

# “Why They Came: Rollie Miles, Johnny Bright and Race in the CFL”

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One of the more regularly mythologized concepts in North American sport is the idea of race and the breakdown of racial barriers. This mythology is steeped in climactic battles and peopled by larger-than-life heroes and villains. The mythology of race in American sports is so pervasive that it has entered the consciousness of Canadians as fully as it has Americans; Canadians know of the struggles of Jackie Robinson in baseball, Jack Johnson in boxing, and they can even recognize the impact that Tiger Woods has had on professional golf. However, in popular Canadian parlance, these problems in American sport are simply specific magnifications of problems in American society. Most Canadians do not look at problems of race relations in Canada, as demonstrated by Canadian sporting culture, in the same way. Few Canadians know of Willie O'Ree's struggles in the National Hockey League though they know of Jackie Robinson's story. Fewer still know of Canadian Football League (CFL)<sup>1</sup> legends Johnny Bright and Rollie Miles to say nothing of Tom Casey or Herb Trawick.

Those Canadians who are aware of these black CFL stars often place them in the same mythological world context as American black sporting heroes. However, because of their movement to Canada to participate in sports, these CFL legends are used to provide a basis for popular Canadian views on racial harmony north of the 49th parallel; the presence of these black athletes in Canada is used as proof of Canada's status as a "more hospitable social environment north of the border."<sup>2</sup> This paper seeks to examine this belief in a more tolerant northern society by looking at race relations through the lens of professional sport. It will focus on the Edmonton Eskimos Grey Cup champion teams

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<sup>1</sup> Though the CFL's official creation was not until 1958, the post World War Two Canadian Rugby Union and the Canadian Football Council (1956-1958) will be referred to as the CFL for the duration of this paper.

Carl T. Rowan, "Negroes In Canada," *Ebony* 15 (Aug, 1960), 98

of 1954-1956 and this team's duo of black stars: Johnny Bright and Rollie Miles. This paper will address race relations in Canadian society as a whole, North American professional football, and the Canadian Football League, while attempting to see why these players came to Edmonton and why the Edmonton Eskimos wanted them. Did these players come to Edmonton only because it was a more tolerant society as John Mackinnon of the Edmonton Journal has suggested<sup>3</sup> or was there a larger set of considerations that made Edmonton home?

### **Race Relations In Canada**

To examine the idea of Canada as a tolerant society, the history of race relations in Canada must be examined. Though there has never been a large population of blacks in Canada the concept of race has always been a prevalent one.<sup>4</sup> As a colony of the British Empire, Canada followed the same racial policies of the entire empire, which included a legal slave trade. This slave trade is what brought the majority of blacks to Canada in its early years, although the total number of slaves was not particularly high as Canada did not have the massive plantation systems prevalent in the southern United States and the Caribbean. When the British Imperial Parliament passed an act abolishing slavery in the Empire on August 28, 1833 there was no compensatory money set aside for slave owners in British North America. Of the nearly 800,000 slaves freed by this Act, estimates state that only 50 of these slaves resided in British North America, and the last surviving

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<sup>3</sup> John MacKinnon, "Johnny Bright incident changed college football," *Edmonton Journal*, Feb. 10, 2004, D1

<sup>4</sup> In 1860 4% of the Canadian populace was black, 0.5% in 1960, and 2.2% in 2001. Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks In Canada: A History 2nd Ed.*, (McGill-Queen's University Press: Kingston, 1997), 494 and Statistics Canada, 2001 Census, <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/standard/themes/RetrieveProductTable.cfm?Temporal=2001&PID=68641&APATH=3&GID=517770&METH=1&PTYPE=55496&THEME=44&FOCUS=O&ALD=O&PLACENAME=O&PROVINCE=O&SEARCH=O&GC=O&GK=O&VID=O&FL=O&RL=O&FREE=O>

former slave, John Baker, died in Cornwall in 1871.<sup>5</sup> This institutional slavery existed in the United States until the passage of the 13th and 14th Amendments to the American Constitution, ratified by 1868.

Existing alongside these black slaves were the black Loyalists and their descendants. The Loyalists were a group of people who fled the United States during the American Revolution, demonstrating their loyalty to the British Empire. Though many of the Loyalists brought slaves across to Canada there were between 3,000 and 5,000 free blacks that came as a part of the 30,000 to 50,000 Loyalists who fled to Canada.<sup>6</sup> These blacks had been freed by the British government for fighting for the British Empire and, along with all other Loyalists, were promised free land in sizes that corresponded to their military rank. The majority of the black Loyalists received their land in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, not Upper or Lower Canada. This pattern of settlement would change little from the 1780's through to the 1960's. In these areas of Loyalist settlement, many segregationist policies would be pursued. The longest lasting of these official policies, segregated schools, lasted in Ontario and Nova Scotia until the late 1960's.<sup>7</sup>

Racial issues did not, however, stop at the eastern border of Manitoba. On the prairies, relations between whites and blacks were virtually non-existent before the movement of blacks into areas around Maidstone, Saskatchewan in 1905. There were few problems with this settlement until larger numbers of blacks began to plan their migration into Alberta from Oklahoma. These blacks wanted to escape the racist laws that began to

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<sup>5</sup> Winks, *The Blacks In Canada*, 110-111.

