White Rules, Black Stars: Race, Sport, Community, and the Emergence of Integrated Boys' High School Basketball in Benton Harbor, Michigan, 1945-1965

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WHITE RULES, BLACK STARS: RACE, SPORT, COMMUNITY, AND THE EMERGENCE OF INTEGRATED BOYS' HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL IN BENTON HARBOR, MICHIGAN, 1945-1965

by

Christopher Michael Jannings

A Master’s Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts
Department of History

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
December 2004
Located in the southwestern corner of the state in Berrien County, the city of Benton Harbor, Michigan rests along the shores of Lake Michigan, in the heart of the Fruit Belt, and near the St. Joseph River. Not until the early 1940s did a significant number of black migrants arrive from the South and larger metropolitan areas in the North to take advantage of a booming wartime economy, higher paying jobs, and better living conditions. The growing black presence greatly altered the social, political, cultural, and economic structure of Benton Harbor. By the late 1950s and early 1960s the community experienced racial tension in several areas of society, partly from a proposal for integrated public schools, but mostly from black concerns over segregated neighborhoods and unfair labor practices. This thesis examines the years 1945 to 1965, a time when integrated boys' sport teams at Benton Harbor High School gained statewide recognition, especially in basketball. It utilizes diverse primary sources to establish connections between society, sport, and race in Benton Harbor to examine the effects of racial change and a movement towards integration.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by acknowledging the influence of my thesis committee chair, Dr. Linda Borish, and readers, Drs. Ross Gregory and Mitch Kachun, of Western Michigan University. Their insight and enthusiasm for this project goes beyond the usual student/mentor relationship. I would not have made it without their help and encouragement and each deserves my thanks for patience, courtesy and expenditure of time. Special thanks goes to Dr. Borish for her devotion to this project, superb mentorship, and for unlimited access to “Linda’s lending library.”

In compiling this history, I have relied chiefly on yearbooks, newspaper articles, and personal recollections from former players, cheerleaders, students, residents, and ardent fans of Benton Harbor high school sports. I am particularly indebted to the following individuals who filled historical gaps or shared personal recollections of their high school years, thus adding much needed authenticity to the story: Tony Ashman, John Barnes, Ellis Hull, John Rudley, Mike Pollard, John Brannock, Bob Lower, Larry Culby, Ronald Lange, L.C. Bowen, Sydney Riccio, Sue Fisher-Cross, Kenneth Overly, Bill and Jean Chandler, and Harold Wheeler. I also appreciate the work of the many sportswriters from the News/Herald Palladium who covered Benton Harbor basketball from 1945 to 1965. In many regards this paper is a tribute to their accomplishments.
This thesis would have been a considerably more difficult undertaking without the help of Matt Anderson, curator at the Ft. Miami Heritage Society, and Jill Rau, librarian at the Benton Harbor Public Library. Both of these individuals took time away from their busy schedules to assist me in sorting through yearbooks, written collections, and newspaper archives. I owe them both a debt of gratitude.

I would be ungrateful if I did not express love and thanks to my wife, Katie, daughters, Sarah and Anna, and mother-in-law, Mrs. Frances B. Piggott. One cannot tackle a project of this magnitude without the support and sacrifice of his family. I am truly blessed in this regard. Finally, I acknowledge two deceased men who I never met: Don Farnum, former varsity basketball coach at Benton Harbor high school (1949-1967) and Fred Greer, a member of the 1963-64 state championship team. It is in their memory that I dedicate this thesis.

Christopher Michael Jannings
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sport can shape and influence experiences of people from the past in various communities. American historians studying sport articulate that it can serve as an agent for change and for studying race, gender, class, religion, and economics.\(^1\) While recent scholarly efforts have focused on diverse areas of sport history, few studies exist on the integration of small communities and its effect on athletic programs in the public schools, or on the community in general. Few works illustrate the historical impact of high school basketball or recognize the contributions made by black players in interscholastic sports. Recent publications concentrate on large metropolitan areas in the East and Midwest, lending an urban slant to sport and American history. With the possible exception of studies on Indiana and Kentucky, traditionally prolific basketball areas, and biographies about National Basketball Association stars, areas outside of the East have received little attention.\(^2\) The need exists for more thoughtful social and cultural analysis on topics related to the


“negotiated struggle between blacks and whites;”\textsuperscript{3} such as exploring the ways in which white and black athletes differentiated from one another by geographical region, color, and class, or how the two groups reacted towards one another in an integrated environment.

This thesis examines the multiracial society and high school boys' basketball in Benton Harbor, Michigan, from 1945 to 1965.\textsuperscript{4} It investigates how the larger established white population perceived and responded to a growing black population and what concerns, if any, it expressed with the appearance of black athletes anxious to participate in, even dominate, sports teams, which previously had been the domain of white players and fans.

Located in the southwestern corner of the state in Berrien County, Benton Harbor rests along the shore of Lake Michigan, in the heart of the Michigan Fruit Belt, and near the mouth of the St. Joseph River. Founded in 1860 by prominent white landowners and originally named Brunson Harbor after one of its proprietors—Stern Brunson—the community lies ninety miles from Chicago and two hundred miles west of Detroit. The name changed in 1865 after local residents complained that Brunson

\textsuperscript{3} S. W. Pope, \textit{The New American Sport History: Recent Approaches and Perspectives}. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 15.

\textsuperscript{4} I utilize the terms multiracial, racially mixed, and integrated loosely throughout the study, with preference given to white and black peoples only. Since Benton Harbor high school and sport teams were never segregated, one might argue that integrated may be an inappropriate term. However, in the case of high school basketball teams, blacks did not participate until 1945.
received too much recognition for founding the site. By 1869 Benton Harbor became a village and, in 1891, a city.⁵

Benton Harbor in 1900 was a prospering community with a population of almost 9,000, mostly derived from native-born whites and European immigrants. Over the next decade the population increased by 5,000, earning the title of largest city in Berrien County. Since the late 1890s the majority of the people, with the exception of small groups of Black, Native-American, and Italian-Americans,⁶ had benefited from a growing economy, established business district, and a variety of leisurely and sporting activities that included organized baseball leagues, fruit farms, and beach resorts, and mineral bath houses divided among three plush hotels.⁷

Some of the leading businesses in early twentieth century Benton Harbor included: J. A. Sheffield and Son Drug Store, the George B. Thayer and Company, manufacturers of a fruit packages, the Farmer’s & Merchants Bank, established in

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⁶ Prior to the 1950 Census Report no accurate figures exist on the actual number of blacks living in Benton Harbor and neighboring communities from 1860 to 1949. A survey by Kenneth L. Wallis, ed., I Know My Community: A Study of Our Community, Benton Harbor and St. Joseph, Michigan, Benton Township, St. Joseph Township (Benton Harbor, MI: Benton Harbor Community Staff, 1942 and 1955) determines a black presence as early as 1890. Robert Noble, curator at the Berrien County Historical Association, asserts that small numbers of blacks arrived in the community during the Civil War period, but written local histories offer no specific dates.

1888, with a capital stock of over $100,000, and the *Miami Club*, which claimed a membership of one hundred, “comprising of leading business and professional men in the city.”

H. L. Hauser described the club as follows:

> Its rooms are handsomely furnished and fitted throughout, parlors and reading room on the first floor, billiard and pool room in the basement and card room, writing room, and ladies’ reception room on the third floor.

Hauser makes no mention of the black population from a social or sporting perspective, leading one to believe that numbers were small, that he ignored the cultural activities of blacks, or that conflict existed over access to city businesses and recreational facilities. Census reports from the early twentieth century neglected statistics of the black population in Berrien County. In 1950, Kenneth L. Wallis and the Benton Harbor Community Staff determined that a considerable number of the community’s black population “have been residents for 30 to 60 years,” placing their time of arrival in the city sometime between 1890 and 1920. How much of an impact blacks had in community building, race relations, and in the sport history of Benton Harbor before the 1940s remains largely unexplored.

At the local high school, founded in the 1880s, whites played football, basketball, baseball, and track and field. High School yearbooks and editorials from the *News*

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9 Hauser, 6.

Palladium, a locally owned Benton Harbor newspaper, reveal the first boys' basketball team being formed in the late 1890s, a squad of five white players and one coach. Yearbooks and archival photographs from the period reveal that white athletes and a small number of blacks performed at high competitive levels and gained statewide recognition both academically and athletically. Except in rare instances, this trend continued until the 1950s, when blacks from the South or larger northern cities continued to migrate into smaller communities, like Benton Harbor, to pursue better paying jobs, or escape overcrowded cities and social/racial injustices. The migration greatly affected the population and social structure of Berrien County and Benton Harbor. In turn, this shift in Benton Harbor's population altered the sporting practices for high school students.

11 Originally coined the News Palladium, the newspaper changed names several times during its history before settling on Herald Palladium in the 1970s.

12 An examination of microfilm and yearbooks revealed that Benton Harbor fielded organized football teams during the 1890s. One can assume that basketball teams took the court shortly after the invention of the game in 1891 by Dr. James Naismith. At present time I have yet to locate photographs before 1895 that verify black participation in football or any other high school sport.

13 The best scholarly piece on the rise of sports in America and the impact made on different ethnic groups is Benjamin Rader, "The Quest for Sub-Communities and the Rise of American Sports," American Quarterly 29, no. 4 (Fall 1977): 355-69. Rader surveys immigrant groups from England, Scotland, Wales, and Germany to determine how and why they developed relationships with certain sports. His study analyzes how sport organizations created either ethnic or communities, thus giving common purpose to many cities, towns, and neighborhoods that were otherwise divided by race, class, ethnicity, and religious differences.

14 Articles from the News and Herald Palladium, archival photographs, and oral histories revealed that blacks participated in football as early as 1895. Benton Harbor High School Yearbooks make no mention of black basketball players before 1945.

The thesis stems from original research about the Benton Harbor community, using research methods in sport and race to chronicle changes over time. A study of sport and social history, it examines such critical themes as the intersection of race, community, education, housing/living conditions, demographics, and labor practices to address white attitudes towards blacks. Sources include institutional records, census reports, newspaper accounts, local and regional histories. The study frequently utilizes written and oral histories from present and past residents of Benton Harbor. Players and students from the 1950s and 1960s, black and white, shared their experiences, as did local businessmen, school board officials, and ardent sports fans. In many cases participants and past observers of high school life and sport had as much, or more, to say about Benton Harbor social and sport history than any other group.

Of the recent approaches to studying sport in American history, two studies proved essential to the project. S. W. Pope, editor of The New American Sport History: Recent Approaches and Perspectives (1997), encouraged future studies to transcend reliance on extraordinary black athletes, "and to begin to think about how various other socially constructed categories"\(^{16}\) affected blacks and black-white relations. Sport historian Jeffrey Sammons, author in 1994 of a significant study of black sport history entitled Race and Sport: A Critical, Historical Examination, states that "the books written on blacks and sport have been overwhelmingly narrative, largely

\(^{16}\) Pope, The New American Sport History, 15.
devoid of theory, rarely path-breaking, and often behind the curve.”\textsuperscript{17} Sammons presents a broad survey of the available historical literature on African-Americans and sport since the 19th century, plotting some of the major methodologies, themes, and historical developments. He closes with suggestions for future directions in historiography, trends, topics, and objectives most useful to sports historians in the study of race.\textsuperscript{18}

The Benton Harbor Public Library houses microfilm of the \textit{News Palladium} from 1868 to present. A white mainstream daily paper, it devoted hundreds of articles and editorials to integrated Benton Harbor basketball teams between 1945 and 1965, eight of which reached the final four of the Class A State Championships at Jenison Field House in East Lansing, Michigan.\textsuperscript{19} Other newspapers also covered high school basketball in Michigan from 1945 to 1965: \textit{Detroit Free Press}, \textit{Detroit News}, \textit{Kalamazoo Gazette}, \textit{Lansing Herald}, and \textit{South Bend Tribune}. These newspapers play a more significant role later in the thesis in my discussion of Benton Harbor basketball teams engaged in tournament play.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[\textsuperscript{17}] Jeffrey Sammons, “Race and Sport: A Critical, Historical Examination,” 203-278.
\item[\textsuperscript{18}] Sammons, 203-78.
\item[\textsuperscript{19}] I researched information on team records and statistics of individual players in Benton Harbor High School Yearbooks (1941-1965). The \textit{Herald Palladium} provides editorials, game, and season summaries, all available on microfilm at the Benton Harbor Public Library.
\item[\textsuperscript{20}] Information obtained from newspaper accounts and photographs taken from the Benton Harbor High School Yearbook collection and the Benton Harbor Public Library microfilm department (1955-1965). It should be noted that competition between Benton Harbor and other integrated teams rarely occurred, except in contests between teams from the Detroit, Flint, Jackson, and Lansing area, which happened more regularly during the post-season. An exception was Muskegon Heights, conference rival and winners of three state championships during the 1950s.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
United States and local census reports revealed important demographic changes from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. These periods in Benton Harbor history led to significant increase in the black population and decrease among whites, indicating mass white flight, racial strife, and other concerns over desegregation. Census reports helped evaluate population trends, an approximate time period as to when a breakdown in race relations and white flight occurred, and how these changes affected the player selection process for high school sport teams.

A variety of other primary and secondary sources aided the thesis. Many accounts deal with the rise of American sports in the twentieth century, form a basis about sport in small town communities, or tackle important themes such as, basketball, race, education, ethnicity, community, and gender. Others explore areas such as politics, migration, labor, religion, economics, and the civil rights movement, all of importance to this study. Sport histories generally focus on black or black-white relations behind segregated or partially segregated walls in the 1950s and 1960s. Unfortunately, many of these works concentrate on professional or collegiate athletics, offering little information on conditions in high school athletic programs before and after World War II. Nevertheless, a considerable number of these offer useful material, especially those that chronicled blacks and their struggles to gain access into predominantly white communities, universities, and sport programs.

The most useful primary sources--newspaper accounts, oral histories, memoirs, census reports, film, yearbooks, photographs, books, essays, documents, journal articles, poems, and pamphlets--all figure into the project, some more extensively
than others. A variety of oral histories served to offset a shortage of written materials, and to better understand race relations and the meaning of high school basketball in Benton Harbor. Secondary sources range in both complexity and importance about American social and sport history: general histories, historical monographs, essay collections, scholarly journals, local histories, and biographies. However, literature dedicated solely to African-Americans in Michigan, Berrien County, and Benton Harbor is scarce. The shortage of local sources proved a major challenge in the writing of the thesis.

No event influenced the integration of American sports and society as a whole more than Jackie Robinson’s assault on the color line in professional baseball during the 1946 season. Jules Tygiel, author of *Baseball’s Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (1993), asserts that in the years leading up to the civil rights movement Robinson’s accomplishments, on and off the playing field, captured the imagination of millions of Americans, who either misunderstood or ignored our country’s racial dilemma. Tygiel relies on a wealth of primary sources, including interviews, newspaper accounts, and photographs, to argue that no other agency in the 1950s destroyed as many racial barriers without mass protests and federal

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21 Given the limited amount of written/published literature solely dedicated to sporting life in Benton Harbor during the twentieth century, most of the sources in the bibliography focus on key social, political, and economic issues. Few accounts mention the contributions or concerns of blacks, thus the reliance on newspaper accounts and personal recollections throughout the study.
intervention, and that Robinson's contributions did little for black people when compared with what he did for white America.22

The most useful works examining integration and race relations in basketball during the twentieth century include such books as: Frank Fitzpatrick, *And The Walls Came Tumbling Down: Kentucky, Texas Western, and the Game That Changed American Sports* (1999) and; Pamela Grundy's award-winning publication, *Learning to Win: Sports, Education, and Social Change in Twentieth Century North Carolina* (2001). Fitzpatrick analyzes the shocking upset of the Kentucky Wildcats, coached by Adolph Rupp, by little known Texas Western in the 1966 national championship game, the first time five black men faced five white opponents in a collegiate basketball game.23 Grundy explores the history of high school basketball and in industrial league sports in North Carolina, giving equal attention to urban and rural environments, male and female, black and white. Drawing on a litany of oral histories and newspaper accounts, she documents the evolution of athletics, from the beginnings of backyard basketball to memorable team moments in championship games. Grundy argues that athletics in North Carolina served as an arena "in which individuals and communities negotiated aspects of their own identities as well as their position in the state's new social order."24

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24 Grundy, a North Carolina historian and winner of the 2002 Herbert Feis Award, American Historical Association (AHA) and the 2001 North American Society for Sport History (NASSH) book award
Some scholars interested in race and sport have begun to investigate sports at different levels of society, including all-black colleges and interscholastic sports. The best book solely dedicated to high school basketball during the 1950s remains Randy Roberts, "But They Can't Beat Us": Oscar Robertson and the Crispus Attucks Tigers (1999). Roberts bases his story on newspaper accounts and oral histories. This semi-biographical account of Robertson and Crispus Attucks High School is not only a story of Indiana High School basketball but also one of "race and America, discrimination and accomplishment, and of power and powerlessness." Leading sport historians cite Patrick Miller's scholarly piece, "To 'Bring the Race along Rapidly': Sport, Student Culture, and Educational Mission at Historically Black Colleges during the Interwar Years" History of Education Quarterly (1995) as the premier work on the development of black athletics and how they affected interracial education before World War II.

Nelson George, Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball (1992) and Ron Thomas, They Cleared the Lane: The NBA's Black Pioneers (2002) explore the contributions made by black basketball players in professional, collegiate, and high school ranks from approximately 1920 to 1965. George examines basketball as a

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25 Randy Roberts, "But They Can't Beat Us": Oscar Robertson and the Crispus Attucks Tigers (Champaign, IL: Sports Publishing Company, 1999), viii.
prism for studying the black experience that differs from notions involving sociology and economy in the alteration of society. Thomas explores early Negro basketball leagues, the Harlem Globetrotters, and less known players that helped revolutionize the game. He uses oral histories and statistical data that chart the rise of blacks in basketball.

The field of sport history also suffers from a lack of scholarly articles solely dedicated to high school basketball. Three essays offered the methods and insight most useful to the thesis: Troy Paino, “Hoosiers in a Different Light: Forces of Change v. Power of Nostalgia,” *Journal of Sport History* (2001); Richard Pierce, *More Than a Game: The Political Meaning of High School Basketball in Indianapolis Journal of Urban History* (2000); and Gerald Gems, “ Blocked Shot”: The Development of Basketball in the African-American Community of Chicago *Journal of Sport History* (1995). Paino mainly utilizes newspaper accounts and secondary sources to examine Hoosiers’ love affair with high school basketball, referred to as a “regional cultural phenomenon.” He argues that the “intense and intimate” relationships between towns and teams was more a matter of reputation than reality, pointing to a decrease in attendance since the 1950s, which he attributed to the growing influence of blacks on the game.28

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27 Ron Thomas, *They Cleared the Lane: The NBA’s Black Pioneers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), x-xiv.

Pierce examines basketball at Crispus Attucks, which was an all-black Indianapolis high school, and how the school's success “inspired considerable soul searching in both the black and white communities” during the 1951 state basketball championship competition. Built on primary and secondary sources, Pierce argues that after successful seasons and state championships Indianapolis residents discovered that “in addition to sharing common spaces they sometimes shared common goals.” Unfortunately, while victories for Crispus Attucks enhanced a positive image of the larger black community, problems lingered on in economic, political, and housing issues.  

Gems explores basketball among the black community in Chicago and the Midwest during the Progressive era, its relationship to eastern black sports, both influenced by a new style of play. Grounded in newspaper accounts, this study explains how blacks developed an urban style of basketball that included speed, passing, and ball handling, growing out of a “cultural fabric woven out of many interconnected threads.” These changes altered ideals of American popular culture, despite whites strategies to “block their efforts.”

At least a dozen comprehensive general histories exist on American sports, some more useful than others. The best of these, as far as integrating material on black athletes is concerned, is Allen Guttman, *A Whole New Ball Game: An Interpretation*

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of American Sports (1988); Benjamin Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Spectators* (1983, 1999); Randy Roberts and James Olson, *Winning is the Only Thing: Sports in America Since 1945* (1989); and Steven Riess, ed., *Major Problems in American Sports* (1997). Guttman offers an interpretation, or selective history of American sports, placing sports within a larger social framework and determining how it affected a larger culture. He dedicates an entire chapter to the black athlete, focusing on rejection, acceptance, and racism in sport during the 19th and 20th centuries.31 Riess’ collection of historical essays and documents examined problems and issues of race in American sports from a variety of viewpoints and the development of athletic activities over time, particularly the emergence of specific sports with their own rules and institutions.32

The books by Arthur Ashe, *A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African-American Athlete* Vol. 3 (1988), and E. B. Henderson, *The Black Athlete: Emergence and Arrival* (1978) are solely dedicated to black athletes and integration of major sports after World War II. Ashe offered the best biographical accounts and theories on blacks, arguing that the exploits of black athletes “were constrained by discriminatory laws, customs, and traditions.” Volume three, the most helpful here, begins in the post-World War II period, and emphasizes an unprecedented five-year period—1946 through 1950—in which major sports like basketball, baseball, tennis,


and football became integrated. Henderson’s bibliography proved irreplaceable. Numerous magazine articles on black athletes from the 1950s and 1960s, notably in basketball, added much needed depth and authenticity to this thesis.

Two works provided major historiographical insight to this thesis. First, Stephen Hardy’s *How Boston Played: Sport, Recreation, and Community, 1865-1915* offered the best analysis of how sport, recreation, and community developed closely with “broader elements of social, cultural, economic, and political changes in American cities.” Sport shaped and defined city. Hardy expertly chronicles the rise of athletic clubs, public parks, playgrounds, high school, college, and professional sports teams, demonstrating “how attractive aspects of recreation or sport could differ by ethnic group.” In terms of community, Hardy defines it as people, and “the nature of the people’s relationships that defines community.” He adds:

> The typical notion of the concept has implied a collection of individuals who share not only common interests but also, and more important, a sense of mutual bonding, personal intimacy, affection, and moral commitment. As a recent study of community in American history cautions, no single form can define the concept. It embraces families, neighborhoods, towns, groups of friends, and social classes.


36 Hardy, 21.

37 Hardy, 21.
In terms of analyzing Benton Harbor, Hardy's methods for studying community, sport, and recreation in a larger metropolitan area served as a model. Even though *How Boston Played* covered a time period much earlier than this project, it remains one of the best studies on sport and race in an urban environment, emphasizing that sport represents a key element in the culture of community life.

Arguably the best collection of essays on the African-American sporting experience, minus coverage of interscholastic sports, is David K. Wiggins, *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in White America* (1997). Wiggins recounts the involvement of black athletes in American sport by employing written materials from early America pre-Civil War to the 1970s that include slave narratives and black newspaper editorials, autobiographies, archival materials, and oral histories. *Glory Bound*, a collection of Wiggins' previously published essays, tackles subjects not previously examined by other academicians, emphasizing the role of the black community, relationships between whites and blacks, and the effects of racial discrimination at different levels of American sport. Wiggins argues that "sport strengthens social relationships and contributed to the integration of African-Americans into the larger society," that it was a positive force rather than alienating one in American society, acting as an inspiration to various social levels.

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39 Wiggins, xiii-xx.
American social histories exploring black and white relations during the 1950s and 1960s appears voluminous. Many address the civil rights movement and the segregation of public facilities, schools, and neighborhoods. Harvard Sitkoff tenders the most useful account of racial equality and justice in *The Struggle For Black Equality, 1954-1992* (1993). Sitkoff offers thoughtful insight into the civil right movement and how it altered or reinforced white attitudes towards blacks. He presents neither a comprehensive nor scholarly account of the struggle, but magnifies the social developments of the 1950s that greatly influenced the rise of social protest during the 1960s. *The Struggle For Black Equality* incites debate about a sensitive period in American history, explaining the strivings and sufferings of blacks in their search for equality and the promise of democracy.  

Two recently published social histories entirely dedicated to the black cause in Michigan greatly aided the thesis. Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (1996) chronicles the city from its transformation as “America’s arsenal of democracy,” and at one time the nation’s fastest growing industrial center and home to the highest paid “blue collar” workers in the United States, to its present state of joblessness, physical decay, racial isolation, and growing poverty. Sugrue presents a guide “to the contested terrain of the postwar city, an examination of the unresolved dilemmas of housing, segregation, industrial

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relations, racial discrimination, and de-industrialization." He argues that a combination of social, political, economic, and race issues from 1940 to the 1960s set the stage for crises that hinders urban America today. Sidney Fine, Expanding the Frontiers of Civil Rights, Michigan, 1948-1968 (2000), examines the dramatic transformation in civil rights policy undertaken by Michigan government, newly-adopted programs that embraced not only blacks, but women, the elderly, migrants, Native Americans, and the handicapped.

To date, few published accounts exist solely dedicated to small Mid-western communities and high school athletics, either black or white experiences. There are, however, numerous works that analyze sports and society in larger urban environments. The thesis draws on these sources where applicable. Any research on the social and sport history of Benton Harbor requires an extensive search for primary sources. Given the limitations of these materials, the historian must make use of newspaper accounts and personal recollections, which included letters and

42 Sugrue, The Origins, 3-14.
personal correspondence with family, former players, and students. Fortunately, a small number of written and oral histories have explored the physical and cultural space of Benton Harbor, adding both depth and authenticity to the story.

Kenneth L. Wallis’ *I Know My Community: A Study of Our Community, Benton Harbor and St. Joseph, Michigan, Benton Township and St. Joseph Township* (1955), is reliable and, to date, represents the most comprehensive social and statistical history written on Benton Harbor during the 1940s and 1950s. Wallis and associates argued that sudden population increase, notably among blacks, in the “Flats” led to racial friction over the segregation of schools, athletic programs, housing, labor, and recreational facilities, notably at the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), founded in the early 1900s, and in city parks. The name “Flats” refers to an historical section of the community that existed from the 1920s to the early 1960s, consisting of a culturally diverse population of varying groups: African-Americans, Native-Americans, Italian-Americans, Jewish Americans, and European Americans. During the 1950s and 1960s blacks emerged as the dominant ethnic group in this area.

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45 The amount of social histories written on the African-American experience in larger metropolitan areas is voluminous. I mainly use those accounts published on major Mid-western cities and Michigan communities. Those written about the cities of Milwaukee, Detroit, Indianapolis, Chicago, and Cleveland were most useful because of their focus on black populations and their close proximity to Southwestern Michigan.

46 Information obtained from written oral histories provided by former residents of the “Flats,” Elaine Shoemaker, Willie Hopkins, and Dr. Joseph Shurn during a local history project at the Fort Miami Heritage Society, St. Joseph, Michigan, entitled “Remembering the Flats,” (January 2002). City maps and directories, dated 1938 to 1960, provide excellent geographical coverage of Benton Harbor and clearly outline the area referred to as the “Flats.”
Despite the high quality and importance of *I Know My Community*, Wallis and staff only briefly addressed race during the 1940s and 1950s. The survey noted that better race relations existed in the local high school and on athletic teams than in other areas of society, but failed to explain why or specify which elements of society favored integration with blacks and which disapproved. One topic overlooked here was the way in which black-white relationships in public schools and athletic programs differed from other socially constructed, class-based organizations in Benton Harbor.

