

**THEY CAME, THEY PLAYED ... BUT NOT FOR LONG:
AFRICAN AMERICAN FOOTBALL PLAYERS
ON THE SASKATCHEWAN ROUGHRIDERS,
1910-63**

By John Chaput

Examining the history of African American (and African Canadian) football players on the Saskatchewan Roughriders forces one to peer through a murky picture. The names and faces are there, but the stories are incomplete. Facts are minimal; attempts to glean deeper truths are foiled by rumours and unsubstantiated stories. Logic practically insists that the men who pioneered integration on the field had to deal with racism, but the extent of it is totally open to speculation. This is not the story of Jackie Robinson breaking baseball's colour bar, fully chronicled by reporters, photographers and historians; this is the tale of a man here, another man there, who came and went, lingering just long enough to be recorded for posterity.

That, if anything, is their unifying bond: they came and went. Some of them, like Gabe Patterson and Cookie Gilchrist, were tremendous talents; some, like Vernon Vaughn and Bill Burrell, were capable workmen; some were merely marginal. None of them stayed for long, and none of them chose to take up permanent residence in Saskatchewan until the most accomplished of them, George Reed, made Regina his home in the mid-1960s.

Created in 1910, it took the Regina Roughriders 20 years to place a man of African race on the football field. That player was Robert "Stonewall" Jackson, who played the last few games of the 1930 season while employed as a porter on the Canadian National Railway. Jackson made his debut in the Western Canada Rugby Football Union regular-season finale against Moose Jaw and dazzled the fans with a 45-yard run. He was also a standout in the Western playoffs and played in the 1930 Grey Cup which Regina lost 11-6 to Toronto Balmy Beach. Jackson's presence was regarded as a curiosity, especially when he actually worked as the team's porter on

the train ride to Toronto for the national championship. It is also odd that Jackson is the only one of the 19 men in the team picture not to be wearing football gear (he is neatly garbed in a white short, sweater vest and tie); whether this is due to a shortage of uniforms, Jackson arriving late from work, or some other reason will never be known. In any case, Jackson did not rejoin the team in 1931 – perhaps because he was most uncomfortable practicing in the previous frigid November. There is no record of Jackson subsequently playing football anywhere else.

Jackson would not have been the first African American to play competitive football in predominantly white leagues. Blacks were present on several elite American university teams as far back as the 1890s, and there were a few in the earliest seasons of the National Football League after it was founded in 1920 as the American Professional Football Association – most notable among them Paul Robeson, the famous singer, actor and activist. By 1934, however, the NFL had established a colour bar every bit as impenetrable as that enforced by major league baseball. Unofficial but firm segregation maintained itself for 12 more years before eroding, according to general consensus, in the wake of the Second World War. Discrimination against blacks became indefensible after a prolonged war against a racist oppressor, especially when so many African Americans served gallantly in the Allied cause.

Robert Jackson may have been the only black man to play elite senior football in Canada through 1945. The following year, lineman Herb Trawick began a 12-year career with the Montreal Alouettes of the Interprovincial Rugby Football Union, also known as the Big Four. In 1947, the Roughriders employed the man believed to be first post-war African American football in Western Canada, "Galloping" Gabe Patterson, a swift and elusive halfback raised in Alabama who played college ball at Kentucky State and Pittsburgh. Patterson was the Western Interprovincial Football Union's leading scorer in 1947 and was named to the WIFU all-star team in both 1947 and 1948. (Patterson's quality of play, while obviously excellent, is hard to determine because no individual statistics, other than actual points scored, were kept by the WIFU

before 1950.) Those, however, would be his only two seasons with the Roughriders. Stories of discrimination against Patterson would become, as decades passed, persistent but ultimately unconfirmed – as would rumours of racism within the ranks of the team's executive.

If indeed there was an anti-integration faction at the top of the Roughriders hierarchy, it may well have cost the team dearly in the early 1950s, when Saskatchewan became a summer home for a virtual legion of African American semi-professional baseball players. One such man was Rollie Miles, a multi-faceted athlete who was playing baseball in Regina but had previously been a standout footballer and track star at St. Augustine's College in Raleigh, N.C. For reasons unknown, the Roughriders did not pursue Miles – but the Edmonton Eskimos did, and in 1951 Miles embarked on a 12-year career that would lead to enshrinement in the Canadian Football Hall of Fame – alongside African American Johnny Bright and Asian-Canadian Normie Kwong, teammates who spurred the Eskimos to three consecutive Grey Cup championships from 1954-56.