<sup>6</sup> The data on the number of Loyalists is inconsistent. My statistics have been gleaned from: Winks, *The Blacks In Canada*, 33; Adrienne Shadd, "Institutionalized Racism and Canadian History: Notes Of A Black Canadian," in Ormand McKague ed., *Racism In Canada*, (Fifth House Publishers: Saskatoon, 1991), 3; and Ann Mackenzie, "A Short History of the United Empire Loyalists," <http://www.uelac.org/history.php>,

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<sup>7</sup> Winks, *The Blacks In Canada*, 362-289

be enacted after Oklahoma moved from territorial status to statehood in 1907.<sup>8</sup> Though the movement of blacks into Maidstone increased through 1910, the Edmonton region began to attract larger numbers of black settlers; Campsie, Wildwood, and Breton were all isolated, largely black settlements that were founded within 100 miles of Edmonton shortly prior to the First World War.<sup>9</sup> The largest settlement, consisting of 350 blacks during the 1930s, was Amber Valley, Alberta, just east of Athabasca.<sup>10</sup> Henry Sneed organized groups of 194, and later 200, blacks in Oklahoma to settle Amber Valley in 1911.<sup>11</sup> The reaction of the Edmonton Board of Trade to the possibility of large numbers of blacks moving into the region is indicative of the attitudes of the majority of the white populace. The Edmonton Board of Trade passed three resolutions and sent three petitions to Ottawa in 1910 and 1911 attempting to force a change in immigration policies that would ban black entry into the country. The major argument of the Board of Trade was that only small numbers of blacks could be tolerated on the prairies; the Board of Trade argued that a higher black population would lead to resentment and violence from the white populace. These letters did not stop the immigration of blacks but the Canadian government did restrict advertising about the prairies to white areas of the United States.<sup>12</sup> This reaction to blacks on the prairies did not dissipate after the movement of people into Amber Valley and Maidstone. Instead, racism continued apace. However, the small numbers of blacks, or any minority, in Alberta did not excite the most racist

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<sup>8</sup> R. Bruce Shepard, "Plain Racism: The Reaction Against Oklahoma Black Immigration to the Canadian Plains," in McKague, *Racism In Canada*, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Howard Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*, (Hurtig Publishers: Edmonton, 1990), 84

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 85

<sup>11</sup> Shepard, "Plain Racism," 18

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-27

organizations, the KKK and the Orange Order, who instead focused on the 'problem' of Roman-Catholics.<sup>13</sup>

Black communities outside of Edmonton did not translate into an influx of blacks into the city as feared by the board of trade. In fact Edmonton's black community was only 208 people in 1911 of an Alberta black population of 1000. In 1951, when the entire black population in Alberta was 702, Edmonton contained 159,631 people and Calgary 129,060. Even though Edmonton's black population was three times that of Calgary, with its relatively small population, the black community would not have been highly noticeable in Edmonton.<sup>14</sup> However, the relatively low numbers of Edmonton blacks did not entirely prevent incidents of prejudice. In Edmonton there were no white barbers who would cut the hair of blacks, hospitals admitted to drawing the colour line both in service and in nurses training programs, and in 1924 the City Commissioner banned all blacks from public parks and swimming pools. Though the Edmonton City Council overturned the City Commissioner's ruling, some racism still existed in the Edmonton area. This general racial harmony in Edmonton differed slightly from the racial problems in Calgary. In Calgary, there were minor anti-Chinese riots and political sentiment prior to the First World War and an anti-black riot during the Second World War which involved 300 people attacking the home of a black bandleader who was said to have made a pass at a white girl.<sup>15</sup> None of these eruptions of violence were mirrored in Edmonton which even had a small black business class as opposed to Calgary whose black population was

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<sup>13</sup> Palmer, *Alberta*, 204

<sup>14</sup> Howard and Tamara Palmer, "The Black Experience In Alberta," in Howard and Tamara Palmer ed., *Peoples Of Alberta: Portraits Of Cultural Diversity*, (Western Producer Prairie Books: Saskatoon, 1985), 381-382, 385 and 1951 Canadian Census, <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/datalib/cc51/census51.htm#maps>

<sup>15</sup> Palmer and Palmer, "The Black Experience In Alberta," 387-388

mainly employed as train porters.<sup>16</sup> The specter of racism in Edmonton would raise its head during the construction of the Alaska Highway in 1942. However, because of the segregation of army construction units, and their relative distance from Edmonton, there were no problems of racial violence.<sup>17</sup> This was the social milieu in Edmonton into which Rollie Miles and Johnny Bright entered when joining the Eskimos in the early 1950s.

Commenting on the social situation in 1950s Edmonton, Rollie Miles stated that "you [didn't] have to be a football hero to avoid discrimination in Canada but it sure help[ed]."<sup>18</sup> He made this statement after being admitted to the Derrick Golf and Country Club, an occurrence which was surprising to a black man from Washington, D.C. This was also recognized by "Sugarfoot" Anderson as he and Woody Strode were invited to join a Calgary country club due to their exploits with the Stampeders though this club did have bans on black and Jewish members.<sup>19</sup> Miles recognized the difference between regular black men and football stars such as himself and Johnny Bright; Miles noted that the "wave of indignation that swell[ed] up" when he and Bright encountered racism became a "trickle of indignation where the ordinary negro [was] concerned."<sup>20</sup> Even a 1961 open letter sent to the Edmonton Journal by four black athletes decrying racial prejudice in the city was said to represent the situation of regular blacks not high-profile athletes such as the Eskimos stars?<sup>21</sup>

