian-for-Dummies
reinterpretation of Val d’Aosta, lifted from an Alpine region in northwest Italy” (Jubera, 2012, p. 33).

Valdosta soon became one of the most influential cities in the county. As a testament to its power and influence, Valdosta became the new seat of county government and home to some colorful residents. James Lord Pierpont, composer of “Jingle Bells,” was once the town’s music teacher (Jubera, 2012). In addition to colorful residents, Valdosta was becoming a magnet for the wealthy. If the railroad gave the city its power, cotton gave it its wealth. According to Jubera (2012), by the first decade of the next century, Valdosta’s fine cotton had caused such a spectacular boom that the city claimed the highest per capita income in America.

Of course, wealth from cotton meant prosperity built on the backs of slaves. Cotton was a labor-intensive crop requiring large numbers of workers. Thus, it is not surprising that the African American population was significant, even at Valdosta’s beginnings. The town’s 1860 census recorded 120 Whites and 46 Blacks (Jubera, 2012, p. 34). In order to maintain their profitable cotton empire, White citizens of Valdosta used brute force, intimidation, and murder to retain African American laborers, even after emancipation (Jubera, 2012). For example, “One Black man was dragged by hooded locals from his home in the middle of the night, toted to a remote spot in the woods, then beaten to death in front of his wife” (Jubera, 2012, p. 29). Even basic civil liberties, such as voting, were considered a capital offense punishable by public acts of violence and murder.

The violence against African Americans was so extreme in this area that “the land [was] literally strewn with the deceased colored gentlemen” (Jubera, 2012, p. 34). Many African American leaders in the community made several attempts to write letters to various resources (e.g., newspapers, state and federal government officials) to try to stop the onslaught. One
African American leader wrote to the local newspaper, stating, “Every log has one [an African American body] behind it . . . every frog pond contains one or more” (Jubera, 2012, p. 34). For many African Americans in Lowndes County, the constant terror became too much to bear.

So in 1871 and 1872, 112 Black men, women and children—tired, angry, frightened from having had their neighbors’ bodies scattered like so much cotton seed—packed up all they owned and emigrated from Lowndes County, in deepest South Georgia, to Liberia, a colony founded by free slaves in far, far-enough away West Africa. (Jubera, 2012, p. 34)

The cruelty and barbarism toward African Americans living in south Georgia escalated, reaching its peak during the Lynching Rampage of 1918 and the murder of Mary Turner (Jubera, 2012). This vicious episode in American history began over the arrest of Sidney Johnson, a 19-year-old African American, for “rolling dice” (Jubera, 2012). Johnson, unable to pay his $30 fine, became a victim of the convict lease system, which is described in great detail in Douglas Blackmon’s Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II. Blackmon (2008) argued that the “retailing of slaves regenerated itself around convict leasing in the 1870s and 1880s. The brutal form of physical punishment employed against ‘prisoners’ in 1910 were the same as those used against ‘slaves’ in 1840” (p. 8). Johnson was bailed out under the convict leasing system, meaning that he was required to work off his debt to Hampton Smith (a White plantation owner) upon his release (Jubera, 2012). Smith was notorious for his brutality toward African American workers. One day, Johnson, unable to work due to illness, was beaten by an enraged Smith. In revenge, Johnson shot and killed Smith a few days later. Smith’s wife was also shot but the injury was not severe (Jubera, 2012). Even though Johnson acted alone, a lynch mob of Whites went on a murderous rampage against African Americans.
For four days, unable to catch Johnson, the lynch mobs murdered other African American men, one of whom was Hayes Turner. Hayes was the husband of Mary Turner, a 20-year-old African American mother of three. At the time of Hayes’s murder, Mary was 8 months pregnant (Jubera, 2012). She “refused to stay silent and threatened to swear out warrants on those involved in her husband’s murder” (Jubera, 2012, p. 39). Her subsequent death was horrific:

On May 19, 1918, a White mob arrived at the home of Mary Turner . . . captured Mary and carried her to a deserted riverbank. There they hung her upside down from a tree, doused her with gasoline and motor oil, and set her on fire. Somebody then cut her unborn baby from her stomach and crushed it in the dirt. Afterward hundreds of bullets were fired into her lifeless body. An empty whiskey bottle plugged with a dead cigar butt marked their graves. (Jubera, 2012, pp. 39–40)

The reaction of the majority of the White community was silence, despite the brutality of the crime and the negative national attention it brought upon the area. The White community chose to protect southern culture rather than defend the civil liberties of fellow human beings. The reaction of many African Americans in the community was to leave: “Five hundred of them fled the county as fast as they could” (Jubera, 2012, p. 40). The brutal murder of Mary Turner and countless other acts of violence toward African Americans set the tone for race relations for generations to come.

Like many southern cities, Valdosta has evolved from its once-violent past. The boll weevil infestation of 1917 forever ended cotton’s economic dominance in the area. Cotton was no longer king. Valdosta was changing (Jubera, 2012). Over time, expansion of new industry into the area and the promise of better wages lured many African American families back. In modern-day Valdosta, the leading employers are Valdosta State University, the regional medical
center, and Moody Air Force Base (Jubera, 2012). The railroad, once a source of the town’s growth and prosperity, has been replaced by Interstate 75, a major highway that connects Georgia to Florida. One of the most significant changes has been demographic. According to Census.gov (2013), Valdosta’s 2013 estimated population accounts for 56,481 of Georgia’s 9,994,759 people. The community has gone from predominantly White to predominantly Black, as many Whites live in the wider county area rather than within the city limits. Table 1 summarizes the 2013 U.S. census report for Valdosta.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2013 Census Figures for the City of Valdosta and the State of Georgia</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population, 2013 estimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population, 2010 (April 1) estimates base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population, percent change, April 1, 2010, to July 1, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White alone, percentage 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American alone, percentage, 2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Given Lowndes County’s horrific history of race-based violence and the general historical and cultural context of 1960s Georgia, it is intriguing that VHS began desegregation in 1965—three years before desegregation was mandated statewide—and accomplished the task smoothly and without violent repercussions.
Methodology

Choosing a methodological approach for this study proved initially to be a dilemma. For most researchers, a choice must be made between two alternative approaches: quantitative or qualitative. Both approaches provide valuable data. However, it was determined that the topic of this study would be addressed best via a qualitative approach. Although the statistical data regarding segregation provide a snapshot of the experience, they do not relate the lived experience of the individuals who were involved. These personal experiences give this research its identity, purpose, and merit.

A common characteristic of historical case studies is that the subject of study is examined over time, but the research results in a story both presented and analyzed through a historical lens (Merriam, 1998). Another definition of the historical case study focuses on the researcher’s effort to unearth the complexities and subtleties that necessarily accompany human behavior, ideas, and events, influencing the ways in which the past constructs the present (Berg & Lune, 2012). Conducting a historical case study is simultaneously “a process of discovery and construction” (Williams, 2007, p. 11). A historical case study, like many other social science methods, is collaborative and combines various elements to create a unique approach. One of the most important collaborative elements in this research is oral history. Fentress and Wickham (1992) observed that “what defines oral history, and sets it apart from other branches of history, is . . . its reliance on memory rather than texts” (p. 1). In this study, as a researcher who happens to be an African American man attempting to elicit memories from research participants, who were predominantly African American men, I was heavily influenced by the work of Jan Vansina. Vansina’s academic work explored the importance and history of oral tradition in Africa.
Most precolonial African civilizations were “oral civilizations.” Our own European or American contemporary societies are “literate civilizations.” . . . The attitude of members of an oral society toward speech is similar to the reverence members of a literate society attach to the written word. If it is hallowed by authority or antiquity, the word will be treasured. (Vansina, 1971, p. 442)

I felt a connection with the participants—a connection stemming from all of us being African American men who all grew up in the South. We are also connected by fears and prejudices facing African American men and their derivatives such as centuries of mass incarceration, racial profiling, and disproportionate rates of homicides, poverty, and unemployment. However, the connection is more, even though I was younger than any of the participants at least by 2 decades. I grew up in the Mississippi Delta in the city of Clarksdale, where there was a clear separation between White-only neighborhoods and Black neighborhoods. My high school (Clarksdale High School) was still participating in segregated activities. Clarksdale High School was integrated before I was born. However, in the 1980s and early 1990s, we still had a White homecoming queen and a Black homecoming queen, as well as two proms: a White prom and a Black prom.

By no means am I insinuating that my personal experience regarding segregation is at the same level of intensity as that of the participants in this study. However, in many ways, my youth in Mississippi was remarkably similar to that of these participants, despite the fact that segregation in my hometown was not enforced by law but by persistent racial norms and expectations. Because of this southern culture of segregation that my participants and I (to a lesser degree) experienced, I intuitively understood much of what my participants were saying—the unstated words behind the story that they were telling. Each interview seemed to be more
than just an interview. I was not interviewing the participants as much as they were sharing their experiences as an elder would share wisdom with the youth of the village. They clearly hoped that their life experiences would help me to complete my research; beyond that, it seemed that they hoped that I would learn something from their experiences that would enable me to become a better man. “Such a bridge involves trust and makes possible experiences of vulnerability and openness. The bridge becomes a vehicle to facilitate mutual understanding, growth and change” (Kaufman, 1974, p. 570).

**Permission to Conduct Research**

After the proposal was successfully defended with the full approval of the dissertation committee, permission to conduct the research was sought and granted by the University of Alabama’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

**Interview Protocol**

Obtaining IRB approval to conduct interviews required compliance with the interview protocol. The University of Alabama IRB guidelines for conducting human research, which strictly follow the guidelines of the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). (see Appendix B for a copy of consent form and interview protocol.

**Participants**

The primary target population consisted of Black football players who had participated in the desegregation of VHS from 1965 to 1969. The following steps were used to identify and recruit participants for the study.

After IRB approval, I made contract with Donald Davis, Director of the Lowndes County Historical Society. Davis provided contact information for two possible participant: John
Copeland, the first African American to play football for VHS, and Kurt Bazemore, the son of the late VHS head football coach Wright Bazemore, who also played football for VHS during desegregation. I called both individuals (Copeland and Bazemore) and they agreed to participate in the study.

I contacted Mike “Nub” Nelson, the VHS Touchdown Club President. Nelson provided contact information for someone whom he called “an important leader in African American community.” That person was Roger Rome, a VHS football player during desegregation. I spoke to Roger Rome, who agreed to participate in the study. However, Rome’s contribution was more than just his participation. Rome provided contact information for several other possible participants who met the research guidelines. He identified Stanford Rome, Robert Savage, John Bell, Melvin Herron, Herman Godfrey, Aaron Holder, Charles Daniels, and Robert Daniels. He identified other possible participants but lack of current contact information made it impossible to locate them. Also, some possible participants initially agreed to participate but later changed their minds.

The initial target number of participants was 10, but 9 participants were finally recruited, all African American former players. Each participant was interviewed once; all agreed to follow-up interviews if needed. All participated in the study with no monetary reward.

**Data Collection**

Merriam (2001) grouped data collection in three categories: “interviews, observations, and documents” (p. 69). I followed interview protocols established by the University of Alabama IRB, which include but are not limited to Alabama Human Research Protections Program (AAHRPP) Document Number 27, *Guidance: General Responsibilities of Investigators*
(Appendix B). Due to the nature of this research, the majority of the data was derived from documents and interviews.

After participants had been selected and agreed to participate in the research, they were given the option of being interviewed in person at their residences or at a neutral site. Table 2 lists the locations of the interviews.

Table 2

Locations of Interviews of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Interview site</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roger Rome</td>
<td>Outside a coffee shop in Valdosta, GA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford Rome</td>
<td>Outside a coffee shop in Valdosta, GA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Savage</td>
<td>His home in Valdosta, GA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herman Godfrey</td>
<td>Outside a coffee shop in Valdosta, GA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Bell</td>
<td>Outside a coffee shop in Valdosta, GA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Copland</td>
<td>His home in Nashville, TN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron Holder</td>
<td>A restaurant in Jonesboro, GA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Daniels</td>
<td>Their church in Valdosta, GA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Daniels</td>
<td>Their church in Valdosta, GA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melvin Herron</td>
<td>His home in Valdosta, GA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before the interview process began, each participant was given a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix C), which had been approved by the University of Alabama IRB. I explained in detail the rights, protections, and responsibilities of the participant relating to this research or any other, and explained that the participant could withdraw from the project at any
time and for any reason. Also, before the interview process began, I informed the participants that the data collection would involve the use of a digital recorder. All participants agreed to be recorded. Also, each participant was given the option to use an alias rather than his legal name. Each participant chose to use his legal name. Consent is evident in the recordings.

After informed consent was signed and the participant was fully aware of his rights, I gave the participant a signed copy of the informed consent form, and then the interview process began. The interview was guided by the predetermined questions (Appendix C). The longest interview took about 2.5 hours; the shortest interview lasted about 30 minutes. Due to the nature of the research, each participant was given the opportunity to relate his experience entirely, so there was no official time limit. After the interview was completed, recorded data were transcribed.

Data collection involves more than just interviews. Documents were significant to this research. I made several trips to the University of Georgia Main Library to pull articles from the Valdosta Daily Times (local newspaper). I found additional materials at the Lowndes County Historical Society, which held such primary sources as a copy of the original letter sent by Superintendent W. G. Nunn regarding implementation of Freedom of Choice, and a copy of the official federal school desegregation plan for Valdosta. The historical society also had valuable archival data, such as yearbooks from VHS and Pinevale High School. Mike Nelson (VHS Touchdown Club President) gave me a tour of the David S. Waller, Sr., Valdosta Wildcat Museum and Bazemore-Hyder Stadium. During the tour, Nelson provided information on the history, tradition, and sports culture of the Valdosta Wildcats.
Data Analysis

“Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data” (Merriam, 2001, p. 179). Organizing and managing all collected data required coding, which is “nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand destination to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (Merriam, 2001, p. 164). The data were processed into categories and divided into themes to be compared and contrasted. The process of data analysis and representation was outlined by Creswell (2007, pp. 156–157):

- Data managing: Create and organize files for data.
- Reading and memoing: Read through text, make margin notes, form initial codes.
- Describing: Describe the case and its context.
- Classifying: Use categorical aggregation to establish themes or patterns.
- Representing, visualizing: Present in-depth pictures of the case (or cases) using narrative, tables, and figures.

Chapter Summary

This study was conducted based on full IRB approval and a sincere commitment to protect and respect each participant’s rights. As discussed in Chapter 1, America has become increasingly segregated, particularly in education. This research was intended to provide much-deserved recognition of the personal sacrifices made by many of the student athletes, coaches, and community leaders involved in creating a better community and a better America. The essence of this research is captured by the words of VHS coach Nick Hyder: “The Supreme Court told us we had to live to together, but they didn’t tell us how. That’s what football has done for this community” (as cited in Jubera, 2012, p. 16).
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

I think football teams served as an example that the races could work together to accomplish a common goal. If they can do it on the football field, then we could do it in the classrooms, or we could do it in the community also. (Stanford Rome)

Stanford Rome was one of the nine African American men who played for VHS during the first years of desegregation. His quote speaks to the belief of many of the athletes in this study that sports could be a unifying factor during the school desegregation process. Whether they chose to attend VHS as part of Freedom of Choice or were transferred there during massive court-enforced desegregation, they left behind a segregated school that had been woefully underfunded. However, this celebratory story was countered by another Black player, Herman Godfrey, who noted that, once the football game was over, things went back to “normal,” meaning fairly segregated lives.

Football team was the cause why the community came together. At that particular time folks forgot about colors, forgot about everything else—football season. It’s kind of 911 when that happened. When everybody came together and prayed regardless of what color you were. We held hands and everybody was crying and everybody felt love toward one another. Over a period of time, folks stopped praying together, folks stopped holding hands. They went back to their old self. Football was kind of like that. It’d bring the community together at the football season, at the basketball season, then everybody go back to normal.
Nevertheless, the majority of the interviews in this study tended to tell a celebratory story of their accomplishments as Black athletes on the Valdosta football team and the positive role football played in bringing about a smooth transition to desegregation.

Growing up in a small town in the Deep South, these Black men were victims in some way of racist laws and policies. However, they did not want to be seen as victims, but rather as trailblazers. They hoped that their sacrifices would help the next generation of African Americans succeed. Each narrative presented in this chapter ends with a somewhat upbeat conclusion. It is because these men wanted their narratives to be narratives of hope, not pity. This chapter presents their stories about being some of the first African Americans to desegregate VHS and to play for a nationally known football team. Their stories are the heart and soul of this research study.

Before introducing the nine participants, some contextual information is needed about the segregated high school that they attended prior to going to Valdosta, the history of school desegregation in Valdosta from the Freedom of Choice policy to massive desegregation (including the student walkout in 1969), and the coach who was a leader during school desegregation.

**History of Pinevale High School**

Lowndes County is no different from a majority of places in the South where African Americans’ first opportunity to receive education came from the Freedman’s Bureau schools. On April 16, 1868, the Freed Colored School opened under the leadership of Jacob D. Enos of the Freedman’s Bureau. It was the first school for African Americans in the county, and it was located in the predominantly Black community of Dasher. By 1869, Freed Colored School had changed its name to West Chester School and had reached an enrollment of 111 students. In
1917, Magnolia School became the first school for African Americans in the city of Valdosta, and it served students of all ages. In 1929, Dasher High School became the first African American high school with grades 9 to 11. By 1952, Dasher High School had progressed to having Grades 9 to 12 and a 180-day school year (Pinholster, 2009).

After World War II, education for Blacks improved greatly because the Black middle class was born during the post-war era. Returning African American soldiers and others who had obtained wartime jobs in factories used their new financial clout to demand better education for their children (Klarman, 2004; Roche, 1998). They began to protest the inequalities of segregated schools. Finally, segregated schools were legally challenged and outlawed in the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision, which ended the “separate but equal” resources and facilities for education. Klarman (2004) explained the significance of this case:

The court’s opinion emphasized the importance of public education in modern life, then refused to be bound by the views of the drafters of the Fourteenth Amendment, or by those of the late nineteenth-century justices, most of whom had held benign views of segregation. Segregated public schools were “inherently equal” and thus violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. (p. 292)

As discussed in Chapter 2, Georgia, like many other southern states, made several desperate attempts to fight the Brown decision throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Georgia tried to stave off desegregation by finally paying attention to the “equal” part of separate but equal as it related to African American salaries, resources, and facilities. Suddenly, the state was ready to invest in Black public schools.

Valdosta was no different. In 1956, the city built a new high school for African Americans, named Pinevale High School (Pinholster, 2009). The new school was named for the
segregated neighborhood in which many African Americans lived. Pinevale High School would become the center of the community, not only geographically but civically and emotionally. It became the forum for African American community activities, providing the neighborhood with a real sense of connection and, especially after Pinevale won its first state (Blacks-only) football championship in 1963, a source of pride. Coincidentally, when Pinevale football was at its peak, VHS’s football was at its worst: 1963 was Coach Bazemore’s only losing season, with a record of 2-7-1 (Jubera, 2012). The rest of the 1960s would bring additional challenges for VHS.

In 1965, Freedom of Choice allowed students from Pinevale High School to attend VHS, although, according to interview participants, only a very small number of students chose to do so. As was typical throughout the South, when school districts were finally forced to comply with desegregation orders, the Valdosta school system closed Pinevale High School and the Black students were transferred to VHS. There were 88 students in the last Pinevale graduating class before consolidation. A year later, Pinevale reopened as an integrated middle school. Then, in 1973, Pinevale became an elementary school, and remains one to this day (Pinholster, 2009).

