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FAULKNER AND “THE FOOTBALL”

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

Jason J. Zerbe

August 2013

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis will examine William Faulkner's career-long engagement with popular discourses surrounding collegiate football, and American sports more generally. Although Faulkner is often viewed as a paragon of American high modernism, his development as a fiction writer during the "Gold Age of Sports" which spanned the 1920s fostered an attentiveness to popular sports writing that had a marked influence on several of his novels. More importantly, as much of writing about college football began to center on the South after the Southeastern Conference became the first collegiate organization to offer open athletic subsidies in 1935, Faulkner's concern with the sport becomes increasingly prominent in his fiction. The first chapter of this study, then, focuses on the "Wild Palms" portion of *The Wild Palms; If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (1939) to gain insight into Faulkner's complicated stance on the hotly debated issue of the professionalization of college football. The second chapter examines the curious Labove episode in *The Hamlet* (1940) to illustrate the way in which Faulkner was informed by popular discourses in pointing to college football, and sport more generally, as an agent of nationalization in the Depression-era South. Finally, the third chapter highlights significant moments in *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), *The Town* (1957), and *The Mansion* (1959) in which Faulkner indicates an affinity with progressive sportswriters in suggesting that the importance of sports in Southern culture might be used as a lever to quell racial tension and bring about the eventual integration of the region.

## DEDICATION

To my Mom and Dad.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I especially want to thank Dr. Leigh Anne for supporting this project since its inception, and for her patience and guidance as my committee chair. Also, I'd like to acknowledge those graduate students who were part of Dr. Duck's Faulkner seminar in the spring of 2012. Their excitement, encouragement, and suggestions for the first chapter of this thesis helped convince me that Faulkner's engagement with football was a topic worth exploring further.

I am also indebted to the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Jay Watson and Dr. Jaime Harker. Their ability to remain supportive and insightful as they trudged through my shoddy prose and tangled arguments was invaluable to my success.

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## INTRODUCTION

Of the many anecdotes about William Faulkner, one of the more interesting ones involves his performance in a 1915 high-school football contest between Oxford and Holly Springs. Quarterbacking Oxford during his final season, Faulkner's most memorable play, according to his brother John, occurred on the defensive side of the ball. When Oxford's hulking left end, Possum McDaniel, intercepted a pass and proceeded to run toward his own goal line, the relatively undersized Faulkner chased down and tackled McDaniel, and purportedly suffered a broken nose in a collision that, at least for John, would win him praise as the day's hero by preventing a game-winning safety (Blotner 47-48). And although Faulkner asserted that he broke his nose in a wartime plane crash and not during a football game, he later highlighted his high school athletic exploits, claiming that he "hung around school just to play baseball and football" (qtd. in Blotner 47). The teenage Faulkner's competitive experience, along with his continued identification as an athlete, points to the significance of sports, and football more specifically, throughout the author's life.

But by the time Faulkner began to take himself seriously as a fiction writer in the mid-1920s, his experience of popular sports like baseball and football came not as an athlete but a spectator. For example, writing to his brother Dean from New Haven in 1921, Faulkner indicates his engaged and informed spectatorship, as he relates his time at the Army-Yale tilt and goes on to point out that "The Army fullback, French is said to be the best football player in this part of the country" before closing his letter by explaining that "Next Saturday is the Brown game. I



shant go though, but shall save my money for the Princeton game” (*Thinking* 131). Such a preoccupation with joining raucous fans, alumni, and students inside the crowded Yale Bowl may seem strange for a young man who was at the time a rather reticent young poet, but it is hardly surprising for a former competitive athlete during what is often referred to as the “Golden Age of Sports” which spanned the 1920s.

Throughout this “Golden Age,” a blossoming sports media not only transformed standout athletes like Red Grange, Babe Ruth, and Jack Dempsey into popular heroes, but also fostered the greater awareness and growing popularity of sports in the United States. As sports historian Michael Bohn points out, “an average daily newspaper devoted at least 15 percent of its reporting to sports in the 1920s, up from less than 1 percent in 1880,” and the emergence of radio, “newspaper chains and wires services facilitated widespread dissemination” of athletic events around the country (5). Also, according to Bohn, in response to the increasing public demand for sports coverage as a result of these advances, “editors began to assign better writers to sports. Writers with more lyrical pens, men who could spin a yarn, migrated to sports” (6). For this new crop of sportswriters, a simple relation of a game’s key moments almost always accompanied an overdramatization of star players and a hyperbolic treatment of their athletic prowess, which were acknowledge by practitioners like Paul Gallico, who claimed to be “guilty of perpetuating sentimental tosh or over-exaggerating a day’s work for two professional teams. It was a florid era and it called for florid reporting to do it justice” (qtd. in Bohn 6). But the explosion of sports coverage in the 1920s also paved the way for writers like John R. Tunis, who continually addressed the problems plaguing American sport instead of instead of blindly celebrating its popular heroes.

That Faulkner developed as a fiction writer amidst such a seismic shift in American sports coverage seems rather significant, as two of his earlier works, “Country Mice” (1925) and “Father Abraham” (1926), engage popular concerns about college football that would become prominent in his later fiction. In “Country Mice,” one of the sketches Faulkner penned for the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* during his time in the city in 1925, the author first addresses what Tunis, writing in 1928, saw as college football’s alarming capacity to threaten “the legitimate pursuits of academic institutions” (95-96). Centering on an unnamed narrator and Joe, his “friend the bootlegger,” “Country Mice” tells the story of their efforts “in the fall of ’20 or ’21” to “bring a bunch of hooch into New Haven, a town up the road from New York, where they was going to have a big football game and we’d clean up” (111). Indeed, Joe claims of New Haven that bootleggers “never had no trouble at all getting ourselves set pretty as you’d want” (Faulkner, “Mice” 111). Such a description of New Haven could certainly have been informed by Faulkner’s time there in 1921, but the scenes from Yale football games described by the nation’s top sportswriters almost certainly influenced this understanding of the Connecticut college town as a bastion for bootleggers. For instance, Gallico, writing for the New York *Daily News* in 1926, was unapologetic in his description of “the white-faced boys and gorgeous girls” who stumbled and slurred into the Yale Bowl on fall Saturdays, and a chorus of sportswriters in the mid-1920s saw “the football weekend at Yale becoming an object lesson on the destructiveness of prohibition” (qtd. in Oriard, *King* 238-9). Clearly, then, as early as 1925, Faulkner’s fiction evinces the author’s engagement with the popular concerns about college football permeating the sporting press.

By the end of 1925, foremost among these concerns was the decision of University of Illinois halfback Red Grange’s decision to forego his senior year in Champaign and embark on a

professional career with the Chicago Bears. By far the most popular collegiate player of the 1920s, Grange's defection to the professional ranks turned out to be an incredibly lucrative decision, as he received numerous endorsement deals, a movie contract, and not to mention a portion of the gate receipts for every Bears game, almost immediately after he walked off the collegiate gridiron for the last time. Unsurprisingly, reports of Grange's earnings incited a great deal of criticism from the press, which is perhaps best summarized by a *Los Angeles Times* cartoon in which Grange runs alongside Father Time with a bag of gold tucked under his arm, representing "The Million He's Out to Make" (qtd. in Oriard, *King* 104). As this image suggests, some in the press believed that Grange's fame would diminish as he struggled in the NFL, while a sizeable majority came to identify him with greed and avarice after he relinquished his amateur status and pursued the lucrative opportunities presented to him as a professional athlete.

In *Father Abraham*, Faulkner offers his own subtle commentary on Grange's departure from the University of Illinois, which is clearly in line with prevailing opinions being circulated on the nation's sports pages. Faulkner betrays his attitude pertaining to the Grange issue through a telling metaphor involving Buck Hipps, the Texan who arrives in Frenchman's Bend with Flem Snopes to help sell dangerous wild ponies to the poor denizens of a backwater hamlet by assuring them that his "good gentle ponies" are "bargains" (*Father* 25, 51). After Buck releases the ponies from their barbed-wires shackles, the narrator notes the way in which he "weaved through the dizzy calico rushes of insane beasts, feinting and dodging with the consummate skill of a Red Grange" (Faulkner, *Father* 28). In comparing a horse salesman in the employ of the avaricious Flem Snopes with a football star who had become synonymous with professional greed, Faulkner evinces his distaste for the professionalization of college athletics that would persist throughout his life and work.