However, it was not even 'ordinary negroes' who encountered racism during the period of Miles' football career. In Windsor, Ontario, a Dr. Taylor was denied access to

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 382, 385 and Palmer, *Alberta*, 85-86, 100

<sup>17</sup> Winks, *The Blacks In Canada*, 320-325, 420-422

<sup>18</sup> Rowan, "Negroes In Canada," 98

<sup>19</sup> Graham Kelly, *Green Grit: The Story of the Saskatchewan Roughriders*, (Harper-Collins: Toronto, 2001), 122

<sup>20</sup> Rowan, "Negroes In Canada," 102

<sup>21</sup> Winks, *The Blacks In Canada*, 461

the Windsor Rotary Club though he had been a member of the Windsor school board for 28 years; and, in Calgary, Theodore King, credit manager for the Calgary Farm Machinery Company and the leader of the Alberta Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, filed a discrimination suit against a local motel that had refused him service.<sup>22</sup> Even the football stars were not entirely divorced from this racism. Norman Kwong, recalling the controversy that had surrounded the decision to award the first Schenley Award, given to the CFL MVP, to Billy Vessels rather than Rollie Miles, said "Conditions in the country then weren't conducive to a person of color winning awards."<sup>23</sup> A hotel manager in Winnipeg almost lost the business of the Calgary Stampeders when he objected to allowing their two black players, "Sugarfoot" Anderson and Woody Strode, to stay. A similar situation occurred for Winnipeg Blue Bombers Tom Casey and "Indian" Jack Jacobs. Though these incidents were ultimately resolved to allow equal access to the black players, they speak to a still prevalent idea of racism.<sup>24</sup> A similar occurrence happened in Edmonton when the location of a team dinner was being decided. An Edmonton hotel offered to host the dinner but requested the absence of the Eskimos two black members. This offer was refused and the dinner was hosted at a more tolerant locale.<sup>25</sup>

Discrimination was also evident in the papers of the time. Generally innocuous minority nicknames such as Normie Kwong, 'the China Clipper,' existed alongside racial profiles such as the naming of Rollie Miles as "the little Negro."<sup>26</sup> However, this labeling of Miles may also have been due to his outspokenness on racial issues as evidenced by

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<sup>22</sup> Rowan, "Negroes In Canada," 100, 104

<sup>23</sup> Graham Kelly, *The Grey Cup: A History*, (Johnson Gorman: Red Deer, 1999), 22

<sup>24</sup> Kelly, *Green Grit*, 122-123.

<sup>25</sup> Vicki Hall, "One of CFL's Best Ever Stood Up For Teammates," *Edmonton Journal*, Nov. 11, 2006, D1

<sup>26</sup> "New Rushing Mark For Rollie Miles In Western League," *The Globe and Mail*, Nov. 18, 1953



his participation in a 1960 feature for *Ebony*, a Chicago magazine designed for a black audience and the discussion of black issues, which discussed the existence of racial prejudice in Canada as well as the U.S.<sup>27</sup> In another example of his outspokenness, as the keynote speaker for a dinner in Wallaceburg, Ontario, Miles challenged a bylaw which gave a nightly curfew to blacks. Though the mayor searched the town records for this bylaw, and found that it did not exist, Miles stated that the belief in this laws authenticity by those at the dinner was just as harmful as an actual law; if the residents of Wallaceburg thought that this law existed, Miles wanted to know why they had not challenged it sooner. Miles ended off the speech with a call for education as the only way to counter the "acquired attitude" of racism, citing the Eskimos of an example of educated racial harmony.<sup>28</sup> Johnny Bright was less public about racial issues and, though often referred to as black, never received a racial moniker akin to that of Miles'. As Marc Horton said in his obituary for Johnny Bright, Bright told stories of racism that were tough to hear but showed courage by not allowing this racism to control his life.<sup>29</sup> Unlike Miles, Bright did not challenge racial issues in a public forum.

This history of race in Canada shows that there were struggles for Canadian blacks just as there were for American blacks. The myth of a society with little racism attempts to cover Canadian instances of racism by comparing them to American segregationist policies. This action does a disservice to the problems faced by blacks in Canada. A new black immigrant who had moved to Canada's west coast said that there was racism in Canada but that at least it wasn't as bad as in his former home of Florida.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Rowan, "Negroes In Canada," 98-106

<sup>28</sup> *Edmonton Journal*, Feb. 22, 1957, 1, 10

<sup>29</sup> Marc Horton, "Pride, Courage Bright's Legacy," *Edmonton Journal*, Dec. 15, 1983, D1

<sup>30</sup> Rowan, "Negros In Canada," 106

This idea is born out by comments of Jacksonville, Florida's mayor on a visit to Edmonton when, after the United States Supreme Court was beginning to strike down segregationist state laws, he stated that "separate but equal" was still a viable way to separate white from blacks. The mayor went as far as to say that in Jacksonville, the black pools were often nicer than the white pools.<sup>31</sup> However, blacks who encountered a flaming Klansman cross in Oakville, Ontario or encountered denial of service at Alberta golf courses and hotels, must have felt similar fear and anger to those in Mississippi or Florida.<sup>32</sup> If there was racism in Canada, similar to that in America, there must have been other reasons for men like Bright and Miles to travel northwards to play football.