The search for primary documents produced problems not conducive to a full scholarly investigation. First, the shortage of materials documenting black history in Benton Harbor inhibited exploring the period before World War II in length. Second, the major local newspaper, the *News Palladium*, now the *Herald Palladium*, prohibits community access to the photo morgue without a written statement of purpose and consent from the newspaper editor, a process not easily accomplished by local historians hoping to view, purchase, or copy important prints from the period. Thus, given the time schedule for this study, I relied on photographs loaned by participants and from yearbook collections. Other concerns included my inability to locate published bulletins by the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP), and minutes from Benton Harbor school board meetings--documentation essential in determining white attitudes towards blacks in terms of

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47 This discussion is based on interpretation of the evidence.
race, integration of schools, sports, and neighborhoods. An unwillingness of participants to recall or share memories of racial conflict also hindered the study, as former players and students seemed intent to protect from controversy a period often referred to as "The Glory Years" of the Benton Harbor community and high school.

Several former players and students were eager to participate. Several, including cheerleaders and former students downplayed their contributions to the team, wished to remain anonymous, or refused to comment altogether. Fortunately there were other individuals, white and black, male and female, whom offered to sit through taped interviews, communicate by telephone, send written correspondence, or share personal recollections in an informal environment. This study benefits from equal participation by both white and blacks. I honored the request of all individuals who requested anonymity for their contributions to this study.

The following chapters address dimensions of race, sport, and boys' basketball, notably in this community. Chapter two deals solely with the black community in Benton Harbor, identifying social, political, and economic concerns that separated it historically from the larger white community. Chapter three investigates the integration process in American sports during the twentieth century, demonstrating

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48 The State of Michigan Library and Archives houses an array of materials on Berrien County, Michigan, but no minutes from School Board meetings. Michigan State University owns one reel of microfilm that sheds light on racial incidents in Michigan reported to the NAACP between the years 1957 and 1961, but offers no detailed material on Benton Harbor.

49 The bibliography reveals a complete list of the subjects contributing to this project under primary source sub-heading "Oral histories." Past participants responded by telephone, email, and letter, offering personal insight to their experiences as members of an integrated high school and sports teams.
that blacks competed with whites before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in professional baseball, but often on unequal terms and with limited numbers. Chapter four examines black participation in Benton Harbor high school athletics from 1895 to 1965, using a variety of tables and photographs to chart black enrollment in public schools, determining in what sports and when black athletes gained prominence. Finally, chapter five investigates the years 1955 to 1965, an unprecedented period in Benton Harbor sports history, when racially mixed teams gained statewide recognition and competed for state basketball championships on a yearly basis.

This thesis examines the extent to which the larger white community in Benton Harbor coped with a growing black population, major social issues, and the emergence of racially mixed high school boys’ basketball teams from 1945 to 1965. Whites and blacks felt threatened by integration in certain areas of society, but sport and the possibility of winning games and championships—a prospect that often accompanied the black athlete—in many instances took precedence over racial inequalities causing friction between the races. I argue that the arrival of integrated teams served as positive force, not as a force of division in the Benton Harbor community, offering temporary relief from racial tension and other social problems.

This study chronicles a pivotal time in Benton Harbor history, when black and white lived and played in relative harmony despite evidence of mounting social and racial problems precipitated by class, labor, and cultural differences. I hope to offer a more suitable sport and social history of the community than exists now. To date, no account exists on this period or any other, solely dedicated to blacks or racially mixed
sport teams in Benton Harbor. Hopefully, this thesis will provide future historians a better means for studying Southwestern Michigan, race relations, and high school sports. By examining certain aspects of the community and sport in Benton Harbor, one may discover that despite social oppression, limited opportunities, and little support from the larger white population, blacks played a significant, ever-growing role in high school athletics and in the process fostered the larger quest for social integration.


CHAPTER II

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY OF BENTON HARBOR (1945-1965)

Small American cities, like Benton Harbor, went through many social changes during the twentieth century. Industrialization, World War II, urbanization, and changing political situations in Europe enticed immigrants and rural populations in the United States to enter cities where jobs were likely to be available and wages more rewarding.1 With the start of World War II came an increase in prosperity, job opportunities, and black migration. Between 1940 and 1970 more than five million American blacks moved from the Deep South north and west into such major cities as, New York, Detroit, Los Angeles, Cleveland, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Indianapolis.2

Homer Hawkins described blacks as being “more fully absorbed into wartime industry during World War II than during World War I because of a much greater

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need for all kinds of labor and also because of deliberate effort by the Fair Employment Practices Commission to reduce discrimination. Chester Walker, former Benton Harbor basketball star, claimed the lure was “the factories offering real jobs for real wages...but the greatest promise of all for southern blacks was to move out of the deeply entrenched segregation and into a new freedom of opportunity.” This chapter considers how the larger white community of Benton Harbor reacted to a growing black population, where blacks lived and worked in the community, their position in public schools, and how black boys fared in high school sports programs.

During the 1940s and 1950s the net migration of blacks from the South reached record proportions. In the decade 1950-1960 more southern blacks migrated to northern and western cities than any other time in United States history. According to Karl E. Taeuber and Alma Taeuber, the South lost nearly 1.5 million African-Americans by migration, while northern states gained almost 1 million and the West almost 400,000. As late as 1960 most black migrants headed for Mid-western states like Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio chose large urban areas rather than rural residences. By 1990 the largest populations of African-Americans in Michigan still

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5 Hawkins, 148.


resided in and around major cities like Lansing, Detroit, Flint, Jackson, and Benton Harbor.\textsuperscript{8}

By 1940 Benton Harbor included 1,293 blacks and by 1950, 1,966. \textsuperscript{9} Census reports taken in 1950 revealed that nearly 75\% of the population consisted of white and American born, with 20\% foreign born, and the other 5\% black. In Berrien County during the same period, the percentage of people living in an urban environment reached 49.6\%, with the urban black population at 8.5\%. The U. S. Census report from 1960 revealed that the black population in Benton Harbor grew from 1,966 to 4,817, as the total population increased from 10,406 to 19,136.

Between 1960 and 1970 Benton Harbor's overall population decreased to 16,481, with an increase from 4,817 blacks to 9,687. In a two-decade period, the total non-white population in the city grew from 11\% in 1950 to 59.5\% in 1970. Much of the change stimulated other demographic shifts, notably an influx of blacks gaining blue-collar industrial and manufacturing jobs, and a large outflow of the white population (white flight) after 1960, mostly caused by economic decline in the city and racial tension in the city and public schools.\textsuperscript{10}


\textsuperscript{9} Wallis, \textit{I Know My Community} (1942), 19.

By the start of World War II, major urban areas and smaller cities like Benton Harbor benefited from prospering economies, established sport programs, and increased social mobility among its residents, both white and black.\textsuperscript{11} The standard of living rose to new heights and Americans enjoyed the new conveniences of modernization. Progress occurred with problems, however, and American cities began to show signs of weakening in social and physical dimensions. Overcrowding and urban transportation were problems and other misgivings related to racial differences. Slums and blighted areas also developed at an alarming pace.\textsuperscript{12} Thomas Sugrue believed that many race problems developed because whites “commonly expressed fears of racial intermingling. Black ‘penetration’ of white neighborhoods posed a fundamental challenge to white racial identity.”\textsuperscript{13}

During the Second World War, Benton Harbor emerged as a small-time but bustling manufacturing and agricultural center. More than fifty plants produced a variety of products: Whirlpool (household appliances), Shepard Products (castors),


Covel Manufacturing Company (saw filing machinery and gray iron castings), Superior Steel Company (steel and malleable castings), Auto Specialties, and Remington Rand (office supplies), to name a few.\textsuperscript{14} The wartime economic boom proved advantageous to a variety of ethnic groups, including blacks migrants from the South, as local plants expanded their facilities and/or converted to war production.\textsuperscript{15} The city also enjoyed the largest open-air wholesale fruit market in the world, covering sixteen full acres, located in the black and immigrant district.\textsuperscript{16}

The Benton Harbor Fruit Market acted as a meeting-place for local ethnic groups and white populations, "where millions of dollars are paid annually for fruit and produce which is shipped all over America."\textsuperscript{17} Local farms attracted hundreds of seasonal workers, mostly black and white southerners from Arkansas, Missouri, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Florida, many of whom stayed in the Benton Harbor area after the yearly harvest, taking advantage of the job market, a prospering economy, and moderately sufficient housing.\textsuperscript{18} Some prospered more than others. But, on a

\textsuperscript{14} The \textit{Herald Palladium} provided extensive coverage of major manufacturing and industrial companies in Benton Harbor during the World War II period. Montgomery also offers a list of businesses in her essay "Critical Assessment" on pages 4-6.

\textsuperscript{15} Steven Riess, \textit{Major Problems in American Sports} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), vii-ix, 1-2, offers the best analysis on the impact of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration in sports and leisurely activities. The last three chapters address race issues, ethnicity, and discrimination within sport from the end of World War II to present. Also see Riess, \textit{City Games} (1989).

\textsuperscript{16} Past residents commonly referred to this area as "The Flats."

\textsuperscript{17} Ken Ellington, "WBBM and Chicago Salute Michigan’s Twin Cities: St. Joseph and Benton Harbor and Their 1938 Blossom Festival," \textit{WBBM 770 Radio} (May 13, 1938): 4. The radio coverage consisted of interviews with white mayors from St. Joseph and Benton Harbor concerning the economic and social status of their communities.

\textsuperscript{18} Wallis, \textit{I Know My Community} (1955 revision), 32.
whole, the black migrant did not always receive fair treatment under the Michigan Civil Rights Law (1948). Jim Lull, a local farmer and long-time Bainbridge Township commissioner, called the first and second generation of migrant workers “reliable, capable people.” He later described third generation migrants, or those more prominent during the 1960s, as “usually unreliable and one-step ahead of the law.”

Wallis and associates agreed:

The migrant Negro and white have brought their own related problems with them from the South and by their very juxtaposition here as farm workers and as economic competitors cause much of the racial trouble as they settle down to live permanently in our community. The fact that each year more of these migrants remain behind to go into local industry or to obtain ‘relief’ compensation here [they must have lived in Michigan, and been self-supporting for one year before becoming residents and thereby eligible for relief] has added not only to the size of the community, but also to the community’s problems in housing, parking, education, health, and recreation.

Outside of working on local farms, blacks worked as barbers, foundry and scrap metal workers, beauticians, truck drivers, tenders at the fruit market, newspaper deliverers, caterers, janitors, household employees, and grocery clerks.

Black ministers and churches, key positions and institutions in the black community, brought hope and added structure to daily lives. By the 1950s many earned positions as board members, committee representatives, on staffs of community social service

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19 Jim Lull, personal recollections, (May 2004).

20 Wallis, I Know My Community (1955), 23, 34.

organizations such as women in the Young Women’s Christian Association, and both genders in the Bureau of Social Aid, Community Chest, Coordinating Council, Berrien County Council of Churches, Ministerial Associations, subcommittee on Health and Housing of the former Benton Harbor City Planning Commission). More served as teachers, lawyers, dentists, nurses, salesmen of real estate, office workers, and small business owners.\textsuperscript{22} Many of the small businesses owned by blacks in the “Flats” were family owned yet, according to Elaine Shoemaker:

They helped to provide gainful employment, the essential staples of everyday life and a sense of ownership in and contribution to their community….financial wherewithal to fuel the hopes of parents for their children to make something of themselves and have a better life.\textsuperscript{23}

Wage scales were favorable and Benton Harbor experienced no visible labor shortages during the post-war period. The years 1945 to 1955 revealed more blacks employed in industrial and manufacturing jobs “at equal pay for equal work.”\textsuperscript{24} Factory environments, however, found many black workers among the unskilled, with most finding better opportunities in the heavy foundry jobs rejected by whites and immigrant groups. Blacks, so it seemed, enjoyed a definite upgrade in the types of work they performed, greatly assisted by higher wages and local businesses adopting seniority scales to provide job security for its workers.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{22} Wallis, \textit{I Know My Community} (1955 edition), 20.

\textsuperscript{23} Shoemaker, “Remembering the Flats,” 1.

\textsuperscript{24} Wallis, (1955), 20.

\textsuperscript{25} Wallis, 20.
Much of the housing in Benton Harbor during the 1940s and 1950s consisted of single-family dwellings. Most of the white population, but not all, lived in more decorative homes and occupied much of the inner city. Living conditions for many depended on the area of town in which a person/family resided. Jean Chandler, a white, former Benton Harbor High School student, recalled that not everyone, “white or black, had the benefits of running water, indoor plumbing, or restrooms.” When confronted with the issue of race relations both Jean and her husband, Bill, argued that the community lived in relative harmony, with few, or any disturbances along race lines occurring during the 1940s and 1950s. Bill Chandler attributed this to “everyone having jobs, working regularly, and earning an income suitable for the time period.” Both said that city streets acted as boundaries to separate white from black communities.26 The only recollection of growing up near the “Flats,” other than its large black population and rundown housing, that Maria Sluiter, a white female, remembered was “my father told me never to go down there.”27

Warren P. Mitchell III, a former black resident remembered, “there were no housing inspectors, no white ‘dogooders’ at all, no bath rooms, no bath tubs, no health facilities at all.”28 He summarized living conditions in the black community in two unpublished poems, bellying the notion that pre-1960s life in Benton Harbor was prosperous and productive for all African-Americans:

26 Bill Chandler and Jean Currie-Chandler, personal recollections, (March 2004).
27 Maria Sluiter, personal recollections, (April 2004).
Life in a Black Ghetto

To watch your little daughter march off to school each morning
with no money for her lunch....

To stand in an unemployment line each day
with the same ole bunch....

To leave a hungry wife and children each morning
wondering if it’s right to go back....

To do the dirty work on your job each day
for no reasons...other than you’re black....

To live each day with insults and accusations
that you really only want to go so far...

To be denied a home improvement loan
but given a $15,000 loan for a car....

This my white friends, in America,
is not a Broadway show;
This my friends is no fantasy....
this is life in a black ghetto.29

Referring to black struggles during the 1940s, the second poem, written in the
mid-1960s, remembers the holidays for lower rank blacks in Benton Harbor:

The Night Before Christmas in the Flats

T’was the night before Christmas down in the Flats,
Nothing was stirring, just roaches and rats.
We hung our stockings by the chimney with care,
Hoping and praying they would still be there.

Mother said go to bed early and wash your feet,
Not because of Santa, but to save the sheets.

We were going to have a good Christmas, we were

In luck,
We just got our basket from the welfare truck,
When all at once we heard such clatter,
We ran down the stairs to see what was the matter.

They had just raided Wendy’s and James Rec Hall
And my Daddy was there, having a ball.

My mother went back to the kitchen singing a
A very sad song,
She knew the WPA check was gone.

I heard the police say as they rode out of sight,
“Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!”

White-black relations worsened in the 1960s as unemployment rates increased and social welfare systems divided the city further by economic and social standing. Joseph Leto, Jr., a white, recalled blacks migrating from Illinois to take advantage of Michigan’s new welfare systems, later commenting that, “whites had serious problems adjusting to a different class of blacks moving into the area especially those more content to draw welfare rather than seek employment.”

Jill Culby, a former white teacher at Benton Harbor high school during the late 1960s, contended that race relations deteriorated beyond repair after new black families moved in from larger cities, notably Chicago, bringing with them different attitudes towards whites and an array of inner-city problems unfamiliar to the larger white community. Jean Chandler remembered the summer of 1963 as the turning point in race relations,

31 Joseph Leto, Jr., telephone conversation, (May 2004).
32 Jill Culby, personal recollections, (May 2004).
pointing to riots and fighting, white flight, and the deterioration of low-income housing.  

Segregated streets restricted blacks and European immigrant groups to areas outside of the city limits, predominately in Benton Township, or in the “Flats.” Formerly bounded on the north by Empire Avenue, the south by Main Street, the east by Colfax Avenue, and the west by Riverview Drive, the “Flats” consisted of a culturally diverse population: American Indians, Blacks, European Americans, and Jewish Americans. Roy Shoemaker, a former “Flats” resident explained the racial make-up of the community:

“There was every type of ethnic group that you can think of... for some reason, people think it was all black, but that wasn’t true. I would say if diversity was in style, it certainly was in style at that time. The only difference is that we were economically disadvantaged compared to other people.”

Most of the homes in the “Flats” consisted of rental units with little insulation, coal-burning stoves for cooking and heating, outside toilets, kerosene lamps for lighting, outside water pumps, and washtubs used for laundry and personal hygiene. Chet Walker remembered moving out of an older house in the Flats after the city built

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33 Bill and Jean Chandler, personal recollections, (April 2004).

34 Written oral histories provided by Roy and Elaine Shoemaker (husband and wife), Willie Hopkins, and Joseph Shum during the local history project entitled “Remembering the Flats,” (January 2002). City Maps and Directories, dated 1938 to 1960, also provide excellent geographical coverage of the black community in Benton Harbor.


36 “Remembering the Flats,” a written oral history that consists of frequently asked questions about the life and times there, (January 2002), 1-2.
the "projects...that's what everyone called the housing developments in the black, east side of Benton Harbor...barracks like housing of a kind built in a hurry all over the United States after World War II." 37 Originally intended for returning war veterans and their families, the city used the "projects" to house its growing black population. Walker remembered the "projects" as single buildings of attached row houses, and each building having four units. "We had an end unit, which was the most desirable because it had three bedrooms." 38 Walker added:

The projects themselves, although isolated racially and ethnically in all ways that are known to be detrimental, were *stable*. I think that the southerners who came to a town such as Benton Harbor re-created a sort of village atmosphere, like a small hamlet or southern crossroads community. The projects were all one-story buildings, so no one was stacked on top of anyone else. At the most, three or four hundred people lived there at any time. We were homogeneous racially, in our roots, in our religion, and in our dreams. Yes, we were segregated and knew it, but we had a lot going for us in the 1950s. 39

Still poor by white northern standards, some blacks fared better than they had in the Deep South. Walker recalled, "to us life had taken a sharp turn for the better. We didn't think about cars or new clothes. We didn't think we were poor. Poor to us in Mississippi was having no food to eat, clothes to wear, the bank throwing you off your land." 40

38 Walker, 19.
39 Walker, 22.
40 Walker, 22.
Oral histories by former black residents, Roy and Elaine Shoemaker, Willie L. Hopkins, and Dr. Joseph Shurn, described the “Flats” population as being economically poor, but hard working, family orientated, and striving to achieve the American dream of home ownership, material success, social mobility, and equality.41 Shurn recalled fond memories of growing up on Benton Harbor’s east side, “the whole thought was everyone’s got to succeed to the best of their ability...there was the work ethic and progressive ethic about the community that wanted everybody to do the best they could.”42 Roy Shoemaker referred to the area “as a great place...it taught me the social, racial, and economic differences in our neighbors.”43 Hopkins lived in the area from 1936 until 1945 recalled fond as well as disappointing memories:

The [white] kids on the south side of Benton Harbor would look down on the children in the Flats...they were better off than we were, so they used to say we’d never amount to anything. But that proved to be false. We had it rough down there [The Flats], but anyone can do it. I’m a witness to that.44

Black living conditions and the response of the larger white community in Benton Harbor to a growing black population resembled that of major U. S. cities during the same period. Dr. Douglas V. Davidson, an African-American Associate Professor of Sociology at Western Michigan University and former basketball player at Cassopolis

41 Elaine Shoemaker, Remembering the Flats, 1-2.
42 “The Flats,” Herald Palladium Section E, pg. 1 (February 3, 2002).
43 “The Flats,” (February 3, 2002).
44 “The Flats,” (February 3, 2002).
High School in Southwestern Michigan during the 1950s and early 1960s, believes that little will be learned by the public in these matters until scholars depart from studies solely directed at larger metropolitan areas and examine race relations in smaller communities, especially in the North and West.

The situation in Benton Harbor suggests that the smaller black population did little to upset the majority white population, often avoiding conflict by maintaining ethnic boundaries and "minding one's own business." As one white informant lauded, "all was fine as long as blacks stayed on their side of the street." The Wallis survey confirmed that a fair share of social and economic prejudice existed in the community during the 1950s:

The Survey Committee considers Negroes an integral part of this community and describes them not as a separate group but as an accepted element of American society, affected by all the usual influences of economics, politics, housing, employment, education, health, law, recreation, and religion. But the committee cannot ignore the fact that the welfare of these particular racial residents in the crowded areas of Benton Harbor and its environs too often is jeopardized by personal and community attitudes and by economic discrimination toward Negroes in general.

Wallis also conducted a survey of black homes in the "Flats" in 1955. The study derived from a 1944 venture undertaken by the Michigan Tuberculosis Association in

45 Cassopolis High School is located 35 miles southeast of Benton Harbor in Cass County, Michigan.

46 A conversation with Dr. Douglas V. Davidson, a professor of sociology at Western Michigan University, revealed the lack of published materials on race relations in communities outside of large metropolitan areas (January 20, 2004).

47 Quoted from an anonymous source (June 2004).

48 Wallis, I Know My Community, 20.
cooperation with the Health and Housing Committee of the Benton Harbor City Planning Commission “to discover the real condition of Negro living which might contribute to Tuberculosis susceptibility.”

A summary of the findings appears as follows:

**TABLE 1**

**SURVEY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN HOUSING CONDITIONS (1955)**

- 2,037 Negro persons tabulated
- 999 Males
- 1,038 Females
- 445 children of school age
- 215 children of preschool age
- 979 persons who desired the tuberculin test
- 421 persons employed in defense plants
- 382 roomers
- 532 families canvassed
- 211 owned homes
- 305 rented homes
- 306 homes had sewer connections—165 did not
- 326 homes had running water—150 did not
- 348 homes had inside toilets—8 had no toilet
- 153 had outside toilets—76 good, 68 bad
- 135 families without garbage collection
- 115 families had central heating; 397 did not
- 302 houses had bathrooms—214 did not
- 2,037 persons occupied 2,531 rooms of which 1,215 were bedrooms
- 1,431 lived in city, 606 lived outside.
- 275 persons under a physician’s care during the year

The committee concluded that the areas and homes along Riford Street or Miller Street or down Bond Street and across 8th Street and 9th Street were dilapidated and

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50 Statistics gathered from Wallis, 110.
unfit for living. These streets ran through the heart of the “Flats.” Wallis described many homes with:

Broken windows, drafty rooms, poor or no plumbing, damp walls and basements, poor ventilation, at least one family living below ground—another in a second story with the only egress to outside through a trap door, can’t help but lower an individual’s physical resistance to a disease such as tuberculosis.51

The Wallis team made no mention of current plans to resolve the housing dilemma in the Flats, only that city officials fielded large numbers of complaints from white citizens concerning the rundown state of the area. Other than suggesting that whites should work more closely with their black neighbors or that black leaders needed to take a more active role in their community, the survey avoided more serious racial issues. Evidence suggests that the white majority offered little support towards upgrading the status and physical well being of blacks in the area. Branches of the local government showed concern over the rundown state of black housing in the “Flats,” but generally reacted negatively.52

On May 3, 1954, the News Palladium described the Negro District as “here tumbledown shacks and old frame houses, crowded with tenants, pile up a fire hazard which is a constant dread to the fire department.”53 Maurice Sheperdson, white fire chief and long-time resident of Benton Harbor, grew weary of answering fire calls in

51 Wallis, I Know My Community (1955), 111.


the Flats. In response to growing concerns among the majority white population to
the rundown state of the area, Sheperdson declared:

We’re going to see what can be done about condemning the
building (and others) so it won’t be used for habitation anymore.
The place is just another of any number of tenements in this area
[the Flats] that are crowded, filthy, and fire traps.54

Eighteen days later, the newspaper viewed Sheperdson’s declaration as another
“sporadic attempt to clean up the area,” stating “that unless public sentiment is
aroused and pressure put on the city hall to wage unrelenting warfare on this situation
it will continue.” Blacks were subjugated to poor living conditions and “let no one
think those forced to live in these areas want it that way,” claimed the newspaper.
“They complain that their landlords will do little or nothing for them; that decent
housing conditions are unavailable that they are compelled to live in holes they now
occupy.” As much as more fortunate whites wanted to blame poor living conditions
on blacks themselves, the editor of the News Palladium believed, in some cases, that
“greedy landlords” were partly responsible for slums and high rental rates for single
rooms. Apparently many avoided maintenance repairs or overhead costs to gain
outrageous profits.55

Transportation shortages and segregated public recreational facilities, such as the
Young Men’s Christian Association and certain parks and beaches, also inhibited
blacks from gaining equal standing with the white population. Most walked or rode

bicycles from their homes to different areas of the city because few owned cars and no busing system existed, only local taxi service. For recreation, most attended church, family gatherings, or visited the House of David (located in Benton Harbor) to partake in train rides, bowling, arcades, baseball, and tour the zoo. Others toured the Silver Beach Amusement Park in St. Joseph to ride roller coasters, bumper cars, or play in the funhouses and arcades. Those that could not afford “expensive entertainment” went fishing, on church-sponsored hayrides, ice-skating, or stayed at home and listened to the radio. Black children learned to do without. Most played games such as: Hide & Seek, “Jacks,” Marbles, Jump Rope, or “Mumble-Peg.” Others rolled in old tires, played stickball in the streets, basketball with makeshift rims and backboards, walked on tin cans, or during the summer months went swimming at the “Burnt Boat.”

David K. Wiggins, author of a critically-acclaimed article entitled “The Play of Slave Children in the Plantation Communities of the Old South, 1820-1860,” argued that slave children realized a sense of community from other children and adults on southern plantations through games and other play activities. According to Wiggins, “play was essential to slave children because it was one means through which they learned the values and mores of their parents’ world. Play became a means by which

57 “Remembering the Flats,” 1.
cultural traits were preserved from one generation to the next." Black youth in Benton Harbor strived for a sense of community as a buffer against white domination likely to relieve themselves of daily worries and anxieties through makeshift games, much like their ancestors who sought communal recreation activities to escape the burden of white slaveholders’ power.

As early as 1938 Benton Harbor featured an array of recreational facilities and outdoor parks stretching from the shores of Lake Michigan to the inner city. In terms of recreation development, the community utilized similar models as major cities. Historian Stephen Hardy called Boston’s efforts to expand public parks and facilities a “grand scheme, radical surgery to implant a new arterial system that would push the lifeblood of fresh air, health, and morality throughout the urban system.” He maintained that parks “were designed as an antidote, a refuge from the hectic, congested conditions of life in the city,” whereas playgrounds “were often located in the very heart of the problems,” referring to overcrowded areas where juvenile delinquency ran at a high rate. In Benton Harbor during the 1950s and 1960s juvenile delinquency, especially among young black males, ran high and few parks and recreational facilities met their needs, which indicates both confinement and discriminatory practices against blacks. The local Young Men’s Christian Association


(YMCA) and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) offered blacks only one hour on Saturdays every week to visit their facilities. Not surprisingly, whites ran athletic programs geared towards the white community, permitting them unlimited access to facilities and sporting events.  