**Freedom of Choice Policy**

As discussed in Chapter 3, the Freedom of Choice policy was the South’s response to the court-mandated desegregation of public education. On the surface, Freedom of Choice seemed to suggest that Black parents and students could choose what school, including formerly all-White schools, they wanted to attend. In reality, Freedom of Choice was not a good-faith attempt at solving desegregation in Georgia but rather a way to find a loophole to maintain a moderate form of segregation (Roche, 1998). According to Roche (1998), “The Supreme Court had not ordered the states to integrate their schools; it simply forbade them from mandating racially segregated schools” (p. 165). Freedom of Choice allowed African American students’ admission to all-
White schools with the assumption that, as long as all-Black schools existed, the majority of African American students would choose to attend the Black schools in their communities. The Valdosta City Public School District implemented Freedom of Choice in 1965. In 1965, 21 Black students enrolled at VHS but only one (George Carter) was on the football team. Unfortunately, Carter never started a game. However, in 1966, John Copeland joined the team and became a starter. Freedom of Choice gradually increased the numbers of African American students at the school (Pinholster, 2009). When court-enforced desegregation took place in 1970, the majority of students at Valdosta city schools were White, making up 64% of the student population (Pinholster, 2009).

Many White Southerners were confident that desegregation could be delayed by using the Freedom of Choice strategy. However, on May 27, 1968, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Charles C. Green v. County School Board of New Kent County, Virginia* that Freedom of Choice was a clear violation of the *Brown I* and *Brown II* decisions (Allen, Daugherity & Trembanis, 2004).

The Justices noted that the 1954-55 desegregation decisions put an “affirmative duty” on school boards to abolish dual schools and to establish “unitary” systems. It disapproved the county’s “freedom-of-choice” plan. Justice William J. Brennan, writing for the Court, explained, “The burden on a school board today is to come forward with a plan that promises realistically to work, and promises realistically to work now.” The court ordered the local school board to develop a new plan to “convert promptly to a system without a “White” school and a “Negro” school, but just schools. (Allen et al., 2004, p. 272)

The *Green* decision was essential to the desegregation process in Valdosta. However, other factors led to full desegregation. There were lawsuits filed by African American parents...
regarding the inequity between the two schools (Jubera, 2012). Even though Pinevale was a distinct improvement over Dasher, by the late 1960s Pinevale was in desperate need of structural repairs as well as newer textbooks and educational materials. However, the Valdosta School Board could not afford to make Pinevale the equivalent to VHS. The federal government threatened to revoke all funding for Valdosta City schools and Lowndes County schools for known noncompliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. However, implementation of Freedom of Choice gave them legal protection for the time being. In 1968, the U.S. Department of Justice filed a lawsuit, United States v. Board of Education, Lowndes County, which included Valdosta City schools. The lawsuit concerned both schools districts maintaining a segregated system. After the Green decision, Freedom of Choice was no longer an option. Without its protection, the Valdosta City schools were open to legal actions from the Justice Department and African American parents and in danger of losing federal funding. The school district quickly capitulated and implemented a complete diversity plan to be executed in the school year of 1969 (Moore, 1997).

Setting the Historical Context

Coach August Wright Bazemore and the 1969 Student Walkout

To understand the role of Black athletes in this study in the desegregation of their high school, one must understand some local context that sets it apart from many other high schools in the region during the same time period. First, VHS was a football powerhouse, known nationally for its winning traditions. The wind behind that sail was Coach August Wright Bazemore. Second, during the first year of massive desegregation, the Black students at VHS staged a walkout in protest of an incident that reminded Blacks of their continued second-class status in the new integrated high school.
Probably no community in the United States can boast of a more winning high school football team than Valdosta, where townspeople refer to their community as “Winnerville.” Also, the worldwide leader of sports news, ESPN, described the city of Valdosta as “Title Town, USA.” The Valdosta Wildcats have won six national championships, 24 state championships, 25 southern regional championships, and 42 regional championships (Valdosta football team sites, 2016). But it might not have been a Winnerville or Title Town, USA, without the hard work and determination of one man: Coach August Wright Bazemore.

August Wright Bazemore was more than a coach; he was the patriarch of a football dynasty from 1941 to 1971. Bazemore’s coaching accomplishments are some of the most impressive of all time: 17 regional championships, 15 South Georgia championships, 14 state championships, and three national championships, all in the toughest football region in America (Geier, 2010). Bazemore has also been recognized by his peers with various honors and awards, such as National Coach of the Year (1969), Coach of the Year for District IV (1968 and 1970), Georgia Prep Coach of the Year (six-time recipient), and Regional Coach of the Year (11-time recipient). He was inducted into Georgia’s Sports Hall of Fame and his alma mater Mercer University’s Athletic Hall of Fame (Geier, 2010).

Bazemore’s greatest accomplishment occurred outside of the football field. The winds of change were coming to Valdosta, and Bazemore knew it. VHS accepted some African American students as early as 1965 due to the Freedom of Choice policy in the state. Bazemore had three African American football players on his team as early as 1966: John Copeland, Don Davis, and George Carter. Pictures in the 1966 VHS yearbook show Copeland running dramatically, breaking tackles on his way to a 74-yard touchdown run against Marietta in the State AAA Championship game. An even more dramatic picture shows Copeland being escorted off the
field by a jubilant White fan (VHS, 1966). In a 1984 interview for the *Valdosta Daily Times*, Coach Bazemore credited the character and personality of his African American athletes, particularly John Copeland, for the smooth transition to desegregation.

He [John Copeland] played when there was freedom of choice–before forced integration. I don’t think he played much at Pinevale, but he wanted to play for us. We took him to camp and put him on defense, and we couldn’t get anybody by him. We put him on offense and he could run, catch the ball and run back points. He was an outstanding pass receiver and punt returner. But Copeland’s biggest contribution to Valdosta athletics may well have been his deportment and personal attitude. I can’t say enough about him–he was a gentleman. We had he [sic] and John [George] Carter, who was his running mate, and our integration was one of the smoothest of any school in the country because of them. Both boys were so fun and likeable, there was no problem when we integrated. John Copeland was a hero to Valdosta sporting fans. (as cited in Perkins, 1984, para. 8-12)

In hindsight, it seems to have been an easy decision for Coach Bazemore to play such a talented player as John Copeland. However, this was 3 years before the majority of Georgia schools were fully integrated. The idea of playing an African American player was very much a controversial decision in the early 1960s in rural Georgia. With the success of John Copeland and the other African American athletes during the Freedom of Choice period, it seemed that Coach Bazemore was making plans for the next big phase for his team and community: the phase of full desegregation. Jubera (2012) credited Bazemore with the smooth transition to integrated schools:
Yet perhaps his most profound accomplishment was uniting his many constituencies to help steer Valdosta High through integration, no slight feat in that day’s hair-trigger, violence-happy Deep South. As much as it would change his own world, this was one game Bazemore wasn’t ready to lose. He’d show up for practice at all-Black Pinevale and tell kids there that one day they’d all win a championship together. The [Valdosta High] Wildcats won that championship just two years after a discrimination suit filed by Black parents . . . shuttered Pinevale and merged it with Valdosta—a largely uneventful, if not always equitable, transition into full integration. (p. 16)

Bazemore ended his coaching career with arguably his greatest team, perhaps even the greatest high school team in Georgia history. The 1971 Wildcats team went undefeated. They were a juggernaut; they did not just beat every opponent, they destroyed them. Notably, the team that they beat for the National Championship was also an integrated team, the T. C. Williams High School from the famed *Remember the Titans* movie. The teams played in a packed stadium with crowds cheering. The Black and Gold (VHS) were unfazed by the fact that their best player was an African American named Stan Rome, and they went on to beat T. C. Williams.

**The African American Students Walkout**

A much less known fact about VHS is that it was the site of a massive school walkout in 1969. In early October 1969, nearly 400 African American students walked out of VHS in protest (VHS, 1970). One cause of the walkout was that the majority of African American students were frustrated by the fact that the song “Dixie” was playing at sporting events and other school activities. Many African Americans feel that “Dixie” shows reverence for Confederate ideals such as, but not limited to, servitude and bondage of African Americans. Another cause was the controversy of the Miss Valdosta High School competition. Several
African American students felt the African American homecoming queen candidate Gloria Holloway had won the election fairly, and the school officials were upset that the African American students block-voted in high numbers for Gloria Holloway while other two White candidates divided the White vote, which resulted in Ms. Holloway winning the popular vote. However, the school officials disqualified her victory on the grounds that the number of votes exceeded the number of students. The majority of African American students contended that the school had fabricated the numbers as an excuse to deny Holloway the title of Miss Valdosta High. The level of African American frustration was reaching its boiling point when the principal, Charlie Green, called for a meeting of all students to discuss the issue. The students were supposed to assemble in the auditorium after homeroom class. However, instead of going to the auditorium, nearly 400 African American students marched out of school (VHS, 1970). The newspaper account is shown in Figure 1.

We were set to meet in the auditorium and discuss this thing, and we didn’t want to discuss it, because it was not right. When the bell rang for us to go in there, we left Valdosta High School. We were going back to Pinevale to take our school back. We were like the Africans marching all the way. Pinevale was a [integrated] middle school at that time. The White parents were coming and getting their kids out because they knew we were coming. We were coming to take our school back. (H. Godfrey)

The decision to walk out was not easy for the African American students, particularly the African American football players who were on the cusp of winning a state championship. The Friday on which the students decided to walk out was the night that the Valdosta Wildcats were playing Moultrie, a must-win game if they wanted to keep their championship hopes alive. According to the *Memphis World Newspaper* (Memphis World Publishing Co., 1969), “Many of
the Negro members of the band were absent when Valdosta played Moultrie Friday night, and one first string player, defensive safety Curtis Lee, did not play. Valdosta won the game 21-0” (para. 5). In that same year, the Wildcats eventually won the Regional Championship, the South Georgia Championship, the Georgia State Championship, and a National Championship (Valdosta High School Touchdown Club, 2017).

Regardless of victory, on that Friday night the boycott was still very much active. The African American student protesters needed a place to meet to discuss their next move, and the African American-owned Harrington Funeral Home offered sanctuary. Many of the students assumed that the school administration had no idea that they were meeting at that location.
However, the school administrators came to the location to discuss a compromise with the students. The compromise was quite simple: Each year, they would have both a White and a Black homecoming queen. The only caveat was that each student who walked out would have to serve a three-day suspension from school for violating school policy. After the days of suspension, the majority of the students returned to school to complete their education. However, a significant number of students never returned to complete their education. As for the African American football players returning from suspension, they also received additional punishment from head coach Bazemore. The student walkout was a contentious issue for the Black football players; many refused to participate, citing loyalty to their team and to the coach. Others did participate and suffered the consequences. Fifty years later, the incident still evokes much emotion, as demonstrated in the stories below.

**John Copeland: Being the First**

Unlike the Hollywood version of Jackie Robinson’s baseball career, the story of the first African American to play for the previously all-White VHS is not a story of a man boldly trying to prove that he could play football as well as or better than the Whites. No, John Copeland’s story is that of a young man who simply loved football and wanted to play. Copeland described his first attempt at playing football at the segregated Pinevale High School, which did not go very well.

I can tell you my sports experience began when I was in ninth grade. I went out for football at Pinevale High School because I loved football. [He drew out the word for emphasis: loooooved.] That’s all I wanted to do, play football, since I was in fifth, sixth grade. I went [out for] football when I was a freshman, and of course I didn’t make the team. But I was one of the last ones to get cut. I kind of forgot about football for a couple
years. Then my junior year I gave it another shot. I trained a little bit. I think I could run a little bit. I could catch a little bit. Needless to say, I didn’t know what I was doing, but I went up for the team. You gotta understand this was my junior year, this was [my] heart, and this is what [I] wanted to do. So they would call guys’ names out and you go get a uniform. It was about 10 to 15 [guys trying to make the team]. You’d go outside, then inside you would get your uniform.

So we got down to the next to the last day, and they called my name and two other guys. So we went in to get uniforms and the thigh pads were mix matched. The knee pads had holes in them. I had never seen anything like it. I will never forget that. So I’m still thinking, “I made the team!” The jersey had ripped, so I took it home to my mother, and she got her sewing machine and sewed it right for me. It was looking pretty good. I was just as happy. That was a fantastic feeling.

We had a spring game and of course I didn’t play. Of course, I dressed out and I was in this old tattered [uniform]. I said, “Man, I made the team!” A couple of weeks after the spring game, I got a notice in the hallway that they were having a meeting with all the football players. It was in the gym and most of the football players were there. I sat down and they said, “What are you doing here?” I said, “This is a football meeting right?” “Yeah, but it’s not for you, you didn’t make the team.” I had to get up and walk out the door and everybody laughing. Why wouldn’t they be laughing? I was the most embarrassed I had ever been in my life, but you know, I was young.

Knowing that the Pinevale administration had a reputation of allowing older, often ineligible players to play, I asked Copeland whether that practice had prevented him from making the team. He responded simply: “I heard about that and I can’t really say it went on.
Except for I know one or two smaller cases because I personally knew the guy. The guy was twenty-something.” Copeland was reluctant to make excuses for not making the Pinevale team. He felt that he had learned a valuable lesson from that experience to carry with him for the rest of his life.

I worked hard in the team, blocking, catching the ball. I didn’t drop a whole lot of passes. They threw the ball at me at scrimmage. I ran back for a touchdown. I was kind of disappointed, but I learned later no life is complete without the taste of bitter and sweet. It was a little bitter. Then the sweet part came along. You got to enjoy it.

Two to three weeks after the embarrassing incident in the gym, fate intervened. A member of the board of education came to Pinevale to recruit African American students to attend VHS. This opportunity had resulted from the 1965 implementation of the Freedom of Choice Act (Appendix D). Copeland was told, “This is Freedom of Choice. Does anybody want to sign up?” He said, “I signed up. I didn’t make the [Pinevale] team. I didn’t have anything to look forward to, so I signed up.”

Initially, Copeland transferred to VHS for a fresh start; it had nothing to do with football. He had lost interest in the game because, he thought, if he could not make the team at Pinevale, how could he make the team at Valdosta, one of the most elite football programs in the nation? Copeland had grown up in Valdosta and he was quite aware of the accomplishments of Valdosta football.

What I knew about Valdosta was “win, win.” They were beating people 50 to 0. They used to have posters up. They beat everybody. That’s just what they did. They won championships, state championships, and national titles in high school. That was something to behold.
However, with some persuading by his friend George Carter, Copeland started thinking about the possibility of playing football again. He recalled the conversation:

During the summer, my brother [good friend] George Carter and I were sitting around, shooting the ball, talking to each other, and he said, “Why don’t you call Coach Bazemore?” (George wanted me to be on the team. He was already on the team at Valdosta High School.) I was like, “Man, I’m not going to call Coach Bazemore.” He kept at me: “Come on, come on, call Coach Bazemore, he’s a good man.” I said, “OK, I’ll call him just to get you off my back.”

So I picked up the phone and called him. “I’m John Copeland from Pinevale. I’m calling to try out for the team.” Coach Bazemore said, “Alright, John Copeland, we’re having a meeting out here in a couple of days. Just come on out here and get a physical, medical examination and come on out.’

I thought, “Wow, he’s a pretty nice man.” I was kind of astonished Coach Bazemore would be that kind of coach.

Ironically, Copeland was much more successful at Valdosta’s football camp than during his attempts at Pinevale. He was excited again at the prospect of playing football.

You got to understand that at Pinevale I didn’t play, so I didn’t have that eagerness or excitement. But at Valdosta I had made the team within a couple of weeks doing the school camp. This was 1966. It was my senior year of high school. We were finishing up camp, and I did not realize I was going to start. The only thing I was thinking about was, “I’m out here playing football. They’re going to let me run and they’re going to let me kick. I’m happy. This is great!”
Beyond the football field, going to Valdosta also meant going into a predominately White environment, which many would consider stressful. Copeland saw it differently.

From my perspective, it was none. No pressure on me whatsoever. Now I did hear that some of the teachers or other people at the school would say that those ones [Black students] that went [to Valdosta] was not too bright. That’s their perspective, you know. Back then, Blacks were real sensitive about it. “All of y’all are going to make us look bad.”

So there was no pressure on me whatsoever. Mine was strictly voluntarily. Before I called Coach Bazemore, I had already made the decision back in the spring that I was going to go to Valdosta. My father had a little reservation about it, nothing serious. I just told him, “I want to play football.” He said, “OK, I’ll let you go.”

To my knowledge, no one was harassed. I will tell you what helped me make my decision to go to Valdosta High School. They had about four or five [Black students] that previous year. I didn’t hear anybody have any problems. I said, “Hey, this is OK.” If I would’ve heard there was trouble, I probably would’ve gone. Because everything worked out fine for those five or six students, I decided to go.

Even though Copeland was seemingly oblivious to the pressure, he had good reason to feel it. The Valdosta Daily Times published a preseason article on the impending loss of many graduating seniors and the reshuffling of many positions. However, the last section of the article was exclusively dedicated to John Copeland as one of the two “Negro” players for the upcoming season. Coach Bazemore confirmed that Copeland would be the first African American to play for Valdosta. However, he was reluctant to confirm that Copeland would be a starter. I asked Copeland about his experience in starting his first game.
I remember that first game he [Bazemore] called everyone out and all the starting positions. My position was the last one. He said, “Copeland, you’re going to start, I don’t care what anybody says. You deserve it. You’re going to start.” That was all he said. That was it, and I started.

I wanted to know whether the crowd booed him. He stated, “Nothing like that. A whole lot of cheering when you’re a good player.” There may have been cheers from the Valdosta faithful, but it was different story from opposing teams.

I didn’t even think about it. We went up to North Georgia. They told me before that game, “Some players may say something.” I thought they were going to be out there yelling. I will tell you what happened. By halftime I was walking off the field. One came by me real close, “Hey nigger.” It was real faint. He didn’t want anybody to know that he said it. I said, “Who?” That was it.

Dealing with occasional racist opponents did not stop Copeland from becoming a star player for Valdosta football and soon he had a new nickname: “Lightning.” Copeland stated, “I think it was after that first or second game. Some of the students said, ‘Lightning, Lightning, he’s so fast.’” Copeland achieved things that seemed almost impossible for African Americans at that time. For example, his picture was on the front page of the Valdosta Daily Times after the game against the Willingham Rams. Copeland returned six punts for 152 yards and a touchdown. He remembered the reaction from being on the front page of the newspaper:

I remember I read that and I saw it. I took that paper home to my mother. I wanted her to see it more than anything else. I knew she was very proud and my father, too. After that picture, my father, who was a taxi driver, came home and he said, “I was out there and the little boys were playing football in the street and they were saying, “I’m John
Copeland! I’m John Copeland! I’m John Copeland! Let me grab the ball! Everywhere I go, I be seeing little boys playing ball.” I said, “Wow, that’s a big deal!”

Not only had the kids respected what Copeland was achieving on the field. He was shocked by how impressed with him certain segments of the population were.

I remember I went to one [White] doctor. I had hurt my shoulder. I dislocated it after the season. The doctor said, “Copeland, how do you play with those White boys?” He thought it was a big deal. Hey, football is football. You block, you tackle, you run, and you kick. That’s me. He thought it was a big deal. I will never forget it. This guy was a doctor and he thought it was a big deal.

Copeland played only one season, his senior year. One of the highlights of his short Valdosta football career—and the game that some would say made him a legend—was the state championship game versus Marietta.