### Race In Football

To see reasons to come to Canada to play football, the differences of race relations in Canadian football and American football need to be examined. The problems of race in sport had existed as long as American professional sport. Race was just as contentious of an issue in American football as it was in American society and in the rest of American sport. In the United States the first blacks to play football played in universities such as Rutgers and Brown along with smaller, black-only colleges. Black legends of the gridiron such as Fritz Pollard and Paul Robeson played in college and some went on to the professional ranks.<sup>33</sup> Much of the major, and best, football played in America during the period prior to the First World War was restricted to the Ivy League

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<sup>31</sup> "Visiting Mayor Says Florida Has No Integration Trouble," Edmonton Journal, July 20, 1959, 3

<sup>32</sup> Winks, *The Blacks In Canada*, 324

<sup>33</sup> Pollard played in the 1915 Rose Bowl for Brown University and then in the professional leagues from 1919-1925. Robeson played football at Rutgers from 1915-1919, and was named an All-American twice but never played professional football. [http://www.profootballhof.com/hofi/member.jsp?player\\_id=242](http://www.profootballhof.com/hofi/member.jsp?player_id=242) and <http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/njh/Pau!Robeson/PRBio.htm>

colleges, which won 40 national championships from 1869 to 1912, and New York based universities.<sup>34</sup> As well, the professional teams of the American Professional Football Association were from Ohio, New York, and Illinois.<sup>35</sup> These areas, while not being devoid of racist thought, were less rigidly segregated than the American South and allowed blacks to play on integrated teams. This is not to say that the racial situation on northern campuses was perfect. Though Johnny Bright lead the NCAA in yardage in 1950, his skin colour forced him to live off the Drake campus as the residences were reserved for whites.<sup>36</sup> However, the expansion of football into the segregated South did cause a variety of even larger controversies than segregated dorms. Often, black players were excluded from game-day lineups by their desegregated northern teams at the request of Southern colleges.<sup>37</sup> However, one of the biggest, and most publicized, incidents, which involved on-field violence, was the "Johnny Bright incident."

Johnny Bright played halfback for the Bulldogs of Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa.<sup>38</sup> In 1949, Bright accounted for 1950 yards of total offence and in 1950 he set NCAA football records with 2400 yards of offence. In 1951, while leading the nation in total offence again, Bright went to Oklahoma A&M as the first black player to play against the Aggies. In this game, Oklahoma A&M's Wilbanks Smith broke Bright's jaw by hitting him in the face with a forearm over multiple plays. The incident was captured

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<sup>34</sup> The Southwest Conference was created in 1914, The Southeast Conference in 1933. Division 1-A Conference Membership History, <http://wv.w.angelfire.com/sports/conferenceratings/history.html>, and <http://www.collegecharlie.com/ctb.html>

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.nfl.com/history/chronology/1911-1920>

<sup>36</sup> Adam Cohen, "Photos Taught A Lesson," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 20, 2001 in David Wiggins and Patrick Miller ed., *The Uneven Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport*, 250-254.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Smith, "Outside The Pale: The Exclusion Of Blacks From The National Football League, 1934-1946," *Journal Of Sports History* 15, No. 3 (Winter 1988), 260-268

<sup>38</sup> This discussion of the Johnny Bright Incident is taken from Ted Soutar, "CFL Legends: Johnny Bright," <http://www.cfl.ca/CFLHistory/CFLLegends/bright.html>, and Cohen, "Photos Taught A Lesson," 250-254.

on film and the pictures, run in the *Des Moines Register*, won a Pulitzer Prize for photographers Don Ultang and John Robinson. This incident drew the ire of the United States and led to Drake and Bradley universities withdrawing from the Missouri Valley Football Conference and the mandating of facemasks in college football. To add insult to this injury, Bright could not get treatment in any Oklahoma hospitals, necessitating a trip back to a hospital in Des Moines.<sup>39</sup>

Alongside incidences of racially-motivated violence on college football fields was the conversion of the professional football ranks into a white-only league. Up until 1933, the ranks of professional football in America were racially integrated. Along with Fritz Pollard and Paul Robeson, names like "Duke" Slater and "Inky" Williams peopled professional rosters and blacks played on the same field as whites. However, from 1933 until 1946, no black players were signed to NFL rosters though they were still playing college campuses and being named to the All-American team roster.<sup>40</sup> NFL owners denied a racial ban, and no ban was ever placed in the rules and regulations of the league, but the coach of the Chicago Cardinals admitted to an unwritten ban on black players in 1935. He stated that this ban was for the protection of the players from racially-motivated violence from both their opponents and their teammates.<sup>41</sup> Blacks played football for semi-pro leagues, including teams such as Fritz Pollard's New York Brown Bombers, and in both the American Professional League and the Pacific Coast Professional League, but they were blocked from competing in major league football.<sup>42</sup> However, in the late 1940's, when Rollie Miles and Johnny Bright were entering the CFL, race had been

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<sup>39</sup> Horton, "Pride, Courage Bright's Legacy," D1

<sup>40</sup> William A Brower, "Has Professional Football Closed The Door?" *Opportunity* 18 (Dec. 1940), 375-377 in Wiggins and Miller ed., *The Unequal Playing Field*, 197-199

<sup>41</sup> Smith, "Outside The Pale," 256-258

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 259, 273-275

pushed to the forefront of American sporting culture. In 1936, Jesse Owens had humiliated Hitler on the Olympic racetrack and, in 1937, Joe Louis did the same in the boxing ring. The success of these two men, Owens as Olympic 100 meter champion and Louis as boxing's Heavyweight champion, highlighted the hypocrisy of America's fight against Nazi racism abroad while promoting racism on the home front.<sup>43</sup> After the Second World War, racial barriers began to fall in all sports with the NBA admitting two black players in 1950, the American Bowling Congress desegregating its lanes in 1949, and the end of racial bans in the Missouri Valley Athletic Conference in 1947.<sup>44</sup> Most important, however, was the introduction of Jackie Robinson into Major League Baseball, America's game, by the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947.<sup>45</sup> This breakdown of the colour barrier in the most popular of American sports paved the way for the integration of all other major sports including football.