As both “Country Mice” and *Father Abraham* reveal, the expanded athletic coverage during “The Golden Age of Sports” turned popular discussions of college football into points of concern for Faulkner since his earliest days as a full-time fiction writer. However, it was not until such discussions began to primarily concern the South, for reasons both negative and positive, that Faulkner offered any sort of extended engagement with college football’s impact on American university life and the corrupting influence of professionalization on the college gridiron. After the Southeastern Conference took a controversial step towards professionalization by offering open athletic subsidies to its athletes in 1935, even proponents of open subsidies like Francis Wallace of the *Saturday Evening Post* feared that such a measure would only allow for further excesses in recruiting practices and alumni intervention that had come to characterize the SEC (Oriard, *King* 115). Furthermore, coaches and administrators concerned with the preservation of an “amateur ideal” feared that the SEC’s decision would open the floodgates for a rampant professionalism that would wash out any semblance of amateurism in college athletics (Watterson 184).

In light of these concerns with overemphasis and professionalism that centered on the SEC, the first chapter of the present study examines the “Wild Palms” story in *The Wild Palms; If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (1939), as Faulkner’s first extended engagement with the popular discourses informing perceptions of college football. Here, I hope to reveal how the characterizations of several men in the novel are informed by the corrupting professionalism bemoaned throughout much of the American sporting press. More specifically, I will illustrate the way in which Faulkner understands non-athletes, such as the “Wild Palms” protagonist Harry Wilbourne, to be as deeply affected by the professional ethos of college football as the men who perform on the gridiron each fall Saturday.

In chapter two, I show how the *The Hamlet* (1940), the novel Faulkner published directly after *The Wild Palms; If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, continues to address the issue of professionalization while also concerning itself with the way in which sports, especially college football, helped to bring a supposedly “backward” South in step with the rest of the nation. This analysis will focus primarily on the Labove episode, as it attempts to situate the tale of Faulkner’s football star within a larger concern for national cohesion that developed during the Depression.

In the third and final chapter, I will focus on curious moments in *Intruder in the Dust* (1947), *The Town* (1957), and *The Mansion* (1959) in which Faulkner seems to suggest that the importance of sports in Southern culture might be used as a lever to quell racial tension and bring about the eventual integration of the region. My analysis here will attempt to provide some insight into how Faulkner viewed the Jackie Robinson saga of 1947 and the increasing presence of black college football stars as an ideal image of American democracy that could not be forced on the South, but facilitated by developments in the world of sports.

## CHAPTER 1

### “THE ONLY WAY A YOUNG MAN COULD EARN MONEY IN SCHOOL”: “WILD PALMS,” THE NATIONAL SPORTING PRESS, AND THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF COLLEGE FOOTBALL

During his time at the University of Virginia, William Faulkner attended a number of Cavalier football games and often sat alongside his biographer, Joseph Blotner. On November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1957, the two men watched a struggling Virginia team lose to South Carolina, despite Faulkner’s ardent and rather vocal support from the stands. Perhaps perplexed by the reserved author’s genuine excitement, Blotner asked Faulkner if he hadn’t seen better football in his hometown of Oxford, where the University of Mississippi boasted a perennial national championship contender throughout the 1950’s. In response, Faulkner claimed to “like this. This is real amateur sport. At home they got a tame millionaire and he buys a team for them. That’s professional sports. This is amateur” (Blotner 646). Not surprisingly, this anecdote illustrates Faulkner’s life-long fascination with the game of football, which he reportedly played until his high school years and enjoyed watching on television (Blotner 47, 656). What is striking about Faulkner’s statement, though, is that it is informed by the rigid binary influencing much of the general discussion about collegiate football in the popular press of the early 1920s to the late 1950s: amateurism/professionalism. That Faulkner is even able to offer “inside dope” about the excessive disbursement of athletic subsidies at Ole Miss betrays his intimate awareness

of the corruption of college athletics, as well as his engagement with a debate that played out on the pages of the same national weeklies in which he published his short fiction.

In light of Faulkner's obvious interest in the debate surrounding the ethics of professionalization in an ostensibly amateur game, and football more generally, it is quite remarkable that very little scholarship explores the author's engagement with the sport in his fiction. The lack of scholarly attention paid to this issue is particularly notable, considering Faulkner's decision to devote an entire chapter of *The Hamlet* to Labove, an Ole Miss football star. Even in the scholarly discussion on this chapter, only Christian Messenger provides a significant reading of Labove *qua* football star, suggesting that Faulkner "relies heavily on the reader's knowledge of that *modern* stereotype from the athletic field" to parody the pop cultural figure of the school football star by placing him in the Mississippi backcountry during the 1890's, a milieu in which no one holds any regard for his on-field achievements (220). Messenger's reading is certainly a valuable contribution to critical understandings of Labove, but what makes it even more intriguing is the way in which its focus on popular cultural texts parallels many scholarly treatments of *The Wild Palms; If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, the novel which directly precedes *The Hamlet* in Faulkner's oeuvre.

While the critical discourse surrounding *The Wild Palms; If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* typically centers on the connection between the alternating narratives of "Wild Palms" and "Old Man," scholars often attend to the myriad references to pop cultural artifacts in the two tales, and particularly those found in "Wild Palms." Certainly, the Tall Convict in "Old Man" disastrously attempts to live out pulp fantasies, but Cleanth Brooks and Thomas McHaney, both early commentators on the texts influencing the novel, argue that Faulkner draws on the popular literary tradition of romantic love in crafting Harry Wilbourne's and Charlotte Rittenmeyer's

tragic pursuit of an ideal love. (*Beyond* 210; *A Study* 51). Anne Goodwyn Jones, who notes the novel's "almost obsessive" concern with popular culture, reworks Brooks's and McHaney's argument to suggest that "Wild Palms" is "a masculine popular romance plot written by men for men...that attempts to warn men away" from the illusion of perfect love permeating mass art forms (156). For Pamela Rhodes and Richard Godden, "Wild Palms" is a result of Faulkner's exploitation as a screenwriter in Hollywood and represents a reflection on how "the whole social metabolism has been invaded by the dominant commodity form" governing the products of popular culture (92).

Although these considerations of the popular forms penetrating "Wild Palms" are important and enlightening, scholars seem to have dismissed the national sporting press as an element of mass culture worthy of serious inquiry. Indeed, Goodwyn Jones gives a sense of the critical consensus, as she claims to notice everything from "dance marathons to movies to pop fiction—romances, true confessions, westerns, and detective stories" in the tale, without broaching the issue of popular sport (145). I hope to add to the investigation into the popular texts infusing "Wild Palms," the story Faulkner claims he was "trying to tell" in *I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, by examining the extent to which the national press's discussions and representations of college football in the 1920s and 30s influence certain aspects of the narrative (*University* 171). More specifically, I posit that Harry Wilbourne is a character deeply affected by popular perceptions of excessive subsidies doled out to collegiate football stars, and that the national press' treatment of the sport has a marked effect on Faulkner's characterization of several other men in the story.

Professionalism and the National Sporting Press



Although the professionalization of college athletics has been a topic of debate since the 1880's, when Harvard, Yale, and Princeton began accusing each other of hiring tramp athletes, discussions of college football did not center on the issue until the 1920s. The condemnation of college football's corrupting professionalism first found frequent attention in monthly and quarterly magazines of opinion, such as the *Independent*, *Outlook*, *New Republic*, and other publications read mostly by America's patrician class in the 1920s. Unquestionably, the most ardent defender of college football's "amateur ideal" was Harvard graduate and former Crimson tennis player, John R. Tunis, whose 1928 *Harper's* essay, "The Great God Football," was the first of his many scathing critiques of college football's unabashed commercialism. In this polemic, Tunis accuses universities of "making a regular profession of football," and turning the sport into "almost a national religion," as he ultimately urges institutions to realize "that what they have on their hands is a first-class octopus which is strangling many of the legitimate pursuits of educational institutions" (95-96). Tunis would disseminate this sort of rhetoric throughout his career, and he became so obsessed with what he viewed as the damaging professional ethos of college football that he would become a well-known American sports journalist by the 1930's.

