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**Integrating Texas Athletics:
The Forgotten Story of the First Black Basketball Players**

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**Integrating Texas Athletics:
The Forgotten Story of the First Black Basketball Players**

by

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**Integrating Texas Athletics:
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During a period in American history when the racial landscape was rapidly changing, racial advances in collegiate athletics were taking place across the South in the 1950s and 1960s. At the University of Texas, that process proved harder to achieve than many expected as it would take nearly two decades to integrate athletics following the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling that admitted blacks to the university in 1950. Caught in the middle of the decade-long struggle, as blacks finally began integrating various UT athletic teams, was a group of black basketball players whose story reflects the racial progress made not just in Austin, but also across the United States.

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Today, in the rafters in Frank Erwin Center, the home basketball court of the Texas Longhorns, are three retired jerseys belonging to three men: Slater Martin, T.J. Ford and Kevin Durant.

While Martin, who lettered in the mid 1940s, might be an unrecognizable name to the average fan, Ford and Durant finished their collegiate careers as two of the most notable alumni in the history of Texas basketball. Although the two players share the distinction of being the only Texas basketball players to earn NCAA National Player of the Year honors, they share another bond.

Both Ford and Durant are African Americans whose accomplishments and stories have been well documented – yet very few people know the history of the men who paved the way for those two members of the NBA.

At the University of Texas, a few key individuals tried to help blacks make significant strides as racial barriers began falling elsewhere in the South in the 1950s and 1960s. But those inroads proved harder to achieve than many expected. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that blacks could be admitted to the university in 1950 – but it would take nearly two more decades for integration to succeed in the Texas athletic department.

For Larry Robinson, one of the first three black basketball players at Texas, a two-time all-Southwest Conference performer and 1974 NBA Draft selection, his introduction to white teammates after arriving in Austin proved to be one his most significant memories during his time at Texas.

As members of the freshman basketball team at the University of Texas at Austin in 1971, Robinson and Rick Kruger entered the university from two vastly different worlds. Robinson, an African American, came from Hobbs, N.M., and had graduated from a segregated high school. Kruger had attended the all-white Memorial High School in Houston.

The two quickly realized their differences.

“This was a filthy rich guy from Houston, Texas, ... and had never really talked to any black people,” chuckles Robinson over the phone. “He thought he was better than I was.”

One afternoon after the basketball team finished practicing, Robinson and Kruger waited until everyone else had left and snuck back to Gregory Gymnasium, then home to the Texas’ basketball teams.

They flipped the lights back on and played a violent one-on-one game. “We were just knocking each other into the wall and then we ended up in a fight,” Robinson said. “We fought all the way to the dressing room.”

That moment was perhaps emblematic of racial tensions then permeating the nation. And it’s a moment that, in its way, signified a changing culture not only at Texas, but also throughout the country. Kruger and Robinson waged war with each other – but finally came to an understanding. They built a bridge over their racial divide.

Today, “he’s one of my best friends,” Robinson says about the white athlete he once fought.

That fight, and its ultimate resolution, perhaps represented the way race relations evolved at university athletic departments all over Texas and the South, marked by several defining moments for ordinary people caught up in a larger swirl of a changing nation. That story of the UT basketball program, in its way, mirrors the evolution of race relations not just in Austin, and not just in Texas, but also in the United States.

Simply put: The first few black basketball players at Texas played a critical role in breaking through decades of racial barriers at one of the most prominent universities in the country.

The first steps

As the 1950s approached, the University of Texas had established itself as one of the leading Southern universities in both the academic and athletic arenas.

Following in Southern tradition, the segregated university had prevented blacks from seeking admission dating back to 1885, when the first black was denied admission based on skin color. However, an unlikely name was emerging as a force to contend with university's decade-long policy of racial segregation.

Heman Marion Sweatt, an African American graduate of Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, attended graduate school at the University of Michigan for two semester before returning to Texas in 1938 due to health issues caused by the cold weather. Sweatt, who was working as a postal carrier, decided to pursue a law career and sought admittance to the UT law school in 1946, knowing segregation policies would prevent him from attending.

Not wanting to go out of state to attend school, Sweatt joined a group of NAACP representatives in Austin who supported his decision and joined him on his trip to the registrar's office. He presented his transcript and requested admission but was notified that funds would be made available for him to attend elsewhere. Sweat declined these options and decided to file suit against Texas in the 126th District Court of Travis County, arguing that his denial of admission violated his Fourteenth Amendment rights.

There had been some provocative precedent in the years building to Sweatt's case: In 1936, George L. Allen, a district manager for the Excelsio Life Insurance Company in Austin, arrived for an undergraduate class on business psychology and salesmanship at Texas. The professor, aware of Texas' segregationist policies but unsure of what to do, let Allen remain in class. Allen had no real desire to attend Texas and was working with the Dallas branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in hopes of being rejected and sparking a lawsuit.

However, 10 days later Allen was informed that he would have to withdraw. After refusing, the registrar's office simply cancelled his admission to Texas. Due to threats by the NAACP to sue the university, an out-of-state scholarship program was established by the Texas legislature. The program provided funds for blacks who sought an education beyond a bachelor's degree, but they were required to pursue their education at an out-of-state university. In addition, the option to pursue an undergraduate degree at Texas was still prohibited.