I will never forget that. They won’t let me forget that. People to this day will come up to me and say, “Man, I remember when you ran those 75 yards.” I say, “That was no big deal.” They say, “Oh yeah, IT WAS A BIG DEAL.”

I remember we were tied up or we were down, but I knew something had to happen. I got the opportunity to return punt. I got the ball. I looked up. I had a couple of guys in front of me, so I just dilly dally. Coach Bazemore would say, “Don’t be dilly dallying.” I dilly dallied and [then] just took off. I turned the burners on! Nobody could catch me. I don’t care who you were. That was a good feeling. Some [White] guy came out of the stands and grabbed me [in celebration].

According to Copeland, this moment was captured in a picture and given a whole page in the Sandspur 1967 (VHS, 1967), titled “Lightning Illuminates Title Game” (Figure 2). Copeland
John Copeland, nicknamed Lightning by fans and teammates, broke a 74-yard punt return to start the Valdosta Wildcats on the way to a 14-3 victory over Marietta’s Blue Devils and the State AAA Championship.

When the final gun sounded, the Wildcats had woven a finishing thread of victory into the intricate design of a championship season.

Of course the AAA title is won or lost in the last game, but before a team can take part in this decisive contest, it must work its way through the chaotic maze of the regular season.

Figure 2. Newspaper account of John Copeland’s punt return for a touchdown.
had a fantastic season for Valdosta; his only disappointment was that he was not recognized with any awards at the annual end-of-season football banquet sponsored by the Touchdown Club. But Copeland had the last laugh:

I got inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1985. I think Coach Bazemore had a lot of influence on that. I think they were trying to make up for what happened in high school. I got absolutely nothing. No formal recognition through the trophy part of it. But the Hall of Fame made up for it.

John Copeland would not consider himself a hero. When he looks back at his past, he simply sees a boy who loved football and wanted to play. But the bravery and courage in his story is impossible to deny.

Aaron Holder: The Defiant One

Aaron Holder grew up in a part of Valdosta called “Kill Me Quick.” The name alludes to the violent nature of some of the residents. However, the community was also full of working-class, blue-collar Black people striving for a better life. Holder stated, “It was a bad neighborhood, but yet it was a neighborhood that was filled with a lot of things that made people go on and become successful in life.” At an early age, Holder was exposed to the brutality and dangers of segregation. Strangely enough, even though he was exposed to the brutality of segregation of the 1960s, Holder was raised to have no fear. He told a story that shaped his perspective of racism forever. He recalled of his mother,

When I was in the third grade, I saw her put a shotgun in a White guy’s face with a finger on the trigger. That was back then when they were killing Blacks. A lot of my thing I got from my mom like that. It was about us . . . . What the [White] guy had done, he slapped me with a package of meat. I went outside, grabbed a limb I couldn’t even carry. I went
back inside the store. My brother pushed me back outside [of the store]. I went and told my mom, she came down there with a shotgun, brother. My mom told this White guy, and I saw, that’s when I become very aware of the color spectrum because he went through it, brother. I saw all kind of colors come from this White guy because she had that shotgun right in his face, with her fingers on the trigger. She told him, my mom at times didn’t talk really pleasant, you know? She told him she’d better not ever hear of him hitting another Black child until he had one. The owner of the store and all of them was pleading with my mom, and when she finished and left, he left. It was a delayed fright. About three or four months later, the owner of the store contacted her and asked her would it be okay for the White guy to come back.

No matter how bleak it seemed at times, Holder clung to one source of joy: playing football. When he was in the ninth grade (1966), he went to Pinevale High School (the Black segregated school). He went out for football in the spring of his ninth-grade year, and he believed that he officially made the team. The “Will Be’s” and “Has Been” game showcased the players of the future playing against current starters. It was game eighth and ninth graders playing against upper classmen (seniors and juniors). This game was a turning point for Holder. “The coach didn’t play me. I went into the locker room and I took that uniform off and I left it in the middle of the floor. That was my incentive to transfer to Valdosta High School.”

Like John Copeland a year earlier, Holder in 1967 used the Freedom of Choice policy to transfer to Valdosta High School for the opportunity to play football. Some classmates were interested in transferring as well; however, he said that they were motivated by other factors. “For many of my classmates, going to Valdosta High School was actually educational purpose
for them [sic], but for me I didn’t feel that at the time. In fact, they were probably more ready, mentally, for that type thing.”

Regardless of his motivations, Holder transferred to VHS at the beginning of his 10th-grade year in 1967. The summer before he transferred, he was part of a summer job program directed by Coach Bazemore. Holder was invited to summer football camp, where he excelled. Coach Bazemore tried him at various positions, at first promising to make him an all-star running back. However, fate had other plans.

[Coach Bazemore] probably put me in just about every position on the team, trying to see, which I thought was a good thing. Finally, I ended up not really playing offense, but playing defense. I guess he could see the need that I needed to hit something. I was kind of an angry kid in a way, like many a young kids grow up today that come up in impoverished situations.

Unfortunately, Holder could not contain his anger just to the field, which led to several incidents with White teammates and classmates. The situation was exacerbated by the difficult transition from all-Black Pinevale High School to predominantly White VHS. One year after transferring from Pinevale, the school was closed temporarily until the school board decided to use it as a middle school. Tensions between White teammates and White classmates intensified even more during full desegregation. For Holder, minor confrontations were turning into brawls. He recalled an example:

It was only five or six of us [Black players], and as we loaded the bus, the White guys all of them, most of them sat side by side. There was a need to, for some of them to spread their legs out to keep a brother from sitting by them. I recall grabbing one guy’s legs, and I moved his legs. He [White teammate] made a motion like he wanted to fight him, and
before I knew it we was into it, and I had him down. This guy weighed two hundred and something pounds. I remember this little White guy. His name was Benjamin but he told the guy that he didn’t have no balls, because I got the best of him.

Another confrontation with some White classmates had a long-lasting effect on Holder. He and other African American students came to school on Senior Day to discover a shocking display of racism.

When Senior Day came and you come to school, you saw “nigger” all over the various areas. They give seniors a little privilege. Guys would ride around with the Confederate flag. Of course, it was always distasteful to me, and I always wanted to do something about it. I remember the guys would ride around with the Confederate flag, and some of the brothers said—I didn’t say it, but some others said, “They got that flag, man. We ought to stop it.” I always seize the opportunity to be in the vanguard. So I walked out, headed for the car, but when I looked back, I noticed everybody had stopped. I went out there by myself and I stopped those guys. I took the flag. One guy, I threw it on the ground and he reached down to get it and I told him if he touched that flag, it was going to be all teeth. He believed me. Later on, I could see many brothers with a piece of the flag around their arm and everything. However, I didn’t see no help out there really.

Some of his confrontations were not just with others students but also with school administrators. Holder had several confrontations regarding his wanting to express his Black identity. To place this in the larger context, he was going to school in the heart of the Black Power Movement. Many African Americans were searching for their identity through rediscovering African cultures by reading African American authors, listening to a new era of soul music, dressing Afrocentric, and of course growing an Afro. This was the height of the
student movement, and Whites too were rebelling against the war and adopting the hippie lifestyle with long hair and colorful clothes (Graham, 2006). In response to this behavior, many predominantly White schools strengthened their dress codes in an attempt to maintain status quo. Holder was a victim of this institutionalized uniformity. He was told by school officials that his “I’m Black and I’m proud” medallions were not permitted on school property. He quickly learned the penalty for violating dress code. “I wore a dashiki, they pulled me out of class all day and put me with a counselor. I had to hang with the counselor all day because I had a dashiki on.”

African American students at VHS were struggling to establish their cultural identity while simultaneously having to deal with school rules and polices meant to stifle expression. Other African American students were having confrontations with school administrators, as well. One of the main points of conflict was the selection of the White homecoming queen, as discussed previously. The African American students contended that the selection should be based solely on popular vote, since African American students voted as a unified group for one African American student. Their candidate overwhelmingly won the election; however, White students contended that block voting was illegal and that the highest White vote recipient should be the winner. As a result of school officials selecting a White homecoming queen and other factors and playing “Dixie” at every game, many African American students decided to walk out of VHS. Holder was one who walked out, which put him at odds with Coach Bazemore.

Bazemore was a coach. I understand he was a prejudiced coach. He was a good coach. Like I say, my senior year, we didn’t speak hardly, but he played me. When the walk out [happened], I remember him making a speech and he said when he heard we should
overcome, it made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. That in itself tell you the
thoughts that was in his mind.

Holder stated that the decision to go to VHS was a difficult one but one that he did not
regret. He had the admiration of the Black and White communities for being such a great athlete
and had camaraderie with his teammates. It does seem that time heals all wounds.

**Robert Savage: The Loyal Teammate**

In 1968, Robert Savage was enjoying his high school experience at Pinevale. He was
active with the football team and was the starting fullback. He had no plans to leave the school
by using Freedom of Choice to transfer to VHS. However, fate had other plans for him. In
Savage’s case, fate came in the form of a White man named Bazemore.

When we first met Bazemore, he knew there was going to be integration. He had been
coming to Pinevale. He must have known there was going to be an integration. Yeah, he
saw it coming because he used to come out there on Friday nights and watch the game
and watch everybody. “Who was that man in there?” Yeah, there weren’t too many White
guys out there. And [he] went on back. But he came, Little Jr. [a Black coach) got all us
together right before we integrated and said the coach wanted to talk to all of us,
everybody who was playing football. Coach Bazemore got all of us together. You could
see the little smile on his face. “Look at all these horses here.” He knew he had horses.
Plus, he knew he had those White boys, and man, they could block! Nosebleed blockers

Savage was excited about the opportunity to play for such a legendary coach as
Bazemore. However, it was very much a bittersweet moment. He was very much connected to
the staff of Pinevale. Although some teachers, administrators, and coaches would make the
transition to VHS once desegregation was fully implemented, it would be a small number
compared to those who remained at Pinevale. In addition, many were demoted as part of the transfer.

I will never forget the first time that we got in there [VHS]. We was kind of hurt because of the teacher situation. We lost a lot of good Black teachers. Now, they said there was no bigotry in there, but a lot of Black teachers didn’t get a job out there. That is one thing that we were really upset about because we really knew our teachers. The teachers that we thought were coming did not get a job. We got the White teachers, and we had to make do. You’re out there to learn, not to complain. That was something, we lost a lot of good teachers.

Savage felt surprised that he had a good transition into VHS and was able to adapt well into an unfamiliar predominantly White environment. He built good relationships with his White coaches and White teammates. “Tom Holt [was the] greatest linebacker I have ever seen. White guy. Yea, helped us out. Pointed out. We was after his position, you know, but he still helped us out.” Savage was very respectful of the coaches, particularly Coach Bazemore, whom he described as “a father figure, man. A coach. You name it. That guy didn’t have bigotry in his body, man. You go to that guy man and talk to him and get everything you want.” Even with good relationships with his coaches and teammates, one event still gives him problems to this day. He did not participate in the African American-led walkout of VHS.

Guys still mess with me about that even to this day. Some of the athletes walked out. Roger didn’t walk out. I didn’t walk out. The running back, Charles, and Willie Jones didn’t walk out, but the rest of them did walk out. It was a strain on the team, but we won that night. When them guys came back a couple days later, they were so far on the bench it was pathetic. They were good football players, but Bazemore had to make a point, too.
He punished them all. He felt like they should have discussed it. But they felt like . . . .

And I don’t blame them, they did the right thing. They did the right thing.

While Savage did not regret that he did not participate in the walkout, he was quite sympathetic toward the students and their fight. However, if he had walked, he would have disappointed his coaches and teammates, and that was something he did not want to do. He had a tremendous sense of loyalty to his teammates and his coaches. He commented that football had instilled valuable life lessons that made him the man he is today and is the very reason he is still coaching today. Even after all these years, people still bring up his lack of participation in the walkout. Nevertheless, his participation on the football team gave him many supporters.

I wonder about that [whether people treated him differently because he was on the football team] sometimes, too. I had this yard I did since I was 6 years old. I used to go every Saturday and rake yards over there at Jerry Jones’s [White man]. When I was in high school playing for Bazemore, boy, did them people use to come up to and talk to me about a game last night and Christmas time they be given me gifts. I always wondered was it because I was an athlete, and I guess that’s what it was. But in the Black community, we was superheroes. They used to say we made Valdosta High. They talked about that now. You talk to an old timer, they tell you in a minute that boy there and his brothers made Valdosta High.

When Savage talks about his high school days at VHS, he does not focus on the difficulty of desegregation or on the walkout. He likes to remember winning championships and being inspired by a legendary coach. Even in retirement, he volunteers at the high school as a coach, hoping to inspire young men in the same way that he was inspired by his coaches at VHS and at Pinevale.
In 1968, the closing of Pinevale High School had a significant impact on Melvin Herron’s life. The transfer to VHS promised to be a difficult transition. At Pinevale, Herron was playing center on the football team, even weighing only about 185 pounds. He felt that he was a perfect fit for the Pinevale team, since both he and the quarterback were left handed. However, VHS was known for having big players on the offensive line.

Most of us guys who came over from Pinevale didn’t get to play. We were smaller guys like myself, weighing 185 pounds at most. . . . They didn’t have no guy on their whole line under 200 . . . pounds [except one]. That White guy that was already there. Everybody else was 200 and above. Me weighing 185 pounds, I wasn’t going to see the daylight, but finally I got to play my senior year quite a bit because [the] left guard spot was always [played by] a smaller guy that can open the field. I got to do that, because I played a good open field game. Most players couldn’t make open field blocks and get down field and stuff. Because [of] my athleticism and being a smaller guy, [I] could get out and do things that the big guys couldn’t.

Herron’s problems extended beyond adjusting to the football team. He also had to face a hostile racial climate of the high school. He was used to a sense of community. In Pinevale, his elementary school, middle school, and high school were mere blocks from his house. He could talk to neighbors in the community while he walked to school. He described his experience at Valdosta High School:

At first, it was quite tense. People had to get used to each other, Blacks and Whites and new faces and new ways of doing things. I’m sure they [White students] felt the same way as the Black students felt, where we was tense for a while. Within the first month or
two of being there we had a student walkout, all the Black students, we left class, because we didn’t think we were being fairly represented in different activities, class, band, and so forth, and there was a lot of rebel flags always being exposed, and we had problems with that. So the first few months there was a lot of tension and some problems.

Deciding to participate in the walkout may have been one of the most difficult decisions these students had to make during their high school years. The administration had been quite clear that any students who participated would be suspended. For the Black football players, the difficulty of this decision was exacerbated by the strict nature of their head coach. Regardless, Herron participated in the walkout. When asked why he did it, knowing the consequences of participating, he responded,

To let the coaches and school and everybody involved with the school and team know that we weren’t satisfied with our situation. . . . Some of us felt like we was being demoted or placed as second when we should have been started, we were placed second team, and elsewhere. So we just felt that we weren’t getting a fair shake.

Herron dealt with consequences of the walkout, being suspended from school and being subjected to the wrath of his football coaches. However, he was not a starting player that year and therefore was not jeopardizing his position. Still, he feared that the coaches would cut all Black players who had participated in the walkout. The coaches did not do so, but they did punish those players in various ways. In time, Herron rebuilt a positive relationship with his coaches.

The coaches helped me get my first job. I walked in with my championship jacket on, and I was hired. Which I know I wouldn’t have been hired if I wasn’t a Wildcat, definitely
wouldn’t have been hired. It worked for us in the community, like I said. People—“Oh, you a Wildcat,”—first thing they say to you. They recognized that, and you was accepted.

Herron spoke of several incidents when he felt love and appreciation from both the Black and White communities for the team’s success on the field. He implied that winning was the glue that kept the community together. One could certainly question whether the community would have responded favorably to Black athletes had they not been a winning team or had the Black athletes not performed well on the field. John Copeland jokingly stated, “I wasn’t thinking about, ‘Oh, if I drop a pass, the White people are going to faint!’” Regardless, Herron expressed the unifying factor that football was to Valdosta.

Valdosta is a football [town] and always a football town, [whether] it was Black or White; but it was almost religious. White folk in this town love winning. After we start winning and blowing people out the way we did, we was sorta idolized, if being you Black or White [and] by Black and White folk, but White folk in particular, man, they accepted us, I think, because we were football player[s], and we were doing so well on the field.

It was quite obvious what football meant to the community, but it would take Herron years to realize what football meant to him. When asked what impact football had had on him, he recounted lessons learned from his coaches.

Football always taught us discipline, to stick with things that you go out for, and stay with them, and work hard at them, and preparing yourself; preparation and discipline. That’s always the plight, the plight for me in life, and that’s what football actually did. It set you up to succeed in terms of discipline and preparation for life.
In retrospect, the initial negative impact of desegregation and the closing of Pinevale High School on Herron’s life ultimately became significantly uplifting, resulting not just in championship jackets and community admiration but also in valuable life lessons.

**Herman Godfrey: The Lost Teammate**

Herman Godfrey, Sr., had initially been excited about his upcoming junior year at Pinevale High School. He was on the football team and playing linebacker, his favorite position. However, it seemed that fate had other plans. “We was in the playoff the year before, 1969, when we integrated. We was looking forward to having a championship team at Pinevale but we all had to go to Valdosta High School.” Leaving Pinevale was psychologically difficult for him, as he was parting from such a nurturing environment. Also, it was physically difficult. While Pinevale was located in the heart of the Black community and was easily accessible for African American students, VHS was on the other side of town. There was no busing of students during the first few years of desegregation. Therefore, Godfrey walked five miles each way.

Beyond the drawbacks, Godfrey noted one major benefit of going to VHS, which was the opportunity to join the football team and meet the legendary Coach Bazemore. He knew Coach Bazemore as a great winning coach but later came to know more about the man.

I think that, overall, Coach Bazemore, he was a good head coach, he had a lot of respect from the Whites and Blacks. He dealt with a lot of issues. In that deep down, one of the things that Bazemore did was, he played the best man at the best position.

Godfrey made the football team. However, he was unable to reach all of his goals on the field.

I started off at Pinevale, played middle linebacker. When we transferred to Valdosta High School, we was competing, I was competing for middle linebacker, me and another guy
named Robert Daniel, Black guy. He won the position, but I was good enough that Coach Bazemore had me on all the special teams, the receiving team. I was on all of the specialty teams throughout my career.

When asked about another facet of his football experience with his White teammates, Godfrey stated, “Basically, on the field we were all Wildcats. We were all brothers. Off the field it was different. They had their side of town and we had our side of town.” However, his main complaint regarding his White teammates arose on Senior Day, when most of the students were out looking for a good time. He saw his team captain, Steve Ericson, a White teammate, and some other White students headed to Twin Lakes, a beautiful recreational property surrounded by lakes. The majority of the property is privately owned by groups such as golf and yacht clubs.

A car full of White guys, they went into Twin Lakes. We were right behind them. State patrol was there. He stopped us. Told us this was private property. We couldn’t come in. Now, we were Wildcats on the field. Then Steve Ericson turned around and waved at me, smiling.

It was difficult for him to name a White teammate who had advocated or openly supported his fellow Black players.

I can’t recall anyone. About the closest guy that I would think in terms was Vance Quilley because he was just crazy. Vance was a good guy. We still stay in contact with each other today. He just, something, he’d say, “That ain’t right.” You know, coming from a White person among his White peers, he was brave enough to step up and say, “Man, that’s not right,” but that’s all he would say. As far as anybody taking up, he was the closest to that. Vance Quilley.
Godfrey’s main struggle was not on the field but at the school. He recalled tension and anger culminating in the African American students’ protest walkout. When the African American students decide to walk out of school, Godfrey was one of the few athletes to participate. He recalled the school response: “Tell you what we are going to do. We’re going to have a Black Miss Valdosta High, and we’re going to have a White Miss Valdosta High every year.”