However, Tunis' persistence rendered him an object of ridicule among his colleagues, rather than a celebrated champion of amateurism. For example, in a 1939 *Newsweek* article, John Lardner joked that "The evils of college football have been exposed officially, with names and numbers, for the eighteenth time in the last ten years, by John R. Tunis...The new revelations...have left America stagnant with excitement" (qtd. in Oriard, *King* 110). Such criticism certainly indicates the prevalence of Tunis's views in the national sporting press, but it also suggests that, as Michael Oriard asserts, "during the hard times of the Depression, the values

of sporting gentleman were an impossibly hard sell” (*King* 110). It is no surprise, then, that by the mid 1930s, the public discussion of college football was moving in a new direction on the pages of general interest publications, such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, which targeted a more middle-class readership.

In 1937, the same year Faulkner began to write *The Wild Palms; If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, Francis Wallace began penning his “Pigskin Previews” for the *Post* and regularly presented a view of athletic subsidies decidedly different from Tunis’s. Instead of opposing the professionalization of college football, Wallace attacked college administrators and coaches for knowing “that the stork doesn’t bring football players” yet still refusing to admit their institutions’ disbursement of subsidies (qtd. in Oriard, *King* 112). For Wallace, even more disturbing than hypocrisy were the exploitative business practices it allowed for, as he illustrated in his 1936 *Post* article, “I Am a Football Fixer”:

They pay these boys and masquerade the payment...They train this talent using expert coaches and scientific equipment...They present the athletes in great outdoor stadia and charge all that the traffic will bear...Because they pay low prices for raw material and services, and charge high for the finished product, they make profit.” (qtd. in Watterson 190)

By selling their highly professionalized, yet grossly underfunded players as amateurs, Wallace suggested, school officials sought to keep the paying public’s interest focused on the high-quality, yet supposedly pure college game as an unabashedly professional brand of football began to gain popularity. Essentially, Wallace was upset with the false product he saw on the

field each fall Saturday and pushed for big-time college football programs to openly acknowledge the funds they granted to athletes.

Despite Wallace's espousal of open athletic scholarships, he displayed the Northern bias typical of many national sportswriters in his condemnation of the Southeastern Conference, which became the first conference to openly offer athletic subsidies in 1935. Faulkner, of course, spent most of his life in the heart of the SEC, and, as his comments to Blotner in 1957 suggest, would probably have been well aware of Wallace's reasons for finding a general movement "definitely away from excess, except in the South," in national recruiting practices during the 1939 season (qtd. in Oriard, *King* 115). Indeed, in 1936, former Ole Miss assistant coach Russell Crane boasted to Bob Zuppke, the head coach of a struggling Illinois program, that "The Southern schools are getting it down to a science," and claimed that many were even beginning to fund clinics for high school coaches in an effort to develop more in-state talent (qtd. in Watterson 184). So, although the wide-ranging debate surrounding the professionalization of college athletics was certainly a national one, it often centered on the South and, as I hope to show, was something that the Faulkner of "Wild Palms," a Southern writer deeply concerned with contemporary popular culture, could simply not ignore.

What if Harry Wilbourne Strapped on a Helmet?

One of Harry Wilbourne's more intriguing characteristics in "Wild Palms" is his seemingly constant need to understand his quest for perfect love with Charlotte Rittenmeyer as the consequence of his innocence or sexual inexperience. Though he tells his friend McCord that his relationship with Charlotte "lasted as long as it did because I waited too long...twenty seven is too long to wait to get out of your system what you should have rid yourself of at fourteen or

fifteen or maybe even younger,” he eventually looks to his medical school years as he ruminates on missed opportunities to lose his virginity (Faulkner, *Palms* 137). For example, after he learns that Charlotte has become pregnant in Utah, forcing him to struggle with her demands for an abortion, he thinks that “*this is the price of the twenty-six years, the two thousand dollars I stretched over four of them by not smoking, by keeping my virginity until it damn near sapped on me*” (Faulkner, *Palms* 208). Clearly, Harry has come to understand that a deferral of sexual pleasure was necessary for him to progress through medical school on the two thousand dollars left to him in his father’s will, and that such a suspension of gratification has rendered him susceptible to the ill-fated journey to live out the sort of romantic love story only “read in books” (Faulkner, *Palms* 48).

Considering Harry’s reflections, the explanations as to why he is unable to supplement his father’s two thousand dollar outlay seem particularly significant. Soon after the first section of “Wild Palms,” in which it is evident that Charlotte’s life is in jeopardy, presumably because of something Harry has done, the narrator begins the second section of the story by describing the early years of a man whose lover now has reason to call him a “bungling bastard” (Faulkner, *Palms* 21). In this interesting exposition, the reader learns that Harry’s father entered medical school “when an education could be paid for in kind or in labor...and had completed his four year course at a cash outlay of two hundred dollars” by heating dormitories and waiting tables (Faulkner, *Palms* 31). Though the “elder Wilbourne” leaves his only son two thousand dollars for a medical education, “*believing that the aforesaid sum will be amply sufficient for that purpose,*” Harry discovers that it “was not much more than his father’s two hundred had been. It was less, because there was steam heat in the dormitories now and the college was served by a cafeteria requiring no waiters and the only way a young man could earn money in school now

was by carrying a football or stopping the man who did carry it” (Faulkner, *Palms* 31-32).

Certainly, modern technology has replaced the menial jobs his father held in medical school, but Harry is a student whose legitimate academic aims are primarily complicated by an excessively professionalized brand of college football, which, according to Tunis, had “tentacles all over the educational world” (qtd. in Watterson 398).

Because the subsidies-obsessed Tunis never mentions Harry’s educational struggles in his writings, it is safe to assume that he never read “Wild Palms,” but it is important to note that education is not the only aspect of university life that a lack of funds complicates for Faulkner’s protagonist. Harry’s poverty also forces to abstain from even the simplest pleasures, but even after “stopping tobacco for a year,” he still has “nothing left over for squiring girls...as he balanced his dwindling bank account against the turned pages of his books” (Faulkner, *Palms* 32). Such an inability to court co-eds can be interpreted as a direct result of the university’s disbursement of athletic subsidies in place of medical scholarships. Furthermore, the reasons Faulkner offers for Harry’s non-existent love life seem to function as a response to “a new formula in 1930’s football fiction and film, in which the shady ethics of subsidization served as the backdrop for conventional romance” and any criticism was silenced as the campus hero invariably got the girl (Oriard, *King* 102). In his treatment of Harry’s experience in medical school, then, Faulkner clearly turns to the pervasive issue of athletic subsidies to suggest that the corrupting professionalism hotly debated in the nation’s sporting press, yet ambivalently depicted in popular fiction and film, can have a devastating effect not only on the “amateur ideal,” but also on the average student who must pay for an education at the expense of youthful romance. Indeed, Faulkner seems to suggest that Harry could only have avoided his ultimate plight if he were able to strap on a helmet and display a certain level of athletic prowess.

## Bradley, Callaghan, and the Corruption of College Athletics

In 1939, readers of “Wild Palms” would have most likely seen Faulkner as an avowed Tunisite after his description of Harry’s Wilbourne’s four years in medical school. While Faulkner may consciously avoid Tunis’ infamous octopus metaphor, he does seem to share the sportswriter’s view that all aspects of the professionalized college game, including scholarship players, adversely affect the academic aims of individual students and the university as a whole. In May of 1947, shortly after visiting a number of English courses at the University of Mississippi, Faulkner even wrote to the Ole Miss English department to demand that his classroom visits not be mentioned in the same “high-pressure ballyhoo” that boasted of how “our football team almost beat A&M” in an effort to lure students to Oxford (*Selected Letters* 249). Later, in 1958, Faulkner responded to a question on the higher education of African Americans by suggesting that black students were more amenable to education while “the white man says...I’ve got to have a good football team or I ain’t going there. I’ve got to have cheerleaders or I may not like it” (*University* 220). Although these statements indicate the extent to which Faulkner ultimately upheld Tunis’ views, “Wild Palms” reveals a certain ambiguity in his thoughts regarding the status of the college athlete. Specifically, near the end of the story, he seems to move toward Wallace’s view of the professionalized college athlete as an under-subsidized laborer duped into doing grunt work for a corrupt and corrupting business run by college administrators.