By 1944, many blacks in Texas were unhappy with the scholarship program and the NAACP decided to take its next step in integrating public universities. The Texas

State Conference of NAACP Branches planned a lawsuit against the University of Texas to help equal the opportunities for blacks seeking education at the graduate and professional levels.

“[The NAACP] saw Texas as one of the more moderate of the former Confederate states and that’s one of the reasons they chose to come here,” said Gary Lavergne, author of “Before Brown: Heman Marion Sweatt, Thurgood Marshall and the Long Road To Justice,” and director of admissions and research and policy analysis at the University of Texas at Austin.

“Austin has a reputation for being very much unlike the rest of Texas. There’s no ideal place to sue somebody but it would sure be a whole lot safer for Thurgood Marshall (head attorney in the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund in 1945 and eventual first black U.S. Supreme Court Justice) to come down here and do a trial than it would be in Montgomery, Alabama or Jackson, Mississippi, places like that,” said Lavergne.

Sixty-one years after the first black sought admittance to Texas and four years after filing suit, Sweatt achieved a significant milestone on June 5, 1950, as the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment required that Sweatt be admitted to Texas’ law school. He became the first black student to gain proper admittance in the history of the entire university.

“[Texas] had a much different path to desegregation unlike Alabama and Mississippi where they had governors standing on the doors saying, ‘We won’t allow negroes here,’” said Dr. Dwonna Goldstone, author of “Integrating the 40 Acres: The

Fifty-Year Struggle for Racial Equality at the University of Texas” and associate professor of English at Austin Peay State University.

“At [Texas] the board of regents were always compliant in terms of the law but wanted to make sure it was still segregated in other meaningful ways.”

While blacks had finally gained admittance to the university, the inclusion of blacks in campus activities such as dances, intramurals and in the dorms was minimal. Barbara Louise Smith, an African American music student, was removed from the female lead role in the university’s production of “Dido and Aeneas” in 1957. Dormitories were not fully integrated until 1964, 14 years after blacks were admitted on campus, and the intramural department abandoned swimming and wrestling to minimize contact between blacks and whites, as documented in Goldstone’s book, “Integrating the 40 Acres: The Fifty-Year Struggle for Racial Equality at the University of Texas.”

“I like the word desegregated, because it certainly wasn’t integrated,” said Leon Holland, an African American who was a freshman in 1956, the first school year Texas permitted black undergraduates. “At that time, nothing was integrated in terms of housing, athletics, bands and extracurricular-type activities.”

“They didn’t really integrate,” echoed Goldstone. “So, unlike Mississippi that said, ‘We don’t want them here at all,’ Texas said, ‘We’ll admit them but we’re going to segregate them.’”

Driven by the Board of Regents and university leaders who held deep-rooted political and social beliefs against racial integration, the process of total integration was moving slowly, if at all. University President Logan Wilson (1953-1960) was the one

who ordered Smith's removal from "Dido and Aeneas," and in a 1963 article published in The Daily Texan, it believed "An unwritten Regent rule has prohibited Negroes from participating in varsity sports ..."

However, prompted by the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in Brown v. Board of Education in 1954, which ruled that segregation in public schools based solely on race, was unconstitutional, Texas' administrators decided to finally admit qualified undergraduate applicants in 1955, five years after allowing blacks to enter graduate programs.

On campus, there were vastly different reactions. There was a cross burning on the School of Law's yard following Sweatt's enrollment. But, the campus newspaper, The Daily Texan, represented a more progressive view that echoed many students' views towards integration.

"In spite of the Regent's discrimination policy Negroes are at the University of Texas to stay," said Gwen Jordan, the first black to be elected to a student government office at Texas, in a 1961 letter published in The Daily Texan. "And we intend to go right on protesting, through demonstrations, orations, letters, and anything else that might persuade the Regents and the administration to treat us like Americans, like students, like Negroes, who – if this nation is at all what it is trumped up to be – have the right to be free. We are not free yet."

"Once we started going to class and things of that nature you kind of got a sense that you were not welcome per se," Holland said. "At one point in time when we were

living there someone decided to put a burning cross in front of our dormitory, so that was another signal that you're not necessarily wanted there.”

Again, The Daily Texan continuously challenged the administration's stance towards integration. Following Smith's dismissal from “Dido and Aeneas,” the newspaper praised her for upholding “a personal dignity throughout the entire incident.” In addition, following riots spawned by integration at the University of Mississippi, the Student Assembly voted to send a telegram to pro-integration groups in Mississippi. It said that Texas' students “salute your courage and perseverance in facing overwhelming opposition to stand up for your constitutional rights.”

“The students by and large were very supportive, no question about it,” Lavergne said. “[So was] the Daily Texan. Students were considered just downright radical back [in the 1950s at Texas]. So students, as a group, were very supportive and the faculty was very supportive. The administration was probably less supportive in so far as the administration [reports] to the regents and legislatures.”

Despite Texas taking grudgingly steps in advancing racial integration in the 1950s, there was one area in which the university was lagging. Regarded as one of the top athletic departments in the country, the Longhorns' athletic teams had yet to integrate by 1960.

Joe Louis, who defeated James Braddock in 1937 to become boxing's heavyweight boxing champion of the world, had become a household name in the 1930s for his success. Jackie Robinson integrated professional baseball in 1947 with the Brooklyn Dodgers. The Harlem Globetrotters defeated the world champion Minneapolis

Lakers one year later in 1948, proving that blacks could compete athletically on any national stage.