What ramifications did unequal access to recreation facilities have on the community? In a study on Boston, Stephen Hardy claimed that American cities needed to build city parks in order to ease tensions caused by congested urban areas, most of which offered no outlet for a growing and restless community of diverse groups. The Wallis surveys indicated a critical shortage of recreation sites available to the black population in Benton Harbor, a situation that led to higher crime rates and racial tension over access to public facilities, more than a decade before the rise of integrated basketball teams.

In 1942 the Benton Harbor Parks Department maintained 15 parks, covering 500 acres. Among the most prominent from 1940 to 1965 included: Jean Klock Park, located on the lake-front; Union Park, which housed an ice-skating rink; and the Babe Ruth Field, positioned behind Benton Harbor High School. Most of the smaller parks featured baseball diamonds, basketball courts, wading pools, playground equipment and shelters, while others served only as scenic parks. In the Wallis surveys (1942

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63 Wallis, 119-122.
64 Wallis, *I Know My Community* (1942), 42.
and 1955) and in *To Know Your Twin Cities* (1963), published by the League of Women Voters, editors made mention of only one park/recreational facility in close proximity of the black community. Wallis suggested:

The further development of the community recreation program should include additional playground equipment and wise playground supervision, in the interest of reducing delinquency [referring here to growing numbers of black youth being housed at the Berrien County Juvenile Center] and for the well-being of all concerned. This should be decided upon in thoughtful cooperation with other agencies [Coordinating Council, Schools, Y.M.C.A., Kiwanis, Y.W.C.A, Scouts, Salvation Army, W.P.A., etc.]. Attention should be drawn to the very good recreation project and its supervision at the Water Works Playground, used mostly by Negro children. . . . a Negro Community Center should be established for the Negroes to share responsibility for program and financing of the center.

The Wallis study made no mention as to whether or not black youths ventured outside of their racial community to investigate other recreational facilities, participated in high school athletics, or how sports played into their daily lives or impacted the community on a whole. Newspaper editorials and yearbook pictures imply that blacks were involved in organized sports by the turn of the 20th century, a topic explored further in chapter four.

The enrollment of blacks in public schools and the racial diversity of sport teams at Benton Harbor high school played a significant role in determining black/white relations during the period. Chet Walker remembered that a white storeowner in the city “hadn’t known me from Adam” until he reached stardom on the basketball court.

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66 Wallis, (1955), 130.
“One day I strolled in to hear him say, “Oh your Chester Walker. Well, I’ll be. He came over and pumped my hand. Scoring points and winning games would prove to be a partial cure for invisibility.” It appears that in most areas of society whites maintained a relative peaceful relationship with blacks, as long as neighborhoods and schools located in white districts remained segregated and everyone attended their own affairs. Walker argued that blacks often met the most resistance from the police force:

In some ways, black kids in Benton Harbor did things that just provoked the cops to come after us. But at the same time the cops let us know they would go out of their way to harass us. So we had to give-and-take. It wasn’t enough to stop us downtown or on our way home from school in groups. They had to let us know where we stood. If we were caught snatching fruit from a stand or trying to sneak into the movie theater, it was never a stern lecture or just a firm hand or warning. It was ‘Get your black ass out of there, you little black son-of-bitch.’ The cops’ responses were always humiliating.

The larger white population seemed less concerned with small numbers of blacks at the single high school and on sport teams, at least until 1968 when they became the majority population. In 1955 Wallis and associates calculated the number of blacks attending Benton Harbor Township elementary and junior high schools as follows:

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67 Walker, A Long Time Coming, 33.

68 Walker, 48.
TABLE 2
AFRICAN-AMERICAN ENROLLMENT (1955)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fairplain</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Shore</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boynton</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hull</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bard</td>
<td>500(^{69})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Harold Wheeler, a former resident of the "Flats" and captain of the 1955 basketball team, explained the situation:

Fairplain and North Shore were reserved for white students, whereas the locations of Boynton, Hull, and Bard schools drew the most black students because of their close proximity to the larger black neighborhood....Being originally from the South and having many black friends as a youth, attending an integrated junior high, and later high school in Benton Harbor had little effect on me.\(^{70}\)

City maps of Benton Harbor published during the 1940s and 1950s indicate that schools "reserved" for blacks were, in fact, located where the largest black populations resided.\(^{71}\) Robert A. Dentler contended:

Northern school boards have frequently geerymandered school districts and attendance zones within districts in order to preserve racial segregation, to be sure, but by and large school segregation has resulted from the confidence of *residential segregation* (economic as well as ethnic) with the principle of neighborhood school locations.\(^{72}\)

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\(^{70}\) Harold Wheeler, personal recollections (February 2003).

\(^{71}\) Report of the Planning, Coordination and Development Committee to the City Commission and the Board of Education, entitled “Continuous Planning of Public Work in Benton Harbor, Michigan: Six Year Programming and Public Work Reserve,” (Benton Harbor, MI: 1942), 34.

The 1954 Supreme Court case, *Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, ruled that "separate but equal" public school systems were unconstitutional, thus establishing a foundation for the end to segregation in public schools. *Brown* heightened the aspirations of millions of blacks as never before. The decision meant that all Americans were worthy of the best schools, education, and athletic facilities that a local school district could provide. It also ruled that the Southern segregation system ultimately would have to end. New ideas of racial equality evolved around the country, indicating changing times and racial attitudes.

As Harvard Sitkoff asserted, "nearly a century after their professed freedom had been stalled, compromised, and stolen, blacks confidently anticipated being free and equal." The question remained in northern communities, like Benton Harbor, whether or not white public schools and athletic departments would commit to wholesale integration. The greater percentage of whites in Benton Harbor shared the same concerns on integration as other white-dominated communities around the country but, on a whole, white students reacted favorably to integration in the classroom.

In 1952 William R. Ming, professor of law at the University of Chicago Law School, argued that, "in several Northern states there are public schools and local school systems with racial patterns and practices hardly distinguishable from the

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segregated school patterns of the Deep South.”75 The situation changed little after 1955 even though several northern states like New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, and Michigan made attempts at full integration of public schools. However, in a 1965 study on Northern school desegregation, Robert A. Dentler, discovered that “about 80 percent of the segregated schools in the northern and western United States were located in New York, Michigan, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and California.”76

As early as 1955 Benton Harbor education officials took steps to accommodate growing numbers of black migrants arriving from the South and larger cities in the North, but with exception of one integrated high school, the community functioned with a dual school system, with many areas of the district marked with varying degrees of defacto segregation. Wallis reported:

> Although the Michigan Law states that public services shall not be discriminatory, some restaurants, taverns, bowling alleys, dance halls, and the like are not open to Negroes. The trend seems to be one of slowly absorbing this problem, especially among some of the Community Chest agencies and public school system, but a long-range goal of overcoming this segregation seems clear in *Our Community* as well as at the various levels within our country.77

On May 31, 1955 the Supreme Court dealt the black freedom movement a harsh blow. The implementation decision on the *Brown* ruling rejected the NAACP’s request to order immediate and total school segregation. Supreme Court Justices

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instead produced a "go slow" approach requested by representatives of the southern states, assigning the responsibility and pace of desegregation to local federal judges and school authorities, requiring only that a "prompt and reasonable start toward full compliance be made." Otherwise, desegregation could proceed "with all deliberate speed." For the first time, the United States Supreme Court vindicated a constitutional right and then refused to exercise its authority.\(^78\)

To many white northerners the Brown decision on segregation in public schools was a step forward; to most white southerners it created social problems of colossal proportions. George E. Sokolsky, writing on behalf of King Features Syndicate, Inc., for the News Palladium in Benton Harbor, viewed Brown in a different light. He believed that southerners would pay dearly by forfeiting their ideas, their mores, their way of life, whereas northerners were not required to assume an equal responsibility.

In an editorial printed by the News Palladium on May 28, 1954, Sokolsky argued that:

> The excitement, the enthusiasm, the self-righteousness of some New York newspapers may have satisfied momentarily their sense of right, but in time they too will have to understand that this question of actual equal political and social rights for Negroes involves such fundamental changes, not only in customs and manners, but in ideas and ideals, that only a patient and comradely approach to the problem can be of permanent good. The South is also part of the United States and what happens there is of equal importance to what occurs in the self-centered metropolis on the Hudson. Whereas in New York and Chicago and other northern cities segregation is practiced deceptively by the device of whites moving out of neighborhoods into which Negroes or Puerto Ricans move, in the South whites and blacks live and work in constant

propinquity. In northern cities, segregation in lower schools exists because if all the children of a neighborhood are of one kind, the school in that neighborhood will be of one kind. The Supreme Court does nothing about that and cannot.\textsuperscript{79}

He later postulated that hypocrisy is not the solution to the problem, concluding that the solution to the Negro problem in the United States “will have to be in the South because that is where it has been placed by geography and population. It will have to be solved by white and Negro southerners working in harmony.”\textsuperscript{80}

On May 25, 1954 state leaders of the NAACP met in Detroit, Michigan to address issues of discrimination in Michigan Public Schools. Delegates to the 18\textsuperscript{th} annual conference of state NAACP branches charged the Detroit Board of Education with stubbornly maintaining a “policy of racial discrimination in assignment and placement of teachers.” Leaders also berated Grand Rapids schools, referring to them as another instance of segregation in Michigan schools because of their intention to build a new school on a site “which will render racial integration impossible. The new school site appears to have been chosen by the board as a calculated means of maintaining racial segregation.” By an overwhelming majority of the vote, delegates vowed to battle all forms of segregation in Michigan.\textsuperscript{81}

The Brown decision had little effect on Michigan because segregation was not as rigid as in the South and it was not de jure. Communities and public schools dealt


\textsuperscript{80} Sokolsky, “The Northern Responsibility,” (May 28, 1954).

\textsuperscript{81} “NAACP Sees Segregation in Michigan School Systems,” News Palladium Sec. 1, pg. 7 (May 25, 1954).
with de facto conditions later, starting in the late 1960s, when issues over busing turned major cities around the country into battlegrounds. The situation appeared differently in the South. For example, Dallas, Texas, long known for its black segregated school system, claimed two high schools and fourteen elementary schools in 1954 to accommodate nearly 16,000 African-Americans out of a total enrollment of 90,000 students. School officials assessed the schools as in “good shape, and many are quite new.” Booker T. Washington High School, an all-black school in the district, represented one of hundreds of schools in seventeen segregated states that reported widespread support for nationwide segregation.  

Peggy Jo Wedgeworth, a fifteen-year-old Dallas freshman and just one of 1,232 students, had little contact with white children. Faced with the possibility of graduation in three years with white students, she replied, “I think we could get along all right if both sides tried. I think the court ruling is real nice—wonderful.” Claudette Roblow echoed Wedgeworth’s sentiments, “We wouldn’t want to force ourselves on the white children, just try to make them like us.” When asked about the possibility of playing on integrated sport teams, Emmett Brown, a senior basketball star said, “I don’t think Negroes would have trouble making the team if they were good enough.” Head coach Raymond Hollie believed that the success of Negro athletes “would depend solely on their ability, and as for teachers—I think it would work the same way.” Despite high hopes from these few black students and faculty

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on desegregation issues, the governor of Texas, Alan Shivers, declared that it would take years to put into place. J. W. Edgar, Texas Education Commissioner, advised all superintendents “to plan for the 1954-55 school year on the basis of continued segregation.”

Did the Brown decision in any way affect attitudes and decision-making processes in the Benton Harbor public school system or did defacto segregation continue to run its course? Most of the participants in this study had some knowledge of the ruling, but remembered little as to how it impacted the community. Bill Chandler, white, a 1955 graduate of Benton Harbor high school, recalled “no racial problems or tensions among white and black students,” later admitting that he never heard of Brown or the ruling. Jean Chandler, a white female, remembered integrated classrooms and sport teams, but little socialization between the races after classes, at lunchtime, or in social events outside of school. “People tended to associate with members of their own race and mind their own business,” recalled the Chandlers. Neither remembered significant numbers of blacks attending sporting events except parents of athletes, but both agreed that no racial friction existed among students at Benton Harbor high school during the 1950s. However, this does not mean that blacks were exempt from the usual racial slurs of the period. According to one anonymous source:

I remember having two black teammates one season. On one occasion, both failed to show up for practice the day before a game.


84 Bill and Jean Chandler, personal recollections compiled from private correspondence with the author (April 2004).
The next afternoon both sat the bench. When the two unnamed players asked the coach if they were going to play he said, 'when you niggers come to practice, then you can play in games.'

The *News Palladium* printed a few columns on *Brown*, but sought no opinion polls or other means to raise community awareness on the matter. Nor did the community appear concerned with mounting racial tensions in the South. In response to questions on how the Supreme Court decision impacted Benton Harbor three-out-of-four respondents polled replied that they had no knowledge of the case. The other one-fourth, all white, argued that *Brown* applied little to Benton Harbor because the high school and most areas of society had been integrated for decades prior to 1954. Most admitted that as teenagers during the 1950s, they paid little attention to social and political issues on the national level, with most of their knowledge coming second-hand through parents or neighbors. Wilma Ann Taylor, a white female and 1960 graduate at Benton Harbor High School, echoed student sentiment on integrated classrooms and sports teams in the late 1950s:

> The majority of the white student body paid little attention to race issues...the number of blacks constituted only a small number of the student population...concerns over percentages came in the 1960’s, more noticeably after rioting in 1968 and after considerable numbers of whites abandoned the city for the suburbs or other communities, leaving black students in the majority.

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85 Quoted from an anonymous source, (April 2004).

86 These figures do not reflect the attitudes of all whites and blacks living during the period.

One explanation for the lack of white concern in Benton Harbor over integration appears to be low black enrollment numbers at the high school level. A study of high school yearbooks revealed that at no time between 1955 and 1965 did the black population reach 25 percent of the student body, leading one to believe that as long as numbers favored the white majority there was no need to fear blacks. The results of the study read:

**TABLE 3: PERCENTAGE OF WHITE AND BLACK STUDENTS AT BENTON HARBOR HIGH SCHOOL (1955-65)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%Black</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>353</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>381</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomores</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>432</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>205</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1216</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>1371</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1956

<p>| | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>337</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>410</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomores</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>480</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>228</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1247</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>1455</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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88 The low number of students in the freshman class each year of the study is the result of the Benton Harbor school board's decision in the 1940s to maintain two junior high schools (up to grade 9) in the city, one near the all-black district and other in the area predominantly white. Rural ninth graders without a junior high in their district were bused into the single high school.
TABLE 3--CONTINUED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% Black</th>
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<td>1957</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>332</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>432</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomores</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>540</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>334</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1412</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>1638</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
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1958

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>389</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>434</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomores</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>606</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>312</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1496</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>1741</td>
<td>14%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1959

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Black</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>366</td>
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<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td>479</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>551</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sophomores</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>583</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>315</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1570</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>1815</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1960

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Black</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% Black</th>
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<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>428</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>528</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sophomores</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>579</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>273</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1585</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>1815</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
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<td>1961</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>441</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>481</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sophomores</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>521</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>275</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1470</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>1718</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>391</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>434</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sophomores</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>552</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>357</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1448</td>
<td>286</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>63</td>
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<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>508</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sophomores</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>684</td>
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<tr>
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<td>247</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>425</td>
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<td>529</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>650</td>
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<td>564</td>
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<td>742</td>
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<tr>
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<td>191</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1645</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>2045</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
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TABLE 3—CONTINUED

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<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>622</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sophomores</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>888</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>154</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1697</td>
<td>479</td>
<td>2176</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

W. M. Cunningham, president of the board of education, claimed, “education is for all children, an invitation to learning, room for all.” Given that renovation of Benton Harbor high school began during the Brown case, it appears that some white school board officials, either through personal or legal reasons had the best interests of the black community in mind, at least from a political perspective. Or so it seemed. Despite funds to improve schools in the majority of the district, no board member raised an agenda to desegregate elementary, middle, and junior high schools, either in the white or black communities, until the early 1960s.

In the post-World War II period Benton Harbor remained a city divided on many social issues, much the same as major metropolitan areas of the time. Kimberly R. Phillips, author of well-received study on Cleveland, Ohio, described the African-

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90 “This is Your High School,” Benton Harbor high school open house invitation, (November 18, 1956).
American situation in that city as “rebuffed in neighborhoods, limited in job
opportunities, and increasingly confined to segregated institutions.” In a study on
Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Joe Trotter argued that, “the persistence of racial
discrimination in the socioeconomic and political life of the city frustrated the efforts
of middle-and working-class blacks to create unity across race lines.” Thomas
Sugrue, author of a major study on Detroit, called the city one of many
“fundamentally entangled with the troubled history of race in twentieth century
America. Increasing joblessness, and the decaying infrastructure of inner-city
neighborhoods, reinforced white stereotypes of black people, families, and
communities.” Bentong Harbor housed many of the same concerns as early as the
1940s. Wallis and associates suspected:

Local Negro leaders have stirred their people to attitudes of
bitterness against the community; while there are apparently white
citizens in Benton Harbor and St. Joseph, even in the church and
educational groups, who have added difficulty to the situation by
their own strong racial prejudices.

By 1955 black student complaints of unfair treatment were addressed by the
NAACP, an organization active in Benton Harbor since the early 1950s, but often
accused by whites as being biased and for using its influence to gain political clout


University of Illinois Press, 1985), xi.


94 Wallis, *I Know My Community* (1944), 32.
rather than to help solve social concerns. On January 15, 1955, the local chapter filed a racial segregation charge against white directors of the Stump school district, accusing them of gerrymandering a new school building. During most of the week prior to charges being filed, a large portion of the 96 colored pupils in the district reported to their old school at Pipestone Road and Nickerson Avenue instead of the new building. In a prepared statement addressed to the school board, the NAACP complained that, “the district’s territory had been divided in such a way that all colored pupils were in the new school area and all the white pupils were in the area served by the older building.” Members of the school board explained that the new building location came by order of the State Department of Education in response to the overcrowded state of the older building. Mrs Burwell Cartwright, white board secretary, stated, “we have acted at the state’s recommendations all along...we never wanted to offend anyone. Our only concern was to get the best possible schools for everybody in the district.” Johnnie Harris, a black elected to the school board in June, three months after the board’s decision to build a new school, contended, “I feel it is a segregated school.”

Black parents of the district announced that they would continue to send their children to the old school until “such a time as the board makes proper disposition of the matter, according to the NAACP statement.” Only after several days of standing outside did black students receive permission to enter the old building, but advised by

95 Wallis, I Know My Community (1955), 130.
Mrs. Harzell Taylor, black teacher, "she had no desks available and that they were
assigned to the new school."\textsuperscript{97} For the first time since the Supreme Court decision on
\textit{Brown vs. Topeka, Kansas}, Benton Harbor faced a racial crisis of major significance.

Unlike chapters in larger cities like Detroit, the Benton Harbor NAACP never
gained momentum because of divided sentiments among the black population. By
1958 some parents and leaders within the black community, mostly from the older
established families, began peaceful negotiations with schools and local government
to address mounting racial tensions. Others remained silent, not wishing to challenge
social norms or totally isolate themselves from the white majority, while a small
percentage became more militant. Uneven participation from the majority of the
black community or a shortage of leadership also undermined any concerted attack on
segregation.\textsuperscript{98}

As Albert Johnson, white, pointed out, "I discovered that leadership in the black
community appeared to shift from time to time. Someone who seemed to be a strong
leader at one time would lose his or her influence and another would come to the
forefront."\textsuperscript{99} To complicate matters, the majority of white citizens in Benton Harbor
offered little input or support to the black community. Whites wanted blacks to
maintain their house and property, but provided no model of conformity for blacks to

\textsuperscript{97} "Negro Pupils Boycotting," (January 15, 1955), 10.

\textsuperscript{98} \textit{NAACP Bulletin} (October 26 and December 6, 1958).

follow. Whites seemed unwilling to take into account that many blacks arriving from the Deep South lived in rural environments where it mattered little if one mowed his grass or fed bones to dogs off their front porch.

On the whole, the community failed to recognize the difference between wartime imported black workers, who often differed in attitude, culture, and social background from the older, more established black families. Wallis argued that “white people fail to note this distinction existing with the Negro group itself.” Peter Yancich, white, 1968 graduate of BHHS, asserted that whites share the blame for poor race relations and the slow deterioration of the community in the 1960s because they refused to prepare blacks for positions in local government, or figure out methods for easing racial tensions, or help them “conform to white ways.” When blacks became the majority population in city and schools, and Benton Harbor elected its first black mayor in 1968, riots and other disturbances broke out, many of local origin others precipitated by riots in Detroit. Whites fled in great numbers, and it was if someone “carpet-bombed the whole damn city,” recalled Yancich.

Albert Johnson claimed that, “strong racial unrest all over the country in the mid-1960s…led to changes taking place in the make-up of the community.”

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100 Quoted from an anonymous source, (May 2004).
102 Wallis, 33-34.
103 Peter Yancich, personal recollections, (May 2004).
104 Yancich, (May 2004).
families increased in number and the percentage of black students at Benton Harbor high school by late 1960s jumped from 20% to approximately 50%. Minor rioting occurred in the black community and the fallout carried over into the schools.\textsuperscript{105} When the civil rights movement reached northern communities blacks became more involved in community affairs and won elected positions in local government, the situation between white and black grew more intense.\textsuperscript{106}

On July 3, 1963, in the wake of Benton Harbor’s first major race riot, the \textit{News Palladium} reported, “the spirit of the recent southern desegregation demonstrations swept into Benton Harbor last night as groups of Negroes assembled first at the Italian village and then moved into other locations.” A fight erupted between several blacks and whites. Groups of disgruntled blacks rose to an estimated 500 persons when pressures erupted into “a general shower of bricks and bottles.” Reporters on the scene mentioned no specific targets, except that some cars were struck. The police initially identified the ringleader as Loretta Pitts, a twenty-three year old black female and sister of one of the black youths jailed for fighting. In near rage, Pitts jumped onto the trunk of a police car and yelled to the crowd, “You all know why we’re here…we don’t want no killing. Just a little beating.” When informed that a meeting had been arranged the following morning with Merle McCarroll, police chief, and Henry Griese, county sheriff, to discuss the arrest of her brother, Robert James Pitts,

\textsuperscript{105} Johnson, \textit{Memoirs}, 59.

the sister called to the crowd saying, "we've caused enough damage tonight. But if my brother isn't out of jail tomorrow, we'll meet right back here on this spot."\textsuperscript{107}

Several Negro community members voiced concern over the violence that resulted in four people being hurt by flying debris and several cars damaged. Reverend W. L. McAfee, pastor at the New Paradise Baptist Church, decried, "you can't just bust into jail and say you want people set free, that's one-hundred years out of date. You can't get those boys out of jail until you talk to the prosecutor...we need to go about this as law-abiding citizens. Otherwise, somebody's going to get hurt because a few idiots lose their head." The local branch of the NAACP responded quickly and decisively to the incident. William Samson, black, declared that, "the NAACP doesn't approve of this type of demonstration. You harm innocent people with brick throwing. We believe in protest and demonstration, but none of this bottle throwing."\textsuperscript{108}

Two days later, following a meeting between Benton Harbor black leaders and local law enforcement officials, charges were dropped against two black youths. Although not blameless in the incident, police determined "they were not aggressors in the affray." Similar charges of felonious assault against three white men were reduced to assault and battery. A joint statement issued by both parties read, "we are deeply concerned by the unfortunate events which have occurred in Benton Harbor..."


we intend to form a committee to determine ways and means for promoting better race relations among the citizens of the area, in order that law and order will prevail.”

Many black and white citizens expressed concern over the incident with most disapproving of the riot, or viewing it as a set back in overall race relations. Voices of moderation worked with law enforcement officials to help quell the situation and return the community to its original form.\(^\text{109}\) Glenda Lindemann, white, and former Benton Harbor student, called for end to racial tensions in the community:

> I am a teenager writing in regard to the racial disputes in this community. I don’t understand why some people think they are so much better than others....most people seem to think that it is the Negro who is starting racial trouble here, but I don’t feel this way. I think that most of the trouble has started here because of all the racial demonstrating down South. I have gone to school with Negro boys and girls ever since 1949...I have met and made friends with a good many Negro students, and as far as I’m concerned they are just as good as the rest of us.\(^\text{110}\)

In June 1965 when the Benton Harbor School Board passed a popular referendum to consolidate all school districts disparities between black and white residents or concerns over segregation of public schools reached a high water mark.\(^\text{111}\) Johnson, interim president, noted:

> We found that in some of the predominantly black areas we had large class loads and few instructional supplies and in some of the predominantly white areas the opposite was true....in some of the slum areas, where blacks lived, the schools were overcrowded with


\(^{111}\) The proposal called for the consolidation of seventeen school districts under one school board.
poor equipment, whereas in some of the white areas we had as few as 15 pupils in a room and some empty classrooms.\textsuperscript{112}

When Johnson and board members attempted to transfer students to different schools the white majority rose in great numbers to protest. Most of the complaints came from the more prestigious, white Fairplain School district, where parents feared blacks would be bused there or, worse yet, white students transferred to traditionally all-black schools. When the School Board proposed to build new schools to remedy the situation they faced fierce opposition from both whites and blacks. Johnson explained:

The racial factor was hiding in the background. If either building was to be located in the black community, where the population was quite dense, we were accused of trying to contain the black pupils in their own neighborhoods and having an all black school. If the buildings were to be located in the rural all white areas the question of who would be sent to the schools came up. The whites were not in favor of having a large number of black pupils sent into their neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{113}

Various other matters also caused concerns for parents among them the integration of sports teams. Johnson believed, “what you do with children after they get into the building, so far as instruction is concerned, is not the greatest concern of some parents. They do seem to get worked up over such items as transportation, attendance areas, lunches, discipline, athletic teams, etc.”\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{112} Johnson, \textit{Memoirs of a School Superintendent}, 68.