While the Eskimos embraced stars from cultural minorities, the Roughriders did not – and finished second in the WIFU standings to Edmonton all three of those years. Despite Patterson's considerable contributions in 1947 and '48, there would not be another black man on Saskatchewan's roster until 1955, when halfback and Michigan State product Ellis Duckett played a single game, carrying the ball once for nine yards and intercepting a pass on defense. Versatile Jon McWilliams, a Nebraska alumnus who could play end, linebacker and halfback, dressed for all 16 games of the 1956 season. McWilliams caught 20 passes for 325 yards, scored a touchdown and occasionally handled kickoff chores.

It is generally conceded that, while football and baseball gradually integrated through the 1950s, '60s and '70s, an unofficial quota system limited the number of black players. Furthermore, said players were usually found in even numbers in order to avoid having men of different races share hotel rooms on road trips. Nevertheless, McWilliams was the sole African American on the 1956 Roughriders and halfback Sam Wesley, who missed only one game, was the only one on the 1957 team. Wesley, from Oregon State University, put up

fair statistics as an all-purpose offensive contributor and scored four touchdowns but, like McWilliams, was gone after one year.

George Terlep's appointment as Saskatchewan's head coach in 1958 coincided with a major step forward in the team's racial balance. There had never been more than one black on the team in the past; no fewer than five saw service in 1958, with three or four the norm in individual games. At the forefront were Cookie Gilchrist and Mike Hagler. Gilchrist (given name: Carlton Chester Gilchrist) was a free-spirited maverick who bounced from team to team in Canada after the NFL thwarted his attempt to turn professional before his university class graduated. Only 23 when he joined the Roughriders, he was already in his fifth pro season and posted far and away the best rushing campaign by any Roughrider up to that time with 1,254 yards.

Just as Gilchrist's real name wasn't Cookie, Hagler's real first name wasn't Mike. It was Collins. Hagler hailed from Washington, D.C., was a star at Iowa, and was sensational in his pro rookie season of 1958, amassing more than 2,500 total yards on rushes, pass receptions, kickoff returns and punt returns. His total of 768 yards (for a phenomenal 12-yard average) on 64 punt returns endured as a Canadian record until 1975 – the first year that the CFL allowed blocking on punt returns.

Gilchrist, Hagler and three white stars – quarterback Frank Tripucka, halfback Bobby Marlow and end Jack Hill – gave Saskatchewan a genuine powerhouse offence. A trio of black rookies also made contributions. Vernon “Victory” Vaughn arrived from the University of Maryland Eastern Shore and was both a capable pass receiver and a steady defensive end. Fullback Bobby Mulgado, out of Arizona State, saw spot duty in five contests. John Smart came out of the Montreal junior football ranks and played nine games as a backup halfback and special-teams player. With so much youth and talent, the Roughriders' 7-7-2 record in the highly competitive WIFU gave fans high hopes for the following season.

Unfortunately, a calamity of injuries and lack of depth made the 1959 edition probably the worst team in Roughrider's history, going 1-15 and allowing a ghastly 567 points. (The next-worst

defense surrendered a mere 301.) Terlep was fired after an 0-11 start. More black players than ever – seven – suited up, but most of them were injured or fill-ins. Vaughn was a bright spot, leading the team with 39 receptions for 511 yards. Hagler and Mulgado both played less than half the season. Frank Fraser, a Montrealer who attended Tennessee State, dressed for all 16 games and posted modest numbers as a halfback and return man. So did Sam Harris, a Santa Monica Community College product who hung around for three games. Russ Goings, from Xavier University, played seven games at guard and linebacker without making a big impression.

The one man from the '59 Roughriders who would leave a deep imprint on the game was Jim Marshall, a 6-foot-3, 240-pound end. Born in Kentucky and raised in Ohio, Marshall would forgo his final year of eligibility at Ohio State University to turn pro as a 21-year-old with Saskatchewan. He had a brief shining moment when he caught a touchdown pass in an otherwise horrific 61-8 drubbing at the hands of the Winnipeg Blue Bombers and played nine games before being hospitalized with a strained back that prematurely (and perhaps mercifully) ended his season. Rather than keep Marshall, the Roughriders dealt him the following May in an unusual inter-league trade with the Cleveland Browns, who had selected him in the fourth round of the 1960 NFL draft. In return, Saskatchewan received linebacker/quarterback Bob Ptacek, who would be a standout for six seasons.

Marshall, meanwhile, set a standard for defensive-line longevity that remains unsurpassed to this day. In 19 NFL seasons (one with Cleveland, 18 with the Minnesota Vikings), he was never sidelined, posting streaks of 282 games and 270 starts that are still NFL records for defensive players. He played in four Super Bowls and was twice named to the Pro Bowl. And yes, he did once run 66 yards the wrong way with a fumble recovery to give the other team a safety, but he forced another fumble that was returned for Minnesota's winning touchdown in the fourth quarter of the same game.