But Texas' athletic department continued to exclude blacks – and no end seemed in sight, even as the 1960s unfolded.

Integrating the Southwest Conference

During football season, the term “Friday night lights” is commonplace throughout the country. The phrase is synonymous with Texas high school games, dating back to the 1960s when it represented a password to a club to which blacks could not belong.

“The first time I heard it I was like, ‘What the hell is that all about,’” said Michael Hurd, author and co-editor-in-chief of the Texas Black History Preservation Project. “The black schools in Houston played our games on Thursday nights, so I had no idea what Friday night lights was all about.”

Hurd's lack of knowledge was related to the fact that Texas high school sports were split into separate divisions into the 1960s: the University Interscholastic League (UIL) and the Prairie View Interscholastic League (PVIL). Dating back to the 1920s, the PVIL helped develop black students in the arts, athletics, literature and music. Although similar to the UIL in structure and format, the PVIL held state championships for football, basketball, baseball and track and included up to 500 schools at its peak.

With segregation producing two separate divisions at the high school level, the lack of integration in collegiate athletic departments forced blacks to pursue their athletic careers at all-black universities: Prairie View A&M University, Paul Quinn College in

Dallas, Wiley College in Marshall, Texas Southern University and Huston-Tillotson University in Austin were prominent black colleges in Texas – and Grambling State University in Louisiana was not far away.

“People look at Prairie View and think, ‘Well, that’s not a very good program,’” Hurd said. “But at one point, back in the 50s and early 60s, Prairie View was THE black college program. A lot of the top black athletes back then went to Prairie View like now a lot of the guys go to UT.”

Players such as Willis Reed, a member of the NBA Hall of Fame, from Grambling State University and Otis Taylor, an NFL Pro Bowler, from Prairie View A&M University were just two of the prominent black athletes who were not given a chance to prove themselves at segregated universities.

In addition to athletics, black universities were producing successful individuals in all walks of life. Charles Brown, a graduate of Prairie View A&M University in the early 1940s, was a successful blues musician who was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1999. Barbara Jordan, the first Southern black woman to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, graduated from Texas Southern in 1956. Wiley College had made national headlines two decades earlier after the debate team defeated the University of Southern California to win the national championship.

For athletes such as Reed and Taylor, attaining a scholarship from a Division I university in the South out of high school was nearly impossible. Players not only had to deal with integration as a major obstacle, but also the lack of coverage from the

mainstream press. Because of the absence of coverage of black athletes, college recruiters who were seeking these athletes turned to the black press to find information.

“The [Houston] Post, the [Houston] Chronicle, the [Dallas] Morning News, all the big daily newspapers really didn’t cover black high schools that much,” Hurd said. “The black media did. A lot of pro teams and college recruiters read the black press because that’s how they found out about these players. Otherwise it was a lot of word-of-mouth. The Houston Forward Times wrote about black sports, players that we knew about, guys from our high schools.”

While the Texas’ board of regents continually voted to keep athletics segregated, citing “deference to the climate of opinion operative at the time,” a breakthrough came November 9, 1963. A unanimous vote by the Texas’ board of regents approved the desegregation of all student activities at Texas, including varsity athletics. In Goldstone’s book, “Integrating the 40 Acres: The Fifty-Year Struggle for Racial Equality at the University of Texas,” she notes the efforts of students and faculty in support of athletic integration that perhaps played a role in the regent’s decision.

In 1961, the Executive Board of Campus Interracial Committee gathered 3,000 student signatures supporting athletic integration. The Student Assembly voted 23-0 to petition the regents to adopt a policy supporting athletic integration after they conducted a survey that revealed 74 percent of students in favor of athletic integration. The General Faculty Council called for the university to pursue integration of all campus activities and students submitted a petition to the regents containing 6,000 signatures in support of

athletic integration. UT's student body president also joined six other SWC school student body presidents in signing a resolution promoting integration.

It was a historic ruling for the Southwest Conference. Texas became the first SWC program to integrate its athletic programs. Athletic Director Darrell Royal told reporters: "We will recruit anyone who will fit in our program. That is anyone who qualifies academically and athletically."

A column in *The Daily Texan* noted that Southwest Conference schools had been in a "gentlemen's agreement" not to integrate in previous years, but praised the university's decision, saying, "We are extremely proud of our Board of Regents for deciding to be men instead of gentlemen. And we are glad to see that they may have instigated a state-wide awakening."

In addition, the paper acknowledged the success needed by the first black athletes, saying, "An 80-yard touchdown run by a fleet Negro halfback will do wonders in dissolving racial antipathy."

One year later, desegregation began to occur at the high school level as the UIL, the governing board for high school athletics in Texas, removed the word "white" as a membership requirement for participating schools. In 1965, the UIL State Executive Committee validated the decision to open membership to all public schools and the PVIL began to merge with it at the beginning of the 1967-68 school year. While it was considered a victory for blacks looking for an opportunity to compete on a bigger stage, the merger, along with the SWC's decision to desegregate, had one negative effect.

“Immigration was a good thing and a bad thing,” Hurd said. “In terms of opportunities for the black community in general it was great, but in terms of athletics, integration pretty much killed a lot of black high school programs.”

Due to the merger, a lot of black high schools closed, forcing blacks to attend traditionally white high schools. High schools such as Houston Kashmere, Houston Wheatley, Houston Yates, Austin Anderson, Dallas Lincoln and Fort Worth Terrell were left with diluted talent.