For Godfrey, incidents such as the homecoming queen and Twin Lake situation still leave an indelible negative impression on his high school experience. However, he maintained that the success of the team, led by great performances by many of the African American athletes, helped to bring the school and the community closer together through the turbulent transition of desegregation.

**John Bell: The Quarterback Dreamer**

John Bell always dreamed of playing quarterback. He believed that the upcoming 1969 football season for Pinevale High school would be his opportunity to finally play quarterback. Unfortunately for Bell, desegregation of all city schools in Valdosta meant that Pinevale High School would be closed that year. Bell remembered his initial thoughts about desegregation.

We left our comfort zone and that was scary territory. From leaving Pinevale High School to go to Valdosta High School, I’m thinking, forced me as an individual. And I thought to myself, I want to go to Valdosta High School. I didn’t want to embarrass my parents. I wanted to make them proud of me, and I didn’t want to flunk over there.

Also, Bell described the emotional loss of leaving Pinevale and its all-African American staff. He had felt an emotional connection to school that he knew he would never have at Valdosta.
It’s like losing [something] not being at home. I can’t put it no better than that. I’m leaving home. I’m in uncharted territories and stuff like that. I lost teachers that I knew that really was trying to help me and had my back that didn’t go to over to high school with me. Some of them had to go other places to find jobs and everything. In my heart I knew that they were good teachers and stuff, but they didn’t come along with the package.

Bell’s changing schools did not mean the end of his high school playing days. Not only did VHS have a football team; it was one of the best in the state, with legendary head coach Bazemore. Bell had two problems with playing at VHS. The first problem he shared with other African American athletes. “We’re not going to play football over there unless you bring some of our coaches over there, and they did.” As a united front, the African American athletes refused to play without some African American coaches. The school quickly conceded to this demand, and three African American coaches were added to the team. However, they did not serve significant roles in the coaching leadership.

The second problem that Bell had with the VHS football team was that he felt that he did not get a fair opportunity to play quarterback because of his race.

I always wanted to be a quarterback. I could throw a ball 75 yards on a rope. When we integrated over at Valdosta High School, I knew that I wouldn’t have a shot [being a quarterback]; that’s what burnt my heart. I wanted to be that [quarterback]. They moved me to running back because I had good speed and everything like that. But then you had Charles Daniels [Black player], I had a couple of them in front of me, Willie Jones [Black player]. I couldn’t get the playing time because I sit over there on the bench as a running back. I was a talented athlete, so my senior year, Bazemore come to me and said, “Good
athletes don’t sit on the bench, we going to move you over to corner because you got speed and everything.” That’s what I ended up, my senior year I played cornerback. There was no way they was going to have a Black quarterback. Not in that time.

Even though cornerback was not his first choice, Bell excelled at the position in his senior year. “Nobody never caught a touchdown pass on me my whole senior year. Because I have a knack for the ball.” Bell’s major conflict would not come on the football field but with the school itself. He was one of the football players who participated in the walkout. He considered this a matter of principle. However, for other African American athletes on the team, participating in walkout was no easy decision.

Some walked out, some stayed. Some of them said, “You know what, we’re going to stay they regardless of whatever, whatever.” I think they had their scholarships on the line, and they were starters on the team and stuff like that, whatever went into that decision. That was them. Me, as a man, I said, “We’ve done wrong, man. It’s time to for us to do something.” We had to make a stand, and, indeed, we made a stand.

The walkout was resolved by selecting two homecoming queens (White and Black).

Recalling his high school football days, Bell maintained that participating on the championship team relieved the tension of desegregation for the community.

I think it [football team success] helped a lot with the tension between the Black and the White race. Because when you played football for Valdosta High School, you were kind of considered a star. You were somebody. Folks would walk up and hug you regardless what color you was. Black kids, White kids, Black girls, White girls, they get put money in your hand, they get up and hug you because it was all about winning. Like I said, it helped the community. It helped to get your name out for some of the guys that played
but they were able to earn a scholarship and go to school. It helped out economically. It helped out in a lot of ways. Socially, it helped out in a lot of ways because a lot of us hadn’t been used to being around White folks. We always among our community, that’s where we grew up, so it helped us learn about different cultures. There was some hatred, some misunderstanding on both sides but we grew from that.

Looking through the prism of time, it is difficult to imagine what Bell felt about not having the opportunity to become a quarterback. Discrimination and racism denied many African Americans the opportunity to pursue their dreams. However, Bell had to live with that feeling, just like many other African Americans. Instead of focusing on what he was denied, he chose to focus on his contribution to the community and to the team.

**Charles Daniels: The Tough Guy**

Charles Daniels remembered being called to a meeting with the other students at Pinevale High School and seeing the superintendent. He immediately knew that this meeting was a serious matter. Charles and his classmates were informed that Pinevale would close in fall 1969, the next year, and that all students would then attend VHS. This was especially disappointing for Jones.

“I just liked Pinevale. When we was coming up, all I wanted to do was play at Pinevale. Like all the great players, Hampton, Duke. I wanted to be like them.” In that year before desegregation, Pinevale High School had its annual football banquet. It was at this banquet that Daniels met someone who forever changed his life. When Daniels met Coach Bazemore, the coach’s first words to him were, “You better be as tough as they say you are.” Then Bazemore told him that he knew all about him and that he was going to be his starting left halfback. So, although Daniels deeply missed Pinevale football, there were certainly positives about playing for Valdosta.
Mostly uniforms, mostly shoes, practice shoes, game shoes. We didn’t have that at Pinevale. Shoes you practiced at Pinevale, you played in on game night. You had to polish it and clean it up. Valdosta, you didn’t have that. You had a practice shoe and a game shoe. You’ve got new socks every day, jock straps every week for a game. We didn’t have any of that at the Black school.

African American players coming from Pinevale wanted more than just better equipment. Daniels recalled the fight for Black representation on the coaching staff. “Coach Daniels [the Black head coach at Pinevale], he was on the coaching staff. We wanted a Black coach, and Coach Bazemore hired him.” Charles Daniels felt that coach Bazemore did many things to help the African American students’ transition to the school and the team, particularly shielding the African American players from community backlash.

We was at practice one day and this guy came out there and he had a son on the team. His son was a backup and the Friday night before, at the game, Coach Bazemore put another guy in, a Black guy, in front of him. He was the only one backup, he put another guy in. This guy came out there. He was raising Sam, cussing and talking about what he was going to do. Coach Bazemore told him, “You get your son and y’all get off my practice field.” He was a no-nonsense type guy. That’s all. The player, he’s begging his daddy to leave, but Bazemore let him stay on the team because he told him, “You don’t come out here telling me nothing. This my team.” This guy raising Sam because his son wasn’t put in the game the Friday before, but he bucked the wrong little, short man.

Coach Bazemore set a strong tone for how the team was going to be run. This firm hand gave direction and helped to overcome racial strife within the team.
Coach Bazemore just didn’t have no crap going in. If you going play with the cats. That’s for the Black players and the White players. You had to do what you were supposed to. Show up on game day. Play. He wasn’t going to have none of that stuff on his team. Now, for the students, like I said, sometimes students had problems. They had fights and stuff, but that’s just people. For the team, we didn’t have no problems because if you did, you wouldn’t be on that team.

According to Daniels, Coach Bazemore provided opportunities for many African American players that seemed impossible at the very beginning of desegregation. Daniels recalled that Coach Bazemore rewarded hard work, regardless of race.

I tell you, I was the captain. It was my senior year. I was the first Black captain. We had about 110 players on the team so there had to be around 90 White. Some of them voting in captain because Bazemore come in and stopped the proceeding. So I was the captain. If I’d gone with their vote, I wouldn’t be no captain.

Not only Coach Bazemore helped Charles Daniels. In some ways, Coach Wilson [White coach] was Daniels’s greatest benefactor.

Coach Wilson, my backfield coach, he kind of took care of me. If I needed a new pair of jeans, he got me a pair, I need a new pair of shoes, he was my basketball coach, he got me a pair of tennises [tennis shoes]. They looked out for a player.

Coach Bazemore reminded his players at the beginning of every game of the benefits of playing for him. “Bazemore had a little saying before game. He’d say, ‘You the best-dressed, best-fed team in the state, and you going play like it.’ He was right.” When asked what Coach Bazemore meant by best fed, Daniels replied, “No, you didn’t get extra food at the cafeteria. We
could go to different restaurants in town, and they had a roster of the team. You tell your name, they give you food for free.”

However, there was a price to pay for Daniels, as his loyalty was tested when the student walkout was planned. He was torn between his obligations to the team and his obligations to the African American community.

I tried [to walk out]. Me, Roger, and Herman Godfrey and Josh Mabel, all of us, we got in the car and we all walked out when everybody left. By the time I got home, Coach Bazemore and Coach Jones was at my mama house and told Mama what was going down. Mama had me get in the car with them and go back to school. Well, it was about six of us that went back. The rest of them walked out. We played [football] that Friday night.

If Daniels had walked out, he would have been suspended for three days and become ineligible to play. Valdosta was playing the #2 team in the state, and both teams were undefeated. Those six African American players were essential to the success of the team in that game and for the rest of the year.

Daniels and the other players did receive pushback from the other African American students. “They called us ‘Uncle Toms,’ but I didn’t really care because my mama said ‘Go back.’ I had to go.” However, Daniels had no regrets. That team won a national championship that year and helped to bridge the gap in community relations. Daniels described how the community acted during that winning season: “I’m on the field all the time, but they seemed to get along. Whites be hugging Blacks, Blacks be hugging Whites.”
Robert Daniels: “Little Daniels”

Robert Daniels, like his older brother Charles Daniels, dreamed of one day playing for Pinevale High School and bringing a championship to the African American community.

I always wanted to play for Pinevale, that was my dream. Because I seen the camaraderie among the players and it was a community type thing. I felt like when we left and went to Valdosta High because they closed Pinevale. I felt like I lost quite a bit. I wanted to play with the guys in the community. I felt like I lost that sense of community.

Though Robert Daniels never played for Pinevale, he did play football for the segregated middle school, Lomax. As at Pinevale, resources were scarce, particularly for extracurricular activities such as football. Before desegregation was implemented, Daniels was attending Lomax. Once desegregation was implemented, he attended Valdosta Junior High School. He was initially shocked at the discrepancy between resources provided by the segregated schools and the integrated schools.

My experiences before desegregation was Lomax. I remember not having a uniforms that we could depend on, even in practice. If we didn’t hide our uniforms or take them home, we got back, and they wasn’t there. They wasn’t there, so once we did get to Valdosta Middle School, we didn’t have to worry about that. We didn’t have that problem. We had lockers to put our stuff in and, overall, it was a good experience for me.

The discrepancy between schools was not just in the football equipment. “When I look back at Lomax, it seemed as we had better resources at the integrated schools. Our books, you didn’t start in Chapter Twelve. You had Chapter 1 from the start. You had complete books.” The true testimony for Daniels regarding the disparity between schools happened during the summer after Pinevale was closed.
Let me lay this on you. When they integrated, we went to work with NYC program [summer youth work program] because Bazemore got us [Robert and Charles] and some of other Black guys from the team [Pinevale former players]. All the books at Pinevale, we loaded up on dump trucks and took them to the dump. The books we were using, we loaded them all up. [Once desegregation happened, books and other material that were good enough for Black student were unacceptable for White students to use]. We made seven trips to the dump, threw them away.

Daniels accepted that he would never play for Pinevale. However, he was not sure that he would have an opportunity to play for VHS. The VHS football team was the pride of the town. It also was recognized statewide and nationally for championships. It was headed by what many would easily consider a legendary coach, even at that point in his career. Coach Bazemore was one of the winningest coaches in the state. In the first year of desegregation, Robert Daniels’s older brother, Charles Daniels, made the VHS football team. Still, Robert was not sure that he would ever make the team. However, he assumed that he would know the answer to that question for a few years. Surprisingly, he found the answer to that question much sooner than he expected. He explained the circumstances that led to finding out whether he was cut out to be Valdosta Wildcat.

My first experience was in the ninth grade, Has Been’s and Will Be’s game we called it. That’s the seniors, the ones that are leaving, playing against the ones who are staying. Actually started in ninth grade, no, the eighth grade. [Coach Bazemore] got us out of the eighth grade to come play on the varsity team. Eighth grade was ending, and the year was ended. But once we did that, I had a pretty good experience because we was on the team with him [his brother, Charles Jones] and Roger Rome. We [Robert Daniels and Stan
Rome] both started in the Has Been’s and Will Be’s game as eighth graders, and Stan [Rome] caught the game-winning touchdown pass.

Because of their stellar performances in that game, Coach Bazemore made Robert Daniels and Stan Rome both freshmen starters for the varsity team. Daniels described his evolution on the team.

The ninth grade we had to be transported over [coaches had to drive them to the high school practice] there after school from Pinevale. [A year after desegregation, Pinevale would be renovated and turned into a middle school]. Stan Rome and I, and a few more players. But they didn’t start. Stan and I was starters. We went down to camp during that summer, which was my ninth-grade year, and I got moved to linebacker because the starting linebacker, which was a pre-season all-American, he got hurt, and when he got where he could play, he couldn’t get his position back, so they kind of left me in there and they moved him to another position to strengthen the defense. I started in linebacker and I played on the offense goal line, defense goal line, and so did Charles [his brother]. Also, after that, and the year that we went all the way [won a national championship in an undefeated season] in ‘71 my starting position was left halfback, and I still alternated on defense whenever we need to go in on defense goal line defense and offense goal line.

In 1971, Robert Daniels arrived on the campus of VHS as a student. It had been two years since desegregation, and many of the issues that his older brother had faced were no longer the same challenges. However, there were still racial issues to contend with, and many of African American athletes were still challenging the status quo regarding racial politics of the football team.
What we did after Charles and them left, we had quite a few Black players come and play on the team, and when we got ready to vote captains, that was my sophomore year, we block voted. All the Blacks got together and decided who we wanted to be captains and that’s who we voted for. We voted in six Black captains. I mean, I’m sorry, three Black captains, we couldn’t have six then. After that was over, Bazemore called us in for a meeting and all the Black leaders he felt, mainly Black starters. He explained the situation with the Touchdown Club and we couldn’t have three Black captains. He was kind of cautious in choosing his words, he chose his words very wisely. We could understand, he laid it out in a way that where we could understand what he was saying. I believe that I made a suggestion, but I may be wrong, it’s been a long time. But we said, “Coach, what about just taking the next three White guys that would’ve been in line and make them captain?” Coach was like, “Well,” that was it, we had six captains. I ended up being one of the three Black captains that year, which was my junior year, and that was very significant to me.

Regardless of this situation, Daniels experienced the cultural shifting at VHS. When he ran for Student Government Association secretary, there was another African American running in the race and the Black vote was divided. It seemed that he was not going to win the position. However, he won the office overwhelmingly because the majority of White students voted for him.

Not only was he recognized by classmates for his hard work and tireless effort; Coach Bazemore often recognized it, too, in practice.
One of the things Coach Bazemore used to say in practice all the time, “There shouldn’t be but one person tired on this field, and that’s Little Daniels.” That’s what he called me because I was doing defense and offense.

Beyond words of encouragement, Daniels gained from his football experience a broader sense of community, which encompassed not just the Black community but the whole community, both White and Black.

I think it was the feeling of togetherness because if the official made a call against Valdosta High and they didn’t feel like it was right and I don’t care whether that player was White or Black, you had both communities getting on the officials.

Initially, Robert Daniels had felt that not going to Pinevale would have a negative effect on his life. However, in retrospect, he maintained that going to VHS had had a positive effect on him and the community. “As far as I’m concerned, I think it made things better for us. Because the facilities were better. We had better books. I just think it really taught us how to get along with the opposite race.”

**Roger and Stanford Rome: The Unstoppable Duo**

The Rome brothers, Roger and Stanford, were both stellar athletes who led VHS to championships in football and basketball. Their fame continued after graduation. Roger Rome had an accident in his freshman year in college that ended his athletic career, but he has the distinction of becoming the first African American head basketball coach at VHS, an accomplishment that he credits to support from Coach Bazemore. Stanford Rome continued to find athletic success playing football and basketball for Clemson University. Later, he was drafted in the fourth round by the Cleveland Cavaliers (basketball) and in the 11th round by the Kansas City Chiefs (football). Unfortunately, drug addiction kept him from reaching his fullest
potential in either sport. The addiction also led to a shooting incident that nearly took his life. After recovering, he refocused his life in Valdosta (Jubera, 2012).

The brothers are prominently featured in Drew Jubera’s Must Win: A Season of Survival for a Town and Its Team. To understand the Rome brothers, one must first understand where they came from. Roger described his early life:

We were blessed with a great mom. But our dad wasn’t there. From a social, economic standpoint, we grew up on a street called Branch Street, today Martin Luther King Drive . . . considered to be the heart of the ghetto. I never thought of myself as living in the ghetto when I was growing up. My focus was, what was I going to do to make my life better? That’s what I was concerned about. My mom was working hard. I was kind of considered to be the man, and tried to be a role model to [Stanford], and to do everything that I could to help my mom out. That was my focus.

Stanford (Stan) agreed:

This was an opportunity for us. Our mother worked sometimes two jobs, sometimes three jobs, to provide for us. But growing up, we didn’t know that we were poor, or we didn’t know that we were economically disadvantaged. We lived in what you would call a gun-barrel house. You could look in the front door and see out the back door. We never had a stable father figure in the home. But the three of us, we were happy. We didn’t know we were disadvantaged. Integration actually was a blessing in disguise for us. It provided opportunities and opened doors for us that may not ever would have happened had it not been for the integration. I looked up to my older brother, I followed in his footsteps. Whatever he did, I wanted to do it. I tried to do it, and tried to do it just as good as he did or better. He was my role model.
In describing their educational experiences prior to mandatory desegregation in 1969, Roger stated,

When I grew up, the school system here in Valdosta was segregated, so I started out at South Street Elementary, an all-Black elementary school. From there I went to Lomax Junior High School. My first two years of high school were at Pinevale High School. These were all segregated schools, and all Black. A freedom of choice. I could have easily left but because of my loyalty to people I grew up with, I stayed in the community. He [the Black coach] was bringing kids from the high school to play middle school ball. My sophomore year, they [Black coaches] were doing the same thing at Pinevale. My junior year, the end of my sophomore year, I went to New Jersey to stay with my uncle for the summer and made some money. I wouldn’t even come back to football camp. I stayed up there and made money. I told my mom, “I’m transferring to Valdosta High School because the head coach [at Pinevale] is not going to play me.” I was frustrated with it. I deserved to play. All these kids would come to school in the fall. Soon as the football season was over, they’d drop out of school. I’m talking about 21-, 22-year-old guys that I’m competing against in the high school level. I was angry. I was ready to transfer before they integrated the school system, . . . my junior year, I was going to Valdosta High School. I had a choice. I had already talked to my mom. They integrated the schools before it happened.