\textsuperscript{114} Johnson, 67.
On November 5, 1965 Benton Harbor organized its first civil rights board, consisting mainly of whites, to investigate thirty grievances filed with the *Michigan Civil Rights Commission* over an eight-month period. Dr. Burton Levy, white, and director of community services for the commission, acknowledged that the grievances were filed on behalf of residents living in both St. Joseph and Benton Harbor, dating from January 1, 1965 through August. The *News Palladium* claimed that life in Benton Harbor had become increasingly divided by the color line.\(^{115}\)

At the same meeting more organized and outspoken black groups questioned city and school board officials on race issues like neighborhood segregation and physical abuse against black students in the public schools.\(^{116}\) Other grievances varied in content, mostly concerning workers unable to gain enrollment in training courses under the Manpower Development and Training Act.\(^{117}\) Mrs. Loretta Henry, of 149 North Winans Street, told the board she was speaking at the request of Negro children allegedly abused by white teachers. Dr. Hazel Taylor, a black dentist and Vice President of the Board of Education said of the abuse situation, “I’m quite shocked at this information. We (the board of education) do have policies against brutality. My knowledge of this situation is nil.” Judd Spray, a white member of the board, remarked that, “we seem to be a target every time a racial problem arises. It’s not the fault of any individual, but rather a problem that will require efforts of everyone


\(^{116}\) Johnson, 68-70.

together to solve.” Dr. Levy added that many of the grievances included “housing, employment, education, and police treatment charges. We see a community that is sharply divided along color lines.”\textsuperscript{118}

Levy responded to criticism from distraught white parents by declaring that “Benton Harbor is becoming a Negro town, let’s face it.” Rex Sheely, a city commissioner, said realtors informed him that a growing black population made it difficult “to sell a home to a white family in Benton Harbor.” He later blamed the trouble on growing racial tensions in the city. When asked to identify these people and areas, Sheeley replied, “they may not be in this room, but walk down Fair Avenue, and you will find tension, walk through the ‘Flats,’ and you will find tension.”\textsuperscript{119} Levy blamed the problems on economics:

Over one third of the Negro families in Benton Harbor had an income of under $3,000 per year—the poverty level. This does not include Benton Township where a large proportion of Negro families are confined within the limits of either Benton Harbor or Benton Township. You may know that over 55 per cent of the Negro occupied homes were structurally deteriorated and dilapidated compared to only 18 per cent of the white homes in 1960.\textsuperscript{120}

Unfortunately, the larger white community of Benton Harbor responded slowly, if at all, to many social and economic disparities between the races. Other than supporting

\textsuperscript{118} Lutz, “State Board,” I, 12.

\textsuperscript{119} Lutz, “State Board,” I, 12.

\textsuperscript{120} Dr. Burton Levy, “Rights Board Hears Twin Cities Complaints,” \textit{The News Palladium} Sec. 1, pg. 12 (November 6, 1965).
poorer black families in community chest programs, whites did little to assist the black population or promote equality within the city.

During World War II blacks migrated north, enticed by better paying jobs, housing, and an overall better standard of living. But, as late as 1962, they were still restricted from certain areas of the community, with many living below the poverty line, often restricted by invisible boundaries that separated diverse ethnic groups from the larger established white population. Many had fond memories of the time period and their homes in the “Flats,” others less than memorable. Far too many blacks were relegated to substandard housing and “dead end” jobs, with little opportunity for upward mobility. Elementary and junior high schools were conveniently located in those areas populated most by blacks and whites, with little progress made towards district wide desegregation, and concerns present over the integration of athletic teams. Blacks held minor leadership roles in the community, but few were elected to public office.121

Debates over desegregation of public schools, public facilities, recreational spaces, neighborhoods, and unfair labor practices in Benton Harbor continued well into the 1960s. As the civil rights movement escalated in the South the trend continued, sparking controversy, riots, and other forms of racial tension in the community. Race relations in Benton Harbor manifested patterns of other northern

cities, with black men and women often left on the periphery of society, powerless, and in many respects, playing by white rules. However, no evidence suggests that racial division and inequality carried over to high school sports teams, a sanctuary that offered both black and whites an unique place in the racial spectrum.

Leading sport historians argue that black entrance into professional sports and collegiate athletic programs greatly impacted society as a whole, as much or more than any other social or cultural force. An increasing presence of black players on sports teams helped race relations in Benton Harbor. Black athletes participated in a variety of high school athletics, often enhancing the school’s chances of winning conference, district, regional, and state championships, notably in basketball. Racially mixed teams raised the level of play and the quality of athletic contests, attracted a loyal fan base, and strived to affect the total setting of the community.\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{122} Opinions based on the interpretation of oral histories, newspaper, and yearbook accounts.
CHAPTER III

THE INTEGRATION OF AMERICAN SPORTS

Decades prior to World War II sports held a distinct place in American culture. For most professional leagues, universities, and high schools, it represented “pastime, leisure, recreation, diversions of play—fun.”¹ In sporting activities, Americans found relief from war, social conflict, unemployment, poverty, and a sense of community. Race in American sports evolved prior to World War II, but on a limited basis. By the 1930s Americans began to recognize the accomplishments of great black athletes like Jesse Owens and Joe Louis. Then during the war many blacks served and died for their country, resulting in increased demands by liberals and civil rights activists for racial equality, which included the integration of professional and collegiate athletics.²

After World War II, sports took on a new role in daily life for millions of Americans, leading to new perceptions of country, community, and family life. Sports developed through media and television, as Americans began to view them seriously with significant economic, social, and political ramifications. As Randy Roberts and James Olson proclaimed about post-1945, “For tens of millions of

¹ Randy Roberts and James Olson, Winning is the Only Thing: Sports in America Since 1945. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press), xi.
² Riess, Major Problems in American Sport History, 370.
Americans, sport was not leisure anymore. Nor was it a distraction from the pressing demands of real life, sport had become a national obsession, a new cultural community."

By the mid 1940s, large numbers of Americans, black and white, began choosing sporting events as a key part of their daily lives. However, the acceptance of blacks as equal to whites in sports came slowly in American society. In Benton Harbor, as in other small communities around the country, sports participants and leaders had experimented with integration of sport since the late nineteenth century. This chapter explores the professional leagues and colleges in basketball as part of the integration debate. It examines the social forces and events that forced integration issues and considers why professional leagues and colleges integrated when they did. It also questions whether a significant number of black players benefited from these decisions, enough so to affect the selection process of high school athletic programs in smaller northern communities like Benton Harbor.

The history of blacks and basketball dates back long before the formation of the National Basketball Association (NBA), the signing of its first black players, the success of integrated sports teams at Benton Harbor high school, government sponsored programs, or laws that prohibited segregation of labor and public facilities.

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3 Roberts and Olson, Winning is the Only Thing, xii.
From the turn of the century through World War I eight blacks were known to have played on all-white teams at the collegiate level: Samuel Ransom at Beloit College (Wisconsin), from 1904-1908; Wilbur Wood at Nebraska (1907-1910); Fenwich Watkins of Vermont, 1909; Cumberland Posey at Penn State, 1909, and Duquesne, 1916; Sol Butler at Duquesne (Iowa), 1910; William Kindle at Springfield University (Massachusetts), 1911; Cleve Abbott at South Dakota State, 1913; and future actor/singer/civil rights activist, Paul Robeson from Rutgers, 1915-1918. No blacks played on Benton Harbor high school basketball teams until the 1945-46 season.

The athletic career of Paul Robeson stands out the most in earlier collegiate sport. A Phi Beta Kappa graduate at Rutgers, he played football from 1915 to 1918, becoming a two-time Walter Camp first team All-American—the first African-American to accomplish such a feat. Robeson also gained All-American honors in track and field as a discus and javelin thrower. In all, he won fifteen varsity letters in four sports. At 6’ 2’’ and weighing close to 200 lbs he played center on the basketball team, winning praise for his athletic prowess and physical play. The multi-talented Robeson went on to play professional football for five years, but quit in 1923 to pursue a career in theatre and singing.

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6 Benton Harbor Public Library photograph collection contains a post card of the 1945-46 Benton Harbor Tigers basketball team, sold exclusively by the Benton Harbor high school “Triangle Club” in 1945. The lone black player, named Osborne, is seen in a team huddle. It is not clear whether or not he played the entire season or graduated from Benton Harbor. A survey of yearbooks dating from 1904 to 1945 revealed that Osborne was the first black basketball player.

7 C. Keith Harrison and Brian Lampman, “The Image of Paul Robeson: Role Model for the Student and Athlete,” *Rethinking History 5*, no. 1 (Spring 2001), 118-119.
Robeson hated American racism, which later prompted him to join the Communist Party and speak out against the United States government and its lack of concern for race issues. By 1940s, he emerged as the leader for the segregation of American sports, speaking out against white owners of professional teams. To refute him, the House Un-American Activities Committee invited Jackie Robinson to speak. Under pressure from white ownership in professional baseball, he denounced racism in America but stated:

> I’ve got too much invested for my wife and child and myself in the future of this country, and I and other Americans of many races and faiths have too much invested in our country’s welfare, for any of us to throw it away for a siren song sung in bass.⁸

The press refused to print Robinson’s comments on racism, but could do little to halt the growing support black Americans received from whites concerned with segregation laws and other social injustices. Robeson, even though he spent his last years abroad, he likely did more for the integration of professional sports than most historians are willing to admit.

As early as 1905, African-Americans designed ways to make money with the game of basketball. Will Madden, who organized St. Christopher’s amateur team in New York, founded a semi-professional offshoot called the Incorporators featuring a star black athlete named Walter D. Cooper. Known for his shooting skills, notably at the free throw line, local legend claims that the all-white Original Celtics, arguably the best team of the era, offered him a contract. Fearful of encountering racial

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⁸ Robinson quoted in Roberts and Olson, *Winning is the Only Thing*, 38-39.
prejudice when traveling with the team, Cooper turned down the offer. In 1909, Penn State dismissed Cumberland Posey for academic reasons. He went on to form the Monticello Rifles and the Loendi Five, teams that played aggressive, up-tempo ball, and who were not afraid to “mix it up” with white teams. Since most colleges and universities were not receptive to the black athlete, these teams offered opportunities for black players to turn professional, and earn a living in the process.\(^9\)

On February 2, 1916, a collection of coaches, educators, and faculty from all-black institutions: Hampton Institute, Shaw and Lincoln Colleges, Virginia Union, and Howard Universities organized the first black collegiate conference. The move ensured all-black schools--most formed after the Civil War by northern liberals with no government funding--systems of unified competition and rules. Under the guidance of a Howard professor, Ernest J. Marshall, the conference enacted four-year eligibility rules for players and united “area colleges in a common effort for athletic elevation.” The Central Interscholastic Athletic Association (CIAA) attracted nationwide publicity, which helped to increase enrollments and create a series of regional rivalries. With no integrated competition in the South, the CIAA schools formed a strong coalition that encouraged racial pride, and success in academics and sports. Drawing on earlier examples of football, Atlanta’s Morehouse College united

\(^9\) George, *Elevating the Game*, 18.
with several other black schools in the South to form the Southeastern Athletic Association. By 1920, the Southwestern Athletic Conference joined the fray.¹⁰

Nelson George claims that conferences like the CIAA, the SAA, and the SWC stimulated black interest in all sports, but impacted basketball the most. He argues that innumerable poor blacks from northern cities migrated South bringing with them on-court skills to gain access to athletic scholarships, better facilities, and college education. By the 1920s, the influence blacks had on basketball in northern areas was already established, but little was known of the game in the South.¹¹

The migration of these highly skilled players to black colleges inspired southern blacks to learn the game. Edwin Bancroft Henderson, a black prolific writer and first author of a history of African-Americans in sport asserted in 1940 that, “since more and more of the young blacks are going to these higher institutions, a splendid opportunity exists in colleges to help these young people.”¹² Patrick Miller claimed that “to join a national intercollegiate culture, African-American students created small distinctions between institutions and selected rivals, but also conformed to patterns of self-representation already well established.” Black athletes at all-black

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¹¹ Miller, 111-33, and George, 23-25.

¹² E. B. Henderson, “The Participation of Negro Youth in Community and Educational Programs,” Journal of Negro Education Vo. 9, no. 3 (July 1940), 421-22. For a first rate study on Henderson’s prolific writing career and contributions to African-Americans in sport see, David K. Wiggins, Glory Bound: Black Athletes in White America, 221-240.
universities took enormous pride in the forming and maintaining of teams and rituals, just as their white counterparts did.13

Together with established conference play and northern “know how,” some of the black teams and players gained national prominence. For example, the Morgan State basketball program dominated play in the South from 1924 to 1927. Led by Ed “Lanky” Jones, Talmadge Hill, and Daniel “Pinky” Clark, the Baltimore-based institution went undefeated in 1927, and claimed the de facto national championship of black college basketball.14 Programs for black athletes gained momentum and seemed poised to compete on a regular basis with white universities.

By the 1930s basketball was still a young sport and bore little resemblance to modern day style of fast break, jump shots, and slam-dunks. Games were slower and final scores normally did not exceed the twenties. After a team scored, players returned to center court for a tip-off, leading to a methodical and physical half-court game. Some college conferences experimented with eliminating the center jump as early as 1928, but the National Basketball Committee eliminated it only after heated debates in 1937. Teams immediately adopted a faster, running style game plan called the “racehorse” maneuver, later changed to the “fast break.” Clarence “Big House” Gaines, a black basketball coach at Winston-Salem State (North Carolina) for forty-six years, remembered the new style in the 1940s:

13 Patrick Miller, “To ‘Bring the Race Along Rapidly,’” 118.

14 George, Elevating the Game, 23-24.
In fast-break basketball, players would run, jump, and throw at the same time...the one-handed shot and the jump evolved along with the fast break. You don’t throw a ball with two hands in any other sport. Shooting with one hand is a natural reaction. If a player’s got good hands and good skills and he’s running, he’s not going to stop and use two hands. The jump just came along with it.\textsuperscript{15}

Cal Irvin, a black coach at North Carolina A&T agreed with Gaines, when he said, “we didn’t need the thirty-five second shot clock; we never held onto it that long...what we called ‘Our Basketball’ is the basketball you are playing today.”\textsuperscript{16}

Basketball styles in the 1940s varied depending on the region, but black teams played a style different from most white eastern schools. In the Midwest, Branch McCraken, long-time coach at Indiana University, schooled white players in the art of quick passing, pressure defense, and the fast break. Indiana used the new style to perfection, winning three national championships in the 1940s and 1950s. Most sport historians, however, give credit to African-American playground players for revolutionizing the fast break, jump shooting, and fancy passing. A white journalist named Frank Davis described the New York Rens, a professional team, style as “blinding speed and passing, so swiftly did they whip the ball from one player to another that often competing athletes quit and, placing hands on hips, watched as if they were spectators.”\textsuperscript{17} In the days when white and black teams competed on a limited basis, blacks could ill afford to use rough tactics such as holding against white


\textsuperscript{17} Davis quoted in Bloom and Willard, 53.
teams during the 1940s. When they did benches often cleared and fans poured out onto the floor, delaying or ending the game. Instead, the quicker and more athletic black teams relied on flashy, dazzling, and deceptive forms of strategy to outplay white teams.\(^\text{18}\) The ability of these players to turn basketball into a situation game, allowed them to improvise, innovate, and develop movements and rhythm, startling attributes that ultimately changed the face of the game and popularity once black players became fixtures in the NBA.

Sport historians call the 1920s the age of the Original Celtics and the 1930s and 1940s the age of the Renaissance Big Five Rens and the Harlem Globetrotters. The “Big Five,” a barnstorming black team, was consistently the best team and a favorite attraction during the Great Depression and war years. Initially not welcomed in organized white leagues, the Rens drew high praise for their hard work and competitiveness. White leagues soon learned the value of all-black teams and invited them to play in tournaments, if for nothing else than to increase profits at the gate.\(^\text{19}\)

Black athletes found more opportunities during World War II, as a shortage of players in the professional ranks left white owners searching for quality replacements. Several played in the early years of the National Basketball League, but had no lasting effect. For the most part, blacks remained on barnstorming teams or within


\(^{19}\) Ron Thomas, *They Cleared the Lane: The NBA's Black Pioneers.* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), pp. 6-7. See Riess, *Sports and the American Jew*, 26-27, for the contributions made by Jewish basketball players to early professional leagues, notably the Celtics.
Negro Leagues. Other than the Harlem Globetrotters, based out of New York, and one of the most popular teams in the Midwest and West during the 1940s and 1950s, no black team impacted integration more than the Renaissance Five. For nearly three decades these two teams served as the primary route to a pro basketball career for black players and a model for colleges and high schools considering integration. The route was narrow, however, as each team carried only eight players at a time. John Isaacs, black, who played on the Rens from 1936-1940 and again in 1942-43 claimed that this path was, “the only way blacks had to go, so the ballplayers on these teams were tremendous-the sixteen best in the country.”

White perception of black players evolved more from recognition of fundamental differences between races than from outright discrimination. Highly influenced by radio and film images in unthreatening comical, race-decided roles from such shows as “Amos and Andy,” white Americans seemed more comfortable with this stereotype. Whites used such terms as, “Sambos in sweats, clowns whose antics, tricks, and mischief” to describe black players whose games seemed more staged performances than actual athletic contests. The Harlem Globetrotters epitomized this symbol of inferiority. Founded in 1927 by a Jewish-American, Abe Saperstein, part of former Jewish basketball interests, the Globetrotters barnstormed the East, Midwest and West, from Madison Square Garden and the Boston Garden, to high

\[\text{\footnotesize 20 Robert W. Peterson. }\text{Cages to Jump Shots: Pro Basketball's Early Years.}\text{ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 12-13, pp. 95-96.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 21 Isaacs quoted in Thomas, They Cleared the Lane, 6-7.}\]
school gyms and arenas around the country.\textsuperscript{22} They later performed on six continents, including outdoor courts in Africa and South America.\textsuperscript{23}

Saperstein touted the Trotters as ambassadors of the United States, "symbols of American success, and ethnic justice." By the end of World War II, the "Clown Princes" of basketball served as a tool for Cold War propaganda but also, from an economic standpoint, represented one of the most lucrative businesses in professional sports. The struggle between black and white teams for money, marketing, and fanfare reached a high water mark during the late 1940s. Many Americans viewed black players as innocent caricatures of racism and vaudevillians not competitors to white leagues, or as contemporary figures joking around to the sounds of "Sweet Georgia Brown," making fools out of hapless white opponents. On the other hand, Saperstein played on the racial expectations of white fans and television viewers. He wanted talented black athletes but, at the same time, recruited "ugly Negros" and entertainers to make a good show.\textsuperscript{24}

William "Pop" Gates, black and a member of the NBA Hall of Fame, starred on the Renaissance and Trotter teams in a career that spanned from 1938 to 1956. In 1937, after playing on an integrated city championship team at Benjamin Franklin high school in New York City, he joined the Renaissance. Gates later went on to play

\textsuperscript{22} Peterson, \textit{Cages to Jump Shots}, 96. For brief account of Saperstein and his legacy with the Globetrotters consult Riess, \textit{Sports and the American Jew} (1998), 28-29.

\textsuperscript{23} Roberts and Olson, \textit{Winning is the Only Thing}, 30.

\textsuperscript{24} Peterson, \textit{Cages to Jump Shots}, 105-107 and, Roberts and Olson, \textit{Winning is the Only Thing}, 30-31.
for integrated teams after World War II when the color line in sports began to diminish. Gates recalled his early experiences with racism:

We played every day in the week, sometimes twice on Saturdays and Sundays. We'd get in a bus and ride anywhere from 100 to 300 miles to get to the ball game. In certain areas, we had to ride another few hundred miles to find a place to sleep, due to the conditions in the country at that particular time. We barnstormed between New York and Chicago, and then we'd set up a base of operations in Chicago and cover the area within 300 or 400 miles, maybe further. We'd play in Kansas City, St. Louis, Milwaukee, and into Minnesota. We played all the big arenas of the Middle West at that time. We had to play in small cities, too, because of the fact that you couldn't play in the big cities all the time; to keep the money coming in, you had to play the small town-wherever we could get to in time to make the ball game... we found prejudice all over the South—and not just the South. Take Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio—those states border on the South and there was prejudice there also as far as staying in hotels and eating is concerned.²⁵

After the Second World War ended, color issues weighed heavily on many Americans. Jackie Robinson crossed baseball’s color line in 1946 after signing with the Montreal Royals, the top farm team of the Brooklyn Dodgers.²⁶ Shortly thereafter the NBL followed baseball’s lead when Gates and Dolly King joined the Buffalo Bisons and Rochester Royals, respectively. However, this did not mean that blacks were now accepted as fully qualified participants, equal to their white contemporaries. Gates offered his views on the progress of integration:

²⁵ Gates quoted in Roberts and Olson, Winning is the Only Thing, 11-12.

As far as the team was concerned, I had no problems. But our home base was Moline [Illinois], and they were used to keeping blacks out of hotels. I did stay in a hotel two days. Then came one of the team’s owners--Cliff Ferris or Leo Ferris--and had a very heated discussion about pulling me out of there. I said, “I want to stay with the team. I’m part of the team, I think I should stay with them.” However, they prevailed and I wound up being shunted to a YMCA there…later on in the season a guy in Rock Island said I could stay in a hotel he had. A certain number of ballplayers on the team [black and white] said, “We’re going to stay with Pop over at the Rock Island hotel.”

Rufus E. Clement, president of Atlanta University in 1954, commented that the thrust of black athletes into predominately white sports did not come rapidly. Rather, he argued that any social historian would have a difficult time, in most cases, pinpointing the exact date that a Negro athlete competed as an individual in an organized or amateur sporting event or played as a member of an interracially mixed team without threat of reprisals by the white majority.28

The integration process during the late 1940s and 1950s varied from sport to sport or institution, largely depending on the geographical locale.29 By 1946, the condition of black athletes in the United States paralleled previous assumptions of inferiority or ideologies of fair play and opportunity. Randy Roberts called the story of race and America one of “discrimination and accomplishment, of power and powerlessness, and why the two are not always as simple as they seem.”30 Racial stereotypes spread

27 Gates quoted in Peterson, Cages to Jump Shots, 13.


29 Clement, 224-25.

from larger cities, where the largest percentage of the black population resided, to smaller towns and communities nationwide, affecting blacks wherever they lived.

No event influenced the integration of American sports more than Jackie Robinson’s assault on the color line in professional baseball during the 1946 season. The integration of baseball represented both a “symbol of imminent racial challenge and a direct agent of social change.” The National Basketball Association (NBA) would encounter these challenges four years later, as would many major college and high school athletic programs. Robinson’s efforts captured the imagination of millions of Americans, who either misunderstood or ignored our county’s racial dilemma in the 1940s offering, in some respect, a peaceful model for civil rights activists to follow, while avoiding physical confrontations and addressing economic privations and racial inequalities. Professional baseball, often referred to as the monarch of U. S. sports, served as one of the first organizations in modern society to open its doors to blacks, allowing for future generations of historians to analyze the integration process in American society. Jules Tygiel explained:

An examination of the forces that led to Robinson’s hiring, the reaction among blacks and whites, the institutional response of the baseball establishment, and the resulting decline of the Jim Crow leagues reveals much about the United States in the 1940’s and 1950’s. The halting and incomplete nature of baseball’s achievement not withstanding, few other businesses have equaled its performance. The dynamics of inter-racial relationships among

players, coaches, and managers provide rare insights into what occurs when non-whites are introduced into a previously segregated industry.  

Tygiel asserts, in the process they contributed to the transformation of the national consciousness and helped to usher in a new, if still troubled, age of race relations in the United States.

After Robinson’s move into professional baseball, white players, fans, and communities, negotiated with deeply entrenched racial attitudes. For the most part, the white establishment considered the black man incapable of playing organized teams sports, notably basketball, where talent and strength were secondary to mental capabilities, planning, and execution on the court. Legendary black tennis player Arthur Ashe claimed attitudes towards black athletes soon changed, calling Robinson’s signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers the event that sparked an unprecedented period in American sport history, when most professional sports began the process of integration. It may have been unprecedented to some, but for the majority of black athletes the inability to become professional athletes often led to irrevocable circumstances, such as loss of education or, worse yet, a return to inner city ghettos with little hope for the future.

32 Tygiel, Great Experiment, 9.

33 Tygiel, 9.

34 Roberts and Olson, Winning is the Only Thing, 27.


36 Ashe, A Hard Road To Glory, 3-4.
In late 1949 Carl Bennett, owner of the Fort Wayne Zollner Pistons, a forerunner to the Detroit Pistons, stated that owners met for a straw vote against the NBA’s Board of Governors decision to sign black players. Since the league had no written rule barring blacks, the vote held no weight if a player signed, but indicated widespread fears among owners for an integrated league. Several owners, including Ned Irish of the Knickerbockers, refused to participate, claiming he wanted to sign Clifton “to help me win games…and if I don’t get it, I’m going to walk out of this room and we’re going to withdraw from the NBA. We’re not going to continue to lose ball games just because you fellows won’t approve it.”

It appears that the NBA needed New York more than Irish needed basketball in Madison Square Garden. In a revote of 6-5 owner approved inclusion of black players into the league. Afterwards one of the other owners questioned Bennett on the decision. Bennett recalled:

I said, ‘Hey, if they’re good ballplayers and can help win games, what’s wrong with it? And he said, ‘Bennett, you dumb son-of-a-bitch, do you know what’s going to happen? In five years we’ll be 75 percent black-if we survive. We won’t draw people, and we’ve just ruined the game of basketball.’

An assessment of the NBA’s first black players deserves special mention here. In 1950, the owner of the Boston Celtics, Walter Brown, selected Chuck Cooper of Duquesne University in the second round of the National Basketball Association’s annual college draft. In the ninth round of the same draft, the Washington Capitols picked Earl Lloyd of West Virginia State. Two months later the New York

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37 Irish quoted in Peterson, *Cages to Jump Shots*, 171.

38 Bennett quoted in Peterson, 171.
Knickerbockers purchased the contract of Nat “Sweetwater” Clifton from the Harlem Globetrotters.\textsuperscript{39} Despite the NBA opening its doors to black players few made an impact before 1957.

Clifton, born in Little Rock, Arkansas, grew up in Chicago. As with other young men of his race, he attended an all-black high school. After graduation Clifton accepted an offer to attend Xavier University in New Orleans because “at that time blacks wasn’t going to Big Ten schools or places like that.”\textsuperscript{40} In 1943, Xavier won the Southern Conference championship and Clifton won most valuable player honors. After a tour of duty in the U. S. Army during World War II, he later barnstormed with the Renaissance Rens. From 1947 to 1949 Clifton played with the Globetrotters, traveling around the country challenging professional and college all-star teams. In 1950 he had a falling out with Saperstein over salary, and was sold to the Knickerbockers. Given the opportunity to play fewer games for more money, other black players soon joined their contemporaries in the NBA. Basketball now began an irreversible trend in major professional sports.\textsuperscript{41}

The integration period in American sports affected black athletes in different ways. For example, Woody Strode was a college teammate of Robinson’s at UCLA during the 1940s, one of the first blacks to play professional football, and later

\textsuperscript{39} George, \textit{Elevating the Game}, 95-102.


\textsuperscript{41} George. \textit{Elevating the Game}, 95-96.
became a movie actor. Strode commented in a 1971 *Sports Illustrated* interview, “that if I have to integrate heaven, I don’t want to go.”

Bill Russell, former All-American at the University of San Francisco, Olympic gold medallist, and a member of the eleven-time World Champion, Boston Celtics recalled many unpleasant memories from playing against white teams and dealing with white fans. In his autobiography, *Second Wind: Memoirs of an Opinionated Man*, Russell recalled former high school coach George Powles’ advice on how blacks should cope with racial concerns on the basketball court:

> We might as well face it, boys, he would say gravely. You are a Negro team playing against a lot of white teams. If you fight in a game, they’ll call it a riot. If the white team fights, they’ll call it a scuffle. That’s all there is to it. We can’t help it. So I won’t have any fighting on this team. If you want to beat somebody up, just beat them with the basketball."}

Despite fears of white retaliation, a few standout black athletes led an all-out effort by for athletic achievement, equality, and fame.