Fraser and Vaughn were back with the Roughriders in 1960. Hal Williams, a halfback, was with the team for only one game, but a

guard/linebacker out of Illinois, Bill Burrell, would prove to be the first black to stick with the team for more than three seasons, establishing himself as a first-line performer through 1964.

Vaughn could, and probably would, have been the first black to play more than three seasons for Saskatchewan, but he was stricken with leukemia and died on March 9, 1961. His time with the Roughriders meant so much to him that he requested to be buried in his No. 78 jersey. It is a curious footnote that when four members of the team were killed in a plane crash in December of 1956, all of their numbers were retired in permanent tribute. No such gesture was accorded Vernon Vaughn, although his athletic stature and the tragic nature of his passing were of a similar nature.

For the next two seasons, the Roughriders certainly looked like a team with a racial quota. Burrell's only black teammates in 1961 were offensive end Earl Smith (who caught one pass in the only game he played), and fleet halfback Billy Gray, who rushed for 312 yards in six contests. Burrell and Gray had no other such company when they soldiered through the entire 1962 campaign, in which Burrell earned his second conference all-star selection and Gray gained more than 1,000 yards in combined yards from scrimmage.

Finally, in 1963, came the man who would not only play for the Roughriders but make Saskatchewan his home – fullback George Reed. When Reed arrived in Regina for training camp after being a standout at Washington State, Burrell and Gray were the only African American holdovers on the squad. Dick Cohee, a veteran of three seasons with Ottawa and Montreal, would also make the team and showcase his versatility as a defensive back, linebacker and flanker. When Gray went down with an injury halfway through the season, Saskatchewan acquired Ed Buchanan in a trade with the Calgary Stampeders. Buchanan (when healthy) and Reed would form the CFL's most devastating backfield tandem for the next four years. Another African American, offensive end Dave Washington, dressed for three games near the end of the campaign but did not stick with the team.

George Reed shot to stardom. After a solid rookie season, he

was a 1,000-yard rusher in 1964, the Schenley Award winner as the CFL's most outstanding player in 1965 and was instrumental in the Roughriders achieving their first Grey Cup victory in 1966. In January of 1966 Reed began work as a sales representative for Molson Breweries and relocated his family from Washington to Saskatchewan. He would become more than a football star – practically an institution – in Regina. He retired from football after the 1975 season and, when feted with a testimonial dinner, summed up his situation by paraphrasing Julius Caesar: “I came. I played. I stayed.”

At the time, it was indeed a distinction among football players of African heritage. Several blacks among Reed's teammates distinguished themselves, but defensive lineman Ed McQuarters was the only other true star who settled in Regina. Over time, however, more blacks have chosen to relocate their families and raise their children in the Queen City or surrounding area, including some like Phil Price, Lou Clare and Robert Mimbs, for whom the Roughriders provided only a small part of their football service in Canada.

It would be interesting to know why these men were comfortable making their homes here – especially in contrast to their white peers. Yes, there are white ex-Roughriders who have become paragons of the community, like Roger Aldag, Jim Hopson, Steve Mazurak and Dan Farthing. However, almost without exception, they are all born and bred in Saskatchewan.

Black men from beyond Saskatchewan's border came and played, and, in time, a significant number of them stayed.

Which is probably something all Saskatchewan residents can look upon with pride – as long as we remember that it wasn't always so.

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(Note: The 1947 season comprised eight games per team; the 1948 season 12 games. All years from 1955-63 were 16-game seasons.)

1947: HB Gabe Patterson (7 Games Played)

1948: HB Gabe Patterson (10)

1950-54: None

1955: HB Ellis Duckett (1)

1956: E-HB-LB Jon McWilliams (16)

1957: HB-DB Sam Wesley (15)

1958: FB Cookie Gilchrist (16), HB Mike Hagler (16), HB-DB Bobby Mulgado (5), HB John Smart (9), E Vernon Vaughn (10) – 5 players, 56 man-games

1959: HB Frank Fraser (16), G-LB Russ Goings (7), HB Mike Hagler (5), HB John Harris (3), T Jim Marshall (9), FB Bobby Mulgado (7), E Vernon Vaughn (16) – 7 players, 63 man-games

1960: G-LB Bill Burrell (16), HB Frank Fraser (16), E Vernon Vaughn (13), HB Hal Williams (1) – 4 players, 46 man-games

1961: G-LB Bill Burrell (13), HB Billy Gray (6), E Earl Smith (1) – 3 players, 20 man-games

1962: G-LB Bill Burrell (16), HB Billy Gray (15) – 2 players, 31 man-games

1963: HB Ed Buchanan (3), G-LB Bill Burrell (14), E-DB Dick Cohee (16), HB Billy Gray (7), FB George Reed (15), E Dave Washington (3) – 5 players, 55 man-games

APPENDIX A: Season-by-season listing, 1947-63