The first black player appeared in a SWC football game in 1966. John Hill Westbrook, a walk-on running back at Baylor University, appeared in September in a game against Syracuse. Running back Jerry LeVias was the first black scholarship athlete in the SWC after signing to play for SMU in 1965. After a year on the freshman team, LeVias made his varsity appearance in the first game of the 1966 season and would go on to become an All-American, academic All-American and the first black SWC Player of the Year in 1968.

As other SWC schools began to integrate their programs, the University of Texas lagged behind. Baylor and SMU had already featured black athletes on the field. Even non-SWC member and Texas archrival Oklahoma made Prentice Gautt the first black to receive a scholarship at a major Southern school in 1958. Gautt went on to earn All-Big Eight football honors twice and was named an academic All-American.

“It was long overdue, obviously,” Hurd said, referring to blacks receiving athletic scholarships. “These guys were given a chance to play in the big time. It was like you

weren't restricted to Prairie View or Texas Southern or Grambling or those schools anymore, you could go to the big schools.”

With rival programs such as Oklahoma and SMU successfully featuring black athletes, Texas' image took a hit both in the black community and nationally. Other programs used Texas' racist image to help steer athletes from going to Austin. Even Texas' success had no sway – Texas had a football team that had gone 60-15-1 and won two national championships since desegregating athletics in 1963 to 1969. Both championship teams (1963, 1969) were all white and the 1969 team would be the last all-white team to win an NCAA football championship.

But as the 1960s were ending, new names emerged that would change the history of Texas' athletics.

Athletic integration on the hardwood

“There are two sports at Texas: football and spring football.”

The quote from Texas sports information director Jones Ramsey in 1971 underscored the athletic landscape. The football program grabbed the majority of the headlines after winning national championships in 1963, 1969 and 1970.

Football was king and it made the recruitment of black basketball players an even more difficult task.

“Everybody used that [quote] to recruit against us,” said former Texas head basketball coach Leon Black. “At Texas, we were not going to pull in a great basketball player for a lot of reasons, that being one of them.”

Black began his UT career as a player, lettering from 1951-53 before returning as an assistant coach under Harold Bradley in 1965. Black served three years under Bradley and was named head coach before the start of the 1968 season after Bradley resigned.

“[Bradley] thought, and it would have been nice if the assumption is correct, he thought the first black basketball player needed to be a great one,” Black said.

The two searched the country to find the right player. With contacts in New York, Bradley even tried to swing a visit from Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) but the reputation of Texas’ athletic department made it difficult to compete against traditionally strong basketball programs such as UCLA and North Carolina.

During recruiting season before the start of the 1965 school year, the Texas basketball program had targeted its first black basketball player in which they felt they had a legitimate shot at landing.

Head basketball coach Harold Bradley had been recruiting James Cash, a 6-6 center from Terrell High School in Fort Worth. Assistant coach Leon Black remembers that while no restrictions were placed on the staff in recruiting a black player, the program lacked a positive reputation not only in the black community, but also as a basketball school. In the end, Bradley ended up rescinding his offer for unknown reasons and Cash decided to remain close to home, signing with Texas Christian University and becoming the first black scholarship basketball player in the SWC.

“At some point several people associated with [Texas] communicated that they couldn’t believe there was a decision to be made,” said Cash in an email, who is now involved with a number of public, private and not-for-profit boards while also running

personal development programs for executives in Global 500 companies for The Cash Catalyst, LLC. “Given that UT had ‘lowered’ itself to offer me a scholarship, I couldn’t be very smart if I was considering offers from other schools.”

It was a significant moment for African American basketball players. While the doors for black football players had been opened a year earlier at SMU, the time had come for blacks to begin entering the basketball landscape across all of Texas.

“Given the social revolution in the country, I felt – given the opportunity – it was a requirement that I contribute,” Cash said. “I thought it was a big deal and enjoyed the spotlight.”

For Texas, it was another opportunity missed. Halfway across the state, Texas Western, now the University of Texas at El Paso, had just won the 1966 NCAA basketball title while starting five African Americans, less than a year after Texas missed out on Cash. Texas’ racist image across the South only worsened after these failed attempts at integration. But according to Black, that image was false.

“Not one time was there ever a meeting or a discussion about who to recruit,” Black said. “I was never told who I could recruit, whom I couldn’t recruit. It was never, absolutely never, an issue.”

Harold Bradley, head coach during Cash’s recruitment, put it this way in a 1965 Dallas Morning News article:

“James is still a very nice boy, but he has changed a lot since I first talked to him. At Texas, we are interested in recruiting boys who have a balanced perspective regarding athletics and education.”

Cash seemed to fit the mold of the black athlete the department was trying to recruit, but he ignored Texas. And the whispers lingered that Texas was not hell-bent on integrating its teams. But Black insists that racism was a non-factor the moment he stepped foot on campus. Black was raised in Van Zandt County in East Texas, in an area of the state known for its racist roots. Barely an hour away in Hunt County, a sign existed until the late 1960s that welcomed visitors to Greenville, Texas: “The Blackest Land, The Whitest People.”

Black, however, was raised in the country working and interacting with blacks. In addition, Black had been in the Army and had coached and played on a team consisting mainly of blacks. Race was a non-factor for Black who had succeeded Bradley as head coach prior to the 1968 season.