Perhaps to emphasize the significance of Harry's time in the university, the narrator of "Wild Palms" often attempts to give some sense of how a number of other men in the story experienced college life. This occurs most noticeably with Francis Rittenmeyer, but it also occurs with Bradley, whom Harry and Charlotte meet after they leave Chicago to spend the autumn months in the Wisconsin wilderness. Bradley's appearance in the story is rather brief, but it is clearly worth considering, as his "crass and insolent confidence" is both unsettling and threatening for Harry, reminding him, as Charlotte says, "that I divide at the belly" (Faulkner, *Palms* 107). What is striking about Bradley's confidence is that the narrator leaves little doubt that it was developed over four years at "an Eastern college," where he presumably acquired the eyes that "did not laugh, the assured, predatory eyes of the still successful prom leader" (Faulkner, *Palms* 106-7). Certainly, these details help to characterize Bradley as what Mary C. McComb identifies as a conventional campus hero "of the 1920s—star football players, captains of sports teams, smooth talkers, and prom leaders" (60). It is intriguing, then, that Harry is more than a little discomfited in Bradley's presence, for although it is nowhere intimated that Brady is a former college football player, his attendance at the professionalized spectacles at his "Eastern college" most likely provided him with another venue in which to establish his status on campus and foster the sort of self-assurance Harry lacks.

While it can be inferred that Bradley enjoyed the social benefits of college football spectacles, the only character in "Wild Palms" who is explicitly identified as a former football player is Callaghan, the man who "hires" Harry to oversee the unpaid immigrant workers at his Utah mines. Like Bradley, Callaghan appears only briefly, in his office in Chicago, where he is unsurprisingly introduced as a man with "the body of a two-hundred-and-twenty-pound college fullback gone to fat, in a suit of expensive tweed which nevertheless looked on him as if he had

taken it from a fire sale at the point of a pistol” (Faulkner, *Palms* 128). Here, Callaghan is the corrupted athlete turned business administrator, and his strict negotiations with his voluntary medical prospect seem to mimic the unfair dealings of university officials attempting to lure valuable athletic talent.

Faulkner seems to highlight the athlete’s powerlessness in such negotiations, as Harry accepts an incredibly low salary, which Callaghan does not even intend to pay. More interestingly, Harry proves valuable enough for Callaghan to pay for two train tickets to Utah, and the transportation, lodging, and food that he does eventually receive from his employer mirror the “wages” paid to college athletes after their tuition was waived. For example, as one college coach claimed, after “greeting and hand shaking,” college officials saw that incoming football recruits had “a place to eat, a place to sleep, often they pay the travelling expense for better boys” (qtd. in Watterson 184). Ultimately, in Harry’s dealings with Callaghan, Faulkner’s interesting sympathy regarding the status of the professionalized college athletes is most evident. Harry is rendered a voluntary recruit who is exploited by an employer; but that employer is a former player whose “four-year course in deception,” as Wallace puts it, has made him more than willing to sell false prospects, just as he helped to sell a false product on the gridiron (qtd. in Oriard, *King* 111).

Faulkner’s sympathy for collegiate athletes also emerges after Harry assumes his unpaid post at the mine in Utah. Buckner, the mine’s acting manager, informs Harry that “There hasn’t been a payroll here” in nearly four months, and suggests that the crew of Polish immigrants still working at the mine are there simply because they cannot “understand dishonesty” (Faulkner, *Palms* 188). That the Poles are the only group left working for Callaghan is especially relevant to this discussion, as young men of Polish descent, most notably the University of Minnesota’s



Bronko Nagurski, were widely celebrated for their exploits on the athletic field throughout the 1920s and 30s. However, a number of sportswriters pointed to Polish players to highlight the corruption of the college game, with Tunis even creating “Slats Miskowitch, the Power House of East Dakota” as a prototype for the professionalized player destroying the “amateur ideal” (qtd. in Oriard, *King* 273). As Oriard points out, “Poles from Chicago playing for the University of Washington might be a source of pride in the Polish American press but evidence of professionalism in an article in *Collier’s*” (*King* 273).

In light of this treatment of Polish players in the popular press, Faulkner’s presentation of the workers at the Utah mine is particularly intriguing. For Harry, whose alienation from the ideal college hero has been illustrated above, the Poles seem to be school sports stars stripped of their pads and removed from Saturday afternoon’s spectacle. For example, he initially perceives the Poles as “giant-seeming men” working in an athletic sort of “frenzy,” but comes to realize that “none of them were the giants they seemed, that the illusion of size was an aura, an emanation of that wild childlike innocence and credulity which they possessed in common” (Faulkner, *Palms* 186-7). In Utah, then, Faulkner presents the college athlete, more specifically the ethnic athlete, as little more than an abused laborer unaware of his own exploitation. But perhaps because of Tunis’ marked influence on his own thoughts concerning professionalization, which appears to preclude Faulkner from explicitly betraying his sympathy for subsidized football stars, the author is either unable or unwilling to explicitly link his Poles with the likes of Nagurski and other Polish gridiron stars. Instead, Faulkner turns to a sport that had been openly professional since the 1890’s, as his narrator notes the Poles’ “tongue which Wilbourne could not understand almost exactly like a college baseball team cheering one another on” (Pope 33; *Palms* 187). Regardless of what type of athletic team the Poles resemble, though, it is clear that

Faulkner at least acknowledged a number of sportswriters, namely Wallace, who suggested that professionalized college athletes constituted a cheap and willing workforce that could be exploited to generate huge profits for universities across the country.

#### “Rat” Rittenmeyer and “Football’s Public”

As pointed out above, the national debate surrounding athletic subsidies often focused on the enormous proceeds universities enjoyed by staging weekly football contests. These profits, however, were perhaps more a result of the spectacle surrounding the game than the product on the field. As Michael Oriard notes, beginning in the 1890’s, newspaper accounts of Harvard-Yale and Yale-Princeton matchups centered on the social elites in attendance, thus “confirming for readers the social importance of the new sport” (*King* 163). Throughout the 1920s and 30s, as college football spread across the country, national magazines such as *The Literary Digest* and *The Saturday Evening Post* placed on their covers not players or coaches but what *Time* called “Football’s Public,” or the mass of “undergraduates, parents, alumni, their wives, sweethearts, cousins...every element of the country” sitting in the stands (qtd. in Oriard, *King* 164). Most importantly, membership in “Football’s Public,” Oriard suggests, “had become a mark of upwardly mobile middle-class status” and signified “the best of what up-to-date America offered.” (*King* 170).

If there is a character in “Wild Palms” who can be identified as a member of “Football’s Public,” it is certainly Francis Rittenmeyer. It is, after all, his middle class “respectability” that Charlotte seeks to escape. Also, Harry clearly views Francis as a man who wants only the best of what modern America has to offer, as he imagines the outrage elicited by the Charlotte’s

potential medical treatment on “*The Mississippi coast? Why in God’s name the Mississippi coast? A country doctor in a little lost Mississippi shrimping village when in New Orleans there are the best, the very best—*” (Faulkner, *Palms* 225). Indeed, Faulkner offers a number of indications that membership in the nation’s football community is an aspect of Francis’ bourgeois pretensions, but he also suggests that his relationship to this community may run far deeper than the “double-breasted suits” with an “impeccable shirt and tie,” which characterized the game-day attire of a successful alumnus (*Palms* 39, 55; Oriard, *King* 228).