How much these black professionals influenced integration in high schools and athletic programs in northern states, considering that many regions integrated at different times much like professional teams, remains largely unknown. For example, in baseball the Boston Red Sox refrained from signing a black player until 1959, thirteen years after the


44 Ashe, *A Hard Road to Glory*, 3-4.
Dodgers signed Robinson. Despite the nationwide efforts a few black pioneers to break color barriers in sports most blacks continued to endure poverty and political, social, and urban discrimination, notably in the Jim Crow South, but also in northern cities.\(^45\)

In the case of collegiate and high school basketball teams, blacks were mainly confined, except in rare cases, to all-black universities in the South or segregated public schools, with only small numbers competing against white opponents or earning scholarships to traditionally all-white institutions. By early 1950s this attitude changed and a great number of colleges and universities began recruiting blacks into their basketball programs.\(^46\) Charles H. Baltimore, author of “Negro in Basketball” in 1951, reported:

> The number of large colleges and universities that have Negro players is too large to present here; however, the list of schools welcoming Negro players is rapidly increasing; and with the removal of the color bar in most of the state colleges, it is not too great a stretch of the imagination to picture Negro players on future Southern college teams....the records show that the Negro is an integral part of the development of the great sport of basketball; and his proficiency, interest and participation in the game will increase as more and more opportunities are opened to him to take part in sport.\(^47\)

\(^{45}\) Roberts and Olson, *Winning is the Only Thing*, 25-27.


The integration of major professional and college sports helped breakdown racial stereotypes and disprove the myths of black intellectual and athletic inferiority. But professional and collegiate sports did not necessarily impact the decision-making processes of high schools around the country or serve as models for integration. As late as 1965 schools districts in Indianapolis, Detroit, Chicago, and Cleveland remained largely segregated. This trend continued despite larger numbers of blacks entering the states of Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois by 1960. Table 4 charts the black population in major urban areas, rural communities with a population of 1,000 to 2,500, and more isolated rural environments in four Great Lakes states:

**TABLE 4**

AFRICAN-AMERICAN POPULATION IN URBAN-RURAL AREAS, 1960

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural: 1,000 to 2,500</th>
<th>Other Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>1,013,199</td>
<td>3,668</td>
<td>20,603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>686,591</td>
<td>1,879</td>
<td>29,111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>751,479</td>
<td>2,578</td>
<td>32,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>260,864</td>
<td>727</td>
<td>7,684(^{49})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the black population increased in northern cities so did the likelihood of integration in public schools, and in turn athletic programs. Ashe noted that the pace seemed to indicate that the equal rights battle was far from over not only in society

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\(^{48}\) Roberts and Olson, *Winning is the Only Thing*, 42-50.

but also the sporting arena.\textsuperscript{50} Such was the case for the Crispus Attucks Tigers basketball team, a segregated, all-black high school from Indianapolis, Indiana. Established in 1927, the school gained access to the state basketball tournament only after school consolidation in 1943.\textsuperscript{51} Richard B. Pierce, historian, described Indianapolis during the 1950s as a place where “success inspired considerable soul searching in both the white and black communities, and in the end, Indianapolis residents learned that in addition to sharing common spaces they sometimes shared goals.”\textsuperscript{52} When Crispus Attucks, coached by Ray Crowe and led by star player Oscar Robertson, attempted to become the first Indianapolis high school to win a state basketball championship in thirty years during the 1955 season, it forced the larger white population to choose between race issues or winning. A large portion of Indianapolis whites temporarily set aside their cultural differences and supported the home team, thus forging a bond with their black neighbors.\textsuperscript{53}

When the first black players were drafted into the National Basketball Association or entered white universities in the North and West, many faced severe racial discrimination. They also helped build solid programs and changed the game from its previous slow down, pass-orientated, low scoring style, to one of up-tempo, fast

\textsuperscript{50} Ashe, \textit{A Hard Road to Glory}, 3-4.

\textsuperscript{51} Troy Paino, “Hoosiers in a Different Light,” 64.

\textsuperscript{52} Pierce, “More Than A Game,” 3.

\textsuperscript{53} Crispus Attucks finished runner-up in 1951, then won three state titles in 1955, 1956, and 1959, with the 1955-56 teams captained by Oscar Robertson, a future college All-American and member of the NBA Hall-of-Fame.
breaking, and high scoring games that white and black fans enjoy today.\textsuperscript{54} White and black audiences around the country waited in line to see black players and their “playground” style basketball during the 1950s. In Benton Harbor the entire community turned out in droves to support the local team, either at home or on the road.\textsuperscript{55} Black players brought with them a unique style of play adopted on inner city playgrounds. Chet Walker remembered that the goal was to “break people down by taking it [the ball] to the hole,” which derived “from anger and frustration, from competing and trying to be on top, from struggling all your life….in the ghetto, you often must take what you can before someone takes it away.”\textsuperscript{56}

Leading sport historians argue that basketball’s final stage of evolution as an entertainment spectacle arrived with the emergence of black playground stars in the 1960s. The college and high school game drastically changed in the early 1960s when a new era of “leapers and shooters” arrived, most of them black and from the inner-city ghettos of New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Los Angeles. But the arrival of the black basketball began a decade earlier. In 1951 6’0 Bill Garrett of Indiana University became the first black to play in the Big Ten Conference. Chosen as team captain for that season, he later was selected as the center on the 1950-51 All-

\textsuperscript{54} George, \textit{Elevating the Game}, 95-120.

\textsuperscript{55} Ronald Lange, personal recollections, (March 2003). Lange, a starting forward on the 1958 state runner-up team recalled gymnasiums being packed to the limit, with the crowd noise so loud one could hardly hear or think.

\textsuperscript{56} Walker, \textit{A Long Time Coming}, 47.
American team. In 1952 Notre Dame University, for the first time in school history, recruited black players. Joe Bertrand, a native of Chicago, and Entee Shine, from South Bend, Indiana, excelled both academically and athletically at the school. Commenting on their selection to the varsity basketball team as sophomores, Father John C. Cavanaugh admitted “we are awfully glad to have Bertrand and Shime with us. We feel privileged to have men of such high caliber representing us in athletics.”

Referred to as “black hoops” by most sport historians, the style of play grew out of “freelance playing styles native to the urban schoolyards and the inner-city playgrounds.” Thomas C. Bjarkman calls it a “survivors’ game of improvised feints and fakes, thundering self-expressive acrobatic dunks, and intimidating one-on-one moves toward the hoop.” Pete Axthelm asserts that by the mid-1950s basketball was the true “city game,” defining it as a “huge piece of the fabric of inner-city life itself.” Bjarkman contends that black players sought the freedom of expression not available in everyday life:

In this new style of playground basketball, ‘deception’ thus became a vital key to success; for youngsters battling for daily survival on ghetto streets, basketball was, in fact, a unique escapist world in which the weapon of deception was for the first time a legitimate accepted strategy and not a guaranteed source of further trouble.

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58 Cavanaugh quoted in “Notre Dame’s First Negro Basketball Stars,” Ebony 7 (February 1952), 22-25.
Basketball—playground style—was, thus, also a game that was far more instinctual than it was scientific.\(^\text{61}\)

By the late 1950s and early 1960s the top players in professional basketball were black. The game became faster and more exciting. Rule changes enhanced scoring, as did the fast break and more athletic players. The harsh realities of racism deepened the resolve of black players. Blacks faced prejudice from white teammates, owners, and fans. Not until an all-black starting five from Texas Western defeated an all-white Kentucky team in the 1966 NCAA National championship game did basketball come full circle over the issues of black inferiority and segregation.\(^\text{62}\) Nevertheless, much credit is owed to the black pioneer players of the 1940s and 1950s for breaking color barriers and to the white owners and coaches of professional teams and traditionally all-white colleges, who finally let them play.

At the same time pioneering black players like Nat “Sweetwater” Clifton, Rod Barksdale, Walter Brown, Earl Lloyd, and Chuck Cooper were playing in the NBA, future stars such as Wilt Chamberlain, Bill Russell, Oscar Robertson, and Walker emerged at their respective high schools.\(^\text{63}\) All of these men faced racial prejudice at one time or another during their careers, but excelled to the point that contemporary sport historians credit them for revolutionizing the game, ushering in a new era in

\(^{61}\) Bjarkman, \textit{The Biographical History}, xv.


American basketball, and encouraging integration of sports at different levels all around the country. Basketball historians argue that the 1950s produced some of the finest black players ever to play the game. In 1958 Chet Walker, a future College All-American at Bradley University and NBA All-Star, led Benton Harbor High School to the Michigan High School Basketball Class A Championship game. His team squared off against Detroit Austin, led by future New York Knicks’ star and NBA Hall-of-Famer, Dave DeBusschere. Nelson George describes the impact players like Wilt Chamberlain, Bill Russell, Oscar Robertson, Connie Hawkins, Chet Walker, and Elgin Baylor had on the game:

The way was opened up by the Rens, the Trotters, the Rucker tournament and several individual teams, games, and players, but it would be in the NCAA Division I that the African-American attitude toward basketball would burst through the locked doors of integrated national competition. While the tales of their professional careers are well documented, it is the way the styles of Russell, Chamberlain, Baylor, Robertson, and Hawkins evolved before they turned pro that the basis of their influence is found.

The accomplishments of Russell and Chamberlain deserve mention here, not solely because of their statistics, awards, and championships, rather for the way they handled racism. Russell was twice an All-American at San Francisco on an integrated team that won fifty-five straight games, a member of the gold-medal-winning Olympic team in 1956, center on Boston Celtic teams that won an unprecedented eleven championships in thirteen years, voted five times the NBA’s

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Most Valuable Player. He then succeeded legendary coach Arnold “Red” Auerbach and became the first black player/coach, serving in that capacity from 1966-69, and later the first black coach and general manager of the Seattle Supersonics in 1973.\footnote{Bill Russell and Taylor Branch, \textit{Second Wind: The Memoirs of an Opinionated Man}. (New York: Random House, 1979), 1.}

Russell both demanded and earned respect from white players. He had little tolerance for race-conscious people. As a two-year player at McClymonds High School in Oakland, California, he learned firsthand the harshness of racism. The all-black school played in the Oakland Athletic League consisting of six teams, most racially integrated. During the 1952 season the team took top honors in northern California, relying on a “playground basketball” style, with full-court presses, and jump shooting. Success did not come easy or without problems concerning race and integration.\footnote{Russell, 61-73.} Russell learned early in his playing days the differences between whites and blacks in organized sports.

Chamberlain’s career serves as a model for the social problems that grew out of the 1950s concerning African-American basketball players. As a sixteen-year old sophomore at Overbrook high school in Philadelphia, Chamberlain led his team to the public school title, averaging thirty-seven points a game, once scoring ninety. The league consisted of white and black schools. Overbrook lost the city league championship in 1953, 54-52, when four of West Catholic’s players surrounded Chamberlain and forced his teammates to shoot from outside. The next two years
they won the city league title. Chamberlain finished his high school career with a 58-3 record.  

For the most part, judgments made by society against Chamberlain and other stellar black athletes of the period were based on unfair criteria, information, and opinions that minimized black individuality. Far too many critics labeled Chamberlain a loser, often pointing to big game losses, while ignoring the fact that over 200 hundred colleges recruited him out of high school, many of which were all or majority white. He often fell prey to catcalls and references to his enormous size despite playing winning basketball. Chamberlain led his high school, collegiate, and professional teams in many offensive and defensive categories, competing on a regular basis for championships.  

It is likely that he never fully recovered from his experiences at the University of Kansas during the mid-1950s, when a series of race related incidents prompted him to leave after an All-American season in 1957. Other than to earn money to support his family, Chamberlain attributed his early departure to white teams using inappropriate tactics to undermine his play such as “freeze tactics,” and white players cutting his legs, pushing him while airborne, but never being whistled for fouls. “I


70 Wilt Chamberlain, “Why I am Quitting College,” *Look* 22 (June 10, 1958): 91-94. “Freeze tactics” are better defined as the stall or four-corner offense, where a team holds the ball for several minutes before shooting.
don't know whether I would have been able to control myself through another season," he recalled. Nothing hurt Chamberlain more, however, than remarks from hometown reporters and fans he endured throughout his professional career, many of which were race motivated, primarily directed at his enormous size (7'1'') and blackness.71

Nelson George contended that by the late 1950s black athletes dominated basketball.72 Ronald Thomas, author of the They Cleared the Lane: The NBA's Black Pioneers (1998) demonstrated that by the mid-1960s blacks inched closer towards majority in the NBA, a first in the history of American sports:

TABLE 5
PERCENTAGE OF BLACK PLAYERS IN THE NBA (1950-65)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Black Players</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950-51</td>
<td>4 of 135 NBA players</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951-52</td>
<td>5 of 116</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952-53</td>
<td>5 of 125</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953-54</td>
<td>6 of 110</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954-55</td>
<td>9 of 105</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955-56</td>
<td>12 of 92</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956-57</td>
<td>15 of 99</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957-58</td>
<td>13 of 99</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958-59</td>
<td>19 of 92</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959-60</td>
<td>24 of 99</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960-61</td>
<td>28 of 93</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961-62</td>
<td>37 of 113</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962-63</td>
<td>46 of 117</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963-64</td>
<td>43 of 111</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964-65</td>
<td>57 of 115</td>
<td>49.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

71 George, Elevating the Game, 110-111.

72 George, 95-105.

73 Ronald Thomas, They Cleared the Lane: The NBA’s Black Pioneers, 251-255.
Whether the integration of the NBA and college basketball influenced black athletes to participate and compete in high school basketball programs in major northern cities or in communities the size of Benton Harbor offers an interesting question for sport historians. For the most part the question remains largely unexplored except for commentary offered by Dr. James Naismith, founder of the game in 1892. Naismith contended in 1941, “collegiate basketball has had a distinct effect on the present day high school teams. Coaches who are hired from the colleges take with them the style of basketball they have learned. When their boys are ready to enter college, they are usually well prepared.” Naismith believed that by the 1940s, “95 percent of the high schools in this country play basketball,” leading all other institutions and sports programs in the number of players. He praised the Indiana High School Athletic Association for putting high school basketball on the map, largely because of their pioneering efforts to organize tournaments and allow for winners to vie for the state title yearly in Indianapolis. 

Despite Naismith commentary and the written works of a few standout sport/urban historians like Richard Pierce, Gerald Gems, and Randy Roberts, scholarly publication on high school basketball appear in limited numbers. Outside of their work written material, mostly by sports journalists, focus on star players from major metropolitan areas, where the largest portions of the black population resided, or where black and white boundaries were more easily defined. In Benton Harbor,

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white and black boundaries were easily defined in most cases, with exception being at the lone high school, where students had little option but to cohabitate peacefully. Until research efforts transcend the usual “big city” boundaries and studies on famous players, little will be known of how sport integration transpired in smaller communities, notably in the North.\textsuperscript{75} The lack of nationwide coverage devoted to sports and to the few numbers of people owning televisions in the 1950s offers some insight. It would seem a likely scenario, that less-marketable areas of the country or those without professional teams or major universities learned only about the progress of black athletes through daily newspaper accounts, sporadic radio coverage of games, or word of mouth.

It appears that the integration process at the high school level mostly depended on the black athletes’ choice of sport, the geographical location of the given city or town, and attitudes of coaches and white fans. According to Chet Walker, blacks in Benton Harbor during the 1950s and 1960s remained on the periphery of society.\textsuperscript{76} Black athletes there had enjoyed a measure of equality in athletics, albeit in small numbers, several years before the integration of most major professional or collegiate sports. According to Harold Wheeler, white, 1955 graduate of Benton Harbor high school and captain of the varsity basketball team, most blacks participated in sports built on

\textsuperscript{75} Comments are based on my own assessment of the available sources, notably personal recollections of former players from the 1950s and early 1960s, who rarely mentioned superstar basketball players of the day, or that they patterned their game after them. Walker, \textit{A Long Time Coming}, is the most helpful of the written sources. In early chapters, Walker offers a detailed account of his youth in Benton Harbor during the 1950s, focusing on how he developed a love for basketball while playing at local playgrounds.

\textsuperscript{76} Walker, \textit{A Long Time Coming}, 22.
speed and quickness like football and track during the period, rather than basketball, a
sport often played by whites.\footnote{The Greybric of BHHS, Vols. 16-40 (1941-1965) revealed that quality black athletes participated on integrated teams. Also based on the personal recollections of Harold Wheeler, (March 2003).}

With the signing of Lloyd, Cooper, and Clifton to NBA contracts a new style of
basketball developed, one that ushered in a new breed of talent from the college
ranks, upgrading the NBA’s talent pool and making it, next to professional baseball,
one of the most dominant sports leagues in America.\footnote{Peterson, From Cages to Jump Shots, 173.} This was accomplished only after warring factions merged in 1949. Other factors also contributed to integration. First, most professional teams recognized the skill and quality of these black players coming out of Division I colleges and drafted them without reservation. Great players also came from the Negro Leagues and from the Globetrotters. Second, spectators wanted to see the world’s best players, regardless of color, perform wonders in shooting, passing, dribbling, and rebounding. Before integration they witnessed wrestling matches among large white men near the basket, or, in close games, smaller men freezing the ball for several minutes to protect leads. People paid to be entertained and the black athlete of the 1950s accommodated them. Third, the power of economics often dictates the destiny of any organization. The NBA was no exception. Because of boring games attendance around the league plummeted and...
teams suffered economically.\textsuperscript{79} The time came for the NBA to invest in black talent, and it is not surprising that collegiate and interscholastic basketball followed suit.

\textsuperscript{79} Peterson, \textit{From Cages to Jump Shots}, 179-81.
CHAPTER IV

AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND BENTON HARBOR HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS (1895-1965)

Throughout the twentieth century blacks in Benton Harbor and other U.S. cities faced difficult challenges as they attempted to gain equal standing with their white counterparts. Racial barriers at nearly all levels of society and sport existed then, as they do today. Mark Dyreson explained that the achievements of quality black athletes like George Poage at the 1904 Olympics, and Theodore Cable and Howard Drew at prestigious track meets in 1912 influenced much of white America “to draw the line in athletics” and that whites exerted a continuous and conscious effort to “preserve the safety of the white race.” ¹ David Wiggins contended that despite constant racial concerns a “large segment of the black community continued to believe that success in sport served as an important symbol of possibility and a much-needed example of achievement.”² Influential American black athletes of the 1930s and 1940s, like Olympic hero Jessie Owens, boxing champ, Joe Louis, and baseball great Jackie Robinson, continued the fight for racial equality and challenged white


audiences to choose between their racial prejudices and support for accomplishment regardless of race, color, or creed.

In the case of Benton Harbor winning sports teams in the mid-twentieth century proved a more useful tool than any other social or cultural force in maintaining stable race relations at the high school and in the larger community. Experiments with sport integration in the pre-World War II period helped whites cope with racial views of others and respond to increased numbers of black athletes participating on sport teams after 1954. This chapter demonstrates that blacks played together with and against white competition in interscholastic sports long before many major professional leagues and traditionally white universities integrated teams. It chronicles the history of Benton Harbor sports, examining black and white sports teams from 1895 to 1965. It also charts the integration progress of other Michigan high school boys’ basketball teams related by size and geography from 1950 to 1965, in part to gain a better understanding of progress statewide, but more specifically to draw comparisons with Benton Harbor.

Black athletes and their performances stood out in a variety of sports including football, basketball, and track for no reason or degree of suddenness, other than blacks and in some cases, majority black teams, were able to compete at a high level and gained statewide recognition because of their skill rather than skin color. White and black athletes during the 1950s and 1960s enjoyed different levels of success but

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3 Photographic evidence reveals that 1895 was the first time a black athlete played on a BHHS sports team. See figure 7 on page 105.
nearly all excelled in team play and contributed to winning seasons and championships.

African-Americans enjoyed modest success in sport during the early twentieth century. Mark Dyreson maintained:

African Americans were never completely excluded from every aspect of American sport, although white racism severely limited their access. When people of color participated in nationalistic athletic spectacles, particularly in the Olympic games, the intense patriotism of American political and athletic ideology sometimes clouded racist sentiment. International stadiums became one of the few arenas in which the mass public cheered America’s ‘invisible’ peoples.4

In Benton Harbor only a few black high school boys distinguished themselves or tried out for high school teams before World War II. Post-World War II photographs from yearbook collections and newspaper accounts reveal increasing numbers rounding out rosters, and that both white and black fans attended Benton Harbor sporting events, followed teams on the road, and shared in post-season celebrations. Black and white shared access to public facilities, the same bleacher sections at games, with no reported race incidents from 1945 to 1965.5 However, these sources covering high school athletics may also reveal this approach as part of their agendas to promote positive race relations to the larger community.

Unfortunately, little coverage of white and black relations in Benton Harbor exists before 1960, partly due to incredibly small numbers of blacks residing in the city,

4 Dyreson, Making the American Team, 115.

5 Observation based on analysis of Benton Harbor high school yearbooks (1904-1945).
suburbs, or attending the one local high school. Except for an occasional news article or yearbook photograph, one would not know if blacks even existed in the community. A shortage of published material on black and white relations or a failure of past participants to recall racial tensions during the period by no means suggests that Benton Harbor served as a positive model for civil rights. Racial prejudice existed then, as in other areas of the country fighting with idea of civil rights and social equality. In Benton Harbor when demographics shifted in favor of blacks any idea of social harmony between the races ended with rioting and white flight, mostly after 1965.6

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Benton Harbor high school fielded integrated football teams when touchdowns earned only five points (see figure 6). The News Palladium reported that in 1903 “hundreds of fans joined a train excursion to Ann Arbor to see Benton Harbor defeat Escanaba for the state football championship.” Years later, in 1964 and 1965, a new generation of sports fans followed Tiger basketball teams by car caravan to Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, Jackson, and East Lansing to witness back-to-back state championships. The News Palladium proclaimed in a 1966 article:

> From the turn of the century to the present day a good sporting event has drawn a good crowd. And there has been no shortage of good sporting events...the years have produced a succession of outstanding individuals. Hundreds have gone on to successful college careers and five have reached the pinnacle of athletic recognition as All-Americans.7

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6 Johnson, Memoirs, 63-73.

7 “Years of Sports Thrills: Jack Dempsey Fought Here in 1920,” News Palladium Sec. 1, pg. 17 (August 8, 1966.)
FIGURE 1: THE 1895 BENTON HARBOR FOOTBALL TEAM

Walter Banyon (sitting far right in the first row) donated this photograph, now in possession of the Ft. Miami Heritage Society, St. Joseph, Michigan. Frank Busby (kneeling far left in the second row), the lone black player was described as "one of the most versatile athletes who ever played at Benton Harbor." He died in the spring of 1900 from injuries sustained during the 1899 season.  

Of those five All-Americans four were selected in football and the other in basketball. The first two came in the same year when white football players Charles E. “Chuck” Bernard and Milton F. Summerfelt won honors in 1932 at the University of Michigan and West Point, respectively. Bernard, perhaps the most famous of his era, played center at Michigan, won All-American honors again in 1933, and played for the Detroit Lions in 1934 where he earned an All-Pro selection. Summerfelt played guard at West Point and later became a brigadier general in the United States Army. Earl Brown, white, continued local tradition in 1939 as an All-American end at Notre Dame, later coaching football at Auburn and with the Lions professionally.9

Two black athletes from Benton Harbor high school earned the same honors. The first, Nate Clark, played every football game for four years in high school, later winning national scoring honors by accumulating 270 points in two years at Hillsdale College, earning Little All-American honors in both 1955 and 1956. In basketball, Chester Walker narrowly missed leading Benton Harbor to the state championship in 1958, but left the school as its all-time leading scoring. He moved on to Bradley University where he broke nearly all of the school’s scoring records, leading the team to the National Invitational Tournament championship in 1960, later earning All-American honors in both 1961 and 1962.10 Other stellar athletes, black and white, fell short of this stature. Their names span the years leading up to integration and beyond: Leon Hill, Benny Schadler, Art Buss, Jack Forestieri, and blacks, Jim


Reynolds, and Alex McNutt, considered one of the best all around athletes ever to play in Berrien County. In 1963 McNutt won the highest honor given to a high school athlete, the Berrien County Athlete of the Year award.\(^{11}\)

Arguably, the single largest sporting event in Benton Harbor’s history occurred on Labor Day, in 1920. An estimated 20,000 fans, consisting of 13,000 “outsiders” and 7,000 locals, paid out nearly a quarter of a million dollars to watch legendary heavyweight boxer, Jack Dempsey, destroy Billy Miske in the third round of a championship bout. In a city of only 12,000, more than half witnessed the “Manassa Mauler” retain his title.\(^{12}\) No evidence exists stating whether or not African-Americans witnessed this event.

In July 1963, the *Herald Palladium* covered Congressman Barrett O’Hara of the Second Congressional District of Chicago as he used former high school teammates to discuss integration issues before the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C. The theme of the talk was a photograph of the Benton Harbor high school football team of 1899. For sixty-four years, O’Hara, a white man, cherished the photograph, which included two black players, using the “local eleven to emphasize the point that color was no issue or bar to football players on the team which he was a member.”\(^{13}\)

Most of the team came from prominent families in Benton Harbor. The two “colored stars” were brothers Frank and Bob Busby, both “fleet of foot, tough

\(^{11}\) “B. H. Had Many Champions,” 18.


\(^{13}\) “Team in Congressional Talk,” News Palladium Section 1, pg. 1 (July 13, 1963).
lineman, who alternated as halfback on occasion." Described by a journalist as a "gangling youth of 15 who had speed to spare," O'Hara played tackle on a team that played an eight game schedule, piling up 90 points against opponents'24, winning six, losing one, and tying once. Opponents included Niles, Bangor (twice), South Haven, Dowagiac, St. Joseph, Plainwell, and Benton Harbor high school alumni.14

When questioned about race relations among teammates, the aging congressmen replied, "we were schoolmates and teammates and there was no consciousness of race, religion, or station that divided our affections and loyalties." Unfortunately no information exists of whether the Busby brothers had the same assessment of race relations. O'Hara called on his fellow Chicagoans and other Americans to live life, as he purportedly had, with no consciousness of color, in the spirit of the "Benton Harbor high school football team of 1899." In closing he speculated that his ideology "will be true of all Americans in a time not very far away."15 The turbulent 1960s proved otherwise as the civil rights movement "set fire" to an entire country, delaying any peaceful resolutions between white and black, such as those visualized by O'Hara.