Black’s impact on the integration of the basketball program began immediately. Sam Bradley, originally recruited as a track athlete out of San Angelo, joined the freshman team on a track-basketball scholarship in 1968, becoming the first black basketball player to receive an athletic scholarship out of high school.

The Texan, for some reason, seemed to take a less than interested view of that watershed moment:

“For although the University signed a Negro trackman-basketball player (Sam Bradley) last spring and has a few other Negroes to participate in track and freshman football, the failure to sign a Negro football player has been a sore spot on campus for many years,” read The Daily Texan.

But it really was a significant step for the basketball program. After averaging 12 points per game on the freshman team, Bradley sat out the 1969 season before returning in 1970 and becoming the first black player to play on varsity and earn a letter. Although Black described Bradley as limited in his basketball abilities, he began the season as a starter and averaged 6.5 points per game before seeing his role diminish late in the season.

“He didn’t have a chance in the program to develop fundamentally in his basketball understanding and skill,” Black said. “But Sam was a good basketball player and we appreciate what he did.”

While Bradley played an important role in the history of integration at Texas, the basketball coaches were still searching for the first black impact player.

Jimmy Blacklock, a point guard from Houston Yates High School, had begun his collegiate career at Tyler Junior College. Black convinced him to transfer to Texas before the start of the 1971 season. It was big news that reverberated through black communities across the state. Blacklock was a star.

“I remember when I found out or heard [that Texas had black athletes], maybe I was watching a game of something and they said, ‘For the University of Texas, Jimmy Blacklock,’” Hurd said. “It kind of threw me back. I knew who Jimmy Blacklock was but I didn’t know he was at Texas. It was like, ‘Wait a minute, Texas has black athletes?’”

Blacklock not only survived his first season at Texas, he excelled as one of the top players for Texas. He averaged 16.6 points in 24 games to lead the team in scoring as Texas finished 12-12 overall and tied for fifth in the SWC.

“What a prince,” Black said of Blacklock. “He was a leader. You couldn’t find a guy that was more coachable and dedicated to the game.”

However, while Blacklock was establishing himself as one of the top black athletes at the University of Texas, a new name was emerging that would soon change the face of Texas basketball forever.

Larry Robinson arrived at Texas from Hobbs, N.M., as one of the top recruits coach Black would bring to the university during his time as head coach, which ended in 1976. Black would never have predicted the 6-6 forward would develop into one of the greatest basketball players in the history of Texas basketball.

Unlike most standout high school athletes, Robinson did not even make the starting lineup as a junior, but managed to earn all-district and all-state tournament honors despite coming off the bench. The following year, Robinson began popping up on the recruiting radar after averaging 27.2 points per game and earning all-state and all-American honors as a senior. Robinson garnered interest from Texas Western, Drake, Nebraska and in-state New Mexico State.

While some thought Robinson would attend New Mexico State, another attractive option was Texas Western – the school that had fielded the first championship basketball team featuring five black starters in 1966.

With the Texas basketball program’s lack of success and racist public image, it seemed like a long shot for Black and his staff to land Robinson.

Robinson estimates that he was one of about 150 black students in a high school with close to 1,600 total students. The basketball team had six blacks and seven whites. The racial tensions prepped Robinson for Austin.

“It wasn’t really a challenge for me,” Robinson said of going to Texas. “I could always relate to people of all races. I didn’t look at it as being black or white; I just looked at it as being a person going to the university [of Texas] to get an education. That’s just the way it was, it was part of that era.”

During Robinson’s senior year in high school, Larry Williams, a white teammate who would accept a scholarship to Kansas State, began to attract the attention of college recruiters. While many schools decided to pursue the pair, Black and assistant coach Bennie Lennox decided to focus only on Robinson.

“It was hard to get a really good black kid to come [to Texas] in that day,” Lennox said. “In those days there was money involved in a lot of cases and the schools would give the top black athletes a little hamburger money or whatever and I didn’t do that, ever. The ones that were classy and scholastically smart enough to get in, normally that was never mentioned.”

A visit to Texas sealed the deal for the future Longhorn. Robinson committed to Texas in 1970, becoming the third black athlete in the basketball program.

“When I signed to go to Texas, a lot of people were disappointed in me, a lot of people around me and the blacks in the community,” Robinson said. “Overall, [Texas] was a very prejudiced state and at the time the Southwest Conference was not a very strong conference and didn’t have many blacks. I didn’t think that I was that good of a

ballplayer. My prime objective was to get an education. I had been going to integrated schools since I was in fourth grade so for me it wasn't a novelty."

Robinson made an instant impact on the basketball program. Robinson was experiencing a smooth transition until that bloody confrontation with teammate Rick Kruger.

After the pair had their seemingly nonstop brawl after practice, Robinson began to mentor Kruger in terms of race relations.

"I didn't know to call a black person 'Boy' was a derogatory term," Kruger said. "Toward the end of a practice he pulled me aside and said, 'Don't you know you can't call a black guy, 'Boy,' especially in front of another black guy?' I honestly didn't know that. He absolutely came in with no chip on his shoulder. He decided he was going to make the best of [his situation] and he wasn't coming out there to prove any points or go on any crusades. He was coming out there to have a good time and get along and he did."

