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Fight for Old DC

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Fight for Old DC

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FIGHT FOR OLD DC

George Preston Marshall, the Integration of the
Washington Redskins, and the Rise of a New NFL

ANDREW O'TOOLE

University of Nebraska Press | Lincoln & London

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For Mia and Mateo,
with a whole lot o' love

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Preface

George Preston Marshall—this name kept popping up as I researched the life of Art Rooney for an earlier project. Marshall—well, all I knew of him previously was that his Washington Redskins were the last major sports franchise to integrate.

Indeed “Marshall the bigot” is an enduring legacy, but there was much more to the man than this unfortunate memory. He was a showman, a sportsman, a man of great foresight and imagination. The more I learned, the more intrigued with him I became. But was Marshall worthy of a full-scale biography? Perhaps, but in Marshall I saw something else. He reminded me of the great baseball folk figure Bill Veeck. Like Veeck, Marshall seemingly popped up whenever a significant issue confronted his sport. He was there at the ready, with an opinion and a solution to whatever problem might arise.

I began to envision a story in which Marshall played the lead, a role as an individual who finds himself immersed in every vital issue confronting his sport. Previously I have chronicled some of the sports world’s great characters, including Branch Rickey, Paul Brown, and Rooney. Those figures are tough acts to follow indeed, but Marshall’s intrinsic pomposity and unflappable verbosity make him a writer’s dream.

But Marshall is just a part of the tale told here. Interwoven throughout the narrative are the stories of numerous players who crossed his path. Commissioners Bert Bell and Pete Rozelle—two men essential to the rise of the National Football League—are here. So are Shirley Povich and Sam Lacy, two journalists who wielded the power of the pen to poke and compel. There is the politician Stewart Udall, who used his position of authority to make this country more democratic. And then there’s a football player, Bobby Mitchell, who wanted nothing more than an equal opportunity to ply his skills in his chosen profession.

This story plays out against a backdrop of a changing social landscape. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was handed down by the Supreme Court of the United States on May 17, 1954; this monumental event was followed three years later by the Little Rock Nine and the integration of Little Rock's Central High School. And in 1960 the election of John F. Kennedy as the country's thirty-fifth president offered promise of a more progressive society.

Change was indeed in the air, but this change was met with great resistance on the streets, in the schools, and on the playing field.

I was born into this world Irish, Catholic, and a Pittsburgher—three circumstances one can never escape. I'm three generations removed from the Old Country, a long since lapsed Catholic, and nearly four decades gone from the Iron City. Still, if asked, I would describe myself as an Irish-Catholic Pittsburgher. That and a Steelers fan.

My heritage played a direct part in several of my earlier works. Art Rooney and Billy Conn were natural subjects for me, and I enjoyed every moment I spent with them.

Paul Brown, however, was not a likely fit for me. The founding father of the Browns and Bengals was certainly deserving of a full-scale life study, but there was one aspect of his career that intrigued me more than any other: his role in ending professional football's unofficial ban on black players. The story of Marion Motley and Bill Willis drew me in. Much has been written about Jackie Robinson's historic arrival in Brooklyn, and deservedly so, but the pioneers in football have been virtually overlooked in comparison.

How was it possible that sixteen years after Willis and Motley the Redskins still remained an all-white outfit? This disturbing fact fascinated me, and I began to look into the events that surrounded the integration of the Redskins. Bobby Mitchell and George Preston Marshall were the leading stars in the tale, but the backstory was brimming with equally captivating characters.

Today the NFL is a behemoth. Practically twelve months a year the league pervades the news. If it's not the college draft, it's the OTAs (whatever the hell

those are) or free-agent season. The Super Bowl, the pinnacle of the football season, has become such a spectacle that the game is nearly unwatchable.

How did we get to this point? That is the genesis of this book.

Personally I have to say I agree with George Marshall's assessment of the NFL more than half a century ago: "The NFL can't encompass the world. It's not that important."

It may not be that important, but the NFL damn near encompasses the world. I have to believe that if George Marshall were still with us he would love every moment of this dominance.

Acknowledgments

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I owe special thanks to everyone who spoke with me about this particular era in Washington DC and NFL history, including Robert Ames Alden, Marti Barry, Upton Bell, Charlie Brotman, Mike Brown, Victor Gold, Steve Guback, Ron Hatcher, Dick Heller, Tom Hurney, Ed Kiely, Myra MacPherson, Thomas Nordlinger, Bill Nunn, Bill Peeler, Art Rooney Jr., Theodore Sorensen, John Thomas, Sterling Tucker, Senator Tom Udall, Dick Victory, Russ White, and Martie Zad.

And finally, my bride Mickie . . . thanks for the support and encouragement. You and me, it's a beautiful thing this life we have.

Prologue | Burgundy, Gold, and Caucasian

“I have nothing against Negroes, but I want an all-white team.”

These words were spoken by George Preston Marshall to a *Pittsburgh Courier* reporter in 1950.

Marshall also famously once said, “I believe in states’ rights, both in government and in football.”

Years later, after every NFL team had integrated except his own, Marshall spoke with *Sport Magazine* for a 1957 profile. He carefully chose his words when discussing his all-white team.