As both Harry and the reader are introduced to Francis, Charlotte reveals that he is an alumnus of the University of Alabama. More specifically, “He is the senior living ex-freshman of the University of Alabama.” In 1935, then, the twenty-seven-year-old Francis, who is Harry’s “own age about,” apparently looks back fondly on his time at the university, probably because he was an undergraduate when the Crimson Tide defeated the University of Washington to win the 1926 Rose Bowl title, and went on to tie Stanford in same game the following year (Faulkner, *Palms* 38). The Tide’s performances in Pasadena were monumental events in the South, because, according to Andrew Doyle, Southern progressives were able to celebrate them as “proof that the region was every bit as modern as the rest of the nation” at a time when “industrial cities with skyscrapers and streetcars” were quickly becoming integral parts of the Southern landscape (117). Little wonder, then, that Francis, a man who has cultivated the modern bourgeois identity that is so suffocating for Charlotte, wishes to cling to his days as a freshman in Tuscaloosa.

Just as interesting as Francis’ alma-mater is the nickname he earned during his years as a student. Expressly because of his designation as “the senior living ex-freshman of the University of Alabama,” Charlotte claims, “we still call him Rat” (Faulkner, *Palms* 40). This appellation,

perhaps inexplicable to modern readers, is richly pertinent in the context of Francis's collegiate career, which began just as a nationally distributed newspaper article, "The Story of a Graduate Manager," brought the term "rat" into the national sports lexicon in 1925.<sup>1</sup> This article, penned by an anonymous graduate assistant at an unspecified "big-time university," was essentially a behind the scenes look at the systems put in place to monitor the actions of subsidized football players. In it, the author reveals that students known as "'Widows' made certain that athletes found their way to the right classes, while 'rats' trailed the laggards to report on their class attendance and hours of study" (Watterson 161). In light of this usage of the term, Charlotte's ostensibly jocose suggestion that her husband "still is sometimes" a "Rat" is interesting, for her husband does indeed hire a detective to trail and report on her and Harry while they are in Chicago and has presumably taken similar measures on other occasions (Faulkner, *Palms* 40). Furthermore, Francis' nickname clearly suggests that he is not only a member of "Football's Public," but one of its privileged members who have undergone what Oriard calls an "initiation into the game's subtle mysteries" (*King* 164).

Though it may seem a bit of stretch to suggest that Faulkner meant so much by designating Charlotte's husband as "Rat," it is important to point out that the author seems to have carefully considered the nickname of this character. In the initial typescript of the first chapter of "Wild Palms," Charlotte, bleeding profusely after her botched abortion, cries "John! John! John!" after Harry tells her to "cover yourself up with something" (Faulkner, Rowan Oak). In the published version, of course, "it was 'rat,' the noun, which the doctor believed he heard" as a delirious Charlotte says "You promised, rat. That was all I asked and you promised" (Faulkner, *Palms* 21). And once again, in the final chapter of the published story, Charlotte

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that Ole Miss head coach C.R. Noble, who coached the team during the 1917 and 1918 seasons, used "rat" to refer to each of his freshman players (Sorrels and Cavagnaro 76).

speaks to her absent husband, telling him to “Listen, Francis—See, I called you Francis. If I were lying to you do you think I would call you Francis instead of Rat?—Listen, Francis. It was the other one. Not that Wilbourne bastard” (Faulkner, *Palms* 228). This interesting shift from “John” to “Francis” (Wallace) and “Rat” should by no means be overlooked, as both the names in the published version shed light on the centrality of the sporting press in “Wild Palms.”

Before ending this discussion of Francis, it is intriguing to consider a curious image that seems to be Faulkner’s attempt to mimic weekly magazine covers with his prose. Immediately after Francis wishes “to make a plea” at Harry’s trial, the crowd gathered in the courtroom Court charging into the wave like a football team: a vortex of fury and turmoil about the calm immobile outrageous face above the smooth beautifully cut coat” (Faulkner, *Palms* 322). Obviously, this scene does not take place in a football stadium, but the football simile used to describe the officers, and more importantly the description of Rat as a composed spectator, is incredibly suggestive of two *Time* covers from 1930 and 1935, on which “Football’s Public” is celebrated. Though the two *Time* covers are the only ones to give a label to “Football’s Public,” Faulkner would certainly have been familiar with the image of a well-dressed man, or group of men, surrounded by the crashing and flying bodies of competing football teams, as weekly magazine returned to it each fall throughout the 1920’s and 30’s (Oriard, *King* 164-70). This image of Francis in the courtroom, one of the final images of him offered in “Wild Palms,” emphasizes his place among America’s rising middle class and firmly entrenches him as a privileged member of “Football’s Public” who enjoys the benefits of his inclusion in such a group.

“Wild Palms” and Frenchman’s Bend’s football star.

As I mentioned at the outset of this discussion, the critical insights into the plethora of pop cultural text in “Wild Palms” has been truly illuminating, but I hope to have shed new light on the significance of the sporting press in the story. Also, I this study helps to set the stage for the following chapter, which will treat the Labove sequence in *The Hamlet* as more than a curious anomaly tacked on to a comic novel in order to parody popular pulp heroes. Labove’s story, as Christian Messenger has illustrated, certainly is a parodic rewriting of the exploits of Frank Merriwell and others, but it also seems to be born out of the more serious issue of athletic subsidies and football’s significance for notions of bourgeois respectability that Faulkner addresses in “Wild Palms.”

To give some indication of the intimate relationship between “Wild Palms” and the Labove episode, I want to briefly return to Harry Wilbourne. As Harry is penning his pulp stories in Chicago, the narrator describes his process as

“one sustained frenzied agonizing rush like the halfback working his way through school who grasps the ball (his Albatross, his Old Man of the Sea, which, not the opposing team, not the blank incontrovertible chalk marks profoundly terrifying and meaningless as an idiot’s nightmare, is his sworn and mortal enemy) and runs until the play is completed—downed or across the goal line, it doesn’t matter which.” (Faulkner, *Palms* 121)

In this passage, it is as though Harry’s thoughts, which become commodities the second he sets pen page to compose his next “moronic fable,” are directly compared to the athlete’s body, which is little more than a piece of machinery composing a hugely profitable spectacle on fall Saturdays.

Considering the argument I offer above, the comparison Faulkner makes between a pulp writer and a college athlete may not be so surprising in “Wild Palms.” In the comic world of *The Hamlet*, however, it is striking to read of Labove during “Saturday’s climax when he carried a trivial contemptible obloid across fleeting and meaningless white lines” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 109). Aside from its much more humorous tone, this passage bears a striking resemblance to the simile used to explain Harry’s pulp writing, and establishes a link between “Wild Palms” and *The Hamlet* that cannot be considered a mere coincidence. Indeed, such an evident connection between the two works suggests that the professionalization of amateur sports and the plight of collegiate athletes clearly inform the Labove episode. And although he doesn’t create a character resembling Rat Rittenmeyer, the Faulkner of *The Hamlet* is particularly attuned to the way in which popular sports, particularly football, work to foster national unity by imbuing the South with a deeper sense of progress and bourgeois respectability.

## CHAPTER 2

### “ALL THAT JUST FOR PLAYING A GAME”: PROFESSIONALIZATION AND PROGRESS ON WILLIAM FAULKNER’S GRIDIRON

In the winter of 1938, shortly before the release of *The Wild Palms; If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, writer Robert Cantwell was assigned to an article on William Faulkner for *Time* magazine. After re-reading Faulkner’s novels and consulting the scant biographical resources available at the time, Cantwell travelled to the Peabody Hotel in Memphis to meet his subject for an interview. Entering the hotel lobby on the afternoon of Saturday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>, Cantwell “was struck by a terrific tumult, shouts, laughter, and the blowing of horns” and, learning that fans were beginning to return from the University of Tennessee-Ole Miss football game, immediately took refuge in his room to await Faulkner’s arrival (31). At five o’clock, well after the arranged meeting time, Faulkner arrived at Cantwell’s room and explained that his wife made the appointment “and she didn’t know that I was going to be busy today” (qtd. in Cantwell 31). Interestingly, Faulkner was “busy” watching the highly anticipated spectacle that had occupied the raucous guests in the Peabody lobby a few hours earlier and was just returning from Memphis’s Crump Stadium with Malcolm Franklin and Johnny Faulkner, his stepson and nephew.