Stan Rome went to kindergarten at a Black church in Valdosta, then to South Street Elementary School in the Valdosta city school system. He attended Lomax Middle School for seventh grade, before being integrated into Valdosta Middle School for eighth grade.
The first time that Roger Rome met Coach Bazemore, he learned that Pinevale High School was closing:

Coach Bazemore, who was the head coach and the AD [athletic director], he had an opportunity to come down and meet all the Black football players that were coming over. I think he wanted to get to know as many of us as possible. I’m pretty sure he had talked to our head football coach at Pinevale High School, and he identified some of the people that he wanted to get to know, that might be a major part of his upcoming team that year. I was fortunate enough to be one of those guys. This was during the summer. He hired me to work for the school system. He was in charge of maintenance of the city school systems, like moving the desks, painting, cutting the grass, stuff like that. He hired about six of us to work.

Desegregation provided a host of opportunities for the Rome brothers, beginning with that summer job. Later on, it provided financial security for the whole family. Roger explained, The laundromat that she [the boys’ mother] worked at was owned by one of the biggest Wildcat boosters in the town. He did all the football uniforms before and after the games. She told me that, during the integration process, [the owner] had made the statement that he didn’t want any Black Wildcats at Valdosta High School. After we got there and became pretty good at what we were doing on the football team, he gave her a promotion at the cleaners to help her out. He became one of our biggest fans. . . . In fact, when she left [that job], he didn’t want her to go, but he recognized that it was a much better opportunity for her and . . . that it meant better insurance for the family, and better wages for her, and more opportunities for her and more opportunities for all of us.
It is interesting that the “better job” came from another Wildcat booster who, like her previous supervisor, admired her children’s contribution to the team. According to Roger Rome, better work for his mother was not the only benefit that he received for playing for Valdosta.

I felt welcomed basically from day one. Coach Wilson, . . . my basketball coach, our offensive coordinator, who worked with my mom, he came down to Branch Street, Martin Luther King Drive, and got me and took me downtown. The two best men’s stores [were] in downtown Valdosta. One was Olin H. Luke and the other one was Irving’s. I mean, they showed the high end shoes, suits, shirts, and everything. He took me into Irving’s and bought me some clothes. Well, . . . he didn’t buy them, but [he had] the owner [give] me a brand new pair of shoes, slacks, and a shirt. The shoes he gave me, I never wore them because they were wingtips and wingtips, to me, were like a typical White guy shoe. I never said to him, “I’m not going to wear these”; it was just the thought, you know.

Although other African American students may have had problems with the transition from segregated schools, Roger Rome considered that summer football camp resulted in a successful transition for him.

I was accepted from Day 1. One of the things that helped with that is that [the football team] went to camp two weeks before [school started]. We left town and went to Twin Lakes. We were down there for two weeks. We were bonding and learning—whether we liked each other or not—to respect each other. I am certain that the White kids went back to their communities and their friends who were regular students and made them aware that “we have some high-quality kids in this football program. We respect them, and if
you’re my friend, we want you to respect them.” I’m not saying we partied together or socialized together, but what I saw was respect.

Beyond football camp, Roger also recognized the contribution that Coach Bazemore made to the peaceful desegregation.

That’s why you didn’t see a lot of . . . violence. I attribute that to Wright Bazemore. He was a leader in this town. Okay? His knowledge of sports and people [was] unparalleled. He was like a Renaissance man. He was like an enlightenment thinker. He ran the town. Had the First Baptist Church and all this other stuff. If it wasn’t good for the football team, . . . he was strong enough to stand up against that on both sides. He was about treating people the way he wanted to be treated, and I think everybody followed his lead.

Stan Rome also reported that he had personally benefited from Coach Bazemore. He was like a father figure for me. When he talked to me I always listened . . . he said very few words, but it was all about the way he treated me like a son. He was just fair. He was fair, he was always motivating me. He challenged me. He built me up. He told me what kind of future I could have. He always encouraged me to do my best. He was instrumental in me achieving a lot of the things I achieved. I think that he was instrumental in giving me a stage or a platform to showcase the talent that I have in me. He also helped develop the talent and skills that I have. That I used.

Although Roger had a smooth transition on the football field and basketball court, he still had to prove himself academically.

I remember at Valdosta High School, they have what they call remedial, standard, and college prep. When I went in to talk to my—I’m talking about me; I don’t know what she did with every student—but when I went in to talk to my counselor in my junior year
about what I wanted to do, she said, “You need to be in remedial or intermediate.” I’m like, “Look, I’m going to college. I’m taking college prep classes.” I was strong enough to say to her, “Oh no, I’m going to college. Here are the classes I’m taking.” She knew I was serious about it. She made sure all my classes [were] college prep. I was just as comfortable in the classroom as I was on the football field.

Roger also had to make the decision whether to support the African American student walkout. Stan Rome was in junior high at that time and therefore was spared that decision. Although some African American athletes did walk out, Roger did not.

There [were about] five of us that didn’t walk out. We didn’t get together and decide that we wasn’t going to walk out. You got to understand that we had just gone through two weeks of football camp and worked our butts off. One of the kids was a senior, and he was probably the best athlete on the team that year and went on a top college, Iowa State; should have played some pro football. He didn’t walk out, along with Charles Daniels, myself, couple of other guys. I was thinking about what can I do to make my life better, and I had gone through all this, I knew I was good enough. I didn’t want to blow my chance. I wanted to stay there. I wanted to be a part of it, and I didn’t walk out. Not only that, I wanted to graduate college. Most of those guys didn’t graduate college. Of course, everybody that did walk out was basically calling us Uncle Toms and stuff like that.

Roger Rome had established considerably strong relationships within the community and school. In his senior year in high school, he was selected Vice President of the Student Government Association at VHS. He built connections that very few African American students could achieve. His connection to the community and his success as a student athlete in some ways sheltered him from the reality that other African American men faced. For example,
My senior year, we played the region championship. Now we won the region my junior and senior year. I was the leading scorer in basketball. All region, all state. The [White] girl who was the captain of the girls’ basketball team [was the daughter of] the president of the basketball boosters. For both boys and girls, she was a real good athlete. Okay. She was crazy about me. She wrote my paper my junior and my senior year for English. Well, my senior year, we [were] playing in the region championship. And we [won] the game. And I, I mean her dad was as close as you are to me. And we had been dating. And everybody knew it. She came down on the field, on the court. She grabbed me. And I mean she kissed me. Tongue-kissed me right in front of her dad. I didn’t know what to do. I was petrified, man. He was standing right there. All he did was look. He didn’t say a word.

Looking back on that extraordinary event, Roger said, “I know I was shielded. I mean I’ve been blessed, man. I’m telling you. Extremely.”

While Roger was experiencing the ups and downs of desegregating high school education, his younger brother Stan was facing similar battles in middle school. Stan knew that he wanted to play for VHS; however, he never imagined how soon he would be presented with the opportunity.

Bazemore came down to Valdosta Middle School and met with Robert Daniels and myself after we played a couple games in middle school and told me and Robert . . . by golly, he said, “You two boys are going to win me a state championship.” We thought, “He lost his mind!” He first told us that we were going to play as freshman the next year. That he was bringing us up during the spring after the season was over, that [we weren’t] going to go through spring practice with the rest of the eighth graders. To prepare for
ninth grade, he was moving us up to varsity. We played in the Has Been/Will Be game as eighth graders against the seniors that were going out for varsity during that spring of our eighth grade year. They [White coaches] used to send a truck down to the middle school every day during the spring to pick me and Robert up to take us to the high school. They sent a truck down there to get us because we started, and I was the first freshman to start in varsity high school football in Triple A in the state of Georgia.

In 1971, when Stan arrived as a high school student, he noticed changes at Valdosta since his brother had started attending. There “was more harmony,” he said. “They had worked through a lot more of the issues.” One example of the greater harmony could be seen in the interaction among the White and Black football players. Stan had more opportunities to socialize with his White teammates than his brother had had. For example, Stan explained that he was “tight” with a White player named Larry Hans, and that there were “all kind of White players” who advocated for him. He attributed this primarily to his personality: “I have an open, welcoming type personality. I’m more accepting and treat you like I want you to treat me until you do me wrong.” He also noted that he “came along a few years after” the initial desegregation, so the student body was already better acclimated. The harmony that Stan had with teammates helped him to lead his team to a national championship and a perfect season. Coincidently, VHS was named national champions over another integrated school, T. C. Williams High School of *Remember the Titans* fame.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Cross-comparison analysis of the nine interviews of the Black former athletes to determine common patterns, similarities, and differences, identified three emergent themes: (a) the positive role that sports played in helping to ease desegregation, (b) the limitations of the “we all came together on the football field” narrative, and (c) disrupting the singular narrative about the “Black athlete” experience. Each of these themes is discussed in detail in this chapter, which concludes with a view of the role of sports in the Civil Rights Movement and the possibilities of expansion for the future.

Theme 1: Sports Played a Positive Role in Helping to Ease Transition

The Benefit of Playing for Valdosta

As shown in Table 3, Valdosta Wildcats was a competitive team that was well known both in the state and in the country. Playing for such a competitive team afforded players, both Black and White, many opportunities that were personally beneficial to them. During school desegregation these benefits extended to Black players in ways that often set them apart from their Black peers. First and foremost, playing football for VHS afforded many Black athletes the opportunity to attend college on an athletic scholarship. John Copeland benefited from national recognition and championship exposure, which led him to receive several football scholarship offers from major universities. Black football athletes financially benefitted in other ways, as well. For example, they more easily found summer employment as Melvin Herron explained.
Table 3

Record of Championships by the Valdosta High School Wildcats (Football)

<table>
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<th>Level of championship</th>
<th>Years</th>
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Note: Years in bold indicate championships won by integrated teams. Source: Valdosta Wildcats, by Touchdown Club, 2017, retrieved from https://valdostafootball.teamsitesnow.com/45430/valdosta-high-school/boys-football

The coaches helped me get my first job. I walked in with my championship jacket on, and I was hired. Which I know I wouldn’t have been hired if I wasn’t a Wildcat, definitely wouldn’t have been hired. It worked for us in the community, like I said. People, “Oh, you a Wildcat,”—first thing they say to you. They recognized that, and you was accepted.

This economic benefit cannot be overstated, given that many of the athletes were from impoverished homes with little resources. Coaches took a special interest in their players to make sure that they had basic needs of food and clothing, as explained by Charles Daniels.

Coach Wilson, my backfield coach, and he kind of took care of me. If I needed a new pair of jeans, he got me a pair, I need a new pair of shoes, he was my basketball coach, he got me a pair of tennises [tennis shoes]. They looked out for a player.
Daniels also shared another benefit of being a Valdosta Wildcat that Coach Bazemore offered to his players. “Bazemore had a little saying before game. He’d say, “You the best-dressed, best-fed team in the state, and you going play like it.” He was right.” Explaining his “best fed” statement, Daniels said, “We could go to different restaurants in town, and they had a roster of the team. You tell your name, they give you food for free.”

Roger Rome shared a similar story.

I felt welcomed basically from Day 1. Coach Wilson . . . my basketball coach, our offensive coordinator, who worked with my mom, he came down to Branch Street, Martin Luther King Drive, and got me and took me downtown. The two best men’s stores [were] in downtown Valdosta. One was Olin H. Luke and the other one was Irving’s. I mean, they showed the high-end shoes, suits, shirts, and everything. He took me into Irving’s and bought me some clothes. Well . . . he didn’t buy them, but [he had] the owner [give] me a brand new pair of shoes, slacks, and a shirt. The shoes he gave me, I never wore them because they were wingtips and wingtips, to me, were like a typical White guy shoe. I never said to him, “I’m not going to wear these”; it was just the thought, you know.

The financial benefits of playing for Valdosta occasionally extended to other members of the family, as well, as explained by the Rome brothers, who were exceptional athletes and received many token gifts. The brothers were surprised to discover that their exceptional play on the field not only benefitted them individually, but also affected their entire family. Roger Rome explained,

The laundromat that she [the boys’ mother] worked at was owned by one of the biggest Wildcat boosters in the town. He did all the football uniforms before and after the games.
She told me that, during the integration process, [the owner] had made the statement that he didn’t want any Black Wildcats at Valdosta High School. After we got there and became pretty good at what we were doing on the football team, he gave her a promotion at the cleaners to help her out. He became one of our biggest fans. In fact, when she left [that job work for a job with another team booster], he didn’t want her to go, but he recognized that it was a much better opportunity for her and . . . that it meant better insurance for the family, and better wages for her, and more opportunities for her and more opportunities for all of us.

Stan Rome also explained,

Our mother worked sometimes two jobs, sometimes three jobs, to provide for us. But growing up, we didn’t know that we were poor, or we didn’t know that we were economically disadvantaged. We lived in what you would call a gun barrel house. You could look in the front door, and see out the back door. We never had a stable father figure in the home. But the three of us, we were happy. We didn’t know we were disadvantaged. Integration actually was a blessing in disguise for us. It provided opportunities and opened doors for us that may not ever would have happened had it not been for the integration. My mother only finished seventh or eighth grade, but because of our popularity, our success at Valdosta High School, it elevated her. My mother, prior to our integration, worked in a laundromat. She immediately got a job at Levi Strauss. She was the first Black female supervisor to supervise a line at the plant here in Valdosta. She retired from there, and had been making really good money. I think a lot of that was because of our success locally.
Being a member of the Valdosta team also gave Black athletes a form of status and privilege heretofore rarely extended to Blacks in the Valdosta community, as explained by Robert Savage.

I wonder about that [whether people treated him differently because he was on the football team] sometimes, too. I had this yard I did since I was 6 years old. I used to go every Saturday and rake yards over there at Jerry Jones’s [White man]. When I was in high school playing for Bazemore, boy, did them people use to come up to and talk to me about a game last night, and Christmas time they be given me gifts. I always wondered was it because I was an athlete, and I guess that’s what it was. But in the Black community, we was superheroes. They use to say we made Valdosta High. They talked about that now. You talk to an old timer, they tell you in a minute that boy there and his brothers made Valdosta High.

The public accolades of their children’s successes brought pride to many of their families. John Copeland’s greatest benefit from football might have come from his impact on his community and the pride that his football success gave his family. An example of this can be found in Copeland’s story about his family’s reaction when he was on the front page of the

*Valdosta Daily Times*, a story that also shows his community’s reaction.

I remember I read that and I saw it [front page of the *Valdosta Daily Times*]. I took that paper home to my mother. I wanted her to see it more than anything else. I knew she was very proud, and my father too. After that picture, my father, who was a taxi driver, came home and he said, “I was out there and the little boys were playing football in the street and they were saying, ‘I’m John Copeland! I’m John Copeland! I’m John Copeland! Let...
me grab the ball!” Everywhere I go I be seeing little boys playing ball.” I said, “Wow, that’s a big deal!”

Similarly, John Bell recalled being treated as a superstar by both Blacks and Whites. Because when you played football for Valdosta High School, you were kind of considered a star. You were somebody. Folks would walk up and hug you regardless what color you was. Black kids, White kids, Black girls, White girls–they get put money in your hand, they get up and hug you because it was all about winning. Like I said, it helped the community. It helped to get your name out for some of the guys that played but they were able to earn a scholarship and go to school. It helped out economically.

Sometimes, the benefits of playing football for Valdosta extended beyond the financial and the psychological. In at least one case, being a Valdosta football player may have physically protected a young Black man. It is important to remember that in the 1950s Black men were being killed or beaten for nothing more than being Black. As discussed in Chapter 3, Lowndes County had a long and distinct history of racial violence. It was even more dangerous when African American men violated certain racial customs. The most dangerous racial custom one could violate was for a Black man and a White woman to have a relationship. However, when Roger Rome became romantically involved with a White high school student, he did not suffer the same consequences as many before him.

My senior year, we played the region championship. Now we won the region my junior and senior year. I was the leading scorer in basketball. All region, all state. The [White] girl who was the captain of the girls’ basketball team [was the daughter of] the president of the basketball boosters. For both boys and girls, she was a real good athlete. Okay. She was crazy about me. She wrote my paper my junior and my senior year for English. Well
my senior year, we [were] playing in the region championship. And we [won] the game. And I, I mean her dad was as close as you are to me. And we had been dating. And everybody knew it. She came down on the field, on the court. She grabbed me. And I mean she kissed me. Tongue-kissed me right in front of her dad. I didn’t know what to do. I was petrified, man. He was standing right there. All he did was look. He didn’t say a word.

Rome expressed a sentiment shared by most of the participants in this study: The benefits of playing for the Valdosta Wildcats extended long past his playing days.

I was the first Black head basketball coach at Valdosta High School. Lot of the other coaches, Black coaches, may have been more qualified than me but they never got the opportunity. Now, thanks to Coach Bazemore and thanks to my reputation and my character and some other people, there’s no way I could have gotten that opportunity without the people that run this system advocating for me. That’s something that I’m extremely proud of and thankful for. Like I said, I became vice president of my senior class and I was able to go on and play college ball and stuff like that and get a good education but I cannot think of any player, but I know a lot of White men who actually advocated for me and support me right now.

Due to the socioeconomic and racial conditions that many of the African American players faced during school desegregation, sports became an invaluable resource in an environment that lacked support for many minorities. Playing sports at VHS meant the difference between eating or starving; more important, it might have meant the difference between life and death.
Sports Helped School and Community to Ease Into School Desegregation

Sports is a microcosm of America’s belief in meritocracy. On the football field or the basketball court, ideas of fairness, hard work, and getting ahead seem quite simple. Many argue that sports is color blind and that racism is nonexistent in sports. They point to the fact that in sports, rules are applied equally to all people, regardless of race or socioeconomic background. Games are won not by the color of one’s skin or one’s socioeconomic class. One becomes a winner by perspiration and determination exhibited on the field. Thus, it is probably no surprise that many attribute the relatively smooth success of school desegregation to the success of the integrated football team. Every participant in this study noted that, when football was played in a community with a notorious history of racial violence toward any forms of racial desegregation, Whites accepted African Americans in the school because of their success on the field. John Copeland stated,

Valdosta when I went [1966], the year before [1965], there were Black students integrated in the school system. Valdosta was always a place where, “Hey, we have a winning football program. We have so much to be thankful for.” They didn’t make a big deal about [desegregation]. Other schools, similar schools, that have won championships maybe they would’ve saw something different. Maybe they would’ve reacted differently. Who knows?

Others expressed similar thoughts about the unifying role of football in school desegregation.

Valdosta is a football [town] and always a football town, [whether] it was Black or White; but it was almost religious. White folk in this town love winning. After we start winning and blowing people out the way we did, we was sorta idolized, if being you
Black or White [and] by Black and White folk, but White folk in particular, man, they accepted us, I think, because we were football player[s], and we were doing so well on the field. (Melvin Herron)

I think it [football team success] helped a lot with the tension between the Black and the White race. It helped out in a lot of ways. Socially, it helped out in a lot of ways because a lot of us hadn’t been used to being around White folks. We always among our community, that’s where we grew up so it helped us learn about different cultures. There was some hatred, some misunderstanding on both sides but we grew from that. (John Bell)

During school desegregation Black and White fans sitting in the football stands came together around a common purpose, cheering and celebrating the success of their team. It created a sense of togetherness that went a long way in helping students and adults to work through desegregation. Charles Daniels and Aaron Holder explain,

I think it was the feeling of togetherness because if the official made a call against Valdosta High and they didn’t feel like it was right and I don’t care whether that player was White or Black, you had both communities getting on the officials. (Daniels)

I think sports will always play a part in unifying or highlighting certain things about certain people. In some areas you cannot see, there are many people who they became friends because of sports. They got an opportunity to look a person in the eye as an athlete, but anytime you do that, you certainly going to think about the man himself. A lot of times, people just got these positive things about themselves, so when they’re close around each other, they’re going to feel it. (Holder)
Much of the success of school desegregation at VHS was attributed to Coach Bazemore, who actively recruited Black athletes during Freedom of Choice and then gave them the opportunity to play. This continued when massive desegregation occurred few years later, as well. In 1966, John Copeland became the first African American to play for Valdosta. He was initially unaware of the pressure placed on Coach Bazemore regarding his participation in the team. Copeland remembered the first time he started a game for Valdosta. He noticed that Coach Bazemore’s demeanor was more animated, which to him meant that this was a pivotal moment and a significant decision.

