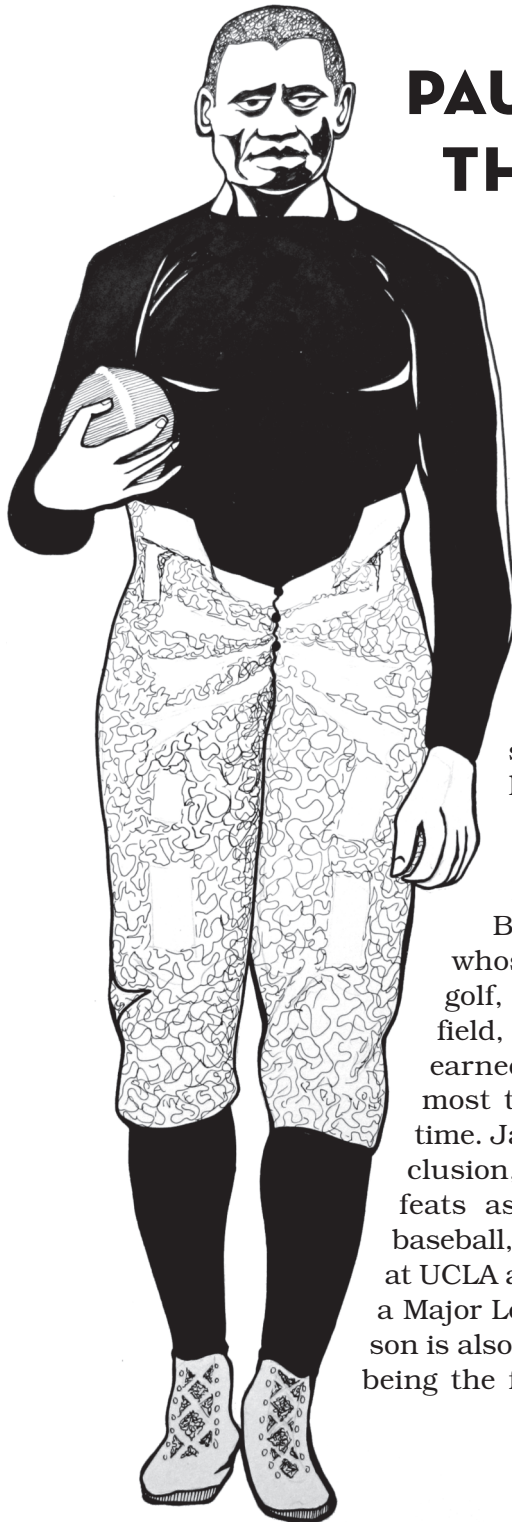


Chapter 3:

PAUL ROBESON THE ATHLETE



THE INTERNET AND OTHER informational sources are full of lists of great athletes. Among the top honorees from the past is Jim Thorpe, arguably the single-most talented athlete of all time. His gold-medal pentathlon and decathlon performances in the 1912 Olympics, his collegiate and professional football brilliance and his professional efforts in baseball and basketball made the Native American athlete a legend. Likewise included is Babe Didrickson Zaharias, whose stellar performances in golf, basketball and track and field, including the 1932 Olympics, earned her the reputation as the most talented female athlete of all time. Jackie Robinson also merits inclusion, based on his remarkable feats as a varsity letter winner in baseball, football, basketball and track at UCLA and his Hall of Fame record as a Major League Baseball player. Robinson is also well known and respected for being the first African American Major

League player of the modern era, and for his vigorous support of the civil rights movement following his baseball career.

Not surprisingly, Paul Robeson rarely appears on these lists of past greats, yet another legacy of his removal from American history. As recently as 1988, a routine sports news piece concerning Rutgers University football victories offered an intriguing observation: "Nestled in a turnpike wasteland is the site of the first college football game, where a mob of Rutgers men in 1869 first shed coats and vests and engaged in some lively shin-kicking and hair-mussing with Princeton. Rutgers contributed little of note in the sport since, until the Scarlet Knights upset two top 20 teams this season. . ."