What is even more interesting than Faulkner’s attendance at the game is his response to Tennessee’s 47-0 drubbing of an Ole Miss team that was an impressive 9-1 coming into the contest. Eager to escape the revelry in the hotel, Faulkner drove Cantwell back to Oxford and



discussed the game with Malcolm and Johnny to break an uncomfortable silence, claiming that “Tennessee must have just about the best team in the country,” and suggesting that the Volunteers dominated Ole Miss “just...to prove they should have been picked for the Rose Bowl” (qtd. in Cantwell 33).<sup>2</sup> For Faulkner, then, the Tennessee-Ole Miss game was not important as a regional rivalry but as a conference matchup with national implications. But despite relating Faulkner’s awareness of college football’s national significance, Cantwell remembers the scene in the Peabody lobby quite differently, viewing it as “the genius of the South for being always out of date, for turning on a 1929-boom-year football atmosphere in the midst of the New Deal’s grim sociological determinisms” (32). Recalling the scene in 1953, Cantwell is perhaps informed by a Cold War-era nationalist discourse that re-emphasized ideas of Southern backwardness, as he seems to overlook the pervasiveness of football celebrations in all regions of the nation during the Depression era (Duck 4). According to Michael Oriard, “College football had been a phenomenon in the 1920s; in the 1930s, it was utterly familiar,” as national weeklies, radio, and newsreels were “saturated with football during the fall months” (*King* 11-12). And few magazines did more to publicize college football than Cantwell’s *Time*, which even celebrated those who paid to witness Saturday’s spectacles by placing “Football’s Public” on its cover in 1930 and 1935 (Oriard, *King* 164). Clearly, the excitement surrounding the 1938 Tennessee-Ole Miss game was not a regional anomaly but a clear indication, as Faulkner’s comments suggest, that the South assumed a significant role in American sporting culture during the 1930s, a decade Oriard identifies as “The Golden Age of Football” (*King* 11).

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<sup>2</sup> The Rose Bowl committee selected an undefeated Duke team as the Eastern representative for the 1939 contest. The Blue Devils would lose to Pacific Coast Conference champion University of Southern California by a score of 7-3. Tennessee would settle for an Orange Bowl bid and a convincing 17-0 victory over the University of Oklahoma.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Faulkner's most explicit engagement with college football in his fiction is found in his 1940 novel, *The Hamlet*. Despite Faulkner's claim that the whole of the Snopes trilogy was envisioned "at once like a bolt of lightning lights up a landscape," a curious episode in the trilogy's first volume, which focuses on an ambitious Ole Miss student-athlete turned sexually obsessed rural schoolteacher, doesn't seem to have been envisioned until shortly before it was incorporated into novel during the final writing and pulling together process, which began in 1938 (*University* 90; Holmes 78). There is, after all, no intimation of Labove's story in any of the short stories reworked into *The Hamlet*, or in *Father Abraham*, Faulkner's initial attempt to bring Flem Snopes and the world of Frenchman's Bend to life. However, Faulkner betrays his awareness of a national debate focusing on the professionalization of college football in *The Wild Palms*, the novel he completed before turning his attention to *The Hamlet*. What I hope to reveal in this chapter, then, is that Faulkner's integration of the Labove episode evinces his continued engagement with popular discourses surrounding the subsidization of amateur athletes and, more importantly, his recognition of the instrumentality of college football, and sports more generally, in uniting the purportedly backward South with a nation desperate for a greater sense of cohesion.

While a number of football historians point to the University of Alabama's 1926 Rose Bowl victory over the University of Washington as the game which won the South acceptance into college football's mainstream, many downplay the unique circumstances surrounding the game. In the final weeks of 1925, after halfback Red Grange incited a national debate by dropping out of the University of Illinois to play professionally for the Chicago Bears, schools felt increased pressure to at least ostensibly resist the commercialization and professionalization of the college game. Nowhere were pretensions to untainted amateurism more evident than in

responses to Rose Bowl bids from Northern schools, as Dartmouth, Michigan, Colgate, and Princeton declined invitations to Pasadena on the illogical grounds that the payments schools received to play in the postseason spectacles were drastically different from the huge profits generated by regular season contests (Doyle 103). In light of such Northern resistance, it is difficult to conclude that Alabama's Rose Bowl victory brought any more than a modicum of national respect to college football programs in the South.

However, Alabama's success did allow college football to become a vital element of Southern culture. Not surprisingly, many Southerners saw the Crimson Tide's victory as a symbolic revenge for past humiliations and a resounding triumph in the "cold Civil War" waged by H.L. Mencken and other arbiters of public opinion who continually lampooned Southern backwardness in national publications throughout the 1920s. For historian Andrew Doyle, Alabama's victory was "a sublime tonic for a people buffeted by a historical legacy of military defeat, poverty, and alienation from the American political and cultural mainstream" (104). Indeed, after the 1926 Rose Bowl, football appealed to adherents of the Lost Cause as well as New South disciples intent on making the Alabama team, and college football more generally, the "centerpiece of economic boosterism" and a vehicle for promoting the specialization, teamwork, and precision necessary for industrial development (Doyle 117).<sup>3</sup> Football's efficacy in fusing Southern tradition with Southern progress is perhaps best illustrated in a letter to University of Alabama president George Denny from a New Orleans resident who wrote that "Southern health, young manhood, vigor, power is no longer to be explained away... Victories like [the 1926 Rose Bowl] are worth ten thousand essays, speeches, advertisements... Maybe we

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<sup>3</sup> Football's role in the development of industrial values was heralded by New Haven Clock Company president and celebrated Yale coach Walter Camp. As early as 1887, Camp was celebrating the way in which "Division of labor has been so thoroughly and successfully carried out on the football field that a player nowadays must train for a particular position" (qtd. in Gems 17).

will have to do less explaining hereafter about swamps, mosquitoes, hookworm, dirt eating, runts and so forth” (qtd. in Doyle 118). Here, the writer highlights the sort of Southern masculinity embodied by the Confederate army while relishing the opportunity to present it to the nation in a venue that signified progress and bourgeois respectability. Ultimately, such sentiments led college administrators in the South to emphasize football in public relations campaigns and prompted the construction of large stadia in urban centers and on college campuses in hopes of staging interregional contests with Northern powers.<sup>4</sup>

Recently, sports historians have suggested that increased administrative support and more modern facilities were instrumental in bringing the South into college football’s mainstream, and that these factors facilitated the sport’s ascendance to a prominent role in a larger nationalization project. As President Roosevelt promoted the image of the South as a region capable of economic uplift by securing the Fair Labor Standards Act and commissioning *The Report on Economic Conditions of the South* (1938), the nation’s sportswriters, aided by newly established athletic publicity departments at Southern colleges, began to incorporate the region more fully into college football’s mainstream (Kennedy 345-346; Turpie 124). For David Turpie, the clearest indication that Southern teams had gained the respect of the national sporting press came in 1936, with the introduction of the Associated Press poll to rank the nation’s top teams. The poll, according to Turpie, “acted as an agent of nationalization and tied the regions of the country together...It thus more ably demonstrated the national perception of big-time teams” (124). In the first four years of the AP poll, no region was perceived more positively than the South, as it

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<sup>4</sup> As historian Raymond Schmidt has illustrated, the construction of large stadia was a distinctive mark of college football’s growing commercialism. In particular, large stadia became necessary for staging interregional games, which were “contributing greatly to the record box-office figures being realized” in the 1920s (58). At the forefront of the stadium building explosion was Yale University, which erected the 70,657 seat Yale Bowl in 1914. In a 1921 letter from New Haven, Faulkner gives his mother some indication of how lucrative the Yale Bowl was for the university, noting that “There is a [football] game every Saturday—Yale doesn’t condescend to make trips—and the Freshman team plays someone every Sunday afternoon” (*Thinking* 129).

secured at least one top five spot in 1936 and 1937, held the top three spots in 1938, and boasted the nation's two best teams in 1939. While some Northern sportswriters attributed the South's success to the excessive subsidies the region's colleges doled out to athletes, by 1939 few could disagree with the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* Ira Seebacher, who asserted that "such teams as Tennessee, Alabama, Tulane, North Carolina, Duke, Georgia Tech, Mississippi State and Louisiana State are *as good*, if not better, than the best from other sections" (qtd. in Turpie 126).