Besides the Busby brothers the most famous black football player at Benton Harbor in the early twentieth century was Sam Dunlap (see figures 2 and 3). The Orange and Black yearbook from 1916 predicted, "his name will be long


Orange and Black of 1912 Benton Harbor high school, Vol. 2, no. 7. Freshman Sam Dunlap, the lone black player, sits far left in the first row. Photograph reproduced by permission from Benton Harbor High School.
FIGURE 3: THE 1915 BENTON HARBOR FOOTBALL TEAM

Orange and Black of 1916 Benton Harbor high school Vol. 5, no.7. Dunlap, holding the football and wearing the team captain’s shirt, stands center in the second row. Photograph reproduced by permission from Benton Harbor High School.
remembered throughout the state as one of the best players ever seen in high school football.” As a freshman in 1911, Dunlap took a pitch in the end zone and ran 105 yards for a touchdown. 18 A four-year letterman and team captain during the 1915 season, the first time such an honor was bestowed upon a black athlete at Benton Harbor, he later played football at Western Michigan, earning eleven letters in several sports.19 The editors of the *Orange and Black* of 1916 stated that “Dunalps’ equal can’t be found,” and Ethel Van Antwerp remembered him in the class poem as “In BHHS or its neighbors; Dame Rumor says, for the state team he’s bound, so congratulate him on his labors.”20

While at Western Dunlap scored 188 points and 30 touchdowns, with the latter record standing until 1978. Statistically, he is still the greatest punter in school history. Gifted intellectually as well as athletically (he spoke three languages), Dunlap also served in the Armed Forces during World War I. Sadly, he suffered racial indignities at Western Michigan. Respected by most of his teammates on the field, no one would room with him. Several threatened to quit the team if he played. One opposing team threatened to cancel the game if Dunlap dressed. The consummate team player, he chose to sit out. Despite enormous ability, he never

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18 Information obtained from the *Orange and Black* yearbooks of BHHS (1911 and 1916) housed at the Benton Harbor high school library.


played professionally because of race. He returned to Western in the 1920s requesting a coaching position; the athletic department hired him as a janitor.21

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s blacks continued to excel in football and track, strong sports at Benton Harbor that added to winning tradition. Harzell Taylor, one of the most popular football players of the era, starred at halfback and led the locals to a winning season in 1939. Warren P. Mitchell remembered Taylor “as a one man team, all alone, and Benton Harbor was proud of Little Hambone.”22 After earning a Bachelor of Science degree in secondary education from Bluefield State College, West Virginia, where he also played football, and serving in the U. S. Army during World War II, Taylor returned to his hometown and began practice as a dentist.23 He later became the first black to hold a position on the Benton Harbor School Board, serving his first term in 1958.24 Now in his early eighties, Dr. Taylor still resides in the Benton Harbor area.

In 1941 Benton Harbor high school set a record, winning three state championships in football, basketball, and track. In track and field the Tigers were led by black sprinter, Bert Copeland, “conceded to be the greatest high school track athlete in Michigan.” Among five Benton Harbor boys who qualified in Kalamazoo for the state meet, Copeland participated in four events: the 100-yard dash, 220 yard

21 Thomopoulos, St. Joseph and Benton Harbor, 102.


23 The News Palladium (September 5, 1949).

FIGURE 4: STATE TRACK CHAMPIONS OF 1941—The BHHS 440 RELAY TEAM

25 Pictured at the top is Bert Copeland, shown at the bottom from left to right: Ed Peppel, Willie Jackson, Harvey Ackright, and the state championship trophy for 1941. Photograph courtesy of the Greybric of Benton Harbor high school Vol. 16 (May 1941), 69. Reproduced by permission from BHHS.
dash, 440 relay (teamed with Ed Peppel, Harvey Ackright, and another black sprinter, Willie Moore), and the broad jump (see figure 4). Together with shot-putter, John Hoffmeister, white, who won state with a toss of nearly fifty feet, the Harbor quintet won five first places. During the 1941 season, Copeland ran a 9.9 second 100 yard dash, 22.2 second 220 yard dash, registered a broad jump of 22 feet, 21 1/2 inches, and ran the last leg on the 440 relay team, the first three conference and regional records. It is not known if Copeland's world-class times in the 100 and 220-yard dashes earned him a college scholarship or an invitation to the Olympic trials.

William J. "Bill" Perigo, the white coach of Benton Harbor high school basketball from 1936 to 1949, compiled an impressive regular season record of 122 wins and 64 defeats. His teams won the Southwest conference championship seven times, played at the state finals three times, and won the 1941 Michigan class A state championship. During the 1940s, Perigo's teams compiled a record of 107-42. He coached only two losing seasons in thirteen years, 1936-37 and 1946-47. In a series of articles commemorating his service to community and school, the News Palladium depicted him as a man "who taught the youth of the city his patience, his kindness, his

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26 The Greybric of BHHS Vol. 16 (1941), 69-70.

27 Records made available by Martin Conrad, Philip Lovejoy, Frances Burnwell, and Margaret Hardy, eds. A Quarter Century of Athletics unpublished document, no date or year given. For information on Perigo's career only see Shiveley, "Great Record Compiled by Perigo in 13 Seasons of Coaching Here," News Palladium Sec. 1, pg. 4 (March 2, 1949).
FIGURE 5: THE 1945-46 BENTON HARBOR TIGERS

Top row left to right: Sabadin, Forestieri, Ullig, Benford. Bottom row left to right: Leach, Dudas, Avery, Coach Perigo, Osborne, Zanders, Story, Salnoske.

Photograph courtesy of the Benton Harbor Public Library, Benton Harbor, Michigan. Sold exclusively by the BHHS Triangle Club of 1945. Reproduced by permission from BHHS.
modesty, and his earnestness. He has built basketball teams that have spread the name of Benton Harbor throughout Michigan.”

Considering that Benton Harbor had a low black enrollment during Perigo’s tenure, he coached no black basketball players before 1945 and only a small number before he left in 1949. He does, however, deserve much praise for putting Tiger basketball “on the map” and introducing black players to the community. Benny Osborn owns the title of first black basketball player at BHHS after joining the 1945-46 team, doing so with little fanfare or publicity (see figure 5). His picture appears in team photographs, but it remains unclear whether or not he finished out that season or graduated from high school.

The problems with blacks participating in high school sports revolved around not talent levels but low enrollment numbers. Jim Lull, a 1940 graduate of BHHS, blamed the shortage of black athletes in the school district on demographics. He recalled, “only six black students accounted for the 240 seniors that graduated in 1939-40.” The trend continued throughout the 1940s and 1950s. A survey of yearbooks from the mid 1940s revealed that out of 252 students, the class of 1945 graduated only four blacks. The class of 1946 honored 264 graduates of which only


30 Team photograph of the 1945-46 Benton Harbor Tigers housed at the Benton Harbor Public Library.

31 Lull sent statistics along with personal recollection of life in Benton Harbor during the 1940s in written correspondence with the author (May 2004).
eleven were black. Among the 294 students in the class of 1947, fourteen were blacks.\textsuperscript{32}

Next to the 1941 state championship team, Perigo's finest years as head coach came during the 1944-45, 1945-46, and 1947-48 seasons. Led by Jack Foresteiri, a white sophomore guard and arguably Benton Harbor's best player of the 1940s, the 1944-45 Tigers registered one of the most remarkable records in basketball among Class "A" schools in Michigan. The team went unbeaten through fifteen regular season games, and then marched through the state tournament only to lose their final game to Lansing Sexton, 31-30. Forestieri won the most valuable player award, notably because of his team play and support from fellow starters: Ed Klum, Neil Benford, Walt Piggott, and Ray Parsons. Shaken by the devastating loss, but still determined, the Tigers returned in 1945-46 winning ten consecutive conference games, the second consecutive undefeated league season for Perigo. Benton Harbor finished 13-2 and seemed poised for another run at the state crown. However, they fell prey to Holland in regional play, a team they beat twice during the regular season by convincing scores.\textsuperscript{33}

After enduring a year of rebuilding in 1946-47, in which Benton Harbor finished 5-10 and fourth in the conference, the Tigers of 1947-48 made another run at a state title. Led by the quintet of Les Butgereit, Bill Bartz, Flaherty, Chew, and a black center, Gene Halliday, Benton Harbor finished second in the conference with a

\textsuperscript{32} Statistics gathered from the \textit{Greybric} of BHHS Vols. 20-23 (1945-47).

\textsuperscript{33} Shiveley, "Great Record Compiled by Perigo," \textit{News Palladium} Sec. 1, pg. 4 (March 2, 1949).
FIGURE 6: THE 1947-48 BENTON HARBOR TIGERS

Bottom Row: R. Fox, L. Butterscotch, M. Beidel.
Second Row: B. Murphy, J. Sama, D. Schudia, R. Kalkenberg, R. Purits.

34 The Greybric of BHHS Vol. 23 (1948) housed at the Benton Harbor Public Library, Benton Harbor, Michigan. Photograph reproduced by permission from BHHS.
regular season mark of 11-4 and overall record of 14-5. The team marched through the regional tournament and quarterfinals to the semi-finals. Overcome by what the News Palladium called “stage fright,” the Tigers bowed out to Port Huron, 43-34, ending Perigo’s dream of a second state crown.³⁵ The presence of Halliday and John Sames marked the first time in Benton Harbor basketball history that two blacks played on a team together with whites (see figure 6).³⁶

Perigo left Benton Harbor the next year for his alma mater, Western Michigan College, later accepting a head coaching position at the University of Michigan. His parting request was to appoint former pupil and long-time junior varsity coach, Don Farnum as his successor (see figure 7).³⁷ The School Board honored his request, hiring a man of extraordinary character and skills, capable of accepting black athletes on equal terms with whites, and who would later coach the best integrated teams in Benton Harbor basketball history. Kenneth Overly, white, 1958 graduate of Benton Harbor and announcer for Tiger home games since 1965, said that, “Coach Farnum was the right man for the job, an individual of high integrity and character, who made the community proud of the Benton Harbor basketball team.”³⁸

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³⁵ “Tigers Bow to Port Huron,” News Palladium Sec. 1, pg. 6 (March 20, 1948).


³⁷ Farnum graduated from BHHS in 1930 where he excelled in cross-country and academics. He later attended Western Michigan Teachers College, earning a degree in biology. He served as a teacher and coach at BHHS for over forty years.

³⁸ Kenneth Overly, personal recollections, (March 2003).
FIGURE 7: COACH DON FARNUM (1962)

39 The Greybric of Benton Harbor high school Vol. 37 (May 1962), 136. Reproduced by permission from BHHS.
Farnum, teacher and coach at Benton Harbor high school for forty years, headed varsity basketball teams from 1949 to 1967, compiling a record of 228-106. During his tenure, Tiger teams won nine conference titles, six district and six regional championships, finished second in the state three times, and won state titles in 1964 and 1965. The 1965 team went undefeated at 23-0. Farnum’s tournament record stands at 44-16. Among his most prestigious honors include: 1963 Michigan High School Coach of the Year; 1965 Detroit News Coach of the Year; 1967 Coach emeritus awarded by the Benton Harbor Board of Education; and an election into the Michigan High School Coaches Association hall-of-fame in 1984. Nearly forty years have passed since Farnum last coached, but he still remains the only high school basketball coach in Berrien County, Michigan in the modern area to lead his team to back-to-back state championships, doing so with a mixture of white and black stars.

Edward Irvin, a white, retired Coloma public schools teacher and former Benton Harbor student, referred to Farnum’s teams of the early 1960s “as the cat’s meow of the entire community.” “I grew up idolizing the play of Alex McNutt, Al Andrews (a white co-captain of the 1962-63 team), John Rudley, and L. C. Bowen. It mattered little to me that many of the star players were black, they played the game right and I

40 Information on Coach Farnum’s long and distinguished was taken from a plaque on the east wall of the Benton Harbor high school gymnasium named in his honor (April 2003). Sadly, he passed away during the summer of 2003 after a long illness.

41 Ron Clark, white, coached two consecutive integrated state championship teams at Covert (located in nearby Van Buren County) in 1965 and 1966. I refer to the modern era of basketball as the period after 1950.
enjoyed it,” recalled Irvin. L.C. Bowen said, “Thousands of fans (black and white) raced home from work, ate dinner, and hurried down to the gym to see us play.” While leading Benton Harbor to consecutive state championships in 1964 and 1965, Bowen remembered high excitement among players, opposition, and fans. He did recall small numbers of whites voicing discontent with blacks in general but shrugged it off as normal behavior, an important point, given the time period. A white cheerleader from the 1965 state championship season remembered, “I don’t recall race ever being an issue. The cheerleaders would join up with the basketball team and everyone would celebrate the victories together. Didn’t matter, we were a proud team and color was unimportant.” Although Stephen Hardy focused not on race issues, he best explained the positive relationship between students, interscholastic sports, and community:

Both the students and the central school authorities had embraced sports teams as an epoxy with which to bond fragments into wholes. Both groups realized that the process must involve all students, whether they played or not. But there were important differences in the two visions. The students saw interscholastic sports as a vehicle only for school unity and pride. In their view, the team and its supporters would be but an extension of the family or the neighborhood, wherein everyone contributed, albeit in different ways, to a common but localized goal.

43 L. C. Bowen, personal recollections (April 18, 2004).
44 Quoted from anonymous source, (April 2004).
45 Hardy, How Boston Played, 122.
White and black players, team managers, and cheerleaders from the late 1950s and early 1960s offered different views on their racial experiences. Chet Walker, a black 1958 graduate of BHHS, said, "as for me, despite my local celebrity, my interaction with the white kids was still very limited. I only knew the guys on the team. We had little social contact." He believed white teachers talked down to black students, forcing them to find ways to act out. "When we played towns like Grand Haven and Holland, all-white teams of Dutch kids, we just wanted to crush them," recalled Walker. Tony Ashman, a white basketball player, called the relationship between white and black players admirable, "but we were by no means civil rights trailblazers." He explained that student-athletes went to school together, practiced, and enjoyed great success during games, but afterwards, white and black went their separate ways. "It had nothing to do with race, we all fell into certain social groups and had separate friends outside of sports....I recall no racial friction in Benton Harbor in the early sixties, at least at the high school." When recalling race relations on the 1963-64 team Ashman pointed out "the game seemed to be a place where the two could come together to view a mutual interest. There was great pride in our accomplishments by both black and white, at least until things got worse racially [referring to the post-1965 period] basketball was a common denominator that helped keep the community together."

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47 Tony Ashman, personal correspondence, (April 2004).

48 Ashman, personal recollections, (May 2004).
Bob Lower, a white team manager in 1964 and 1965 and valedictorian of his class, described sports teams as a powerful influence between himself, black athletes, and the larger community. "I felt a closeness with them because of my middle class upbringing. I respected them as equals and for their athletic abilities, and they were proud of me because of my academic achievements and talents as a track runner."

Despite black efforts to mingle with whites outside of school and athletics little racial interaction occurred. Lower remembered racially divided victory dances with "blacks on one side and whites on the other." The school responded positively to the emergence of black basketball players, the press favorable, and public sentiment ran high, "but not on a personal level. Most fans did not interact with black players only admired them like a fan would a movie star," recalled Lower.\(^{49}\)

Most of the credit for establishing positive race relations within Benton Harbor, however, belongs to white and black high school students. Willingness to assimilate with one another in the classroom, clubs, sports teams, and at athletic contests said a great deal about the character and maturity of these young people. But few developed cultural relations outside of the school arena. Sue Fisher-Cross, a white cheerleader for the 1965 state championship team, admitted, "I feel blessed to have grown up in Benton Harbor because as a college student and then as an adult, I did not carry around negative stereotypic ideas about black people, but in high school I was not good friends with any black students...this was common behavior at the time."\(^{50}\)

\(^{49}\) Bob Lower, personal recollections, (July 2004). Lower later graduated with honors from Harvard Law School.

\(^{50}\) Sue Fisher-Cross, personal recollections, (April 2004).
female and former BHHS graduate commented, “blacks were different from us because of economic station not the color of their skin, however, at that time there was still tacit separation/difference between blacks and whites. For example, you didn’t see interracial dating/marriage. It was not acceptable.” Efforts by students, however limited, created a positive environment and a means for integration to work, far exceeding efforts by local government or the larger white community.

Far too often the majority white population, most noticeably those in leadership positions, remained divided on important race and social issues. On the whole, Benton Harbor whites, and to some extent blacks themselves, were more content with maintaining racial “boundaries” and preserving ethnic identities rather than creating a racially friendly environment for all to enjoy. John Barnes, black, argued, “blacks were not segregated from whites, rather all ethnic groups in the community were segregated from one another.” A white female, who requested anonymity, remembered different habits among whites and blacks. “Blacks consistently avoided going to the beach during the day, showing up in the evening hours after whites left. Blacks didn’t go to dances. There were always summer dances at the old Silver Beach, no blacks. I don’t even remember seeing blacks at the movie theaters.” She added:

Attending high school with blacks and whites was not a problem. However, there were acceptable ways to socialize at school that

51 Quoted from an anonymous source, (April 2004).

52 Wallis, I Know My Community, 130.

53 John Barnes, personal recollections, (July 2004). Barnes, a football and basketball player in 1965 referred to other ethnic groups as Whites, Blacks, American Indians, Jewish and Italian-Americans, and Eastern European immigrants.
differed outside of school. For example, we would kid around everyone at school and really integrate, however after school, I don’t remember blacks being invited to or attending social activities such as parties, girl sleepovers, etc. The whites and blacks stayed with their respective group. There were some exceptional students that were black and they distinguished themselves and were respected for their talents, just as those that were athletically talented.54

Groups other than students and central administrators played an important role in race relations at Benton Harbor high school. Statistics and starting line-ups compiled from yearbooks and newspaper accounts suggested that coaches accepted, reluctantly or not, black athletes on equal terms with whites or at least permitted them to compete and showcase their talents before making roster decisions. Eric Johnson, white, former football and basketball player in the early 1960s, pointed out that “if you were good enough, you played,” regardless of skin color. “We played to win and fully understood in order to do so, we needed our best players on the field/court.”55 At Jenison Field House, in Lansing on March 21, 1964, when Benton Harbor won the second of its three state championships, Eric recalled without regret, “Mitch Pruitt and myself [both white players] had the best seat in the house.” “We sat at the end of the bench and supported our team, knowing full-well the best players were playing.”56 Sue Fisher-Cross recalled, “It was an incredible experience to be a part of the team and cheer at Jenison Field House at MSU. I’ll always remember that. However, I

54 Quoted from an anonymous source, (April 2004).
55 Dr. Eric Johnson, personal recollections, (April 2004).
knew (and probably the rest of the community) that the reason we were so good as a basketball team was because of the talented black students.  

Despite an abundance of quality athletes at Benton Harbor high school sport teams rarely consisted of equal numbers of white and black. A survey of yearbooks from 1955 to 1965 revealed that the ratio of black to white boys playing varied by sport (see Table 6). At no time during the period did black athletes at Benton Harbor high school account for 50% of any football or baseball team. They fared better in basketball and track, especially after 1960. But only once did blacks out-number whites in basketball, that being the 1964-65 squad, undefeated state champions and, arguably, the greatest area sport team of all time. Yearbooks, newspaper accounts, and statistics suggest that positive race relations existed on teams and that black athletes shared shower facilities, lockers, and had access to equipment on equal standing with whites.

The Benton Harbor community strived to desegregate most areas of society. Beyond segregated housing and neighborhood practices other areas of society such as public facilities, restroom, gas stations, most restaurants, and movie theaters welcomed both black and white patrons. It also appears that race issues had no lasting impact on sports fans, especially during 1950s and 1960s, a period marked by “big game” wins and championships, which brought prestige to both the city and high school. The basketball teams of 1963-64 and 1964-65 started as many as three or

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<td>1960-61</td>
<td>35 (8)</td>
<td>10 (5)</td>
<td>16 (5)</td>
<td>38 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961-62</td>
<td>40 (13)</td>
<td>11 (6)</td>
<td>18 (2)</td>
<td>42 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962-63</td>
<td>39 (10)</td>
<td>12 (6)</td>
<td>23 (5)</td>
<td>43 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963-64</td>
<td>41 (6)</td>
<td>12 (6)</td>
<td>21 (6)</td>
<td>35 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964-65</td>
<td>40 (13)</td>
<td>13 (9)</td>
<td>25 (9)</td>
<td>51 (25)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

four black players and, depending on the size or quickness of a given opponent, it was commonplace for Don Farnum to play five blacks at the same time; a startling achievement given the time period. As one white cheerleader, who asked to remain anonymous, pointed out, “we were very proud of our basketball team, they

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59 Larry Culby, personal recollections, (May 2004).
represented our school in many ways, and black players greatly contributed to that tradition. "

At no time during the research did I uncover any incident or event in which white or black athletes abused their privileges, violated team rules, or brought embarrassment to their school or community. No past participant recalled any racial disturbances at games among students or fans. Occasional “scuffles” occurred between opponents, common in competitive sports, but nothing attributed to race. Even when the accomplishments of black players overshadowed those of whites, fans still packed the Colfax gym to support the team. The sports performance rather than race drew the spectators.

Michigan’s black population endured segregation on many fronts after World War II, notably in neighborhoods, public schools, and sport programs. From the years 1950 to 1965 Michigan high schools mainly consisted of all-white basketball teams, rarely multiracial or all black. When integrated or all black squads competed against all-white teams it generally occurred in non-conference games or during the state tournament. This was especially true in schools rated C to E, more often located in smaller rural areas or suburbs where the black populations were small or nonexistent. Class A and B schools located within major cities like Detroit, Saginaw, 

60 Quoted from an anonymous source (April 2004).

61 Nearly all of the participants mentioned this fact when discussing high school basketball games.

62 Evidence based on map in “African-American Population in the Great Lakes Region (1960).” The map outlines the rural populations of Negroes in Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio, indicating that only small populations existed outside of major cities. In the case of Michigan, these slight numbers indicate that few blacks attended smaller, rural schools, or those predominately classified C-E.
Lansing, Muskegon, and Flint featured the largest portion of Michigan’s black populations. Berrien County had few class A or B schools with black students, thus Benton Harbor teams, much the same as other Michigan schools, rarely competed against other multiracial teams during regular season play. Muskegon Heights, a perennial state power and conference rival was an exception, meeting Benton Harbor twice annually and several times during tournament play during the 1950s and 1960s.

Teams photographs from the same collection of bulletins (the years 1956 and 1957 are incomplete), revealed a small number of black basketball players and integrated teams competing for state championships in the five Michigan classes from 1950 to 1965. Of the thirteen years, five classes (A to E), and three hundred teams profiled, 72% of the black players who participated in state final games hailed from larger cities like Detroit, Lansing, Saginaw, Muskegon, and Flint, or their neighboring suburbs. A large portion of the blacks studied played at class A or B schools. The total number of players calculated during the period peaked at 2028, of which 1746

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66 Note that the MHSAA disbanded the Class E tournament in 1960.
were white and 282 black, or 86% and 14% respectively. Benton Harbor teams accounted for 53 black players from 1955 to 1965, or 18.8% of the total number.  

Tiger teams competed for the state championship on six separate occasions, leading all class “A” schools. River Rouge, an integrated high school located outside of Detroit, dominated class B play by winning eight state championships and finishing second twice between 1951 and 1965. Parentheses in column two reveal the total number of blacks from all classes in each year of competition:

TABLE 7
PERCENTAGE OF WHITE AND BLACK BASKETBALL PLAYERS IN MICHIGAN CLASS A-B STATE FINALS (1950-65)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Players</th>
<th>%Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950-51</td>
<td>106 (1)</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951-52</td>
<td>111 (10)</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952-53</td>
<td>107 (5)</td>
<td>.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953-54</td>
<td>116 (3)</td>
<td>.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954-55</td>
<td>119 (21)</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955-56</td>
<td>115 (24)</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956-57</td>
<td>118 (19)</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957-58</td>
<td>115 (14)</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958-59</td>
<td>125 (29)</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959-60</td>
<td>112 (18)</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960-61</td>
<td>112 (24)</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961-62</td>
<td>113 (27)</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962-63</td>
<td>105 (18)</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963-64</td>
<td>105 (34)</td>
<td>32.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964-65</td>
<td>117 (35)</td>
<td>29.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Benton Harbor basketball teams did not advance to the state finals in the years 1950-54, 1956, 1959-61, and 1963, yet constituted nearly 20% of all black players participating between 1950 and 1965.

The table chronicles the emergence of black athletes in Michigan high school basketball, but raises questions about numbers and geographical locales of players. For example, lower class schools (C-E) represented rural areas or small communities that had few, if any, black residents. In the 1950s and 1960s low graduation rates among black students, certainly lower than those of whites, offered less opportunities for participation in sports programs. State final games mostly involved junior and senior players. Even in the class A-B schools, many, probably most, black males never got that far because of grade restrictions. Douglas Davidson, black, former Cassopolis high school basketball player from 1958-62, agreed when he said, “blacks, at the time, were tempted to join the workforce once they reached sixteen years of age, with many joining the army or civilian occupations. At the time many high schools required a 2.5 G. P. A. in order for student-athletes to compete in sports.” It is in my opinion, recalled Davidson, black athletes could have contributed to teams, if not for academic deficiencies or “that many potential players needed to join the workforce and help their families economically.”

Chet Walker remembered “the best black players in Benton Harbor, such as those on our church team, didn’t always go on to play organized school ball. First, academic work would knock out many guys. Second, other guys would quit rather than stomach all the coaches’ orders.”

69 Douglas Davidson, personal recollections, (March 2003).
70 Walker, A Long Time Coming, 43.
Black participation enhanced the quality of competition in the Michigan state basketball tournament during the 1950s and 1960s. Records compiled by the *Michigan High School Athletic Association* (MSHAA) *Bulletins* suggest that, at no time, did black players or integrated teams negatively affect attendance ratings, and that the popularity of the sport continued. No evidence revealed that whites withdrew from watching high school basketball because of black teams or players. Studies indicate a rise in total attendance at high school games in district, regional, and finals play, as well as in total gross receipts nearly every year between 1944 and 1951, with significant changes occurring between the years 1953 and 1963.

One might assume that the mid-1960s, a period often associated with mass protest and civil rights demonstrations, had a negative effect on the attendance of Michigan tournament games. The MHSAA offered evidence stating otherwise. Total attendance at 1964 district, regional, and state tournaments reached an all-time high of 695,795, approximately 34,500 more fans than 1963. Despite only a 2,650 increase in 1965 overall attendance reached 698,440, another state record. Semi-final and state championship games were sellouts for both 1964 and 1965, the same years

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71 Jenison Field House (capacity, 15,800 spectators), on the campus of Michigan State University, hosted the annual state basketball tournament from 1945 to 1971. Prior to the opening of the field house, the MHSAA finals had been played at five locations—East Lansing, Ann Arbor, Detroit, Grand Rapids, and Flint. The first state championships took place in the 1920s. Since 1974 the University of Michigan has hosted the finals.