Blacks reentered professional football when the All-American Football Conference (AAFC) was set up to compete with the NFL in 1944 and began to sign black stars in March 1946 when the Los Angeles Rams signed Kenny Washington.<sup>46</sup> Though the AAFC folded in 1950, desegregated teams such as the San Francisco 49ers and the Cleveland Browns joined the NFL with their black players.<sup>47</sup> This did not immediately lead to an explosion of black players in the NFL; by 1952 there were only 27 black

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<sup>43</sup> Benjamin Rader, *American Sports: From The Age Of Folk Games To The Age Of Televised Sports* 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, 1999), 296-297

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 295

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 294

<sup>46</sup> Smith, "Outside The Pale," 275-276

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 280

players on NFL rosters. Those that could not find spots on NFL teams looked to Canada as a place to play.<sup>48</sup>

Canadian football was not devoid of racial problems; however it was not as large an issue as in American football. In Canadian football race issues occurred much less frequently and with less public vehemence. One minor controversy was the attempted inclusion of Gordon Simpson on the Ottawa Rough Riders in 1912. The Toronto-born Simpson was playing football for the Ottawa Intermediates, a more minor league club when the Rough Riders went after him. The controversy was not large but an Ottawa paper did recognize that the Rough Riders may have been waving the colour line to allow Simpson to play.<sup>49</sup> Other controversies may have arisen except for the fact that Canadian football, until the modern era beginning post World War Two, was an amateur sport regulated by the Canadian Rugby Union, and its affiliated members the Intercollegiate Rugby Union and the Western Canadian Rugby Union, along with University rugby union teams.<sup>50</sup> As amateur associations, a myriad of unofficial steps, backed by official rationale, could be taken to ban most black players from the United States, and any blacks in Canada that wanted to play, in a manner similar to that used to ban Aboriginal athletes from Canadian lacrosse.<sup>51</sup>

The advent of the modern CFL, and its professionalism, did begin to bring a larger number of blacks northwards. These men, having experienced racial violence on

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<sup>48</sup> The LA. Rams had 7 black players, Cleveland Browns 6, Philadelphia Eagles 3, New York Giants 2, San Francisco 49ers 2, Dallas Texans 2, Chicago Cardinals 2, and the Chicago Bears had 1 black player. The Detroit Lions and the Washington Redskins were both all white teams. "New Faces In Pro Football," *Our World*, Dec. 7, 1952, 62-64 in Wiggans and Miller ed., *The Uneven Playing Field*, 235-236

<sup>49</sup> Frank Cosentino, *Afros, Aborigines and Amateur Sport in Pre World War One Canada*, (Canadian Historical Association: Ottawa, 1998), 10

<sup>50</sup> Robert Stebbins, *Canadian Football: The View From The Helmet*, (CSHS University Of Western Ontario: London, 1987), 5-9

<sup>51</sup> Michael Robidoux, "Imagining a Canadian Identity Through Sport: A Historical Interpretation of Lacrosse and Hockey," *Journal of American Folklore* 115, No. 456 (2002), 210-214

the field, and with an influx of Southern football players into the professional ranks during the 1930's, looked for a professional league that accepted integrated teams. Prior to the signing of Kenny Washington in the AAFC, Tom Casey had come to Canada to play for the Hamilton Wildcats in 1940 and both Herb Trawick and Virgil Wagner had become charter members of the Montreal Alouettes in 1946.<sup>52</sup> This signing of black players continued with the Regina Roughriders signing Gabe Patterson for the 1948 season and the Stampeders signing the duo of Strode and Anderson in 1948-1949.<sup>53</sup> Despite these signings, the numbers of black players per team was not higher on CFL teams than on NFL teams in the early 1950's. Therefore, if there was a situation of racial intolerance in Canada, perhaps lessened by a degree from that which existed in the United States, was this slightly less virulent racism the reason these men came to play in the CFL? Was the fear of violence by Southern players, as stated by Johnny Bright, the only factor in his movement to Edmonton or were there other mitigating factors which brought Rollie Miles and Johnny Bright north of the border to play football?<sup>54</sup> Also, why did the Eskimos front office desire to have these men on their team, given the incidents of racial prejudice that could occur, both on the field and off?