If success in the AP poll evinces the South's complete incorporation into what was quickly outstripping professional baseball as the nation's most popular spectator sport, then the hype surrounding the Third Saturday in October, 1939, indicates the region's centrality to American sporting culture. As Turpie illustrates, the Alabama-Tennessee game on October 21, 1939 was a hugely significant even for Southern football because it was the first time that a game played on a Southern field between two Southern teams won the attention of the majority of the nation's sporting press. Not only did the game mark the first time both CBS and NBC broadcast the same game in the South, it also brought nearly all of the nation's most respected sportswriters, including Francis Wallace and Grantland Rice, to Knoxville. Rice's presence, in particular, held so much importance for the city that Mayor Walter M. Mynatt declared Friday, October 20<sup>th</sup> "Grantland Rice Day" and led a parade in the sportswriter's honor (Turpie 128). Also, after top ranked Tennessee defeated sixth ranked Alabama 21-0, Bing Crosby discussed the stellar Volunteer team the following Thursday on his nationally broadcast "Kraft Music Hall," a weekly program which rarely addressed sports. Crosby, in response to a guest's asking his Rose Bowl predictions, claimed that "If the clockers are correct...New Year's Day in the Rose Bowl may echo with..." and went on the hum Tennessee's fight song, "The Spirit of the Hill" (qtd. Turpie 133). Though Tennessee would lose the 1940 Rose Bowl to the University of

Southern California, the team's 1939 season illustrates the role that football played in bringing the South into the nation's mainstream as Americans clamored for national unity in the face of the Depression.

This recent assessment of college football's significance for the Depression-era South demands further consideration of the curious Labove sequence in *The Hamlet*. Considering Labove's distinction as Yoknapatawpha's lone football hero, it is rather surprising that scholars have yet to examine his story in light of American sports history, let alone the shifting sports landscape that Faulkner would have observed in the late 1930s. While critics now dismiss Irving Howe's early assertion that the Labove episode does "not carry sufficient weight...to justify" its length or any serious critical examination, most attempt to explain little more than Labove's violent and obsessive longing for Eula Varner (244). Of the many commentators on Labove's sexual yearning, only historian Joel Williamson notices "the pure genius [Faulkner] showed in making Labove a football player." For Williamson, Labove's skills on the gridiron indicate what he sees as a propensity among Southern men to use violence as a surrogate for sex, as he goes on to point out that well over a decade after Faulkner completed *The Hamlet*, Tennessee Williams presented Brick Pollitt, the sexually frustrated Ole Miss football star at the center of 1955's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (392).

Along with Labove's obsession with Eula, Faulkner's influences in crafting Labove's story have been a common avenue of inquiry for critics. Many readers posit the myriad ways in which Faulkner appropriates Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820) for the twentieth century South, but the writer's engagement with the football fiction of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century has not been overlooked. According to Christian Messenger, who offers the most extensive explanation for Faulkner's inclusion of a football star

in *The Hamlet*, Labove is a parody of the fictional college sports heroes of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, namely Frank Merriwell, whose Ivy League exploits were celebrated on the pages of *Tip Top Weekly*, *American Boy*, and other publications directed at young American males (218).<sup>5</sup> Faulkner, Messenger asserts, denies his football star the heroic status he would have enjoyed on an college campus by situating him in rural Mississippi during the 1890's, where "heroes that grew out of the soil and stock" render "heroes in artificially created sports with rules and uniforms" almost meaningless (221). Michael Oriard also discusses Faulkner's parodic rewriting of campus football fiction, but suggests that the author engages works set in the South, particularly John Fox, Jr.'s, *The Heart of the Hills* (1913), in which a poor white hillbilly arrives on campus to learn traditional sporting values from a football captain descended from Kentucky planters. With this bestselling novel, Fox established "the connection between Southern sporting myth and modern football," a connection Oriard credits Faulkner with beginning to explode in a treatment of Labove which heralds a number of critical assessments of the game from Southern writers (*Sporting* 267-268).<sup>6</sup>

The readings offered by Williamson, Messenger, and Oriard are helpful in situating *The Hamlet* within a larger tradition of fictional treatments of college football, but they don't address the extent to which the Labove sequence is born out of Faulkner's previous novel, *The Wild Palms*. Throughout the novel's "Wild Palms" episode, Faulkner betrays an engagement with the debate surrounding the professionalization of college football, particularly in his characterization of several men in the story. For instance, Callaghan, the man who dupes Harry Wilbourne into

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<sup>5</sup> Faulkner betrays an interest in such fiction in a 1921 letter he wrote during his brief term of employment at Lord and Taylor bookstore in New York City. Writing to Dean, his youngest brother, Faulkner excitedly notes that "In the store where I work they have the "Connie Morgan" in a book form from The Boy's Life Magazine, and some baseball stories written by Christie Matthewson, Indian and Scout and football stories of all kinds" (*Thinking* 139).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1949); William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951); Harry Crews's *A Feast of Snakes* (1976); and Barry Hannah's *The Tennis Handsome* (1983) are among the novels Oriard points to.

accepting an unpaid medical post so he can continue to sell stock in his worthless Utah mines, has the body of “a two-hundred-twenty pound college fullback gone to fat” (Faulkner, *Palms* 128). In *The Hamlet*, Faulkner continues to link corpulence, questionable business practices, and former college football players, as if to emphasize the corrupt nature of staging an “amateur” contest with professional players. Indeed, in his initial description of Jody Varner, the son of Frenchman’s Bend’s notoriously corrupt “chief man,” Will Varner, the narrator notes the “quality of invincible bachelorhood which he possessed: so that, looking at him you saw, beyond the flabbiness and the obscuring bulk, the perennial and immortal Best Man, the apotheosis of the masculine Singular, just as you discern beneath the dropsical tissue of the ’09 halfback the lean hard ghost which once carried a ball” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 16-17). In explicitly linking Jody with the most unsavory businessman in his previous novel, Faulkner seems to foreshadow the younger Varner’s failed plan to dupe the barn-burning sharecropper Ab Snopes into harvesting a crop before voiding his contract in light of the tenant’s reputation as an arsonist, a plan of which even his father disapproves.

Interestingly, the same “invincible bachelordom” which prompts an intriguing halfback analogy is also a quality shared by V.K. Ratliff, the character many readers identify as the “humanistic” or “moral force” in the novel (Vickery 174; Rueckert 155). But it is the different type of bachelordom exuded by each character that is significant, for Ratliff possesses

that same air of perpetual bachelorhood which Jody Verner had, although there was no other resemblance between them and not much here, since in Varner it was a quality of shabby and fustian gallantry where in Ratliff it was that hearty celibacy as of a lay brother in a twelfth century monastery—a gardener, a pruner of vines, say. (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 57)



Here, the overblown sense of courage that defines Jody's bachelorhood is evocative of many contemporary sportswriters' treatments of college football stars, most notably Grantland Rice's hyperbolic "Four Horseman" lead on the lauded stable of running backs at the core of Notre Dame's 1924 squad.<sup>7</sup> Later in the novel, Faulkner more obviously lampoons the inflated bravery attributed to college athletes by describing the "M" on Labove's football sweater, parodically worn by his grandmother in lieu of a campus sweetheart, as "the crimson accolade of the color of courage and fortitude gallant in the sun, or on the bad days, sprawled and quiet but still crimson, still brave, across her sunken chest and stomach" (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 126). It is not too much of a stretch, then, to suggest that both Jody's shady business dealings and pretentious air render him a veiled caricature of the excessively celebrated collegiate athlete.