I remember that first game he [Bazemore] called everyone out and all the starting positions. My position was the last one. He said, “Copeland, you’re going to start, I don’t care what anybody says. You deserve it. You’re going to start.” That was all he said. That was it, and I started.

Undoubtedly, Coach Bazemore was receiving pressure from the community for starting John Copeland, but those reservations quickly dissolved when White fans saw Copeland play. His success on the football field began to change naysayers’ opinions regarding desegregation. An example of this transformation of the White community’s acceptance of Black players is the story of the state championship game against heated rival Marietta.

I will never forget that. They won’t let me forget that. People to this day will come up to me and say, “Man, I remember when you ran those 75 yards.” I say, “That was no big deal.” They say, “Oh yeah, IT WAS A BIG DEAL.” I remember we were tied up or we were down, but I knew something had to happen. I got the opportunity to return punt. I got the ball. I looked up. I had a couple of guys in front of me, so I just dilly dally. Coach Bazemore would say, “Don’t be dilly dallying.” I dilly dallied and [then] just took off. I
turned the burners on! Nobody could catch me. I don’t care who you were. That was a good feeling. Some [White] guy came out of the stands and grabbed me [in celebration].

(Copeland)

The fact that in 1966 a White man ran onto the football field to embrace an African American to recognize his achievement on the field speaks volumes to the impact of sports on this southern town.

The football players set an example for other students to follow as they moved to a desegregated school system in which, for the first time, Black and White students were thrown together.

I think football teams served as an example that the races could work together to accomplish a common goal. If they can do it on the football field, then we could do it in the classrooms, or we could do it in the community also. (Stanford Rome)

It was not just the success on the field for Roger Rome. He felt the success of desegregation happen long before they played the first game. Relationships were built during the two weeks of summer football camp. Rome said that the time spent with White players help to dispel many preconceived notions of African Americans.

I was accepted from day one [at VHS]. One of the things that helped with that is that [the football team] went to camp two weeks before [school started]. We left town and went to Twin Lakes. We were down there for two weeks. We were bonding and learning — whether we liked each other or not— to respect each other. I am certain that the White kids went back to their communities and their friends who were regular students and made them aware that “we have some high-quality kids in this football program. We
respect them, and if you’re my friend, we want you to respect them.” I’m not saying we parted together or socialized together, but what I saw was respect.

However, many participants were quick to point out that coming together on the football field and in the stands did not necessarily signal any massive transformations in race relations. Godfrey noted that, once the football game was over, things went back to “normal,” meaning fairly segregated lives.

Football team was the cause why the community came together. At that particular time folks forgot about colors, forgot about everything else–football season. It’s kind of 911 when that happened. When everybody came together and prayed regardless of what color you were. We held hands and everybody was crying and everybody felt love toward one another. Over a period of time, folks stopped praying together, folks stopped holding hands. They went back to their old self. Football was kind of like that. It’d bring the community together at the football season, at the basketball season, then everybody go back to normal.

The desegregation of VHS was not a perfect process. There were definitely issues of contention for the White and Black community. There were also flashpoints such as the walkout when African American students protested because they felt that they were treated unfairly. Also, on Senior Day, White students brought Confederate flags to school and defaced property, using racial slurs in protest of desegregation. Both of these events happened in 1969 at the full implementation of desegregation. Despite those, it is worth repeating that the desegregation in this area happened without major instances of violence.
Poking Holes in the Notion of “Separate But Equal”

Coming together on the football field during and after desegregation brought attention to the disparities between Black and White schools. There was consensus among all participants in this study that VHS and Pinevale High School were separate and certainly not equal, particularly as it related to facilities and resources. The Pinevale building was dilapidated and the textbooks were badly tattered, not that most of the White community at Valdosta ever walked the Pinevale halls to witness this precariou state. That said, the most visible indication of the gross disparity between the two schools was the sports teams themselves. Valdosta always appeared in the best equipment and the finest uniforms. In comparison, the Pinevale equipment was in shambles, and most uniforms were tattered or torn. John Copeland described the football equipment at Pinevale:

So we went in to get uniforms and the thigh pads were mismatched. The knee pads had holes in them. I had never seen anything like it. I will never forget that. The jersey had ripped, so I took it home to my mother, and she got her sewing machine and sew it right for me.

Robert Daniels explained that it was not just football materials that were subpar; it was everything in the school. The fact that, once Pinevale closed, Valdosta public schools wanted all materials from Pinevale to be sent to the landfill because there were unfit for White students to use illustrates how bad things were. Daniels talked about his experience regarding Pinevale resources.

Let me lay this on you. When they integrated, we went to work with NYC program [summer youth work program] because Bazemore got us [Robert and Charles] and some of the other Black guys from the team [Pinevale former players]. All the books at Pinevale, we loaded up on dump trucks and took them to the dump. The books we were
using, we loaded them all up. [Once desegregation happened, books and other materials that were good enough for Black students were unacceptable for White students to use.]

We made seven trips to the dump, threw them away.

Also, the Valdosta public school system would not re-open Pinevale for another year until the appearance of the building could meet the standards for White students. Daniels stated, "As far as I’m concerned, I think it made things better for us. Because the facilities were better. We had better books. I just think it really taught us how to get along with the opposite race."

The disparities between the White and Black schools were made obvious when Black players began playing for VHS. It was impossible to ignore the falsehood of “separate but equal.” Daniels described the differences in the athletic equipment at the two schools:

Mostly uniforms, mostly shoes, practice shoes, game shoes. We didn’t have that at Pinevale. Shoes you practiced at Pinevale, you played in on game night. You had to polish it and clean it up. Valdosta, you didn’t have that. You had a practice shoe and a game shoe. You’ve got new socks every day, jock straps every week for a game. We didn’t have any of that at the Black school.

Robert Daniels stated,

My experience before desegregation was Lomax (Middle School). I remember not having a uniform that we could depend on, even in practice. If we didn’t hide our uniforms or take them home, we got back, and they wasn’t there. They wasn’t there so once we did get to Valdosta Middle School, we didn’t have to worry about that. We didn’t have that problem. We had lockers to put our stuff in and, overall, it was a good experience for me.

The Black football players who transferred from Pinevale High School to Valdosta directly benefitted from improved athletic equipment, uniforms, and facilities.
As discussed in this section, sports served a positive role in desegregation in three primary ways: (a) Black athletes personally benefitted from the opportunity to play for a nationally known football team, (b) Whites and Blacks coalesced around their football team to diffuse racial tension surrounding school desegregation, and (c) sports made visible the falsity of the argument of “separate but equal” schools segregated by race. Separate was inherently unequal.

**Theme 2: The Problem With the “Sports as the Great Unifier” Myth**

Despite the positive spin that many give to football’s role in desegregation and the fact that it mitigated the level of violence associated with the transition from segregated to desegregated schools, sports did not eliminate racism and discrimination that was deeply entrenched in southern culture or eliminate the losses associated with desegregation.

**The Persistence of Racism**

While fans and students celebrated Black athletes on the field, this positive feeling toward them did not always translate off the field nor did it erase long-held beliefs about social interaction across racial lines or fears about Black masculinity and the presumed inferiority of Blacks off the field. John Copeland recalled an incident in which a fellow player’s father objected to his son sharing a room at training camp with Black players.

I thought it was dandy until about 10, 15 years ago, I saw a former colleague. He said, “Hey, how do you guys feel about what happened in the cabin?” I said, “What are you talking about?” “Well you know Tiger Williams, his father came down and he said he didn’t want his son in a cabin with Black boys.” I said, “Well, that’s what he wanted, that’s fine with me.” They never said anything about it. The only thing I know is the students who left the cabin were football players. I knew their names and that was about
it. The coaches had to be involved in it to a certain extreme. The players, I don’t think there was any animosity with us.

Charles Daniels witnessed the erratic and furious behavior of a White parent whose son was placed as a backup to an African American player.

We was at practice one day and this guy came out there and he had a son on the team. His son was a backup and the Friday night before, at the game, Coach Bazemore put another guy in, a Black guy, in front of him. He was the only one backup, he put another guy in. This guy came out there. He was raising Sam, cussing and talking about what he was going to do. Coach Bazemore told him, “You get your son and y’all get off my practice field.” He was a no-nonsense type guy. That’s all. The player, he’s begging his daddy to leave, but Bazemore let him stay on the team because he told him, “You don’t come out here telling me nothing. This my team.” This guy raising Sam because his son wasn’t put in the game the Friday before, but he bucked the wrong little, short man.

One of the persistent stereotypes of Black masculinity, as discussed in Chapter Two, is that of the “Black savage” or “Black brute.” Black men were relegated to their bodies; their sexuality was feared, they were considered intellectually inferior even as their physical prowess was exploited and manipulated during slavery and afterwards. By the 20th century, Black men were still engulfed in the propaganda of the mindless and dangerous “Black savage,” little different from the previous comparisons to a beast (Richardson, 2007). The persistence of these stereotypes can be seen in the stories of many of these athletes. For John Copeland and Roger Rome, their experience of racism came not from coaches, teammates, or the White community, but from school counselors. Both were celebrated for their athletic abilities on the field; however, in the classroom, they were still considered intellectually inferior and were subjected to the
racism of low expectations. In essence, they were objectified for their athletic prowess while, off the field, they were considered to be academically unworthy. Copeland was unaware of what opportunities football could provide him, and apparently the counselors were not pushing the college track for African American students at VHS.

Especially back in the 60s. She [his older sister] couldn’t go [his family could not afford to send his sister to college] and I looked at that and I said, “Well, I know I can’t go [to college].” I was in football and guys were not getting scholarships during that period of time. Not like they are now. So, I did take the college track. There were a couple of tracks you could take, the general track. Of course, I didn’t take that. That was a big mistake because I did not know last minute I was going to have the opportunity to go to Notre Dame and all these schools.

Roger Rome found himself in a similar situation three years later. However, he had more confidence and demanded the college preparatory program.

I remember at Valdosta High School, they have what they call remedial, standard, and college prep. When I went in to talk to my—I’m talking about me; I don’t know what she did with every student—but when I went in to talk to my counselor in my junior year about what I wanted to do, she said, “You need to be in remedial or intermediate.” I’m like, “Look, I’m going to college. I’m taking college prep classes.” I was strong enough to say to her, “Oh no, I’m going to college. Here are the classes I’m taking.” She knew I was serious about it. She made sure all my classes [were] college prep. I was just as comfortable in the classroom as I was on the football field.

Of all the men interviewed for this study, Aaron Holder was the most vocal about preserving his Black identity and less concerned about his athletic ability. This caused him to
have several confrontations with the White power structure of Valdosta because he did not conform to the common stereotypes about Black masculinity that were described in Chapter Two. He was neither an “Uncle Tom,” a Sambo or the Coon. He was most often described at the school as an “angry Black man” or a “Black militant.” This caused friction between him and the school and the White players and coaches. Black and White athletes may have enjoyed a form of togetherness on the field and in the locker room, but race relations between Black and White players were not suddenly transformed through the process of playing together on the field.

Aaron Holder described an incident that occurred on the football bus.

It was only five or six of us [Black players], and as we loaded the bus, the White guys all of them, most of them sat side by side. There was a need to, for some of them to spread their legs out to keep a brother from sitting by them. I recall grabbing one guy’s legs, and I moved his legs. He [White teammate] made a motion like he wanted to fight him, and before I knew it we was into it, and I had him down. This guy weighed two hundred and something pounds. I remember this little White guy. His name was Benjamin but he told the guy that he didn’t have no balls, because I got the best of him.

Away games could be particularly problematic to Black players, who were sometimes subjected to racial slurs and actions. Copeland and Rome explained.

I didn’t even think about it. We went up to North Georgia. They told me before that game, “Some players may say something.” I thought they were going to be out there yelling. I will tell you what happened. By halftime I was walking off the field. One came by me real close, “Hey nigger.” It was real faint. He didn’t want anybody to know that he said it. I said, “Who?” That was it. (Copeland)
I can tell you, we played a game against Lowndes County, which is our biggest rivalry, right across town here. The head coach and me almost got in a fight. Joe Wilson, my head basketball coach, and him almost got in a fight. He had one of his kids poke his fingers in my eye. It was like they couldn’t stop me, okay? I got thrown out of the game, and he tried to get me suspended for the rest of the year. He actually had stuck it during a time out for his point guard to drop down and poke me in my eye. He stuck both of his fingers in my eye. To me, I thought that was because he couldn’t handle me, but I don’t think he would have done that to a White kid. He wanted to fight me. (Rome)

Football may have eased the transition to school desegregation, but racial tensions continued in the early years of school desegregation. Black athletes such as Aaron Holder sometimes found themselves embroiled in the racial politics of their school. One such incident occurred on Senior Day in 1969. Seniors were given a certain level of freedom to “hang out” before school started. However, some White seniors took this opportunity as a way to show their opposition to the full desegregation of the school. Before school started, some of these students spray painted racial slurs on the building, and others went around waving rebel flags.

When Senior Day came and you come to school. You saw “nigger” all over the various areas. They give seniors a little privilege. Guys would ride around with the Confederate flag. Of course it was always distasteful to me, and I always wanted to do something about it. I remember the guys would ride around with the Confederate flag, and some of the brothers said . . . . I didn’t say it, but some others said, “They got that flag, man. We ought to stop it.” I always seize the opportunity to be in the vanguard. So I walked out headed for the car, but when I looked back I noticed everybody had stopped. I went out there by myself and I stopped those guys. I took the flag. One guy . . . I threw it on the
ground and he reached down to get it and I told him if he touched that flag it was going to be all teeth. He believed me. Later on I could see many brothers with a piece of the flag around their arm and everything. However, I didn’t see no help out there really. (Holder)

Holder shared another experience of racism, this time not with students but with the school administration. It was his desire to express his Black identity and culture by wearing Afrocentric attire. However, he was met with strong resistance because the school saw this as a violation of the school’s dress code.

It was not permissible to wear “I’m Black and I’m proud.” James Brown came out with the song “I’m Black and I’m Proud,” and they had some medallions that said that. It was not permitted. I wore a dashiki, they pulled me out of class all day and put me with a counselor. I had to hang with the counselor all day because I had a dashiki on. My wearing of the dashiki, which was an expression of my ancestry. People were trying to deny that by taking me out of class as if though he didn’t want the rest of the students to see the display of the dashiki. That was something that was deeply invigorated into the system where they were trying to deny Blacks the opportunity to express themselves in a positive manner about themselves. My experience there led me to the need to go beyond that and fight for civil rights.

**Losses Associated With the Closing of Pinevale**

A number of researchers, including Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996), Adam Fairclough (2007), James D. Anderson (1988), Wayne J. Urban (Urban & Wagoner, 2014), and Natalie and James Adams (forthcoming), have documented, school desegregation came with a loss to the Black community as it was often their beloved high school that was shut down or converted to a
junior high school. Black principals and coaches were demoted, and Black students lacked role models and people to look out for their best interests in the newly desegregated schools.

All interviewees were unanimous in their perception of the teachers and administrators of Pinevale High School as being invested in their future and being strong role models. During the Freedom of Choice phase of desegregation, there were no African American teachers or administrators at VHS. However, when the full desegregation order came, the city transferred a few African American teachers, counselors, and coaches to VHS. Unfortunately, many qualified and passionate African American educators did not find new jobs in the school district when Pinevale closed, and many of those who did so had to take lesser roles than they were accustomed to at Pinevale. This loss of Black teachers was poignantly felt by the participants in this study.

I will never forget the first time that we got in there [VHS]. We was kind of hurt because of the teacher situation. We lost a lot of good Black teachers. Now, they said there was no bigotry in there, but a lot of Black teachers didn’t get a job out there. That is one thing that we were really upset about because we really knew our teachers. The teachers that we thought were coming did not get a job. We got the White teachers, and we had to make do. You’re out there to learn not to complain. That was something, we lost a lot of good teachers. (Robert Savage)

Looking back, you cannot forget the camaraderie among African American peers. It was somewhat negated when you went to a White school. You just simply didn’t have the time to bond like you once did. Also to have the leadership. There were some teachers that was there just to teach, and there was others there to inspire and motivate. Through the years, I had a few of those. I had, in elementary school, Agnes Brown, who took a
little time to do a little preaching, a little motivating. In junior high school, I had John T. Fisher, who sometimes uplifted me, having . . . me stand and [tell the] other guys “Hey, this how you supposed to look when you come out the door.” (Aaron Holder)

It’s like I lost not being at home. I can’t put it no better than that. I’m leaving home. I’m in uncharted territories and stuff like that. I lost teachers that I knew that really was trying to help me and had my back that didn’t go to over to [Valdosta] High School with me. Some of them had to go other places to find jobs and everything. In my heart I knew that they were good teachers and stuff, but they didn’t come along with the package. (John Bell)

Roger Rome shared his thoughts about the Black educators from the segregated schools.

From an educational standpoint, what I learned, I had the basics down when I got to Valdosta High School, and I didn’t learn that at Valdosta High School. I learned that with the Black teachers that were at Saul Street, Lomax, and Pinevale, and my mom and my church. From an educational standpoint, I think that the teachers in the all-Black schools cared a lot more about the kids and did everything —they lived in the community, we looked up to them—and they did everything they could to push us to be better academically. I’m telling you, those Black teachers during that time period did an outstanding job.

It wasn’t just the teachers and coaches whom they missed. For Melvin Herron, it was a sense of community.

We lost a community thing because I was always—like, I just always attended schools in the community where I was born and raised. All the other schools were one block away
and all the students and the people that attended school with them, people that we not
only knew the other students, but we knew the whole family.

This loss of camaraderie in Black schools and the guidance of Black teachers, coupled
with being transferred to the White school, left many participants with the feeling that somehow
they had lost part of their community identity.

[We] lost the closeness of our teachers because they would take extra time with you if
you had a problem with the subject matter. They would visit your home and talk to your
parents, and they would work with you to make sure that you come up to where you need
to be with your grades. That was very helpful to me. I lost that when we integrated. A lot
of our identity was lost, and we never did get that back. (H. Godfrey)

Most Black principals and head coaches lost their jobs during desegregation or were
demoted to positions with far less authority, thus robbing Black students of Black male role
models.