### **CFL Rules and Play**

The main reason that these men were brought up north to play football is rooted in the structure of the CFL game and its coaching system. The evolution of the Canadian version of football has often lent itself to the importation of players from the United States. Though the first two-game challenge series between an American college and

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<sup>52</sup> Josh Bell-Webster, "CFL Legends: Herb Trawick," <http://www.cfl.ca/index.php?module=page&id=47>

<sup>53</sup> Kelly, *Green Grit*, 122

<sup>54</sup> Soutar, "CFL Legends: Johnny Bright," <http://www.cfl.ca/CFLHistory/CFLLegends/bright.html>

Canadian university football team prompted the Americans to adopt Canadian rules, and the Canadian ball, the majority of football innovations have traveled northwards rather than south.<sup>55</sup> For example, the scrimmage line, the quarterback, and signal calling diffused into Canada from Yale in the 1880's and 1890's and the forward pass would follow when it was adopted by the Canadian Rugby Union (CRU) in 1931.<sup>56</sup> The final innovation adopted in Canada that would convert rugby-football into modern football was the adoption of downfield blocking for linemen in 1946.<sup>57</sup> As these rules were adopted first by the CRU, and then by the university teams, there were few Canadians trained in their use during a game. Therefore, American players and American coaches, trained under these rules, were brought in to train the Canadians. Often those that had excelled in American college and professional programs were the same men who excelled in Canadian senior football. To combat this spread of Americans into Canadian football, the CRU placed varying restrictions on the numbers of imports allowed on each team. It was set at 5 players in 1946 and moved to 7 players by 1950 thus forcing a CFL team to choose the best available American talent.

Prior to the creation of the modern Eskimos in 1949, Edmonton was well steeped in this tradition of football importation. William "Deacon" White was the head coach of the Esquimaux from 1912 through to 1921 after being the head coach of Northwestern University in the United States and a Chicago running back.<sup>58</sup> On the roster of Edmonton in 1912 were three Americans: Cullem from Michigan, Van Hom from Pennsylvania, and

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<sup>55</sup> The May, 1874 series was played between McGill and Harvard, using McGill's rugby-football rules for one game and Harvard's "Boston Rules" for the other. American colleges quickly dropped "Boston Rules" in favour of McGill's and they also dropped Harvard's round ball for McGill's more oblong shape.

Stebbins, *Canadian Football*, 4

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5, 9

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 10

<sup>58</sup> Jerfry Goodman, *Huddling Up: The Inside Story of the Canadian Football League*, (Fitzhenry & Whiteside: Don Mills, 1981), 49



Dugal from Minnesota. These Esquimaux were not an oddity, however, as both Regina and Saskatoon fielded American players in the same period.<sup>59</sup> "Deacon White" was also the coach of the Esquimaux during their 23-0 loss to the Toronto Argonauts in the 1921 Grey Cup. Along with bringing in American players, White bought in an American system of play, the T-formation. The T-formation had the quarterback lined up behind the center and the running backs placed on either side of the quarterback and back five feet. This system was recognized by the Edmonton Bulletin as being American and was construed as slightly less intelligent than the Canadian style of play, though it was equally effective. This style of play, with the center handing the ball directly to the quarterback would be banned by the CRU in 1922 and was only reinstated in 1947.<sup>60</sup>

The modern Eskimos were also proponents of bringing in American players and coaching staff. The coaches of the 1950's Edmonton Eskimos, after Annis Stukus, were Frank Filchock, Darrell Royal and Frank "Pop" Ivy, all Americans with varying degrees of CFL experience. On the field, the Eskimos brought in former Tulsa All-American Billy Vessels, Maryland quarterback Bernie Faloney, and Mississippi running back Jackie Parker to complement their black Americans, Bright and Miles.<sup>61</sup> These men were brought in by the Eskimos for their on-field abilities and also due to the perception that the best players for skilled positions were Americans. This perception was fueled by the coaches and general managers that came to Canada from the United States; American coaches were inclined to favour American college honours over Canadian university

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<sup>59</sup> Frank Cosentino, *Canadian Football: The Grey Cup Years*, (The Musson Book Company: Toronto, 1969), 48-49

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 53, 129

<sup>61</sup> Kelly, *The Grey Cup*, 20-22 and Gerald Redmond, *Forty Years Of Tradition: The Edmonton Eskimos 1949 to 1989*, (ESP Marketing & Communications: Edmonton, 1989), 10-11

accolades.<sup>62</sup> Billy Vessels' All-American and Heisman Trophy winning credentials spoke for themselves as did the college statistics of Johnny Bright.<sup>63</sup> Along with Bright's offensive statistics was his versatility, shown by his two years playing linebacker for the Calgary Stampeders in 1952-1953.

This versatility was vitally important at a time when CFL rosters were limited to 30 players and many of these men had to play both offense and defense.<sup>64</sup> Even quarterback Jackie Parker played defensive back along with running the ball, kicking field goals and converts. The reasoning behind signing Rollie Miles, later a perennial Western All-Star as both a running back and as a defensive back, is indicative of the need for versatility. Miles, who was playing baseball for a Regina team, was asked to try out for the Eskimos by Annis Stukus who had heard of his football skills. Stukus saw that Miles, beyond being able to run, could throw an option pass when running left better than any other Eskimos prospects and immediately signed the back.<sup>65</sup> As well, the offensive system that Royal and Ivy brought to Canada from their days as coaches of the University of Oklahoma Sooners, the split-T system, was more familiar to these American players than their Canadian offensive counterparts. In the split-T system, the linemen maintained a 4 foot split between themselves on the line of scrimmage. This caused the defense to widen its lines and provided different running lanes than those provided by a closed line.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, American players who were trained in the reading of offensive holes

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<sup>62</sup> Steve O'Brien, *The Canadian Football League: The Phoenix of Professional Sports Leagues*, (Lulu Press: Morrisville, 2004), 267-269

<sup>63</sup> Soutar, "CFL Legends: Johnny Bright," <http://www.cfl.ca/CFLHistory/CFLLegends/bright.html>

<sup>64</sup> Cosentino, *Canadian Football*, 137

<sup>65</sup> Kelly, *The Grey Cup*, 22

<sup>66</sup> Cosentino, *Canadian Football*, 150

were invaluable to the Eskimos offence. This was a major reason that the Eskimos brought in players like Bright and Miles but this style of play was not the only reason.