72 MHSAA Bulletin 40, no. 9 (April 1964), 403.

73 MHSAA Bulletin (April 1964), 403.
that integrated teams from Benton Harbor won state championships.\textsuperscript{74} The \textit{MHSAA} reported no cases of racial conflict between fans or players during these pivotal years in the civil rights movement.

Benton Harbor adored high school basketball teams of the 1950s and 1960s even with the presence of black players. Many local residents still refer to the period as a special time in the community when people worked together and felt a sense of pride for themselves and the high school. Ken Overly, a 1958 graduate, recalled living in a Benton Harbor where equal opportunity existed and everyone sought the American Dream. “It was a golden age for high school basketball. Games were sold out and fans exhibited a level of enthusiasm and pride for the school rarely seen since. We had great individual players who played within the team concept, race was not an issue… if you were good, you were good,” he recalled.\textsuperscript{75} John Rudley, black, remembered the early 1960s as a time that brought significant social changes to the community, as people (whites) became more aware of African-Americans and their struggle to gain equal rights. He singled out Don Farnum as being “courageous” for orchestrating racial transition on basketball teams, solving the race problem by playing numbers of blacks acceptable to the larger white community.\textsuperscript{76} Albert Johnson, Benton Harbor school superintendent from 1962 to 1969, reported that local residents really “supported the team and the gym with a seating capacity of 3,000 was

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{MHSAA Bulletin} 41, no. 7 (March 1965), 396.

\textsuperscript{75} Ken Overly, personal recollections, (March 2003).

\textsuperscript{76} John Rudley, personal recollections, (July 2004).
packed for all home games. The scramble for season tickets was something and many of our supporters did not get to see the team play until we reached the regional level of play at Western Michigan University.” Jean Johnson, wife of Albert, called Benton Harbor “basketball crazy.” Her husband recalled “we had quite a few enthusiastic fans who wanted the Board to raise money to enlarge the gym. However, in later years when the teams started losing a few games there were vacant seats.”

Remarkably, racially mixed teams from a variety of sports at Benton Harbor high school from the late nineteenth century to 1965 thrived in both conference and tournament play, with no evidence of racial problems existing among teammates or the community. However, racial prejudice likely existed on the level of “non-reported” cases involving race, or from small populations of whites unwilling to accept black presence in the community. The success of black and white basketball teams, and the support they received from the larger white community despite average race relations in other areas of society offers an intriguing study in race and sport. It appears winning, and the recognition that came with it, offered temporary relief from racial prejudices and other social ills plaguing the community. Pamela Grundy asserted that, “athletics has become a means by which communities have drawn together, frequently over great distances, to celebrate the ways that human beings rise to challenges through individual and collective efforts.”

Perhaps John B. Albert Johnson, Memoirs, 50. His wife Jean also quoted in the memoir.

Grundy, Learning to Win, 301.
McLendon, Jr., legendary black college basketball coach at North Carolina College, summed up best how sports in an integrated society could help ease racial tensions:

If you can get the sports thing going, that's the best way to go...because everybody pulls for their team. They don't pull for part of their team...you can't divide up your loyalty. And then you begin to think—you might start admiring [someone]. And then you want your son to play like he does...pretty soon race is not the most important thing. 79

In Benton Harbor, the athletic achievement of black boys as key players on basketball teams demonstrated the community enthusiasm for victory and sports pride.

79 McLendon quoted in Grundy, Learning to Win, 261.
CHAPTER V

THOSE CHAMPIONSHIP YEARS (1955-65)

The decade 1955-1965 produced more racially mixed basketball, victories, championships, and local community support than any previous period in Benton Harbor sports history. Support units like the student body, school administration, local fans, and the press viewed black athletes as skilled players rather than in terms of race. However, much like other states around the country high school athletic integration in Michigan, particularly at Benton Harbor, during the 1950s and 1960s evolved under a measure of racial tension, as “civil rights activities as well as white resistance built in intensity.”¹ But, by the 1950s all black schools like Indianapolis Crispus Attucks, Detroit Miller, Lockland Wayne near Cincinnati, and Dunbar and DuSable in Illinois competed successfully against all-white schools in state basketball tournaments, challenging myths of white superiority and making people think differently about race.² By 1955 Benton Harbor teams began a decade of success in Michigan high school class “A” basketball, appearing in its first of five state championship games.

¹ Grundy, Learning to Win, 266.
² Roberts, But They Can’t Beat Us, 166-167.
By the mid-1960s strategies of dual school systems in Michigan became less effective. Whereas major state colleges had recruited only a handful of black players, high schools began enrolling more black and white athletes.\(^3\) In 1965 basketball teams at Benton Harbor won their second of back-to-back state championships, proving that freedom and success on the hard court could translate well to a larger white community.\(^4\) This chapter examines Benton Harbor high school teams and, especially black individual players between 1955 and 1965, to assess their place in community building around this sport.

Nelson Campbell, journalist and long-time sports enthusiast, contended basketball “is the only one of the ‘Big Three’ (baseball, football, and basketball) pursued with equal enthusiasm in farm town, city ghetto, and suburb.” Every state possesses a rich basketball history along with its own laundry list of legendary male and female players, or teams that ran up incredible records and championships. Campbell pointed out, at the high school level, basketball represented “the game’s purest, most dramatic, and most nostalgic vineyard. But prep lore, however compelling, tends to remain local.”\(^5\) Benton Harbor high school provided the community with a similar vibrant atmosphere.

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\(^3\) Grundy, *Learning to Win*, 267.

\(^4\) Roberts argued that despite the success of Crispus Attucks on the basketball court their accomplishments did not translate well into the rest of society, referring to the larger white population of Indianapolis. Whites refused to participate or were discouraged by local police to attend victory celebrations in the black district.


Black players Halliday, Reynolds, Watson, Walker, Yarbrough, McNutt, Pollard, Dodd, Bowen, Rudley, John Barnes, Ellis Hull, and others ushered in a new era of Benton Harbor basketball, one that emphasized speed, quickness, man-to-man defensive play, full-court pressure defense, and high-scoring games. Players met standards in the classroom as well. Nearly all of these young men went on to play college athletics, a new experience for Benton Harbor’s black boys. Jim “Jellybean” Reynolds played basketball at Hillsdale College and later professionally in the Canadian Football League.7 John Barnes, a football and basketball star, also earned a scholarship to Hillsdale where he continued his athletic career on the hardwood. After a distinguished high school career, Ellis Hull starred in basketball at Western

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6 Team accomplishments and player biographies were courtesy of plaques housed in the Benton Harbor High School trophy case and from photographs taken from the Greybric of BHHS, Vols. 30-40, (1955-1965).

Michigan University. Chet Walker twice won All-American honors at Bradley University, leading that school to the National Invitational Tournament (NIT) championship in 1960. He later starred in the National Basketball Association. A seven-time All-Star, Chet “The Jet” scored nearly 19,000 points in his thirteen year NBA career with Philadelphia and Chicago. More recently, Walker was nominated (fifth time) for induction into the NBA Hall-of-Fame.  

John Rudley, one of the quickest and best point guards ever to play at BHHS, was a catalyst on the two state title teams, excelled academically and athletically at the University of Toledo, later earning a Ph.d in Finance and Administration at the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga. L. C. Bowen, a Parade All-American in 1965 and two-time all-state selection, earned a scholarship to Bradley University, held many scoring records there, and later played professional basketball in France. Inducted into the BHHS Sports Wall-of-Fame, along with Rudley, Harold Wheeler, Mitch Pruitt, and others in 1997, many locals still consider Bowen the best to ever play at Benton Harbor. These players, black and white, represent some of the finest athletes ever to play at Benton Harbor high school, young men that rewarded school and community with successful seasons and impressive records, transforming the boys varsity basketball program into one of the most respected in the state.

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The year 1949 signaled a transition period in Benton Harbor basketball. Don Farnum’s first teams suffered through several mediocre and losing seasons. The 1950-51 team registered only 5 wins against 12 losses. The following year the program nearly collapsed after a dismal 2-14 season. The school yearbook reported, “our team had a tough season, but there were always thrills in the games till the last second.” In 1952-53 the Tigers earned a 9-8 record and Farnum achieved his first winning season as varsity basketball coach. Led by future all-state forward, Don Arend, the team surprised Kalamazoo in the opening game of the regional tournament, 53-47, only to lose the next night to Grand Rapids Creston, 64-51. The next season a more experienced Tiger squad finished with 10 wins against 8 losses. In the state tournament, the “Harborites” won two consecutive regional contests before bowing out to Kalamazoo Central, in the final. Farnum coached his team back to respectability, but did so with few black players.

From 1950 to 1954, the Tigers compiled an overall record of 26 wins and 42 defeats. Don Farnum coached a total of two black players during the span, one being Jim Reynolds, first of many black all-staters to play at Benton Harbor. Reynolds, Arend, and Harold Wheeler returned for the 1954-55 season, signaling an end to the school’s losing ways and igniting a decade long run as a basketball powerhouse in

\[\text{References}\]

10 The *Greybric* of BHHS, Vol. 27 (May 1952), 86.

11 The *Greybric* Vol. 28 (May 1953).

12 The *Greybric* Vol. 29 (May 1954), 90.

13 Statistics compiled from the *Greybric* of BHHS, Vols. 26-29 (1951-54).
Michigan (see figure 8). For the first time in his six years as varsity coach, Farnum facilitated the talent needed to challenge Muskegon Heights and other opponents for supremacy in the Southwestern Conference.

Harold Wheeler, white, epitomized the unselfish, working-class athlete of the 1950s. A three sport star much of his career at Benton Harbor, he utilized strength, long arms, and quick feet, to snare rebounds, drive to the basket, and harass opposing guards into turnovers. Credited along with teammate, Melrose Hensley, black, for introducing pressure defense and fast break offense to Tiger basketball, the venerable Wheeler fit the role of team captain.14 Now a principal of Coloma high school, Wheeler described Farnum as “a likeable, good guy, but not a pure basketball coach. We excelled with a short bench, using only five to seven players, all unselfish, hard-working guys dedicated to winning,” recalled Wheeler. Teammates on the court, usually players went their separate ways after games because most lived in different parts of town marked by racial divisions. He called friend and teammate Don Arend “the best white basketball player to ever play at Benton Harbor high school, and Jim Reynolds as a “highly skilled athlete,” who contributed to overall team success.15 Arend, Reynolds, and Wheeler shouldered much of the scoring load during the 1954-55 season. Along with fellow starters Chester Ross and John LaMantia, the trio led Benton Harbor to a surprising run towards a state championship.

FIGURE 8: THE 1954-55 BENTON HARBOR TIGERS
CLASS “A” STATE RUNNER-UP (17-4)


16 The Greybric of Benton Harbor high school Vol. 30 (May 1955), 112. Photography reproduced by permission from BHHS.
Early in the 1954-55 campaign the *United Press* and *Detroit Free Press* ratings ranked Benton Harbor the second best class “A” team in Michigan behind defending champion, Muskegon Heights. After seven years of obscurity Benton Harbor rejoined the ranks of elite basketball schools in Michigan. Four more wins in January 1955 left the team with an 8-0 record with undefeated, number one-ranked, Muskegon Heights next on the schedule. In a close contest, the Tigers bowed to Heights 57-51, igniting a three game losing streak. The team recovered by winning three straight conference games to extend their record to 11 wins against 3 defeats. A rematch against Heights for the share of the conference championship ended the regular season. Tiger faithful poured into the Naval Armory gymnasium to show support. Led by the scoring combination of Reynolds and Arend and the defensive play of Wheeler, the team throttled Heights 60-50, setting up a possible third meeting between the two powerhouses in the state tournament.

The Tigers pursuit of a state championship in 1955 began in the regional at Portage High School with a victory against Grand Rapids Christian, 65-50, in what the yearbook editors called a “thrilling contest.” Don Arend’s scoring and rebounding, along with the defensive play of Chester Ross and Harold Wheeler

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18 Before 1956 Benton Harbor High School basketball teams played their home games at the Armory building because the high school gymnasium seated only 250 to 300 spectators. The armory seated 2,500.

19 The *Greybric* of Benton Harbor High School Vol. 30 (May 1955), 111-112.
charged fans and ignited a fourth quarter rally that saved the game. Next, Benton Harbor dismantled a talented Grand Rapids Ottawa team, 67-53, in front of a capacity crowd of 3,200. Anticipating the first regional championship since 1948, the *News Palladium* declared, “it has been a long time since tournament fever has taken such a strong grip on Benton Harbor and the way this team is playing it’s worth all the fanfare and the 100-mile drive to Portage. The Tigers have been a hot team this week capable of going all the way.” Fans seemed to think so too, as the school sold its allotment of tickets for the regional final against Battle Creek in less than an hour, leaving over a hundred people empty-handed.

The regional final against Battle Creek resulted in one of the most exciting games in the history of Benton Harbor high school basketball. Down by 14 points twice, the Tigers “caught the support of 1,200 Benton Harbor contingents who wouldn’t be beaten,” to pull out a thrilling 55-54 overtime victory. John LaMantia’s long jump shot in the closing seconds of regulation tied the score at 50-50. Reynolds, who led all scorers with 22 points, converted a rebound into the winning basket with 46 seconds left in overtime. In a post-game interview Don Farnum praised the Benton Harbor faithful proclaiming, “it shows what cheering can do for a team...we were really on.”

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20 The *Greybric* (May 1955), 111.


The next day, as the team prepared for a third meeting against Muskegon Heights in the quarterfinals, the Detroit Free Press named Don Arend to the first team Class “A” all-state basketball team, and Jim Reynolds to the fourth. These individual honors marked the first time in Benton Harbor basketball history that two players earned all-state honors the same year, with Reynolds becoming the first black player.23

On March 16, 1955, before a capacity crown of 5,285 at the Grand Rapids Civic Center, Benton Harbor dethroned defending class “A” state champions, Muskegon Heights, 43-34. The BHHS yearbook contended. “The wide nine point margin left no doubt as to which team was best in this long-standing feud.”24 More than a thousand enthusiastic Benton Harbor fans next arrived in Lansing to watch the team challenge Flint Central in one of the state semi-final matches. The high school sold its allotment of 500 tickets in less than an hour, with hundreds of disappointed fans forced to buy additional ones in Lansing.25

Before 1955 only three other Benton Harbor teams advanced this far in the tournament—1941, 1945, and 1948.26 A near capacity crowd of 11,877 fans at Jenison Field House witnessed the Tigers dismantle Flint 65-50. Jim Shanahan, sports writer for the News Palladium, noted “Jim Reynolds was never more clever

23 “Don Arend on All-State Basket Team,” Sec. 1, pg. 12 (March 14, 1955).


25 “Not Enough to Go Around,” News Palladium Sec. 1, pg. 9 (March 19, 1955).

than last night when he made Flint Central’s all-state Joe Quarles look sick and fouled him in out in the third quarter.” He led four other players into double figures with 18 points often deceiving the opposition and fans with his athleticism and by “working the ball between his legs.” His efforts propelled the Tigers to their first state championship match in ten years.

The Benton Harbor High School yearbook of 1955 argued that “Jackson’s 14-6 season didn’t compare with the Tiger’s 17-3, and only once during the regular season had they managed to beat one of Michigan’s ‘big’ teams.” In the tournament alone Benton Harbor beat four of the state’s top-ranked teams, several with standout black players. Records mattered little in the final game, however, as Jackson used record-breaking performances to defeat the Tigers 74-61. Don Arend led a rally late in the third quarter to close the gap to eleven points, but Jim Reynolds fouled out, ending any possibilities of comeback.” Yearbook editors commented “never once during the game was it evident that either the team or the Benton Harbor fans were discouraged. The team played a game that everyone agreed was championship caliber.”

A crowd of over 2,000 fans greeted the boy’s basketball team after a giant motorcade escorted them through town. Mayor Joseph Flaugh and W. M.  


Cunningham, president of the school board, praised the team for its accolades. Jim Shanahan reported “tributes were great, but it was the continued backing of the hundreds of loyal fans that really chased the blues for the players.” Coach Farnum acknowledged the welcoming crowd for their season long support, declaring “it was one of the big reasons why the Tigers kept going.”

It appears that the sport of basketball and the presence of black players both served as catalysts to community interest and spectatorship. Spectators increased over the next the decade in light of several more drives for a state championship. Even in defeat loyal support continued for a program that later became increasingly dominated by black players.

In 1955-56, the loss of four key players left Jim Reynolds as the lone returning starter. Reynolds, along with top reserve, Melrose Hemsley, teamed with fellow black players junior Sam Watson and sophomore, Chester Walker, marking the first time in Benton Harbor basketball history more than two blacks appeared on a varsity roster. By the opening game of the season three black players, Reynolds, Watson, and Walker, held down spots in the starting line-up, another first for Benton Harbor. A close victory against long-time rival, Muskegon Heights, a majority black team, ensured a share of the Southwestern Conference championship and marked the only time that Heights lost that year in route to their second of three state titles during the 1950s.


Walker remembered the anxiety of playing in his first varsity game in 1955, unsure of whether or not white fans would accept him, a prospect likely shared by his fellow black teammates. When awarded the honor of leading the team through the hoop-shaped paper tiger, the first such by a black player at the school, Walker recalled busting through and dribbling to the other end of the court, jumping “as high as I could and dunking the ball,” and hearing the gymnasium exploding into absolute bedlam. “The fans went bananas, cheering and stomping their feet. As a shy kid, I didn’t know whether to hide, smile, or raise my fist…nobody on a Benton Harbor team had ever dunked the ball in a game or warm-ups.”33 It appears that Walker’s abilities rather than race earned him the respect of white fans, proving that high school sports united individuals from disparate groups who reside together in small towns.34 It also showed that a star player could emerge on a noted team though a minority among whites.

Led by the solid play of Reynolds, named to an all-state team for the second consecutive year, Leroy Goff, and honorable mention selection, center Sam Watson, and rising star, Walker, Benton Harbor finished the 1955-56 campaign with 14 wins against 4 losses. The team entered the Holland regional tournament as one of the state’s top-ranked teams, but lost a heartbreaker to unheralded Kalamazoo Central, 54-50, in the regional finals.35

33 Walker, A Long Time Coming, 31-32.
34 Walker, 53.
35 Greybric of BHHS Vol. 31 (May 1956), 135.
Farnum’s Tigers of 1956-57, consisting of seven returning lettermen and the addition of six reserves, notched an impressive 12-4 regular season record (see appendix 1). The team benefited from playing nine home games in the new and spacious Colfax Coliseum, including the season finale against Muskegon Heights “which brought a capacity crowd and all-time attendance record of 3,200.” Despite Walker breaking school records with a 40-point game, 22.2 scoring average per game, and field goals made (47.3%) few expected this team, largely consisting of underclassmen, to challenge more experienced opposition in the state tournament.36

The first game of the regional eliminations played at Portage High School in Kalamazoo, pitted Benton Harbor against Grand Rapids Catholic Central, an all-white school and winners of 12 games against only 3 losses during the regular season. More than 800 Benton Harbor fans witnessed two black players, Watson and Walker pace the team to a 50-40 victory. The win set up a regional semi-final match against powerful Kalamazoo Central, and integrated squad and owners of the best record in the region at 13-2.37

On March 15, 1957 a contingent of nearly 1,000 Benton Harbor fans cheered the team on in what the News Palladium called a “fiercely fought battle that belongs in the championship class.” Farnum’s Tigers prevailed 60-58, a victory that marked only the second time in six tries that Benton Harbor defeated Central in tournament play.

36 The Greybric of BHHS Vol. 32 (March 1957), 93-95.
under their coach and the first time with more than one black starting player. Two nights later, another late rally enabled Benton Harbor to beat Battle Creek, 60-57, and win its second regional title in three years. Playing on a sprained ankle Chet Walker scored 33 points as he “drove and faked for lay ups and fired out court jump shots” in route to the second highest point total of his career. The News Palladium reported, “tournament-conscious Benton Harborites bought 1,189 advance tickets while just 90 were sold to Battle Creek.”

By virtue of a 61-58 overtime victory against Jackson in the quarterfinals, Farnum’s Tigers earned a birth in the state semi-finals in Lansing against Muskegon Heights. Walker, who led the Benton Harbor scoring attack with 16 points, made a basket in the closing seconds of regulation to save the team from defeat. According to Jim Shanahan, sports editor, “joyous Harbor fans made it bedlam as the overtime ended.”

On March 22 a crowd of more than 10,000 fans packed Jenison Field House in Lansing to watch undefeated Muskegon Heights destroy Benton Harbor 72-54, ending the team and city hopes for a state crown. Heights led the entire game. Walker accumulated 389 points for the season breaking the school record set by Don

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38 Jim Shanahan, “Tigers Tip Kalamazoo: Battle Creek Foe in Title Tilt on Saturday,” News Palladium Sec. 2, pg. 2 (March 15, 1957). Note that Benton Harbor was only allotted 800 tickets in the first two games of the tournament, so as to allow equal distribution of tickets among the seven participating schools. In the regional finals the two remaining schools earned the most tickets.


Arend two years earlier. Poised to become the most prolific scorer in school history, Walker returned in 1957-58, along with fellow senior starters, George Peoples, Duane Dunbar, and junior center, Charles Yarbrough for the new season.

The Benton Harbor Tigers of 1957-58 achieved their most successful season since 1945. The *News Palladium* described the integrated team as a “coachable lot” because of their senior leadership and unselfish play. The assessment of the team applied to both white and black players. Spending most of the campaign rated as the best team in the state, they missed a perfect season by eight points losing to perennial rival, Muskegon Heights, after winning 13 straight games. Often referred to as the “Farnum Five” because all five starters shared high scoring honors at least once during the year, the Tigers of 1958 shared a common goal—winning a state basketball championship. Described as a “versatile team than can run or play from a pattern,” Benton Harbor began its quest for a state title behind the play of Walker, coined as the school’s first black superstar in basketball by the local press.

No other black player of the 1950s influenced race relations or contributed more to the success of integrated basketball in Benton Harbor than Walker. Born into a family of poor sharecroppers in segregated Bethlehem, Mississippi in 1940, his

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FIGURE 14: THE 1957-58 BENTON HARBOR TIGERS
CLASS "A" STATE RUNNER-UP (19-2)
45 The Greybric of BHHS (May 1958), 166-173. Photograph reproduced by permission from BHHS.
State Basketball Championship, played annually at Jenison Field House in East Lansing, Michigan. In 1958, the Detroit Free Press voted him to the All-Dream Team, an honor reserved for the top five players in the state. Few blacks before him achieved such status. How his play affected the organization of future integrated basketball teams and the attitudes of the larger white community of Benton Harbor remains deeply entrenched in local history.⁴⁶

After breaking scoring records and becoming only the second African-American player to earn all-state honors at Benton Harbor, he later became a college All-American and a perennial NBA all-star. Walker became one of the first black athletes to reach stardom on the basketball court during the modern civil rights movement. Considered by many former teammates and peers as the consummate team player he helped build one of the all-time great NBA teams, the 1967 Philadelphia 76ers, featuring standout professionals like Chamberlain, Hal Greer, and Billy Cunningham.⁴⁷ Walker’s talents more than race defined his essential role on the boys’ basketball team at Benton Harbor high school.

Benton Harbor closed out the regular season with a 59-51 loss at Muskegon Heights and a decisive victory over Niles 70-29, a game in which Walker scored 41 points to become the top scorer in Tiger history. The team entered the 1958 state

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⁴⁷ Walker Hall of Fame Nominee,” Herald Palladium, 5.
tournament ranked number two in the state behind undefeated Detroit Austin and star player, Dave DeBusshere. In an easy 65-25 victory over Niles in the district round Walker thrilled the crowd with two assists on fast breaks to Ron Lange and a behind the back pass to Yarbrough for scores. In the first game of the regional championship the Tigers defeated Kalamazoo Central, 60-48. More than 4,700 fans witnessed the action. Benton Harbor next carried a 16-1 record against Grand Rapids Christian (14-6) for the regional championship, hoping to win their third such title in four years.

Nearly 1,500 Benton Harbor fans attended the regional final game against Christian. Trailing by eight points with seven minutes left in the game, a “near hopeless cause became a regional championship” for the Tigers, the seventh in school history. Walker played his finest game of the year pouring in 34 points, forcing double and triple teams the entire game, while leading the team to a 70-67 victory. The total gave him 1,010 points in his three-year varsity career, the first black or white player to accomplish this feat at Benton Harbor. The News Palladium made no reference to Walker’s race as an advantage for his accomplishments.


Benton Harbor earned a third trip in four years to the state semi-finals at Jenison Field House, in Lansing, with a convincing 62-52 win over Inkster in the quarterfinals. In the semi-finals Benton Harbor matched 18-1 records with Flint Central. More than 12,500 spectators in Lansing witnessed the Tigers break the state scoring record with a convincing 81-58 win. Walker scored 28 points and Dunbar 24 in what the News Palladium declared “may be a now or never state championship opportunity” for Benton Harbor. Despite playing against a “racehorse” style and never trailing Farnum played his starting five the entire game until Nate Wells entered with 38 seconds remaining. One 1958 player, who requested anonymity, argued that Farnum’s failure to rest starters in the fourth quarter cost them the state title the next evening. The veteran coach never explained why starters played as long as they did. During his long tenure at BHHS he consistently played his best players, either white or black, for as long as he felt comfortable.

In the state final “Farnum’s five” faced its stiffest competition of the season, Detroit Austin, the undefeated and number one team in the state. More than two thousand Benton Harbor fans followed the team and thousands more listened to the game on the local radio station, WHFB-FM. According to the News Palladium, “win

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54 Quoted from anonymous source (April 2003).

55 Ken Overly, personal recollections, (March 2003).
or lose, a big celebration was being cooked up to greet the team on its return." Chet Walker remembered:

Nothing is as exciting in an athlete’s life as a high school championship game. You’re playing before people you’ve known for most of your life....In high school, your friends and family appear in great numbers. Many black people drove to Lansing from the projects for this game. They would cash their paychecks or use the money made working in the orchards to charter buses in order to watch us. At the time high school sports triggered a lot of community excitement....The team and the game belonged to the whole town.

The enthusiastic local newspaper made no reference to player’s race, only that solid team and spectacular individual performances ignited community support. Blacks were referred to as players never as Negroes.

More than 12,500 fans packed Jenison Field House to witness what the News Palladium described as a dual between all-state players, Walker and Dave DeBusschere. Benton Harbor trailed at halftime, 39-33, but rallied to take 49-48 lead at the end of the third quarter. DeBusschere, held in check most of the second half, erupted for five fourth quarter baskets giving Austin the lead at 64-56 before Walker fouled him out with 3:10 left in the game. Walker, Lange, and Dunbar then led the Tigers on furious comeback that fell short. Austin won the title 71-68. Walker paced Benton Harbor with 25 points, but picked up three early fouls that slowed his game. The game came down to free throw shooting, as black starters, Walker and


57 Walker, A Long Time Coming, 53.
Yarbrough, missed four one-and-one attempts at the free throw line in the last three minutes of the game. Walker recalled:

I was so keyed up that I must have missed ten foul shots. I couldn’t help feeling I cost us the championship. I cried after the game, just sobbed, because the game had drawn everyone who was woven in the fabric of my life except my mother. It was personal and local. We wanted that game for our team, our town, ourselves, and our friends and families. Such a moment happens very seldom in sports.