“There has been so much pressure placed on us that it would appear as if we were trying to exploit the race angle,” Marshall told the writer, Ed Linn. “I did exploit Indians in Boston. I’ll admit that and the same kind of exploitation has taken place with the Negro in baseball. It’s wrong. Anyway, Negroes play against us, so what’s the difference?”

Marshall was nothing if not consistent.

The fact that the Redskins were an all-white operation was an open secret. There was a time, not so long ago, when such a sight wasn’t so remarkable. For years the game was remarkably pale. George Preston Marshall had informed a writer in 1941 that a black athlete would never again play in the NFL.

“Negroes will never play in our league again because the white players would not stand for it,” he said. “After a tangle on the turf every player would rise but the Negro. He would never rise, he would be dead.”

And Marshall knew something of the subject. It was he who, following the 1933 season, sweet-talked league leaders into cleaning up their sport, which had been “stained” by the participation of several black players. Why men of substance like George “Papa Bear” Halas and Art Rooney could be swayed by Marshall is difficult to discern.

But that was then.

In the spring of 1947 Jackie Robinson burst into the national consciousness. He played the game of baseball with a fierce sense of purpose, and Robinson, with his indelible sense of self, prompted lines of demarcation to divide the spectators. Many were filled pride, others with outrage, and some sat silently entranced by the social spectacle before them.

Jackie wasn't the first breath of change, however. One year earlier, with very little hoopla, the Los Angeles Rams and Cleveland Browns had each welcomed black players—the first to play pro football in thirteen years.

No, it wasn't 1941 any longer. Circumstances had changed; people had changed. One look around the league, and any half-educated football fan could see what a Jim Brown, an Ollie Matson, or a "Big Daddy" Lipscomb could do for a team's fortunes.

In 1950 Chuck Cooper stepped on the basketball court as a member of the Boston Celtics. Cooper's arrival prompted barely a mention in the sports pages.

And so over the course of the next decade integration continued in the three major league sports. The change came in dribs and drabs, with each new barrier broken gathering less notice than the previous. By 1961 the circle was nearly complete. Every team in the National Football League, the American Football League, the National Basketball Association, and Major League Baseball employed at least one black player.

Every team, that is, with the exception of one.

The NFL's Washington Redskins remained the lone holdout, the last vestige of segregation in professional sports.

George Preston Marshall, according to Sam Lacy, columnist for the *Baltimore Afro-American*, was the "racist owner of the Washington Redskins and the only one of the thirty-eight operators of major league franchises who finds solace in the perpetuation of segregation." "Only in the capital of the nation," Lacy wrote, "in a stadium be-decked by flags of freedom does the spirit of democracy get kicked in the pants."¹

A favorite phrase used by Lacy when describing Marshall's team was "lily-white." This term was picked up by Shirley Povich, who, while writing for

the *Washington Post*, had been poking the Redskins owner in print for some twenty years. His finely tuned literary jabs always found their mark. And when Povich began to focus on Marshall's intransigence the results were often poetic.

"George Marshall is still trying to restore the Confederacy, ninety-four years after everyone else has quit," Povich observed. "The décor Marshall has chosen for the Redskins is burgundy, gold, and Caucasian."²

It's been written that it was Corinne Griffith who encouraged her husband, George Marshall, to relocate his football team from Boston to Washington. At least that was her story. Whether it was true or not the Redskins and Washington were a natural fit. The Boston sports fan of the mid-1930s cared little for professional football. And Boston reporters were suspicious of the Redskins' owner, George Preston Marshall, who just happened to be a DC native.

Griffith came into her marriage with Marshall well acquainted with fame in her own right. During cinema's silent age she was a starlet of acclaim and fame. Griffith even had an Academy Award nomination on her résumé for her role in the 1929 film *The Divine Lady*. In her prime, before the Depression hit, Corinne could command up to \$150,000 a picture. Her lasting legacy, however, is not her worthy work on the silver screen but a little ditty Griffith penned for the Redskins faithful.

Griffith's modest ode has been credited with being the first fight song for a professional team. Originally named "Fight on Redskins," with an assist from composer Barnee Breeskin, who wrote the music for the catchy tune (which was adapted from the hymn "Jesus Loves Me"), Griffith unveiled the song to a receptive public in the summer of 1938, when the Redskins were fresh off a World Championship:

Scalp 'um, swamp 'um, we will
Take 'um, big score
Read 'um, weep 'um, touchdown
We want heap more

Fight on, fight on, 'til you have won,
Sons of Wash-ing-ton
Rah! Rah! Rah!

Hail to the Redskins
Hail Victory!
Braves on the warpath
FIGHT FOR OLD DC.³

The “song,” as it were, was embraced by Redskins fans. In time the tune became synonymous with the team and its lyrics, however primitive, protected by the faithful. And so, when Marshall opted to change the final line of the song prior to the 1959 season, it was a calculated decision. The Redskins were the southernmost pro football team, in a southern-minded city, and Marshall had longed marketed his Redskins as “Dixie’s team.” Over the previous few years pressure had been mounting for Marshall to integrate his club. These calls fell on stubbornly deaf ears. Columns were written decrying Marshall’s hiring practices, and pickets were organized protesting the same.

Journalists and fans opened the 1959 team brochure and saw that the tag line of “Hail to the Redskins” had been changed to “Fight for Old Dixie.”

Marshall’s response to the changing times was a simple, defiant alteration to a line in his team’s fight song.