Mr. Lomax . . . was the principal at junior high school, and I would always tell jokes
about him when I went to college. Everyone would sit around, and I would tell jokes.
One thing about Mr. Lomax is they loved him because I had him down. I would just
pretend to be Mr. Lomax and every time they would be like, “Hey, hey, Copeland, do Mr.
Lomax.” Now Mr. Lomax didn’t take any stuff from anybody. That’s what I liked about
him. He was a direct person. He would tell you to do something and you would do it. I
recall when I was in the seventh grade he lined us up [to go] up to the building after
recess. He came up to the door, and one of the guys was just playing around [imitating
him], “Sir, arghh, I’m, arghh, have to tell everyone to stop playing, arghh, I’m in charge
of this school, arghh, my name is Lomax, arghh.” Well, he came barreling down after this
guy—this guy is 6’ 7”. Mr. Lomax grabbed that boy and “Arghh, arghh, arghh!” You can’t do that now. Boy, we didn’t have any trouble in that school. He ran it. Also, I liked the fact that, when the White superintendent would come around, other [Black] principals would start shaking. Not Mr. Lomax, “I’m in charge of this school arghh arghh arghh!” (John Copeland)

They gave them [Black coaches from Pinevale] token roles. They [Black coaches] weren’t offensive coordinators. Coach Jones [former head football coach at Pinevale] should have been, at least, a co-head coach or offensive coordinator, or defensive coordinator, or something. They knew they had to have him on staff. All he was, was a figure head and try to keep the Black players in line. We elevated him. Coach Jones got to be the head coach of the track team then. (Roger Rome)

In addition to losing many Black teachers and coaches as role models, Pinevale High also lost many of its unique traditions, customs, and extracurricular activities that were not continued at VHS. For example, Pinevale trusted some students with the role of hall monitor and seniors had special privileges, as explained by John Copeland:

One of the only things that I lost, and what I liked about those high schools, all the seniors, they were posted down the hallway. I think they called it a hall monitor. They would select you by junior year, and you would know you were going to come back in fall of your senior year. You knew exactly where you were supposed to be in the hallway. It was a big deal. That’s what I missed out on. You would get a chance to stand out in the hallway. You would tell the lower classmen to go to class. You would march in the auditorium together as seniors. You would be the last one to take a seat. Everybody would see you.
However, not all perceptions of Pinevale were positive. Some participants were critical of the Pinevale coaches, believing that they had been unfair in their practice of playing older, outside players instead of currently enrolled high school students. These players would quit school after the football season, only to join again for the next year’s season. John Copeland and Aaron Holder both left Pinevale for a fair chance to play football. Despite the loss of traditions, teachers, and community identity, many participants agreed that the benefits of desegregation outweighed the costs—better books, nicer facilities, scholarship opportunities, championships, Black and White community support (including financial support for some), and playing for a legendary coach—outweighed the negative effects.

**Loss of Position on New “White” Team**

One of the most intense issues that desegregation brought to the football team was who should play in the starting positions. Many of the White players believed that they had been promised starting positions since middle school and fully expected to play those positions once they got to high school. However, desegregation brought an influx of talented African American athletes, many of whom had been star players at their old school. Sometimes, they knocked White players out of the starting lineup, something John Copeland was not aware of at the time.

I think that was the bigger thing for me. “I’m playing football.” I had lost that opportunity at Pinevale. “I’m playing now. I’m happy.” It’s just that simple. I can’t think of it in any other form. I wasn’t thinking about, “Oh, if I drop a pass, the White people are going to faint.” Now thinking about it, I went to the 40th High School Class Reunion and this [White] guy came up to me and said, “Hey, you know, before you came to Valdosta, that position you won, that was my position. I had played in that position since junior high school.” I said, “What!” That dawned on me. I said, “Well, he’s right.” The only thing I
cared about is I was playing. He took it in good nature. He had to hand that position because they had a thing in junior high school that if you come to Valdosta as a freshman, you work your way up. Like a pipeline. When I got down there, I probably knocked him out of the way. I could see he had a little bitter taste, but he didn’t appear to have any bitterness. I’m glad he told me.

The majority of parents, both White and Black, believed that their child should be in the starting lineup, which provided additional community pressure to Coach Bazemore and his staff. Coach Bazemore also had to deal with pressure from the Touchdown Club (their booster club and their primary financial backers) because the majority of its members also had children on the team. Mr. Herron stated that Coach Bazemore caved under the pressure from the team boosters, and the community did not give enough African American players starting positions. “Some of us felt like we was being demoted or placed as second when we should have been starters, we were placed second team, and elsewhere. So we just felt that we weren’t getting a fair shake.”

Some other participants believed that the racial stereotypes of that era were too difficult to overcome, even for Coach Bazemore. Aaron Holder said, “I don’t think the time that I was there, that they was ready for a Black quarterback. This thing here, remember the quarterback supposedly is the leader of the whole team.” Related to that, John Copeland said, “Even in the pros [during that era], the quarterback position, they always said they wanted to keep a White position.”

Another factor to be considered was whether or not Coach Bazemore would follow racial stereotypes and place African American athletes only in positions where it was perceived that speed was more important than critical thinking. There is no other position in sports in which critical thinking and leadership are valued more than in the quarterback position, and critics of
the “we all came together on the football field narrative” typically point to the absence of Black quarterbacks to emphasize the limitations of that narrative. Of the nine participants, only two (Roger Rome and Stan Rome) agreed that Coach Bazemore would have placed an African American in the starting lineup as quarterback.

We had a Black quarterback. Our quarterback at the time was Fred Thompson, and they moved him to second team. They started him at free safety, but they moved him to second team at quarterback, so Fred quit. Because Fred always done start, and he was real good, I felt. . . . That’s kind of like a little slap in the face. It was a while before a Black quarterback started at Valdosta High. (Charles Daniels)

I don’t feel like they would have [given the position to a Black player], because what we experienced was that there was two players, one was White and one was Black, and they had equal talent, the White player would get to start and the Black player wouldn’t. (Robert Daniels)

Herman Godfrey expressed a slightly different point of view about Bazemore as a coach, torn between doing the right thing and being beholden to his financial boosters.

I think that, overall, Coach Bazemore he was a head coach, he had a lot of respect from the White as far as the Black. He dealt with a lot of issues. In that deep down, one of the things that Bazemore did was, he played the best man at the best position. If I got a kid on the team and I’m giving $5,000, then I want my kid to start. He based on, I think he was very fair and competitiveness in that you could be for particular position. Now I don’t think he had total control over the quarterback position, but I think the boosters called a lot of shots. The folks that were giving a lot of money and doing this and doing
that. The thing, I know one thing, they say a Black quarterback would never lead the Wildcats to a championship, but years later we proved them wrong.

John Bell experienced personally the consequences of the belief that only White players could be quarterback.

I always wanted to be a quarterback. I could throw a ball 75 yards on a rope. When we integrated over at Valdosta High School, I knew that I wouldn’t have a shot [being a quarterback], that’s what burnt my heart. I wanted to be that [quarterback]. They moved me to running back because I had good speed and everything like that. But then you had Charles Daniels [Black player], I had a couple of them in front of me, Willie Jones [Black player], I couldn’t get the playing time because I sit over there on the bench as a running back. I was a talented athlete, so my senior year, Bazemore come to me and said, “Good athletes don’t sit on the bench, we going to move you over to corner because you got speed and everything.” That’s what I ended up, my senior year I played cornerback. I know Fred Thomas wanted to play quarterback when we went out there to camp and stuff. He left camp and he didn’t make it back to the field and stuff. It broke a lot of Black young men’s hearts that they couldn’t play the quarterback position at that time. You know what I am saying? I was one of those guys that wanted to play quarterback. I played quarterback junior high school but when I got over here, I was moved over to running back, and then I was moved to a defensive back. I know Coach Bazemore was the coach of the team but, then again, he got people over him and stuff like that, but at that time in the ‘60s, we weren’t going to have no Black quarterback. Not in that time. Really what broke my heart as a youngster and as a teen and as a Black man I knew I didn’t have the opportunity to do what I wanted to do. That hurt me to this day. I know at
time and stuff like that I could have been a quarterback for Valdosta High School, but I
didn’t have a chance. That hurt me.

Roger Rome was one of the two players who believed that Coach Bazemore made his
position decisions solely based on the athlete’s demonstration of skill, hard work, and
determination.

Based on what I saw, I didn’t see any discrimination as to where a kid had an opportunity
to play. From an aptitude standpoint, you had to learn the plays. We had a quarterback at
the high school, he was a real short kid, but he was athletic. He couldn’t learn the plays.
He got frustrated because Bazemore was running a processed system. The kid couldn’t
run the plays. I don’t even think he finished high school.

**We’re Brothers on the Field, Not off the Field**

Movies such as *42* (the Jackie Robinson story) and *Remember the Titans* show
Hollywood’s proclivity to portray a well-known story: After witnessing the atrocities committed
against their Black teammates, White players would become advocates for them. However, this
close camaraderie leading to social desegregation off the field rarely happened in the early years
of desegregation. Social norms persisted, and race relations off the field meant that Black and
Whites returned to primarily segregated lives, particularly social lives, off the football field.

Of the nine participants in this study, only one, Stan Rome, reported that he had had a
friendship with the White players. Stan Rome and Robert Daniels both entered VHS two years
after full desegregation. They were in the ninth grade, and they both played as underclassmen, so
they were going to school at the middle school but playing football for the high school. When
Stan Rome arrived at VHS as a student, he developed a friendship with a White player named
Larry Hans. He felt that other White players supported him, as well. He stated that he was able to
bridge relationships with White players because of his personality. “I have an open, welcoming
type of personality. I’m more accepting and treat you like I want you to treat me until you do me
wrong.” However, the other eight participants had no such relationship with White players, other
than what was happening on the field. Roger Rome said, “We respect them, and if you’re my
friend, we want you to respect them. I’m not saying we partied together or socialized together,
but what I saw was respect.”

Black players did not “party” with their White peers; they did not visit them in their
homes or mingle outside the confines of sports, as explained by Charles Daniels and John
Copeland.

Outside of the locker room and the practice field, we didn’t really interact. I would just
know them, man. They go there way, we go our way. This back in ‘60s, man. Wasn’t a
whole lot of mingling. You had to if you were going to play to be a Wildcat because
Bazemore wouldn’t have it no other way. After that, there wasn’t no socializing and all
that. It probably came later, after I left, but not when we had it. (Charles Daniels)

I didn’t have the opportunities to go to their parties or anything like that. I’m sure
there were some going on, but that part was still just White. We didn’t get that deep into
the social side of Blacks and Whites. At least, I didn’t. I probably could have gone to
some. I was invited to some, but I didn’t participate in the social stuff. I was busy at
Pinevale. (John Copeland)

One situation that clearly showed this lack of off-the-field unity was Senior Day. Steve
Ericson, a team captain and White teammate, and other White students of VHS decided to go to
Twin Lakes. The Twin Lakes area is a beautiful recreational property surrounded by lakes, where
the school would take the players to for two weeks of summer football camp. The majority of the
property is privately owned by groups such as golf and yacht clubs. John Bell reminisced about this day. “‘Why don’t we just go? All the other classmates [went] over there to Twin Lakes.’ All us got our stuff, loaded up, and went on over there. They told us we couldn’t come in there.”

Herman Godfrey remembered the incident in a similar manner.

A car full of White guys, they went into Twin Lakes. We were right behind them. State patrol was there. He stopped us. Told us this was private property. We couldn’t come in. Now, we were Wildcats on the field. Then Steve Ericson turned around and waved at me, smiling.

Ironically, as a team leader, Steve Ericson often spoke of unity and teamwork on the field but apparently that did not apply outside of the football field. When remembering what happened on Senior Day, Herman Godfrey said, “Basically, on the field we were all Wildcats. We were all brothers. Off the field, it was different.”

**Theme 3: Disrupting a Singular Narrative of the Black Athlete During Desegregation**

By virtue of all being Black athletes living in the same small Southern town in the late 1960s and playing for one of the greatest high school football teams in the country, the participants in this study shared remarkably similar experiences. All personally benefitted in some way from their athletic experience at VHS; all experienced some sense of loss moving to the “White” school, and all continued to live fairly separate and segregated lives from their White counterparts. However, to paint them the same fails to capture the complexity of identity. Most obvious in these participants’ stories is the tension between identity as an athlete and identity as a *Black* athlete. These tensions are best illustrated in how players responded differently to the Black Student Walkout in 1969. As illustrated in Table 4, of the nine
participants in this study, three were not associated with this event. John Copeland had graduated prior to this incident, and Stan Rome and Robert Daniels were in middle school when the walkout occurred. The seven remaining participants who were attending Valdosta at the time were evenly split between supporting the walkout and supporting the team.

As discussed in Chapter 4, nearly 400 African American students walked out of VHS in protest to the playing of “Dixie” at major events and because Gloria Holloway, an African American student, had been denied the crown of Miss Valdosta High School. Holloway had won the popular vote in a crowded field of White competitors. However, school officials dismissed the election results on the grounds that the vote total exceeded the number of students at the

Table 4

Participants in the Valdosta High School Black Student Walkout of 1969

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Walked out</th>
<th>Had a starting position or was an active player</th>
<th>Regretted the decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John Copeland</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Graduated prior to the walkout</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron Holder</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Not at that time</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Savage</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melvin Herron</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Not at that time</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herman Godfrey</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Bell</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Not at that time</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Daniels</td>
<td>No(^a)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Daniels</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>In middle school</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger Rome</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford Rome</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>In middle school</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Forced by his mother to participate.
school. Many African American students felt that the vote count was a ruse to deny an African American queen. Aaron Holder provided further explanation of the event.

Gloria Holloway was truly the winner, but the Whites couldn’t handle that. It led to the walkout. I don’t think any players actually walked out. Yeah, “Dixie” was the song that we constantly had to listen to. Hell, that was just like the fight song! I remember when they was trying to resolve things, and I think it finally came to grips that we’ll have two queens: a Black one and a White one.

According to a newspaper report of the incident, Chris Lee, the defensive safety, was the only African American player in the starting lineup to support the walkout and not play (Memphis World Publishing Co., 1969). Of the five African American starters, four (Roger Rome, Charles Daniels, Robert Savage, and Willie Jones) chose to play and not participate in the walkout. The Black athletes interviewed for this study who decided not to participate in the walkout justified their decision as loyalty to their team, to their teammates, and to Coach Bazemore. It is still a contentious issue 50 years later and triggered a great deal of passion in the participants. Robert Savage did not walk out but he explained the repercussions for those who did so.

Guys still mess with me about that, even to this day. Some of the athletes walked out. Roger didn’t walk out. I didn’t walk out. The running back, Charles, and Willie Jones didn’t walk out, but the rest of them did walk out. It was a strain on the team, but we won that night. When them guys came back a couple days later, they were so far on the bench it was pathetic. They were good football players, but Bazemore had to make a point, too. He punished them all. He felt like they should have discussed it. But they felt like . . . . And I don’t blame them, they did the right thing. They did the right thing.
Roger Rome did not walk out. He decided that he had worked too hard to get where he was on the team to compromise it by defying school policies and Coach Bazemore’s direction. In the interview he pointed out that participation in the walkout could have jeopardized chances of getting a scholarship.

We had a meeting at Herrington Funeral Home, which is a Black funeral home. At that meeting, they decided that we were going to walk out. The students were going to walk out. We get to school the next day and because of the playing of “Dixie,” the kids walked out. Now it was about, I want to say there was five of us that didn’t walk out. We didn’t get together and decide that we wasn’t going to walk out. You got to understand that we had just been gone through two weeks of football camp and worked our butts off, and one of the kids was a senior and he was probably the best athlete on the team that year and went on to Iowa State, should have played some pro football. Dried up, he got drafted by the Falcons but it didn’t work out, but he was good enough to play. He didn’t walk out along with Charles Daniels, myself, couple of other guys. That’s what the walkout was about. Of course, everybody that didn’t walk out was basically calling us Uncle Toms and stuff like that. There was, it came from both sides. On the White side and the Black side. During the walkout, the White kids supported us, but I’m just saying in general, with the racial tension during that whole integration process, we were getting it from both sides. My point was, I wasn’t really that political. I was thinking about what can I do to make my life better, and I had gone through all this, I knew I was good enough. I didn’t want to blow my chance. I wanted to stay there. I wanted to be a part of it, and I didn’t walk out.
However, other athletes did participate in the walkout to demonstrate their frustration with the continued apparent racism in their school. Their identities as athletes were secondary to their identities as members of a minority group being mistreated. Melvin Herron was one of those.

At first, it was quite tense. People had to get used to each other, Blacks and Whites and new faces and new ways of doing things. I’m sure they [White students] felt the same way as the Black students felt, where we was tense for a while. Within the first month or two of being there we had a student walkout, all the Black students, we left class, because we didn’t think we were being fairly represented in different activities, class, band and so forth, and there was a lot of rebel flags always being exposed, and we had problems with that. So the first few months there was a lot of tension and some problems.

John Bell was another athlete who walked out.

Some walked out, some stayed. Some of them said, “You know what, we’re going to stay there regardless of whatever, whatever.” I think they had their scholarships on the line, and they were starters on the team and stuff like that, whatever went into that decision. That was them. Me, as a man, I said we’ve been done wrong, man. It’s time to for us to do something. We had to make a stand, and indeed we made a stand.

Charles Daniels wanted to participate in the walkout as did a few other athletes.

However, the coaches intervened.

I tried [to walk out]. Me, Roger, and Herman Godfrey and Josh Mabel, all of us, we got in the car and we all walked out when everybody left. By the time I got home, Coach Bazemore and Coach Jones was at my mama’s house and told Mama what was going down. Mama had me get in the car with them and go back to school. Well, it was about
six of us that went back. The rest of them walked out. We played [football] that Friday night. They called us “Uncle Toms,” but I didn’t really care because my mama said, “Go back,” I had to go”

As illustrated in Table 4, the Black players who held starting positions did not participate in the walkout, including Charles Daniels. Perhaps they had too much at stake as athletes to compromise possible future prospects. Failure to participate in the walkout resulted in being labeled an “Uncle Tom.” As discussed in Chapter Two, this characterization of Black men reflected servitude to White interests. Within the Black community, the “Uncle Tom” label is derisive and is meant to imply a lack of loyalty to the Black community (Richardson, 2007). On the other hand, those players who did not hold a starting position were more likely to act in solidarity with nonathletes to protest discrimination at their school.

Another issue about which the participants disagreed was Coach Bazemore. For most people in Valdosta, Coach Bazemore is considered a town hero, a person who not only knew how to win football games but who was also instrumental in helping to ease the town into school desegregation with little violence or fanfare. All of the study participants agreed that Coach Bazemore was a great coach and a motivating and inspirational leader. A few of them cast him in the position of a surrogate father; most believed that he was progressive in terms of race relations. However, one player questioned the ways in which he has been celebrated as a leader in school desegregation.

Robert Savage, Roger Rome, and Stan Rome viewed Coach Bazemore not only as an excellent coach but also as a father figure who treated them like sons rather than just players. They strongly believed that he did not regard them as inferior and treated them as he would his own children. Savage described Bazemore as “a father figure, man. A coach. You name it. That
guy didn’t have bigotry in his body, man. You go to that guy, man, and talk to him and get everything you want.”

While most of the participants did not refer to him as a “father” figure, they reported that he held himself above the racist beliefs of most Whites at the time. They attributed the smooth transition to school desegregation to Coach Bazemore and his ability to be “color blind” on the football field. John Copeland considered Coach Bazemore courageous because he went against the grain at the time.

Because that first time he said, “I don’t care what anybody says, and you’re going to start.” Apparently, to me there had been some conversation about, “Don’t start a Black player.” He said he was going to do it. He did it, and that was it. That would be an example of him.

The Daniels brothers, Charles and Robert, agreed with Copeland that it was Coach Bazemore’s actions that dictated their perception of him. An example of this is that Coach Bazemore gave Robert Daniels the opportunity to play for Valdosta as an underclassman, an opportunity that shaped his life. His brother Charles was the first Black team captain for Valdosta football. Charles stated that this would not have happened except for Coach Bazemore.