The championship game ended the prep careers of starters Walker, Lange, Dunbar, and George Peoples. The foursome combined to lead Tiger teams to an impressive 49-11 record in three years.

The Benton Harbor community gave their team a championship welcome home. The celebration began twenty miles out of town where a motorcade of police cars and fans greeted players and coaches. Black and white players rode together as more than 2,000 residents watched them parade through town on a fire truck. Don Farnum proclaimed, “we are tremendously grateful for this wonderful reception. It almost seems like we didn’t lose. This is typical of Benton Harbor.” The demonstration proved, win or lose, with or without integrated teams, the community showed its support with no regards to race. But the fact remained, despite possessing talented players and winning a high percentage of games from 1955 to 1958, a state


59 Walker, A Long Time Coming, 53.


championship in basketball eluded Benton Harbor high school. Close calls resulted in high disappointment within the community. Perhaps the editors of Tiger Tournament Tales 1958 summed up the near misses best. “Thrice the bridesmaid, never the bride describes the feelings among local basketball fans, as the Tigers, for the third time in four years failed to bring home the coveted state championship.” Benton Harbor teams closed out the 1950s with two respectable seasons, but not of championship caliber.

The 1960s began with promise for the Benton Harbor Tigers, as a young team manned by Alex McNutt, black, Ladell McBride, black, and Al Andrews, white, produced a 11-4 regular season record. After beginning the campaign with six straight wins the team lost consecutive games to conference rivals Muskegon, 78-73, and Grand Haven, 65-61. Wins against Kalamazoo Loy Norrix and Niles gave Benton Harbor momentum entering the post-season tournament. However, for the second straight year Farnum’s Tigers lost the opening game of the districts to cross-town rival, St. Joseph, 61-57, to finish 11-5.

The Tiger starting five of 1961-62 consisted of three black players: McNutt, McBride, and senior captain, John Hall (see figure 10). Much to the surprise of local fans, students, and sportswriters, the team performed beyond expectations, consistently defeated first-rate competition, and earning a spot in the state

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62 Tiger Tournament Tales (Dallas, TX: 1958).
Row 1 (from left): Al Andrews, B. Hurse, N. Siegert, R. Paulson, Alex McNutt; Row 2 (from left): C. Bassett, R. Starkey, L. McBride, J. Kling, W. Jackson, John Hall.64

64 The Greybrick of BHHS Vol. 37 (May 1962), 132. Photograph reproduced by permission from BHHS.
championship game. The Tigers compiled an impressive 13-2 regular season record, sharing the LMAC championship with Muskegon and Muskegon Heights. The Associated Press named Benton Harbor the fourth best class “A” team in the state.

In a game much closer than anticipated, the Tigers won the district title with a 76-69 victory over Niles. McNutt, McBride, and Andrews led the scoring with 26, 20, and 17 points respectively. The first game of the regional tournament, played at Western Michigan University Field House, pitted Benton Harbor against long-time nemesis, Jackson. The Tigers won convincingly, 86-56. In the regional championship game Benton Harbor faced Kalamazoo Central. Yearbook photographs reveal that a large audience witnessed the contest at Western Michigan “where a happier or more satisfied team could not be found” after BHHS won the championship, 54-45. Farnum earned his fourth regional crown, the most ever by a Benton Harbor coach, using a combination of black and white talent.

The Tigers behind “thousands of local fans” moved to Battle Creek to play Detroit Dearborn in the quarterfinals. Sparked by pressure defense and fast break offense in the fourth quarter, the Tigers destroyed Dearborn, 88-62, a team record for points in tournament play. McNutt led all scorers with 27 points, followed by

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65 John Hall became the fourth African-American at BHHS to hold the title of captain or co-captain on the basketball team.


The Benton Harbor Tigers of 1961-62 became the fourth Farnum team since 1955 to play for a spot in the state finals. The match up with Saginaw (20-0) marked the second time they faced and undefeated, number one ranked team. A capacity crowd at Michigan State University witnessed a 17-2 Tiger team begin with a fast start and giving “the impression that they would go all the way,” Saginaw prevailed, 69-58, adding to Benton Harbor’s history of tournament frustrations. McNutt, who scored 22 points, mounted a comeback in the fourth quarter that came up short. Talk of a return the following year started immediately after the team was escorted through their hometown by police cars and fans, honoring their feat as the class “A” state runner-up. Local dignitaries, that included Chet Walker, and fans gathered at the Colfax gymnasium to view trophies and honor the team.⁶⁹ The return of four starters for the 1962-63 gave Benton Harbor an excellent chance to win the elusive state championship.

Many locals and former players still consider the 1962-63 version of the Benton Harbor basketball team as one of the best in school’s history. “If not the best, it was certainly the most exciting,” claimed the editors of the 1963 yearbook. The Tiger

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⁶⁸ The Greybric of BHHS, Vol. 37, 137.

⁶⁹ The Greybric of BHHS, 137.
starting five consisted of four seniors, three black and two white players, Alex McNutt, black, Al Andrews, white, Ladell McBride, black, Nels Siegert, white, and junior Mike Pollard, black. Led by three-year lettermen and co-captains McNutt and Andrews, the team exhibited team spirit and cooperation that earned Benton Harbor a spot as one of the most respected basketball towns in the state (see appendix A). Former white teammate, Eric Johnson, called McNutt the best six-foot basketball player I ever saw.”

John Rudley, black, credited McNutt for opening the doors for the black athlete in the 1960s at Benton Harbor, “but he paid the price,” leaving one to speculate if Benton Harbor fans remembered their star black player for his remarkable contributions and individual honors or for his failure to bring home a state championship title two straight years. Black players influenced the larger white community with spectacular play, but more than likely relationships lasted only as long as the next victory.

During the 1962-63 season the Benton Harbor Tigers reeled off sixteen straight victories and became the number one class “A” team in Michigan. “Fans thronged to the Colfax Coliseum to watch Benton Harbor’s ‘firebrand’ of basketball…run and shoot tactics and insurmountable fourth quarter splurges became so well known that the fire marshal had to restrict the size of crowds,” remembered one editor of the 1963 yearbook. The team averaged nearly eighty points and a victory spread of twenty-four points per game featuring a twelve-man roster of six blacks and six

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70 Eric Johnson, personal recollections (April 2004).
71 John Rudley, personal recollections (July 2004).
whites, a first in Benton Harbor basketball history.\textsuperscript{72} Equally important, for the first time since 1945 a Benton Harbor team entered tournament play undefeated, doing so with a star black player leading the way.

Benton Harbor entered the state tournament with high hopes of avenging the championship loss of 1961-62. After edging cross-town rival St. Joseph 70-65 in the opening round of the districts behind a twenty-one point effort by Andrews, the Tigers seemed poised to dismantle a Holland team they beat twice during the regular season by average of twenty-five points. Fans prematurely began preparations for a trip to the state championships in East Lansing, only to watch the season come to an abrupt end by way of a 68-66 loss to Holland.\textsuperscript{73}

The \textit{News Palladium} called Holland’s upset “a fantastic game of pathos and tragedy...that left Benton Harbor fans in a state of shock.”\textsuperscript{74} Tony Ashman, a junior at the time who watched helplessly from the bench, described the final game as highly controversial and the season as one of “colossal disappointment.”\textsuperscript{75} Suggesting that race may have played a role in the outcome of the game several participants voiced discontent. John Rudley, a standout on the junior varsity team at the time, said “the game had an astounding effect on me as a player...I vowed afterwards to never place myself and team in that position...to have a season end in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{72} The \textit{Greybric} of BHHS Vol. 38 (May 1963), 137, 140
\item \textsuperscript{73} The \textit{Greybric} of BHHS Vol. 38, 141.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Jim Shanahan, “Pandemonium Breaks Out as Holland Topples Benton Harbor, Harborites Lose in Last Second,” \textit{News Palladium} Sec. 2, pg. 2 (March 11, 1963).
\item \textsuperscript{75} Tony Ashman, personal recollections, (April 2004).
\end{itemize}
such controversy."76 One long-time fan remembered near violent reaction from Benton Harbor fans, many of which complained that white referees and Holland crowds influenced the final outcome. “We were victims of home cooking,” he added.77 John Brannock, former BHHS and Benton Harbor Community College basketball player and long-time special assistant to Don Farnum, discounted race as the cause of defeat. “Race had nothing to do with the outcome. Whether the referee was white or black said nothing about his overall incompetence. The call should have never been made.”78

The quest for a state championship in basketball continued for Benton Harbor high school. Three state final defeats and one semi-final loss together with the disappointment of 1963 had many overzealous fans questioning whether Don Farnum could take his team to the next level, especially with a racially balanced team.79 With the graduation losses of McNutt, Andrews, McBride, and Siegart, no one expected a return to the state championship in 1963-64. Fresh off an undefeated junior varsity season, the first in the history of Benton Harbor basketball, five young men, four of

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76 John Rudley, personal recollections, (July 2004). In 1962-63, Rudley along with fellow teammates L. C. Bowen, Perry Dodd, Dave Mack, and Don Lewis helped lead the Benton Harbor Junior Varsity squad to a perfect 16-0 record, the first for a JV squad in BHHS basketball history. In one year of JV ball and two years of varsity together these players compiled a record of 58-3.

77 Quoted from an anonymous source (April 2003). Participant was referring to a controversial call made by a white referee in the closing seconds of the Holland game. The referee placed four seconds back on the clock allowing Holland to win at the buzzer. Time had originally expired.

78 John Brannock, personal recollections, (July 2004).

79 Johnson, Memoirs, 72.
which black, prepared for their varsity debuts the following season. L. C. Bowen, John Rudley, Perry Dodd, Don Lewis, and Dave Mack.\textsuperscript{80}

On the heels of a thrilling last minute victory over Traverse City, 82-79, the 1963-64 Tigers closed out regular season play with 12 wins and 3 losses and claimed their third straight Lake Michigan Athletic Conference (LMAC) title (see figure 11). Along with another conference championship, L. C. Bowen poured in 25 points to clinch the conference scoring title with a 31.2 average, the highest ever by a Tiger player.\textsuperscript{81} Led the entire year by balanced scoring, solid defense, and the play of junior stars, Bowen and John Rudley, and seniors Tony Ashman and Mike Pollard, the Tigers broke several team and individual records during the season. Bowen paced four other Tiger starters in double figures with 27 points per game. The team averaged 85.5 points per game and surpassed the record of 100 points in a game (set earlier in the 1964 season) with 103 against Niles, converting 723 field goals at 44\% and 414 free throws for 1,860 team points. Bowen scored 49 points in a 100-75 victory over Muskegon Heights, surpassing Chet Walker’s previous record of 41 points set in 1958.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{80} L. C. Bowen was moved up to varsity for the state tournament in 1962-63. He played sparingly in Benton Harbor’s two district games.

\textsuperscript{81} “Tigers Win Title In Thriller, 82-79,” \textit{News Palladium} (March 1964).

FIGURE 11: THE 1963-64 BENTON HARBOR TIGERS
STATE CHAMPIONS (19-3)


⁸³ The Greybric of BHHS Vol. 39 (May 1964). Photograph reproduced by permission from BHHS.
championship, 54-45. Farnum earned his fourth regional crown, the most ever by a Benton Harbor coach, using a combination of black and white talent.\(^{68}\)

The Tigers behind "thousands of local fans" moved to Battle Creek to play Detroit Dearborn in the quarterfinals. Sparked by pressure defense and fast break offense in the fourth quarter, the Tigers destroyed Dearborn, 88-62, a team record for points in tournament play. McNutt led all scorers with 27 points, followed by Andrews with 19. In the semi-finals at Jenison Field House Benton Harbor faced Detroit Northwestern. Overall, Northwestern committed 29 turnovers and lost 53-48. Andrews, carried off the court by teammates, and McNutt combined for 41 of Benton Harbor's 53 points.\(^{69}\)

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\(^{68}\) The *Greybric*, Vol. 37 (May 1962), 136.

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\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{70} The \textit{Greybric} Vol. 37 (May 1962), 137.
\textsuperscript{71} Eric Johnson, personal recollections (April 2004).
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at the time who watched helplessly from the bench, described the final game as highly controversial and the season as one of "colossal disappointment." 76

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78 Quoted from an anonymous source (April 2003).
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could take his team to the next level, especially with a racially balanced team.\footnote{Johnson, \textit{Memoirs}, 72.} With the graduation losses of McNutt, Andrews, McBride, and Siegart, no one expected a return to the state championship in 1963-64. Fresh off an undefeated junior varsity season, the first in the history of Benton Harbor basketball, five young men, four of which black, prepared for their varsity debuts the following season. L. C. Bowen, John Rudley, Perry Dodd, Don Lewis, and Dave Mack.\footnote{L. C. Bowen was moved up to varsity for the state tournament in 1962-63. He played sparingly in Benton Harbor's two district games.} 

On the heels of a thrilling last minute victory over Traverse City, 82-79, the 1963-64 Tigers closed out regular season play with 12 wins and 3 losses and claimed their third straight Lake Michigan Athletic Conference (LMAC) title (see figure 16). Along with another conference championship, L. C. Bowen poured in 25 points to clinch the conference scoring title with a 31.2 average, the highest ever by a Tiger player.\footnote{“Tigers Win Title In Thriller, 82-79,” \textit{News Palladium} (March 1964).} Led the entire year by balanced scoring, solid defense, and the play of junior stars, Bowen and John Rudley, and seniors Tony Ashman and Mike Pollard, the Tigers broke several team and individual records during the season. Bowen paced four other Tiger starters in double figures with 27 points per game. The team averaged 85.5 points per game and surpassed the record of 100 points in a game (set earlier in the 1964 season) with 103 against Niles, converting 723 field goals at 44%
FIGURE 19: THE 1963-64 BENTON HARBOR TIGERS

STATE CHAMPIONS (19-3)


83 Greybric of 1964 BHHS Vol. 39, 146. (Photograph courtesy of Mr. Tony Ashman and Mr. Larry Culby, April 2004).

103 The Greybric of BHHS Vol. 40 (May 1965), 182. Photograph reproduced by permission from BHHS.
Bowen that it opened up the others.”

Bowen, frequently referred to as the best player ever to play in Southwestern Michigan, averaged nearly thirty points a game, seventh best all-time in the area. He ended with a career scoring mark of 1,311 points for an average of 26.8 per game, also earning the title as Benton Harbor’s first ever black or white High School All-American. “L. C. was the best player I’ve ever seen. He could do everything. He was a great rebounder and sometimes when we faced pressure he would bring the ball down the floor for us. But he was also quite a leader,” said Don Farnum. John Rudley, teammate and long-time friend, believed Bowen improved after he graduated from high school, claiming, “I’ve never seen anyone who compares with him.”

At 5’9” Rudley averaged over 17 points a game from his point guard position, shooting 54% from the field, and dazzling spectators with his ability to drive to the basket then pass the ball off to an open teammate for an easy score. Farnum called him a “natural leader. He didn’t have that much physical size, but he knew when to move, when to pass, and when to try to steal the ball.”

Each year between 1955 and 1965 less heralded black and white players emerged to compliment stars and increase overall team performance. Local fans responded as Jim Reynolds, black, raised his level of play and led the 1954-55 team to the state finals. The rebuilding year of 1955-56 witnessed the talents of sophomore Chet

105 Rudley quoted in Walkden, (March 1, 1993).
Walker. In 1957-58 Ron Lange’s (white) timely scoring, rebounding, and overall solid play complimented Walker and contributed to another state final appearance for the Tigers. Between 1960 and 1963 Ladell McBride, black, consistently scored in double figures despite playing in the shadows of stars Alex McNutt and Al Andrews. Tony Ashman, arguably the last of the accomplished white players at Benton Harbor, averaged only 9 points a game during the 1963-64 regular season, but accounted for 18 per game throughout the state tournament, earning a spot on the prestigious all-tournament team along with teammate Bowen.

During the 1964-65 many black players excelled. Junior forward Ellis Hull finished third on the team in scoring with a 14.5 average. But in the state semi-final game, with Saginaw using a zone defense designed to stop Bowen, he poured in a career high 40 points, converting 17 of 22 from the field and 6 of 7 from the free throw line. “We had always thought of Ellis as the young upstart. But he became a full member of the team that night,” recalled Rudley.107 Perry Dodd, a 6’5” forward-center, averaged 12.4 points and 10.1 rebounds a game. But his greatest skill involved passing the ball teammates out of the low post or coming off picks. “He fit in as our pivot man. He was just a great passer,” said Farnum.108 Guard Dave Mack’s (white) defensive skills earned him the nickname “shadow” by sports editor, Jim Deland. Larry Culby, team manager, called him the “phantom” because


he relentlessly hounded opposing players on defense, usually with a facial expression of great intensity.\textsuperscript{109} Mack earned the respect of his coach as well. “Dave earned his keep on defense. He could smell where the ball was. Basketball is a game of size, but if you have a heart as big as Dave Mack’s, there will always be a place,” said Farnum.\textsuperscript{110} Black and white basketball players at Benton Harbor brought unique styles and a commitment to winning which, in turn, captured the imagination of a community eager to share in its accomplishments.

Four decades later former players still take pride in their accomplishments and for the honor of playing basketball for Benton Harbor high school. Nearly all pointed to the willingness of individual players to conform to team play and sacrifice individual goals. Mixed with team play was their ability to overcome race issues. To the man they consider the 1964-65 team the best ever in Southwestern Michigan, if not the entire state. “Our victories and statistics speak for themselves. If we aren’t the best Michigan high school basketball team of all time then someone tell me who was better,” declared Hull.\textsuperscript{111} Rudley agreed, “I have never seen any other team like it. We were the real ‘Dream Team’ as far as I was concerned. We established a mark of excellence that’s hard to challenge.”\textsuperscript{112} “We thought we had something pretty good. I don’t think we were concerned about how the job got done, just so it got done. We

\textsuperscript{109} Larry Culby, personal recollections, (May 2004).


\textsuperscript{111} Ellis Hull, personal recollections, (July 2004).

were comfortable with each other and just went out and played the game. If something changed, we adjusted to it,” added Bowen. Dave Mack remembered, “we really didn’t know how good we were. We were playing for the fun of the game.” John Brannock described the difference between the 1964-65 team and others as, “these guys really cared about one another, race never factored into their decision making process on the basketball court, only winning.” As a coach and man, I both admired and loved those guys, and still do,” he added. Jack Walkden summed best the legacy of the team and the impact they had on the community of Benton Harbor. “No matter where they are or what they’re doing now, the 1964-65 Tigers are one group that no one will ever forget because they’re the greatest.”\footnote{Rudley, Bowen, and Mack quoted in Walkden, “The Greatest,” 4, and again at the Benton Harbor class of 1964 reunion (July 2004).}

Integrated boys’ basketball teams at Benton Harbor high school during the 1950s and 1960s stood as a force that promoted a measure of racial harmony at a time otherwise identified with growing racial tension in the larger region. Blacks utilized basketball to demonstrate excellence when sport preceded society in the mixing of races and ethnic groups. Benton Harbor basketball teams only serve as one area of society for examining race and sport but their accomplishments suggest that color did not ban a person from playing in any year or affect the overall attitudes of the larger white community. Teams consisting of fifty-percent black players or more between the years 1960 and 1965 compiled an overall record of 87 wins and 12 defeats, the best winning percentage in school history. Winning games and championships, a
prospect that often accompanied the arrival of the black athlete, took precedence over racial distrusts and divisions that caused friction between the races. But victories on the basketball court did not overshadow widespread racial inequalities and social ills plaguing the Benton Harbor community. They still existed but basketball at least temporarily reduced their significance.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Outside of successful black and white high school basketball teams, interracial cooperation and optimism failed to carry over to the larger community and economic life in Benton Harbor during the 1950s and 1960s. In most cases, relationships among black and white players, students, and fans began and ended at the high school gymnasium. Periods of intense loyalty for athletic teams at times paled in comparison to deeper issues of race and other social injustices going on in the community. Social integration in other areas such as social clubs, wages, and work, or the mere mention of it often led to racial tension or in the community, especially during the 1960s. Larger economic and social contexts offered little access for blacks to economic and social mobility. Opportunities for jobs in industry and to buy a newer home became increasingly difficult for them in the face of de-industrialization. Race lines hardened even as the civil rights movement era continued, mostly attributed to economic and social community decline.

The Benton Harbor community failed to address longstanding racial inequalities in nearly all areas of society, except at the local high school and in sports programs for boys. Before 1950 only three blacks participated on boys basketball teams at Benton Harbor high school. The situation changed as more blacks migrated to the community from southern states and northern industrial cities, enrolled in public schools, and earned positions on sports teams. Outside of these areas, most problems occurred when black
students walked through white sections of the city to reach schools, disturbances at local taverns, increased joblessness among the black population, below standard housing, and the troubles that came with certain areas of the community being segregated, while others were desegregated.¹

Black boys playing basketball and other sports on high school teams produced a positive effect on race relations in Benton Harbor as early as the 1940s, in some respects offering a model for how black and white could work together.² The need for other history studies concerning small towns, race, and sport still exists. Further investigations could reveal persistence of sports and race interlinked in smaller community building. The black athlete’s skills exhibited in trying out for sport teams, notably during the 1950s and 1960s, enhanced Benton Harbor’s chances of winning championships, especially in basketball. Black basketball players served as a positive force, rather than a force of division in the community, and their experiences provided critical support for being in a largely white setting. Championship basketball stimulated community support, as a large portion of the population rallied around the integrated teams. Increased numbers of black boys in basketball led to a community centered on sports and sports success with blacks and whites, boys to men, girls to women cheering the team onward to victory. Race still mattered enormously to Benton Harbor, but success in basketball at least allowed people to set aside some of the worst racial ramifications—and sports offered some means,


² Once again (see introduction pg. 22), that most participants in the study seemed unwilling to discuss racial tensions in the community in order to protect a time period in Benton Harbor often associated with high morale and positive race relations.
perhaps more than any other social entity, that race relations truly could get better. The excitement in the community generated by the quest for a state basketball championship served as a prime example.

The legacy of blacks and sports at Benton Harbor high school and on the college scene began several years before the integration of many professional leagues. Benton Harbor introduced its first black basketball player in 1945, amidst little fanfare. On the national scene, evidence suggests that black players enjoyed modest success playing at integrated universities before World War I. Many players also won fame playing in the Negro Leagues and with barnstorming teams like the Renaissance Rens and Harlem Globetrotters. The black NBA players of the early 1950’s were carefully selected by white owners for their style of play and skills on the court, in hopes of boosting attendance and increasing profits. Most of these players took advantage of this opportunity, conformed to team play and gave a maximum effort when they played, fully aware that their attitudes and performances would lesson the burdens of those that followed them. These early black professionals all contributed to the integration process, and significantly altered or popularized the game by bringing their unique styles, skills, and personalities to the court. How much their efforts influenced the selection process for boy’s high school teams in the North remains largely unexplored.
APPENDIX A: BENTON HARBOR HIGH SCHOOL CHAMPIONSHIP TEAMS OF THE 1950s AND 1960s

THE 1955-56 BENTON HARBOR TIGERS REGIONAL FINALISTS (14-4)

Kneeling (from left to right): team managers, R. Cayo and L. Warnock. 
Standing (from left to right): D. Marler, Jerry Barchett, Sam Watson, Larry Goff, B. Marosites, Coach Farnum, Chester Walker, Jim Reynolds, Jim Culverhouse, Melrose Hensley, and George Peoples.³

³ Greybric of 1956 BHHS Vol. 31, 135. Photograph reproduced by permission from BHHS.
THE 1956-57 BENTON HARBOR TIGERS
STATE SEMI-FINALISTS (16-5)
1956-57 TEAM (CONTINUED)

JIM CULVERHOUSE
Center

BRUCE WIGHTMAN
Forward

TONY BELSKI
Forward

DON MARLER
Guard

RONALD LANGE
Guard

BILL ROGERS
Guard

JERRY BARCETT
Guard

GERALD BIGGART
Forward

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4 Greybric of 1957 BHHS Vol. 32, 93-95. Photograph reproduced by permission from BHHS.
THE 1962-63 BENTON HARBOR TIGERS (16-1)

ROW 1: A. Andrews, M. Pollard, N. Siegert, L. McBride, A. McNutt
ROW 2: C. Bassett, C. Wilborn, F. Green, L. Johnson, T. Ashton
W. Jackson, T. Rutz

5 Greybric of BHHS Vol. 38 (May 1963), 137. Photograph reproduced by permission from BHHS.
CONCLUSION

Outside of successful black and white high school basketball teams, interracial cooperation and optimism failed to carry over to the larger community and economic life in Benton Harbor during the 1950s and 1960s. In most cases, relationships among black and white players, students, and fans began and ended at the high school gymnasium. Periods of intense loyalty for athletic teams at times paled in comparison to deeper issues of race and other social injustices going on in the community. Social integration in other areas such as social clubs, wages, and work, or the mere mention of it often led to racial tension or in the community, especially during the 1960s. Larger economic and social contexts offered little access for blacks to economic and social mobility. Opportunities for jobs in industry and to buy a newer home became increasingly difficult for them in the face of de-industrialization. Race lines hardened even as the civil rights movement era continued, mostly attributed to economic and social community decline.

The Benton Harbor community failed to address longstanding racial inequalities in nearly all areas of society, except at the local high school and in sports programs for boys. Before 1950 only three blacks participated on boys basketball teams at Benton Harbor high school. The situation changed as more blacks migrated to the community from southern states and northern industrial cities, enrolled in public schools, and earned positions on sports teams. Outside of these areas, most problems occurred when black students walked through white sections of the city to reach schools, disturbances at local taverns, increased joblessness among the black population, below standard housing, and
the troubles that came with certain areas of the community being segregated, while others were desegregated.¹

Black boys playing basketball and other sports on high school teams produced a positive effect on race relations in Benton Harbor as early as the 1940s, in some respects offering a model for how black and white could work together. The need for other history studies concerning small towns, race, and sport still exists. Further investigations could reveal persistence of sports and race interlinked in smaller community building. The black athlete’s skills exhibited in trying out for sport teams, notably during the 1950s and 1960s, enhanced Benton Harbor’s chances of winning championships, especially in basketball. Black basketball players served as a positive force, rather than a force of division in the community, and their experiences provided critical support for being in a largely white setting. Championship basketball stimulated community support, as a large portion of the population rallied around the integrated teams. Increased numbers of black boys in basketball led to a community centered on sports and sports success with blacks and whites, boys to men, girls to women cheering the team onward to victory. Race still mattered enormously to Benton Harbor, but success in basketball at least allowed people to set aside some of the worst racial ramifications—and sports offered some means, perhaps more than any other social entity, that race relations truly could get better. The excitement in the community generated by the quest for a state basketball championship served as a prime example.

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