This well-intentioned, witty story neglected the dramatic years of Paul Robeson's nationally visible exploits for the Rutgers football squad. Like most examples of daily journalism, little or no serious historical research informed the article. Readers would understandably assume that the 1988 effort was a unique departure from a long history of football mediocrity and invisibility. And they would scarcely be inclined to inquire more fully into the record, where they would find ample documentation about Robeson's football achievements. This is scarcely the first time that the national media, unintentionally, exacerbated Robeson's shameful exclusion from the historical record.

Exceptions to this sorry phenomenon exist, usually among African American scholars, journalists and athletes who have long recognized Robeson as one of the most accomplished and versatile athletes of the early twentieth century. The process of restoring Robeson's athletic reputation is a daunting task, because his artistic grandeur and his later, more controversial political activism eclipse his earlier record as a multitalented college and professional sports figure. This record deserves inclusion in any account of his life, both for its substance, and for his slow but inexorable resurrection in the arena of athletic greatness.

Paul Robeson's earliest triumphs occurred at Somerville High School, where he starred on the football, basketball and baseball teams. By his senior year, he had grown to over six feet tall and weighed close to 200 pounds, giving him the powerful physical presence that augmented his stature in every feature of his life, even beyond athletics. On

the gridiron, his dominance both on offense and defense attracted considerable statewide attention in New Jersey. Unfortunately, some of that attention reflected the racist resentment against a superior black athlete. Opponents, fearing his fierce play, especially his tackling, often retaliated, sometimes causing him injury, in accordance with the indifference of officials. In baseball, he played catcher and in basketball, he played center and forward. He also faced verbal racist assaults during his high-school sports activities. Because the coaching at Somerville High School was amateurish, he relied on his brother Ben's instruction, which enabled him to excel later at the collegiate level.

Robeson's legendary athletic accomplishments at Rutgers College began when he tried out for the football team. Coach Sanford knew of Robeson's talents, having seen him play at Somerville High. But the Rutgers college football veterans wanted no part in having a black teammate. Rutgers had never had a black player and many of the white players set out to prevent Robeson from making the team. At the first practice, they piled on young Robeson, leaving him with a broken nose, a sprained right shoulder and various cuts and bruises. He stayed in bed for ten days as a result of these injuries. He considered leaving Rutgers entirely and enrolling in his father's alma mater, Lincoln University, where he would no longer encounter such overwhelming white hostility.

Paul's brother Ben gave him a pep talk and encouraged him to return to practice. Robeson remembered that his father taught him never to be a quitter. At a subsequent practice, he lost his temper. Members of the varsity team came toward him, and he swept his massive arms out and brought down three men, grabbed the ball carrier and raised him over his head. As Robeson said, "I was going to smash him so hard to the ground that I'd break him right in two." Coach Sanford quickly intervened and said, "Robeson, you're on the varsity." He also told his players that anyone who tried to injure Paul would be dropped from the team.

Eventually, his white teammates accepted him, nicknaming him "Robey," and Coach Sanford taught him how to play football with precision and careful concentration, taking advantage of his prodigious natural talents. He worked hard

on such football fundamentals as blocking, tackling and pass catching, and became a starter on the varsity during his freshman year. By the 1916 season, Robeson was a mainstay of the team. His performances on the field attracted major attention at the college, and the campus newspaper, the Targum, wrote glowing stories about his football prowess.

AGAINST THE ODDS

THE FRESHMAN

AT SIX FOOT, TWO INCHES PAUL ROBESON WAS MUCH LARGER THAN THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE RUTGERS FOOTBALL TEAM WHEN HE TRIED OUT FOR VARSITY

RUTGERS NEVER HAD A BLACK PLAYER. SOME OF THE MEMBERS SET OUT TO PREVENT HIM FROM MAKING THE TEAM!!