I tell you, I was the captain. It was my senior year. I was the first Black captain. We had about 110 players on the team, so there had to be around 90 White. Some of them were voting for a captain; but Bazemore came in and stopped the proceeding. So I was the captain. If I’d gone with their vote, I wouldn’t be no captain.

Participants such as Copeland and the Daniels brothers agreed that Coach Bazemore rewarded hard work over racial ideology. However, the strongest advocate for the legacy of Coach Bazemore as an advocate for racial unity and tolerance was Roger Rome.
When the school system integrated, it integrated at a time period here in Valdosta where we had the guy that was suited to deal with that situation. He had the right temperament. Kind of like an Obama. Bazemore was like that. He was so much ahead of his time when it came to dealing with people, understanding people, and football. He was the leader of the community. People respected him. He commanded respect. He didn’t do it walking around quoting scripture out of the Bible. He did by trying to motivate you, and trying to encourage you, and treating you the way he wanted to be treated. I think everybody followed his lead. His coaches, the teachers, even the principal. Anything happened in that school, when I was there, they’d call Bazemore to the front office. Anything. Any type of race relations, any problem, any fight that broke out. He was brought to the school. Even if it wasn’t a player. If it was a Black or White issue, he was brought there. He dealt with it. He tried to be as fair and honest and objective as he could. I never saw him or any of his coaches treat me any different. I never saw him treat anybody else any different. I think those guys even said that. He was the right guy for the time here. I think that kept a lot of that stuff down. If he had been the opposite, and was an egotist, if he was a racist and he really hated having to deal with us, I think things would have been a revolt. It didn’t because he wasn’t like that. He was like a visionary. He knew his status was already established before we came, but if he wanted to win, he had already proven he could win with White players. He wanted to prove he could win with Black players as well. He knew, just being around sports, the Black athlete was blessed with speed and power that most, not all, most of the White players didn’t have. He was eager and excited about the opportunity to work with some of that. He knew that some of these Black players were just as good as some of these White players. He also knew some of these
Black players were better than any White player that he had ever coached, and he was looking forward to that.

Other participants were somewhat circumspect about his “color blind” attitude. Participants such as Godfrey and Bell agreed that Coach Bazemore was a good man and was not to blame for controversial decisions, such as African Americans being unable to play positions such as quarterback, or less talented White players starting ahead of Black players. They attributed those decisions not to Bazemore but to external pressures from the Touchdown Club (booster club), among others. Herron blamed the entire coaching staff for such decisions. However, after the walkout, he decided that the coaches were trying to make a stronger effort to give African American athletes more opportunities. The coaches even helped Herron to find his first job.

One participant disagreed with the legacy of Coach Bazemore as a unifier in race relations. Aaron Holder contended that the man did not live up to the legend. He expressed that the walkout exposed the true nature of coach Bazemore as a racist.

I understand he was a prejudiced coach. He was a good coach. Like I say, my senior year, we didn’t speak hardly, but he played me. When the walkout, I remember him making a speech and he said when he heard we should overcome, it made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. That in itself tell you the thoughts that was in his mind. I don’t think he actually wanted it [complete desegregation]. I think that he had to go along with the court ordering. I don’t think they was actually prepared for it. I think everybody was making adjustments as this thing took place. They knew it was coming eventually, but they weren’t ready for it. I don’t think Bazemore was ready for it. Bazemore was more ready
for freedom of choice. He was more ready for a few of us that was good on the team that could help give some victory.

Conclusion and Further Research

It is my hope that this dissertation will somehow benefit those who are trying to bring together communities scarred by racial and socioeconomic divisions. The heart of this research took place in a time when America was desperately trying to unite after decades of anger and distrust caused by segregation. In the most unlikely of places, where violence was once a response to any social change, the people, both White and Black, from the small southern town of Valdosta, Georgia, decided to turn to football instead of violence. The lessons learned from the era of school desegregation should resonate today. In 2017, after a heated Presidential election, America seems to be tearing itself apart again. Schools are more segregated now than before the Brown decision (Orfield, 2001). Educators should search for ways to bridge the gap between people, and sports should be given consideration as a method of social justice. Many athletes were in the struggle for civil rights, just like others who marched and did sit-ins. However, very few researchers have recognized their accomplishments, which makes their sacrifice all the more hurtful.

This research topic is fertile ground for additional research and exploration. Although the football team was the most prominent and most recognizable example of desegregation in VHS, the football team certainly was not alone in this fight for desegregation. Several other extracurricular organizations should be recognized as well, such as the band, the chorus, the cheerleaders, and so forth.

One of the most prominent omissions in this research is the role that African American women athletes played in the desegregation movement. In many ways, they were fighting a battle
on two fronts: gender inequality and racial inequality (Leonard, 2014). Like the great male athletes from Georgia who were the participants in this research, the state of Georgia has produced great women athletes. One of the most famous examples of great women athletes from Georgia is Alice Coachman. In 1948, Coachman became the first African American woman to win an Olympic gold medal (Goldstein, 2014). When Coachman triumphantly returned home to Albany, Georgia,

She was invited aboard a British Royal yacht, she was congratulated by President Harry S. Truman at the White House, and Count Basie gave a party for her. She was lauded in a motorcade that wound its way through Georgia from Atlanta to her hometown, Albany. But she had returned to a segregated South. Blacks and Whites were seated separately in the Albany city auditorium when she was honored there. The mayor sat on the stage with her but would not shake her hand, and she had to leave by a side door. (Goldstein, 2014, p. 1)

Coachman is but one example of African American female athletes whose success proved that segregation did not address the inherent racism in American culture. My only regret is that I did not have the resources and time to expand the scope of this research to recognize women as well as men. Still, I hope that my research and the work presented in this dissertation will encourage future scholars to look at female athletes such as Alice Coachman and her contemporaries, so that a fully realized picture of the time and its struggles can be painted to serve as a tribute to everyone who fought for desegregation, as well as a document for future generations to understand their history, their past, and who they are.

In Valdosta, Black athletes played a pivotal role in bringing about school desegregation, and their stories are rarely included in the civil rights literature. For most of the men in this
study, being a member of the Valdosta High Wildcats and playing for one of the most famous high school coaches of all time taught them valuable lessons about life and set them on a path that would have been far different had they remained in the segregated Pinevale High School. The lesson here is that sports can play a pivotal role in bringing about social change. At the same time, caution is advised in emphasizing that role. As the stories in this study demonstrate, as successful as these Black athletes were on the field playing for the VHS football team, the athletes were still subjected to racism off the field. Persistent stereotypes about Black men and their presumed intellectual inferiority followed them off the field. Sports alone cannot right the wrongs of racism, no matter how much we pretend otherwise as we cheer our favorite team.
REFERENCES


Green v. County School Board of New Kent County, 391 U.S. 430, 377 U.S. 218.


Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).


APPENDIX A

DESEGREGATION ORDER FOR VALDOSTA HIGH SCHOOL
NOTICE OF SCHOOL DESEGREGATION PLAN UNDER TITLE VI OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964

This notice is made available to inform you about the desegregation of our schools. Keep a copy of this notice. It will answer many questions about school desegregation.

1. Desegregation Plan in Effect
   The Valdosta school system is being desegregated under a plan adopted in accordance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The purpose of the desegregation plan is to eliminate from our school system the racial segregation of students and all other forms of discrimination based on race, color, or national origin.

2. Thirty-Day Spring Choice Period
   Each student or his parent, or other adult person acting as parent, is required to choose the school the student will attend next school year. The choice period will begin on April 1, 1966, and close April 30, 1966.

3. Explanatory Letter and School Choice Forms
   On the first day of the choice period, an explanatory letter and this notice will be sent by first-class mail to the parent, or other adult person acting as parent, of each student then in the school who is expected to attend school the following school year. A school choice form will be sent with each letter, together with a return envelope addressed to the Superintendent. Additional copies of the letter and the choice form are freely available at the public at any school and at the Superintendent's office.

4. Returning the Choice Forms
   Parents and students, at their option, may return the completed choice forms by mail to the Superintendent's office, at any time during the 30-day choice period. No preference will be given for choosing early during the choice period. A choice is required for each student. No assignment to a school can be made unless a choice is made first.

5. Choice Form Information
   The school choice form lists the names, locations and grades offered for each school. The reasons for any choice made are not to be stated. The form asks for the name, address and age of the student, the school and grade currently or last attended, the school chosen for the following year, the appropriate signature, and whether the form has been signed by the student or his parent. If the choice form asks for the student's race, color, or national origin, insert the following sentence: "This race, color, or national origin of the student is requested for purposes of record keeping required by the U.S. Office of Education. The information will not be used in any way to discriminate against the student."
   Any letter or other written communication which identifies the student and the school he wishes to attend will be deemed as valid as if submitted on the choice form supplied by the school system. The names of students are not assigned to the plan will be made public by school officials.

6. Course and Program Information
   To guide students and parents in making a choice of school, listed below, by schools, are the courses and programs which are not offered by every school in this school system.

   Mechanical Drawing, Cosmetology, Brick Masonry, and Industrial Arts will be offered at Pinevale High School but not at Valdosta High School.
   Distributive Education, Spanish, Latin, Bible, and Math 3, will be offered at Valdosta High School but not at Pinevale High School.
   Classes for Exceptional Children will be offered at Pinevale High School, Valdosta High School, Valdosta Junior High School, and South Street School.

7. Signing the Choice Form
   A choice form may be signed by a parent or other adult person acting as parent. A student who has reached the age of 15 at the time of choice, or will reach the majority or any higher grade, may sign his own choice form. The student's choice shall be controlling unless a different choice is exercised by his parent before the end of the period during which the student exercises his choice.

8. Processing of Choices
   No choice will be denied for any reason other than overenrollment. In cases where granting all choices for any school would cause overenrollment, the students choosing the school who live closest to it will be assigned to that school. Whenever a choice is to be denied, overenrollment will be determined by a uniform standard applicable to all schools in the system.

9. Notice of Assignment, Second Choice
   All students and their parents will be promptly notified in writing of their school assignments. Should any student be denied his choice because of overenrollment he will be promptly notified and given a choice among all other schools in the system where space is available.

10. Students Moving Into the Community

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12. Priority of Late Choices

No choice made after the end of the spring 30-day choice period may be denied for any reason other than overcrowding. In the event of overcrowding, choices made during the 30-day choice period will have first priority. Overcrowding will be determined by the standard provided for in paragraph 8. Any parent or student whose first choice is denied because of overcrowding will be given a second choice in the manner provided for in paragraph 9.

13. Tests, Health Records and Other Entrance Requirements

Any academic tests or other procedures used in assigning students to schools, grades, classrooms, sections, courses of study, or for any other purpose, will be applied uniformly to all students without regard to race, color or national origin. No choice of school will be denied because of failure at the time of choice to provide any health record, birth certificate, or other document. The student will be tentatively assigned in accordance with the plan and the choice made, and given ample time to obtain any required document. Curriculum, credit, and promotion procedures will not be applied in such a way as to hamper freedom of choice of any student.

14. Choices Once Made Cannot be Altered

Once a choice has been submitted, it may not be changed, even though the choice period has not ended. The choice is binding for the entire school year to which it applies, except in the case of (1) compelling hardship, (2) change of residence to a place where another school is closer, (3) the availability of a school designed to fit the special needs of a physically handicapped student, (4) the availability at another school of a course of study required by the student, which is not available at the school chosen.

15. All Other Aspects of Schools Desegregated

All school-connected services, facilities, athletics, activities and programs are open to all on a desegregated basis. A student attending school for the first time on a desegregated basis may not be subject to any disqualification or waiting period for participation in activities and programs, including athletics, which might otherwise apply because he is a transfer student. All transportation furnished by the school system will also operate on a desegregated basis. Facilities will be desegregated, and no staff member will lose his position because of race, color or national origin. This includes any case where less staff is needed because schools are closed or enrollment is reduced.

16. Attendance Across School System Lines

No arrangement will be made, or permission granted, by this school system for any students living in the community it serves to attend school in another school system, where this would tend to limit desegregation, or where the opportunity is not available to all students without regard to race, color or national origin. No arrangement will be made, or permission granted, by this school system for any students living in another school system to attend school in this system, where this would tend to limit desegregation, or where the opportunity is not available to all students without regard to race, color or national origin.

17. Violation To Be Reported

It is a violation of our desegregation plan for any school official or teacher to influence or coerce any person in the making of a choice or to threaten any person with penalties or promises for any choice made. It is also a violation of Federal regulations for any person to intimidate, threaten, coerce, retaliate or discriminate against any individual for the purpose of interfering with the free making of a choice of school. Any person having any knowledge of any violation of these prohibitions should report the facts immediately by mail or phone to the Equal Educational Opportunities Program, U.S. Office of Education, Washington, D.C., 20202 (Telephone 202-242-0333). The name of any person reporting any violation will not be disclosed without his consent. Any other violation of the desegregation plan or other discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in the school system is also a violation of Federal requirements, and should likewise be reported. Anyone with a complaint to report should first bring it to the attention of local school officials, unless he feels it would not be helpful to do so. If local officials do not correct the violation promptly, any person familiar with the facts of the violation should report them immediately to the U.S. Office of Education at the above address or phone number.
APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL
July 21, 2016

Robert Robinson
Dept. of Instructional Leadership
College of Education
Box 870229

Re: IRB#: 16-OR-257 “More Than Just a Game: The Impact Sports Had on One Southern Town’s Racial Segregation”

Dear Mr. Robinson:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your application will expire on July 20, 2017. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to provide to your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.
APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM AND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
AAHRPP DOCUMENT #193

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM

CONSENT FORM FOR NONMEDICAL INTERVIEW STUDY

Please consider this information carefully before deciding whether to participate in this research.

Dear Potential Participant,
I want to personally, thank you for considering participating in this research study. This study is called “More Than Just a Game: The Impact Sports Had on One Southern Town’s Racial Segregation.” This historical research is being conducted by Robert L Robinson, who is a doctoral student at the University of Alabama. Mr. Robinson’s research is being supervised by Dr. Natalie Adams, Professor, College of Education, Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations of Education.

What is the purpose of the research?
The purpose of this research is to explore the role that sports played as a unifying factor during the desegregation of public schools by focusing on one of the most successful high school football teams (Valdosta High School).

What your role in this study?
If you decide to volunteer, you will be asked to participate in one or two interviews. You will be asked several questions. You will be asked questions about your experiences as it relates to the desegregation of Valdosta High School and the football team. With your permission, I will tape record the interviews so I don’t have to make so many notes. You will not be asked to state your name on the recording.

As mentioned above, the individual oral history interview will be audio recorded for research purposes to describe the experiences as it relates to the desegregation of Valdosta High School and the football team. These tapes will be stored in a locked file cabinet and only available to Robert L. Robinson (the primary investigator). We will keep these records/transcripts for six years per the Office for Research Compliance policy. After the six years, we will destroy all materials.

I understand that part of my participation in this research study will be audio-taped and I give my permission to the research team to record the interview.

☐ Yes, my participation in this interview can be audio recorded.

☐ No, I do not want my participation in this interview to be audio recorded.

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 7/27/16
EXPIRATION DATE: 7/26/2017
Why have I been asked to take part in this study?
You meet the criteria of the study as a witness to or participant in the desegregation of Valdosta High School and/or participation Valdosta football.

How many other people will be in this study?
The investigator hopes to interview 10-15 people from Valdosta within the next two months.

What are the alternatives to being in this study?
The only alternative is not to participate.

How much time will I spend being in this study?
The interview should last about 45-60 minutes, depending on how much information about your experiences you choose to share.

What are the risks (problems or dangers) from being this study?
Little or no risk is foreseen for your participation in this study.

What are the benefits of being in this study?
This study is a chance for you to tell your story about your experiences regarding desegregation of Valdosta High School.

Will being in this study cost me anything?
The only cost to you from this study is your time.

Will I be compensated for being in this study?
Sorry, you will not be compensated for your participation in this study. However, your participation is greatly appreciated by the researcher.

How will my privacy be protected?
You are free to decide where and when the interview will take place so we can talk without being overheard. If you prefer, the interview will take place in the privacy of your home or another place of your convenience. At any point during the interview, you have the right to refuse to answer any question or decide to no longer participate in the study.

Permission to Re-Contact Study Participants
After the initial interview is completed, there may be a possibility that the primary researcher Robert L. Robinson may need additional clarification on statements made by the participant. If this occurs it may be necessary for the researcher to re-contact you for clarification purposes. Your permission is necessary before the primary researcher can contact you.

Please indicate below whether or not you give the researcher permission to re-contact you.

☐ Yes, I give permission to the researcher to contact me should she needs me to clarify any statements made during my interview.

☐ No, I do not give permission to the researcher to contact me again after I have completed my interview.
How will my confidentiality be protected?
Your responses to interview questions will be kept confidential. At no time will your actual identity be revealed. You can select the pseudonym of your liking to be used as an alternative to your name. Anyone who helps me transcribe responses will only know you by this pseudonym. The recording, transcript, consent forms and key code linking your name with your pseudonym will be kept in a locked file cabinet in a locked office, and no one else will have access to it. We will keep these records/transcripts for six years per the Office for Research Compliance policy. After the six years, we will destroy all materials.

What are my rights as a participant?
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study without penalty. You may withdraw by informing the researcher that you no longer wish to participate (no questions will be asked). You may skip any question during the interview, but continue to participate in the rest of the study.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board is a committee that looks out for the ethical treatment of people in research studies. They may review the study records if they wish. This is to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

Who do I call if I have questions or problems?
If you have questions about this study right now, please ask them. If you have questions later on, please call the primary investigator, Robert L Robinson at 205-527-8321 or research advisor, Dr. Natalie Adams at 205-348-4600.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a participant in this research study, you may contact Ms. Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer at the University of Alabama, at 205-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066.

You may also ask questions, make a suggestion, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach Website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html. After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online there, or you may ask Robert L Robinson for a copy of it. You may also e-mail us at participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu

I have read this consent form. The nature and purpose of this research have been sufficiently explained, and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without incurring any penalty.

______________________________
Signature of Research Participant

______________________________
Signature of Investigator

Date

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 7/24/11
EXPIRATION DATE: 7/20/2011

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APPENDIX D

FREEDOM OF CHOICE LETTER
Dear Parent:

Our community has adopted a school desegregation plan. We will no longer have separate schools for children of different races. The desegregation plan has been accepted by the U.S. Office of Education under the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The plan requires every student or his parent to choose the school the student will attend in the coming school year. It does not matter which school the student is attending this year, and it does not matter whether that school was formerly a white or a Negro school. You and your child may select any school you wish.

A choice of school is required for each student. A student cannot be enrolled at any school next school year unless a choice of schools is made. This spring there will be a 30-day choice period, beginning APRIL 1, 1966, and ending APRIL 30, 1966.

A choice form listing the available schools and grades is enclosed. This form must be filled out and returned. You may mail it in the enclosed envelope, or deliver it by hand to any school or to the address above any time during the 30-day choice period. No one may require you to file your choice form before the end of the choice period. No preference will be given for choosing early during the choice period.

No principal, teacher or other school official is permitted to influence anyone in making a choice. No one is permitted to favor or penalize any student or other person because of a choice made. Once a choice is made, it cannot be changed except for serious hardship.

Also enclosed is an explanatory notice giving full details about the desegregation plan. It tells you how to exercise your rights under the plan, and tells you how teachers, school buses, sports and other activities are being desegregated.

Your School Board and the school staff will do everything we can to see to it that the rights of all students are protected and that our desegregation plan is carried out successfully.

Sincerely yours,

W. G. Nunn
Superintendent.