With Blacklock having a successful first year on the varsity team, Robinson was recording one of the greatest individual seasons in the history of Texas basketball. As a member of the freshman squad, he rewrote the Texas record book, averaging 33.9 points and nearly 17 rebounds per game, highlighted by a 55-point, 28-rebound game against Rice.

The future of the Texas basketball program was on the upswing with two blacks leading the way into the 1972 season. With no conference championships or postseason appearances since Black's arrival, the coaches needed a quick turnaround. In the previous five years, Texas had gone 43-53 overall and 25-31 in the SWC.

Before the '72 season tipped off, Blacklock etched his name into the history books, becoming the first black athlete to be elected to captain of any Texas athletic team, an honor voted on by the players.

But despite Blacklock's successful junior campaign, he struggled throughout the season and eventually lost his starting position as Black decided to go in another direction with sophomore Harry Larrabee. In his book *Longhorn Hoops: The History of Texas Basketball*, Richard Pennington believed turnovers and tentative play kept Blacklock from making an impact and he was replaced in the starting lineup after two straight conference losses.

But according to Black, the decision to bench Blacklock was based on other factors as well. A SWC coaches meeting with conference officials in Dallas prior to the 1972 season would restrict the way Blacklock played. Black believes that coaches told referees to work against Blacklock.

"Every time he touched the ball they called traveling," Black said. "They decided that his quickness wasn't legal. Coaches put it in their ears. The coaches said, 'He can't do that. It's not fair because he's traveling. He's not that quick.' He was just that much better; it didn't have anything to do [with being black]. It killed him. We started the year and every time he touched the ball, traveling. It just burned me up and I had no choice."

However, the decision brought criticism to the basketball program and on athletic director Royal – perhaps due to the still lingering image of racism at Texas.

"One guy said, 'Well the reason he can't play is because Darrell Royal wants just one black on the court at a time,'" Little said.

“Obviously I made a lot of mistakes, but I know I never made a mistake on a black and white issue,” Black said. “I may have played the wrong guy but it wasn’t because he was black or because he was white. That didn’t enter the picture at all.”

Regardless, the decision to use Blacklock off the bench paid immediate dividends as Texas finished the regular season 17-7 and 10-4 in the SWC, good for a first-place tie with SMU as Blacklock contributed 6.9 points in a reserve role.

The two teams met in Waco three days following Texas’ season finale win with a chance of advancing to the NCAA Tournament on the line. Texas had not reached the NCAA Tournament in eight seasons and Robinson was determined to change that. In a 91-89 overtime win, Robinson collected 30 points and 12 rebounds to give Texas a berth in the NCAA Tournament and a first-round matchup with 19th-ranked Houston.

Texas entered its matchup with Houston not only as underdogs, but riddled with injuries. More importantly, Robinson had broken his foot in Waco and it looked like the Longhorn’s leading scorer would have to sit. However, Robinson managed to record 23 points and 14 rebounds in 35 minutes as Texas shocked Houston, winning 85-74 and giving the Texas basketball program one of its most memorable wins.

The win sent a huge message: Texas, with its black stars, was an up-and-coming basketball program, and people across the state and nation took notice. Things had surely changed in the Lone Star State.

“For the whole Southwest Conference and for the rest of the world, it was like, ‘Wow,’” Little said. “It was like when Texas beat Southern Cal in the [2006] Rose Bowl.”

Texas would go on to lose to Kansas State in the Midwest Regional and again to Southwestern Louisiana in the consolation game, but Robinson and the entire team had left a significant mark on the program and had done their part to bury the racist legacy at the University of Texas.

Changes across Texas athletics

While the integration of the Texas basketball program began in 1968 with Sam Bradley, the story of athletic integration at UT had begun 12 years earlier.

Marion Ford, a talented athlete and honor student out of Phillis Wheatley High School in Houston announced his decision to try out for the football team in 1954. Until this point, no black athletes had attempted to join the athletic program since Texas had approved the integration of undergraduate studies just months earlier. However, after announcing his intentions to a reporter from the Houston Chronicle, Ford was denied admission to the university and eventually decided to attend the University of Illinois.

Despite Ford's attempts to integrate in 1954, it would be nine years later until blacks finally made a presence on the athletic field. In November of 1963, three African Americans – James Means, Cecil Carter and Oliver Patterson – approached Texas track and field coach Jack Patterson and asked about competing for Texas after the regent's decision to integrate. One month later, Means and Carter became the first black athletes to workout with a Texas athletic team before becoming the first black athletes to compete for Texas at a meet in February of 1964, as noted in Goldstone's book, "Integrating the 40 Acres: The Fifty-Year Struggle for Racial Equality at the University of Texas."

“My perspective is totally different than a lot of other people, like Jerry LeVias at SMU,” said Means, an Austin native. “He said he had a horrible time but I didn’t have a horrible time. I can’t recall many overt racism from anybody. The coaches I had were excellent coaches so they were accepting to me personally. I don’t know what happened behind closed doors, but I never had a problem with the coaches.”

In an excerpt from Richard Pennington’s book, *Breaking the Ice: The Racial Integration of Southwest Conference Football*, former Texas history professor Joe Frantz described additional influences that perhaps delayed integration between the years of 1954 and 1963 and slowed Royal, who had been named head football coach in 1957:

“Powerful forces on the Athletic Council and the Board of Regents impressed upon Royal that there was no need to hurry integration, but no less significant was the huge number of UT alumni, most of whom wanted to keep the school like it was in the old days. ‘I think Royal was running with the conservative, status-quo set. Those are the people who deliver football players and underwrite what you’re trying to do,’ said Frantz. ‘Royal would have lost a lot of support. I saw a letter from a longtime Dallas supporter, saying, ‘The minute you get a black down there, I’m through with you forever.’ No telling how many hundred he got like that.’”