BREAK HIS BONES!!

KILL HIM

PUT HIM IN THE HOSPITAL!

PAUL SPENT TEN DAYS IN BED AS A RESULT OF THESE INJURIES

PAUL'S OLDER BROTHER ENCOURAGED HIM TO RETURN TO PRACTICE

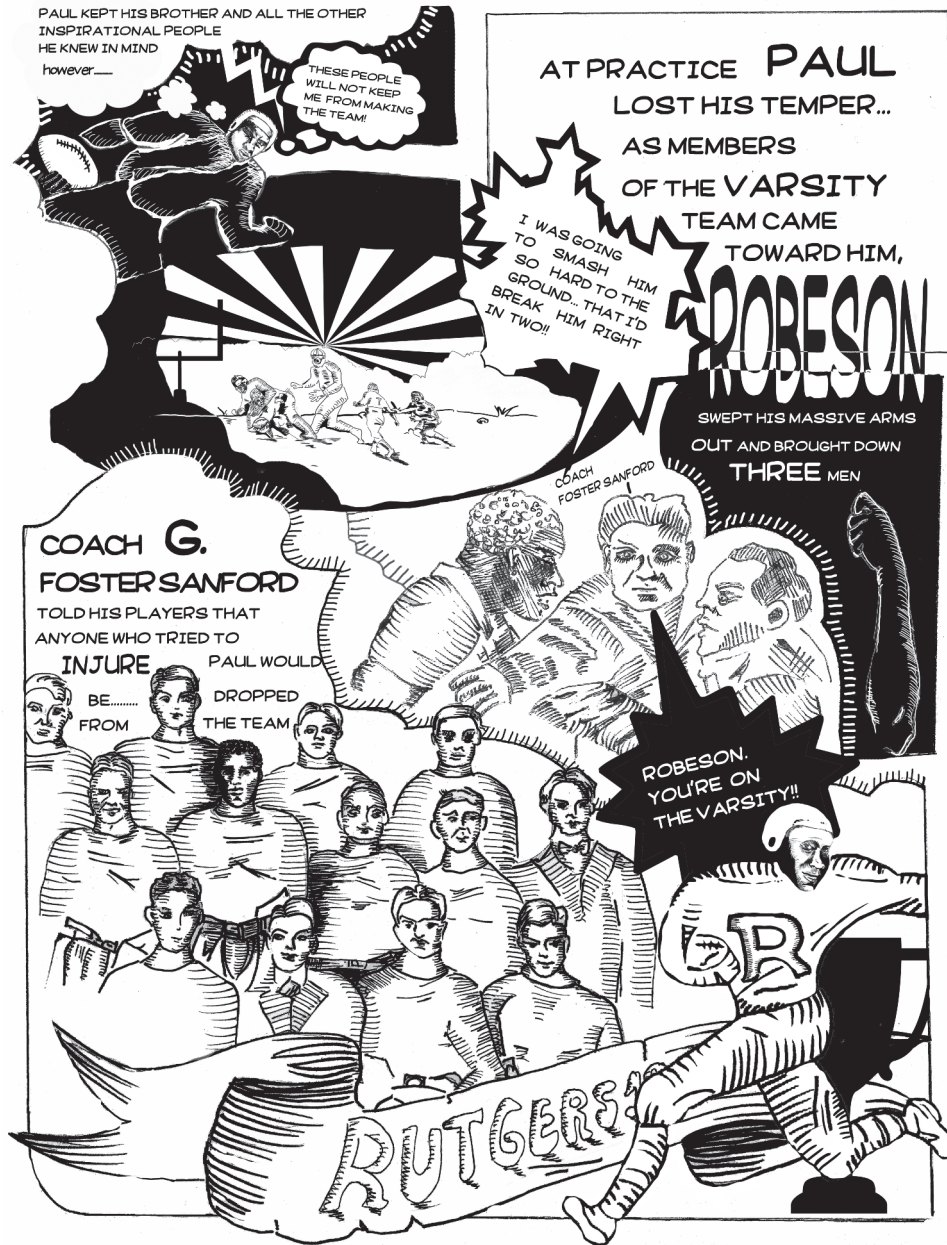
I AM NOT A QUITTER

RUTGERS 1917

SPRALINED SHOULDER

BROKEN NOSE

I WILL MAKE THAT TEAM!!