### **CFL Finances**

The financial situation of the CFL and NFL during the 1950's is in sharp contrast to the situation of these two leagues during the modern period. In the 1950's the National Football League did not have a national television contract which would be one of the major dividing lines between future CFL and NFL profitability. In the CFL, the revenue of the league came primarily from gate revenue. Splitting the gate revenue with the visiting team began in 1955 with 15% of the gate going to the visiting team, a number that would rise to 25% in 1956.<sup>67</sup> This could be quite lucrative as the rise in Grey Cup gates went from \$26,655 in 1948 to \$228,000 in 1955.<sup>68</sup> Along with the rise in gate revenue, television revenue increased throughout the 1950's. The television rights to the Grey Cup first sold to CBC in 1952 for \$7,500 but had risen to \$125,000 by 1957.<sup>69</sup> Though Grey Cup profits were split equally between the Western and Eastern conferences, all other games were subject to the gate splitting regulations. Team finances would be greatly buoyed by both attracting fans to all home and away games and by progressing into the playoffs. Therefore, it was in the best interest of the teams to hire the best quality talent available.

In order to attract the best available talent the CFL had to pay equal or higher salaries than the NFL. During the 1950's, the Canadian dollar was worth \$1.02-\$1.06

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 152, 154

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 134, 153

<sup>69</sup> The 1957 Grey Cup was the first coast-to-coast broadcast of the game. Goodman, *Huddling Up*, 84

American; therefore, the salaries were directly comparable to NFL salaries.<sup>70</sup> As professionals a major consideration for football players, and one that has not changed through the passage of time, was their salaries. At a time when the average Calgary train porter was receiving \$200 a month plus tips, Jack Gotta, an undrafted free agent cut from the Cleveland Browns, received \$700 a game, \$2,500 dollars more than he was offered by the Packers, to play for the Calgary Stampeders in 1956.<sup>71</sup> Seeing as Gotta could also hold a job in the offseason, as many CFL players did in the 1950's, his salary far outstripped that of a regular black man in Calgary. However, Gotta's salary was a more conservative one; former NFL players, higher skill positions, and established CFL pros made much more money. Frank Filchok, the future Eskimo coach and former New York Giant, made \$8,500 in 1949 and \$9,500 in 1950, along with a \$300 a month job from the Montreal Alouettes. Comparatively, Bill MacFarlane, a Toronto Argonaut and interception leader in the East for 1954, was offered \$7,000 by the New York Giants but stayed in Toronto.<sup>72</sup> Alex Webster, the Alouettes running back, was signed by New York for \$9,000 in 1955, a raise of \$1,800 over his 1954 salary.

This situation persisted with the Eskimos. Steve Paproski, an Edmonton non-import lineman, considered a less-skilled position, during the 1950's, made only \$3,500 a season. Quarterback Jackie Parker, however, received \$9,500 and a \$500 signing bonus in 1954. This salary figure increased to \$15,000 in 1955 after his 1954 Grey Cup winning fumble recovery against the Alouettes. New York Giants owner Wellington Mara's offer of an \$18,000 contract to Parker that same year was rebuffed. The personal attempt to

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<sup>70</sup> James Powell, *A History Of the Canadian Dollar*, 61, reproduced at [http://www.bankofcanada.ca/en/dollar\\_book/index.html](http://www.bankofcanada.ca/en/dollar_book/index.html)

<sup>71</sup> Palmer and Palmer, "The Black Experience In Alberta," 308

<sup>72</sup> Cosentino, *Canadian Football*, 135, 151

sign Parker, and the size of the salary, was not a common NFL practice for those not considered stars.<sup>73</sup> Similar to these figures, Johnny Bright, a first round pick of the Philadelphia Eagles, received \$14,000 to play for theStampeders in 1952, including a \$2,000 signing bonus that dwarfed the \$300 bonus offered by the Eagles.<sup>74</sup> This salary would only increase with his record-setting play for the Eskimos. Monetary incentives were clearly a major consideration to joining the CFL.

## **Conclusion**

The situation of race relations on the Eskimos during the 1950's was vastly different than the situation of the Eskimos during the 1970's. Though there were other black stars on the Eskimos, such as Larry Highbaugh, the most relevant story is that of Warren Moon. During his six year career with the Eskimos from 1978 to 1983 Moon won 5 Grey Cups, 1 Grey Cup MVP, and 1 CFL MVP. These accomplishments got Moon into the CFL Hall of Fame in 2001 along with being enshrined on the Eskimos Wall of Fame. Moon was not, however, only a CFL star. His final 17 seasons in professional football were played in the NFL where he was named to 9 Pro Bowls and elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2006. The idea of race, though he attempted to downplay its importance, was acknowledged when Moon discussed being the first black quarterback in

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<sup>73</sup> Curtis Stock, "Houdini In Cleats: Jackie Parker 1932-2006," *Edmonton Journal*, Nov. 8, 2006, C1-2

