



Lost Champions: Four Men, Two Teams, and the Breaking of Pro Football's Color Line

Gretchen Atwood

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The story of the integration of professional football--the year before Jackie Robinson did the same for baseball--has been overlooked for too long.

Many know the story of Jackie Robinson integrating major league baseball in 1947. But few know that the NFL integrated a year earlier, when Kenny Washington stepped on the field for the Los Angeles Rams. He wasn't the only one. Four men broke pro football's color line in 1946, Kenny Washington and Woody Strode with the Los Angeles Rams and Bill Willis and Marion Motley with the Cleveland Browns.

Lost Champions traces this history from the early 1930s--when NFL owners first instituted a ban on black players--through pro football's re-integration, to the 1950 NFL Championship Game, which pitted the Rams and Browns against each other in a showdown of the most prolific and advanced offenses pro football had ever seen.

But the battle wasn't just waged on the gridiron. *Lost Champions* shows how efforts to integrate sports sits within the often-ignored history of the civil rights movement in the 1940s. The four players faced animosity and death threats for their role in integration while they and all black Americans were threatened in 1946 by a spike in lynchings, threat of legal expulsion from their own homes, and segregation all the way down to the simple act of going to an amusement park for a bit of relaxation.

Finally, *Lost Champions* explains why these men and their stories have for so long languished in the shadow of Jackie Robinson, and why they too deserve widespread acclaim for integrating what is arguably the most popular sport in America.

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