“Good school, racist school. I think that was the perception,” Hurd said. “There were rumors that Darrell Royal didn’t like black players and all that kind of stuff. That really hurt the image their image in the black community.”

After Patterson and Cecil left the team for various reasons, none due to racism according to Means, history was made as Means became the first black to earn a varsity

letter at Texas and in the SWC. Despite being a walk on during his first two years, he became the first black athlete on scholarship at Texas during his junior year in 1966. But while Means was receiving the benefits of an athletic scholarship, he knew all eyes were on him to see how he performed as a student-athlete.

“I think the coaches [watched me] because if I’d have stayed in trouble while I was in school it would have been a negative image and would have filtered in their brains when they tried to recruit somebody else,” Means said. “It was always a struggle to always improve and do your best, plus stay in school at the same time without flunking out, so it was all a challenge and something to be proud of.”

Means had cemented himself in the history of athletic integration at Texas, but his role had done little to help speed the process of integration in UT’s most significant and well-known program: football.

Breaking through

With Texas’ athletic programs making productive steps in integration in the 1960s, the failure to find a black athlete capable of playing football continued to feed the university’s racist image.

In a 1967 article in the *Austin American*, questions surfaced about why Texas was publicly failing to recruit black athletes.

In the article, members of the Negro Association for Progress (NAP) “remained unimpressed by [academic and athletic leaders] arguments that most Negro athletes in Texas either cannot pass University entrance requirements or lack desire to attend the

University.” Grace Cleaver, president of the NAP, said Texas claimed it did not know where to recruit black athletes – but that the University of Houston and other schools not only easily found black athletes, but recruited them as well.

“That’s ridiculous,” Goldstone said of the notion that Texas could not recruit black athletes due to university academic entrance requirements. “That was a way to keep them out. I don’t know how much of it was Darrell Royal, but I think they were all following the wishes of the people who gave so much money to the university.”

“We certainly weren’t going to integrate with an average football player,” said Royal in a 2010 interview. “If we were going to integrate, we needed to have a black here that excels and gets the publicity so prospects can see that. If we were going to integrate, we needed to integrate with a guy that could play.”

Bill Little, sports information director for Texas beginning in 1968, believed that racist image hurt Texas on the recruiting trail.

“We’re in the late 60s and Texas still had not had an African American star,” Little said. “The other schools were hammering coach Royal in recruiting, saying he was a racist. He called me in and said, ‘Bill, I want you to write a story that shows I’m not a racist.’ I said, ‘Coach, I can’t do that because being a racist is like being a son-of-a-bitch. If people think you’re a son-of-a-bitch you can’t stand on a street corner and say, ‘Hey, I’m really not.’ You’re going to have to show them that you’re not.’”

Since Texas was regarded as a football school during the integration of the SWC, Royal was perhaps the most well known face at the university. It was up to him not only

integrate the athletic department, but also to find a black student-athlete who could succeed in all areas once arriving on campus.

“When Oklahoma went in and said, ‘Hey, we had Prentice Gautt and he’s a super player and has done really great,’ and SMU is able to come in and say, ‘Jerry LeVias, boy has he done a great job for us,’ Texas didn’t have a way to respond to that,” Little said. “They were looking for the guy that could come and make it academically and perform well on the field.”

The lack of a strong black presence in the athletic department caused some black students at the university to root against Texas – especially when visiting schools with black athletes competed against Texas.

“Always root for the black guy,” Hurd said. “You would see the only black player on this team and that kind of stuff and you wanted that person to succeed and send a message that all the racist perceptions are wrong.”

Then, in 1967, four years after the board of regents approved the integration of the athletic department and many failed attempts at integrating the university’s most scrutinized athletic program, Texas had finally found its men to integrate its football team.

E. A. Curry from Midland and Robinson Parsons, both African American walk-ons, became the first black football players at Texas. Curry also became the first black to score a touchdown against the Rice freshmen squad that year.

The following year in 1969, Leon O'Neal of Killeen became the first black player to receive a scholarship and signed with the football team. But the pressure of being the first black football player at Texas was immense.

“He’s got to be good or he’ll let down a great number of people. Unfortunately, we must realize that he will be judged as a Negro athlete first and as a person second. In athletics, he’s got to prove good before he has a chance to become just a person. That is one of the sadness of the times, but perhaps the trial period will soon give away,” read The Daily Texan.

However, despite playing well on the freshman team, O'Neal flunked out by the end of the year and never competed at the varsity level.

It was 1968 and Texas once again had no blacks on the most high-profile athletic program on campus.

But the significance of O'Neal's presence within the athletic department did not go unnoticed. The Daily Texan regarded O'Neal's signing as a “step in the right direction toward a really integrated institution, instead of a half-heartedly integrated one.”

In the fall of 1969, Roy found Julius Whittier, a standout lineman from San Antonio who would become the first black football letterman in school history. Whittier would develop into a three-year letterman and two-year for the Longhorns.