By 1917, his junior year, these exploits attracted wider journalistic attention, particularly in the major newspapers in nearby New York, including the *New York Sunday Tribune*, the *New York American*, the *New York Sun* and the *New York World*. Stories extolled his offensive and defensive attributes and frequently commented on his keen football

instincts and intelligence. In both 1917 and 1918, Robeson was selected, in the position of offensive end, to be on Walter Camp's All-American team, one of the most singular honors of the sport. Camp, known as the "Father of American Football," called him a "veritable superman." By the end of the 1918 season, he had achieved national prominence and was widely regarded as one of the finest players in the land.

Unfortunately, like everything else at Rutgers, the specter of racism hovered over Robeson's efforts on the gridiron, including some incidents that had lifelong emotional significance. On road trips, he was compelled to live apart from his teammates and sometimes had to take his meals on the team bus. He constantly faced excessive violence from members of other teams, although he had learned how to defend himself effectively. Often, football officials on the field, many of whom were southerners, looked the other way when rival teammates assaulted Robeson. Racial slurs, including "nigger," were commonplace from crowds in the stands.

Some southern opponents like William and Mary and Georgia Tech even refused to play against a team with a black player. The worst insult occurred when Washington and Lee of Lexington, Virginia was scheduled to play Rutgers in New Brunswick for its 150th anniversary. Rutgers officials were anxious to keep the festivities calm and orderly, probably to attract alumni contributions. When Washington and Lee demanded that Paul Robeson be kept off the playing field because of his race, the Rutgers administration complied, viewing it as a "courtesy" to the other team, a convenient rhetorical veil for racism.

Although some Rutgers players protested the decision to bench Robeson for this game, the Rutgers policy prevailed. Paul Robeson was unable to resort to his usual mechanism of pretending that he had another engagement elsewhere. He merely sat on the bench with the substitutes for the entire game, which ended in a 13-13 tie score. It is impossible to know what went through his mind during the game, but it is likely that he felt an enormous sense of humiliation. His close friend and collaborator, Lloyd Brown, in *The Young Paul Robeson*, noted that he never liked hearing about that incident, which generated a lifelong ambivalence that he felt

about his alma mater. As Robeson later told Brown, a more politically savvy and mature version of himself would have refused to play again for Rutgers in order to be true to himself. Of course, such an action in 1916 would also have meant that he would never have achieved the football glory that made him the legendary, “Robeson of Rutgers.”

Robeson’s athletic greatness wasn’t exclusive to his Rutgers football record. During his undergraduate years, he won fifteen varsity letters in four different sports, reinforcing his status as one of most versatile athletes in American history. He played center and forward on the college basketball team (and was the leading scorer), catcher on the baseball team, and he threw the discus, javelin and shot put on the track team. Reflecting his remarkable versatility, on one day in May 1918, he competed in a collegiate baseball game and walked to an adjoining field to participate in the shot put and javelin competition, and then returned to his baseball responsibilities.

Although his performances in the other sports never rose to the level of his football brilliance, he had one emotionally gratifying success on the baseball diamond at the end of his Rutgers studies. On the very afternoon of his valedictorian speech, Robeson took the field as the catcher against the hated team from Princeton University—a school that had defeated Rutgers in every contest of every sport for many years. Rutgers won the final game 5-1 in Robeson’s last appearance in a Rutgers uniform. Defeating Rutgers’s rival would have been a source of jubilation in itself, but Robeson also savored that final baseball victory because of Princeton’s strongly deserved racist reputation, having denied admission to many qualified black students. Robeson, understandably, could not forget his role as a proud black American.