<sup>74</sup> *The Globe and Mail*, April 9, 1952 and Cohen, "Photos Taught A Lesson" in Wiggans and Miller ed., *The Unlevel Playing Field*, 254

the Pro Football Hall of Fame. He said that he "always had that extra burden when [he] went on that field that [he] had a responsibility to play the game for [his] people."<sup>75</sup>

This burden of playing as a black quarterback is what set the CFL apart from the NFL in the 1970's for Warren Moon. Moon played college football for the University of Washington between 1975 and 1977 and, in his final college season, Moon won the Rose Bowl and was selected as the Rose Bowl MVP. However, Moon went undrafted in the 1978 NFL draft without even an invite to the NFL scouting combine and no personal workouts for any NFL team. The general belief was that Moon would be looked at as an NFL player if he would change positions but not as a quarterback. This belief was widespread and various black players were asked to switch position.<sup>76</sup>

Consequently, NFL teams only started 8 black quarterbacks from 1968-1976 and in 1976 there was only one black starting quarterback. This was at a time when almost of the NFL players were black.<sup>77</sup> A number of black players who wanted to play quarterback joined the CFL where they were allowed to continue their careers. One such player was Chuck Ealey. Ealey was a black college quarterback who won 35 straight games from 1969-1971, 3 Tangerine Bowls, and his team was ranked in college football's Top 20 all three seasons. After his college career and failing to be drafted in the NFL, Ealey played quarterback for the Hamilton Tigercats, Winnipeg Blue Bombers and the Toronto

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<sup>75</sup> Warren Moon's enshrinement speech transcript, reproduced at [http://www.profootballhof.com/history/release.jsp?release\\_id=2179](http://www.profootballhof.com/history/release.jsp?release_id=2179)

<sup>76</sup> Warren Moon's enshrinement speech transcript, reproduced at [http://www.profootballhof.com/history/release.jsp?release\\_id=2179](http://www.profootballhof.com/history/release.jsp?release_id=2179) and Phil Petrie, "The NFL Sacks The Black Quarterback," *Encore American and Worldwide News*, Oct. 18, 1976,46-47, in Wiggins and Miller ed., *The Unlevel Playing Field*, 324

<sup>77</sup> In 1975 there were 437 black NFL players or 38% and men like Tony Dungy were converted from quarterback to defensive players when coming to the NFL .Petrie, "The NFL Sacks The Black Quarterback," 323, 324, 327 and Mark Sappenfield, "Football's Last Race Barrier Crumbles," *Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 5, 2001, at <http://search.scmmonitor.com/durable/2001/01/05/text/pls3.html>,

Argonauts from 1972-1978.<sup>78</sup> Though men like James Harris and Marlin Brisco played quarterback in the NFL they were a rarity and their careers did not often last at the quarterback position.<sup>79</sup>

This is in direct contrast to the situation of Johnny Bright and Rollie Miles during the 1950's. Unlike Warren Moon, whose CFL career has been acknowledged as being caused by racial policies, the stories of Rollie Miles and Johnny Bright encompass other factors. Two of the major reasons that combined with a slightly more tolerant society were the issues of salary and the game itself for American players entering the Canadian game, there was the opportunity to excel in a system that was well known by American players but less well known by their Canadian counterparts. The American coaches also wanted players that were used to these schemes and could execute properly. To go along with this, due to the solid financial standing of the Canadian Football League, teams were able to pay large salaries that were equal to or larger than those of their NFL counterparts; whereas Miles and Bright were paid an equivalent amount to NFL players, Moon took less money to join the CFL, a fact that was known even to his teammates.<sup>80</sup> This paper does not deny that race considerations were important to the movement of black players north of the border. However, it seems that race might not have been the only consideration, or even the largest consideration, for black players joining the Eskimos specifically, and the CFL generally, during the post World War Two era.

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<sup>78</sup> Ron Musselman, "In Their Words," *The Toledo Blade*, July 17, 2005, reproduced at [http://www.geocities.com/cfl\\_historical/EaleyC.htm](http://www.geocities.com/cfl_historical/EaleyC.htm)

<sup>79</sup> Marlin Brisco was converted to a receiver for the Buffalo Bills in 1969 after playing as quarterback in Denver during the 1968 season.

<sup>80</sup> In his history of the Eskimos dynasty, Danny Kepley wished Moon well and suspected that he would receive a significant raise, possibly as much as a million dollars, in the NFL. Dan Kepley and Jim Taylor *The Edmonton Eskimos: Inside The Dynasty*, (Methuen: Toronto, 1983), 81-82.

Race relations in Canada have been structured in such a way to place Canadian actions in opposition to American actions. Within Canadian society, institutionalized racism in the form of slavery had almost as long of a history as in America and official segregationist policies existed in such institutions as the Ontario and Nova Scotia school boards until the late 1960's. On the prairies, official segregationist and racist policies did not last much beyond the 1920's. However, de-facto segregation and racial prejudice were evident through the 1950's when both of the Eskimos first black stars, Rollie Miles and Johnny Bright played football. The later construction of myth around these men joining the Eskimos involves the perception of a tolerant society. However, if this 'tolerant' society is deconstructed to demonstrate that the situation was only marginally better than in the professional football cities of the United States, it is important to look at other reasons made Edmonton, and the CFL, an attractive option to black football players.



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