“Everybody told me not to come play football here,” Whittier told The Daily Texan in 2010. “They told me they were racists and they had the Ku Klux Klan and all that. But everything I was told about the University of Texas wasn't true. I have to thank coach Roy for making it all possible that I played here. He stuck his neck out for me

and he believed that UT should be an opportunity for people of all colors, despite what everybody around him was saying otherwise.”

While Texas believed it needed to find a particular athlete like Whittier to successfully integrate, one that not only succeeded athletically but academically as well, others believe the qualifications placed on the ‘right’ athlete were a way to further delay integration. Regardless, Royal admitted later in *The Daily Texan* in 1972 that the decision weighed heavily on him.

“If I’ve had a fault, it’s been this – that I didn’t go ahead and be the first and say, ‘This is right, and blacks should be given equal opportunity. Now I’m going to pioneer it.’ ... I feel a little guilty about that.”

Whatever the reasons for the delayed integration, Texas had finally opened its doors to black athletes on a public stage. While Whittier was successfully integrating a Texas football program that would field the last all-white national football champion in 1969, the successes of Robinson and Blacklock were having a significant impact on the basketball program.

A program on the rise

Despite playing for a basketball team that was greatly overshadowed on a football-dominated campus, Robinson and Blacklock, both members of the 1972 team, had perhaps finally opened a major door in the recruitment of black athletes, not only for basketball, but across the entire Texas athletic landscape.

While Texas had successfully integrated the track, football and basketball teams in previous years, the black athletes had remained somewhat under the radar. Means, O’Neal, Whittier and Bradley each played a significant role in breaking racial barriers, but their stories faded away following their departure from the university. For the university to become nationally recognized and garner an interest in black athletes, it needed superstars.

While the Texas football program was introducing the nation to Roosevelt Leaks, who rushed for over 1,000 yards and eight touchdowns as a sophomore in 1972 and would go on to become one of the greatest running backs in the history of Texas’ football, Robinson was having a similar impact on the basketball court.

Robinson led the team in scoring as a sophomore, averaging 21.9 points a game after his stellar freshman campaign.

“I realized that [Roosevelt Leaks] was a difference maker,” Little said. And “the thing about Larry, more than him being an African American, was him being the best. Roosevelt Leaks was great, but there would be an Earl Campbell who would follow. But Larry Robinson’s numbers, when you consider that he missed half a year completely and still had the numbers he had is just incredible.”

Robinson would go on to lead Texas in scoring all three years, averaging 18.1 points per game as a junior and 22.4 points along with 10.9 rebounds per game as a senior. He earned all-SWC and team MVP honors his sophomore and senior years while leaving his imprint all over the Longhorn record books. Although Texas missed the postseason in 1973, in large part due to Robinson breaking his knee cap in the ninth game

of the season and missing the remainder of the year, Texas returned to the NCAA postseason in 1974 for the second time in three seasons after winning the SWC conference title.

“You can’t really say Larry Robinson was a success story,” Robinson said. “Of course you have somebody come before you like Charlie Scott, who came before a lot of people at North Carolina. Of course they’re going to say, ‘The doors are open for blacks.’ I think when Roosevelt Leaks came that was also a step for getting black basketball players and black athletes in general. I think it was just a sign of the time. It was inevitable it was going to happen.”

Four seasons after Robinson’s departure, Texas won its only basketball postseason championship in school history. The Longhorns captured the 1978 National Invitational Tournament (NIT), which consisted of the 16-best teams who did not receive an invite to the NCAA Tournament, which fielded 32 teams. The team started three blacks and had a total of eight on the 17-man roster, a far different appearance 10 years after Bradley became the first black basketball player.

The Texas basketball program boasts 11 All-Americans since Robinson’s departure in 1974. Nine of those are African Americans, highlighted by T.J. Ford and Kevin Durant who won NCAA National Player of the Year honors. Considered one of the greatest basketball players in school history despite just playing one season, Durant has twice led the NBA in scoring in his four seasons in the league. Despite the success of black basketball players at Texas, it’s hard not to wonder if these opportunities would have been available had it not been for Bradley, Blacklock and Robinson.

While Bradley and Blacklock, who went on to play for the Harlem Globetrotters, were vital to the desegregation of the basketball program, it was Robinson whose impact was felt for years to come.

Robinson was selected by the Houston Rockets with the 59th overall pick in the 1974 NBA Draft, one year after being taken by Memphis in the second round of the 1973 American Basketball Association (ABA) Undergraduate Draft. Robinson decided to go to Memphis. However, Memphis went bankrupt, leaving Robinson without a team. The following season, the Boston Celtics invited Robinson for a tryout, and despite his strong preseason play, was the last player cut.

After coming back to Austin and receiving his degree, Robinson played seven years in Sweden, leading the league in scoring and rebounding several times, winning three consecutive championships and being named the league's MVP each season.

“He was as big a basketball talent as [Texas] has ever had,” Kruger said. “I think we should consider retiring his number. He's in the Hall of Honor (inducted in 1989) and some things like that, but when you look at him being one of the first blacks to sign an athletic scholarship at the University of Texas and all the things he did, I would think that should be under consideration.”

Robinson, Bradley and Blacklock played a significant role in creating some of Bill Little's most memorable moments as Sports Information Director at a school that had struggled with changing its racist image for decades.

“What I realize is that the best day of my life as SID was the day that I didn’t know the number,” Little said. “That was always the question. ‘How many blacks do you have on your team?’ The day that I didn’t know that number was a blessed day.”

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