Paul Robeson extended his athletic legacy during his studies at Columbia Law School. He entered professional football through his association with Fritz Pollard, another black All-American football player who had performed spectacularly at Brown University. Robeson worked part time for Pollard as assistant football coach at Lincoln University, and when Pollard was invited to play pro football, he brought Robeson along with him. In 1920, they joined the Akron

Pros, a team in a fledgling league that later became the National Football League. Surprisingly, blacks were permitted to play professional football until owners banned them at the start of the 1934 season.

Pay ranged from \$50 to over \$500 per game, allowing Robeson to pay his law school and living expenses. Games were played on Sundays, requiring complex travel arrangements to make practice sessions on the Saturday before the game day. He took the train from New York to Philadelphia and joined Pollard and then traveled through the night to any of the cities where the game was scheduled: Buffalo, Chicago, Columbus, Canton, Rochester, Cleveland and several others. After the game, he journeyed back to New York to resume his law classes.

In his first professional season, Robeson's Akron squad won every game. After a second season with Akron, the team was somewhat less successful, with a 7-2-1 record, finishing third in the league. Despite the overall success of the Akron Pros, the same racism that Robeson encountered as a Rutgers football star was present in Akron, Ohio. Chants and racial slurs were common. Denial of service at restaurants and hotels also reflected the dominant racial discrimination of the era, in the North as well as the South.

For the 1922 season, Pollard and Robeson joined the Milwaukee Badgers. Although the team as a whole was mediocre, Robeson was able to recapture some of his collegiate glory. His most famous game for the Badgers took place on November 19, 1922, when the team played the Marion, Ohio Indians, led by the legendary Jim Thorpe. Before a crowd of eight thousand, Robeson led his team to a 13-0 victory, scoring both touchdowns. Thorpe himself revealed flashes of his football brilliance in a losing effort. Above all, this was a rare opportunity to see, in one contest, two of America's finest multi-sport athletes compete against one another.

Robeson dabbled further in basketball as a Rutgers undergraduate. While starting at Rutgers, he also played center and forward for the club basketball team for St. Christopher in Harlem, which he continued while he studied at Columbia Law School. As a law student, he picked up small amounts of money playing semi-pro basketball in the New York area.

Although a minor feature of his overall athletic record, his basketball efforts reveal a fuller picture of his multifaceted athleticism.

Despite his brilliant record, the same forces that succeeded in obscuring Robeson from national history and public consciousness also erased him from the annals of American sports history. In a particularly egregious example, the 1951 edition of the *College Football and All America Review* listed a ten-man All-American team for 1918, leaving out the name of Paul Robeson. The omission reflected the deep fear and anti-communist hysteria of the times, but the educational consequences of such censorship are long lasting. The protracted struggle to induct Robeson into the College Football Hall of Fame was equally as troublesome. His candidacy had been put forward in 1970, but his long overdue recognition in 1995 occurred only after a deliberate campaign by Robeson supporters (and sportswriters committed to athletic excellence) to correct a grievous historical omission. For decades, Robeson was denied induction solely because of his unpopular political record.

Slowly but inexorably, the full restoration of Paul Robeson's reputation will encompass his stature as a world-class athlete. But that knowledge alone, however valuable, is insufficient. Sociologist Harry Edwards, in his perceptive 1978 essay, "Paul Robeson: His Political Legacy for the Twentieth-Century Gladiator," urged African American athletes to transcend their roles as mere gladiators in the service of capitalist America. He implored them to accept the burdens of social responsibility for their people and for humanity in general. He championed such stalwart African American athletes as Jackie Robinson, Tommie Smith, John Carlos and Muhammad Ali for their highly publicized, often unpopular efforts in standing up for their principles and using their athletic fame on behalf of deeper social and moral goals. As Edwards perceptively writes, long before any of these courageous figures, "there stood Paul Robeson."