Though Ratliff's bachelorhood is drastically different from Jody's, it also establishes his association with a celebrated athlete. Just as Ratliff seems to emanate a monastic quality, Labove, we later learn, has a face that "would have been a monk's, a militant fanatic who would have turned his back on the world with actual joy and gone to a desert and passed the rest of his days and nights calmly and without an instant's self-doubt battling...his own fierce and unappeasable natural appetites" (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 127). Obviously, the narrator highlights sexual abstinence as the defining characteristic of monastic life, and the contrast between Ratliff's "hearty celibacy" and Labove's constant "battle" with his carnal desires portends the radically different types of admiration each man displays for Eula Varner.<sup>8</sup> However, more

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<sup>7</sup> "Outlined against a blue-gray October sky, the Four Horsemen rode again. In dramatic lore they are known as Famine, Pestilence, Destruction and Death. These are only aliases. Their real names are Stuhldreher, Miller, Crowley and Layden" (qtd. in Sperber 178).

<sup>8</sup> Labove's desire for Eula instills a madness that even he recognizes when he walks "with his calm damned face to the bench and lay his hand on the wooden plank still warm from the impact of her sitting of even knell and lay his face to the plank" (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 143). Furthermore, he wishes to engage Eula in a sort of "battle," urging that she "Fight it. Fight it" as he futilely attempts to rape her (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 145). Ratliff, on the other hand, admires Eula's beauty from afar, considering her "another mortal natural enemy of the masculine race. And beautiful"

pertinent for the present discussion is the irony in identifying Ratliff and Labove with the seclusion of monastic life.

Neither Ratliff nor Labove turns “his back on the world,” as both leave Will Varner’s two-county kingdom more frequently than any other character in the novel and work to unite Frenchman’s Bend with a world beyond it. As an itinerant sewing machine salesman, Ratliff spreads news across “four counties with ubiquity of a newspaper,” and at one point finds “himself not only on foreign soil, but shut away from his native state by a golden barrier, a wall of steadily accumulating minted coins” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 25). Outside of Mississippi, Ratliff comes to understand the opportunities that lay beyond his four-county route when he first travels to Memphis to settle debts with a wholesaler and later arrives in Columbia, Tennessee, “where, after the first amazed moment or so, he looked about him with something of the happy surmise of the first white hunter blundering into the idyllic solitude of a virgin African vale teeming with ivory” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 74). For Ratliff, then, Columbia represents an untapped and relatively prosperous market in which he can peddle a product that was a distinct symbol of progress in the late-nineteenth century South. Indeed, the sewing machine had such signifying power in the region that, in 1881, Johnson, Clark, and Company, a New York sewing machine manufacturer, distributed pamphlets showing “The ‘New Home’ in the Sunny South” (qtd. in Laird 83). As a shrewd business man, Ratliff understands how any semblance of progress appeals to both his backcountry and town customers, as he carries his model machine in “a sheet iron box the size and shape of a dog kennel and painted to resemble a house in each painted window of which a woman’s face simpered above a painted sewing machine” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 24). Ratliff’s model case, then, presents a picture of what Faulkner calls “Progress...a pierceless front of

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(Faulkner, *Hamlet* 177). Later, in *The Mansion* (1959), we find Ratliff contemplating a “Eula Varner room” “for folks that wasn’t that lucky, that was already doomed to be too young” to lay eyes on her (257).

middleclass morality” to potential customers in the “one-and two-room cabins” of Frenchman’s Bend and further promotes bourgeois norms to those in Columbia and Jefferson (*Requiem* 178).

During his time in Tennessee, Ratliff is able to sell enough machines to pay off his wholesaler while maintaining full title to “twelve twenty dollar notes” he issued in Mississippi, and even bringing another \$2.53 into Yoknapatawpha County. Indeed, just as a young Ab Snopes is preoccupied with preventing “Yoknapatawpha county cash dollars” from “rattling around loose” in other states, Ratliff comes to realize the satisfaction of getting even a meager amount of foreign capital to begin circulating in his native county (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 48).<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, Ratliff’s time in Tennessee evinces the extent to which his livelihood depends on a complicated web of transactions uniting manufacture, Memphis wholesaler, independent salesman, and customers, and which underscores the way in which Ratliff’s civic pride buttresses Yoknapatawpha’s unity with a nation beyond its boundaries.

While Ratliff’s understanding of the appeal of progress and bourgeois respectability allows him to quickly overcome a sense of bewilderment to engage in meaningful exchanges with the world outside of Yoknapatawpha county, Labove struggles mightily to reconcile the inherited values of a hill farmer with those of university life. As Michael Grimwood points out, Labove obviously belongs to an “archetype of Southern humor, or of any folk humor: the hayseed who goes to college—or to the city, or to the army, or to the court” (175). For Faulkner, Labove is a “hayseed” on the gridiron who must be continually reminded by his coach and teammates “how there were rules for violence,” which he confusedly responds to by asking “But

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<sup>9</sup> Soon after alleged barnburner Ab Snopes arrives in Frenchman’s Bend, Ratliff explains that “He ain’t naturally mean. He’s just soured” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 40). Ratliff goes on to tell Jody Varner and others that, at eight years old, he was with Ab when he was “soured” after losing “Yoknapatawpha county cash dollars” in a horse trade with legendary trader Pat Stamper.

how can I carry the ball to that line if I let them catch me and pull me down?” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 131).

But Labove’s bewilderment is not entirely humorous, for his inability to comprehend the value placed on the game by university officials aligns him with sportswriters and cultural critics who bemoaned the commercialization and professionalization of college sports in the 1920s and 30s.<sup>10</sup> Shortly before the end of his first summer term in Oxford, Labove takes a job “grading and building a football field” and, with no knowledge of the game, “he would speculate now and then with cold sardonicism on the sort of game the preparation of ground for which demanded a good deal more care and expense both than raising the same ground to raise a paying crop on” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 130).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, after the coach presents his 1890s recruiting pitch, complete with tuition, room and board, and the responsibility to “feed my horse and cow, milk and build the fires,” Labove cannot comprehend why “anyone would give me all that just to play a game” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 131). This exchange is obviously a humorous one, but it also illustrates how even a hill farmer can recognize the extent to which the supposed aims of a university are jeopardized as athletes prove to be far more valuable than honest, hard working students struggling to fund their education.

Intriguingly, Labove’s struggle to comprehend university values is something he seems to share with Faulkner, who briefly attended the University of Mississippi in 1920 and 1921. In his biographical reading of the Labove sequence, James G. Watson asserts that “Labove’s position at the University of Mississippi...is a projection and performance of Faulkner’s brief, problematic career there, not as a football player like Labove, or like Faulkner’s classmate Possum McDaniel,

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<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the popular press’s engagement with the commercialization and professionalization of college football, see pp. 9-12 of Chapter 1.

<sup>11</sup> Labove initially enrolls in the summer normal term because he cannot afford the traditional fall and spring terms.

on whom Labove may have been based, but as a poet” whose wide-ranging imagination led to a skepticism of university values (178).<sup>12</sup> Faulkner’s record at Ole Miss does indeed indicate that he may have been as out of touch with university life as Labove, particularly in his inability to win acceptance into campus social circles. But far from being a “hayseed,” Faulkner distanced himself from other students with his affected sophistication, most evident in his outlandishly dandified dress and frequent imitations of French Symbolist poetry in the university newspaper, *The Mississippian*. Though Faulkner did find friendship among The Marionettes, a university theatre group headed by his eventual editor Ben Wasson, he was frequently the subject of scathing ridicule, as most students had a definite distaste for his ostentation.

For the most part, Faulkner easily shrugged off the insults directed at him by other students, but at least one campus rival proved rather difficult to dismiss. Louis M. Jiggitts, who Joseph Blotner describes as a “fullback, debater, crack pistol shot, columnist, track captain, and cornet soloist,” was Faulkner’s first literary rival and said to be the man largely responsible for denying “Count no ‘Count” membership in the Scribblers of Sigma Upsilon, Ole Miss’s most selective literary society (80). Jiggitts, like a number of other students, often mocked Faulkner’s affected persona and imitative verse. For example, on April 7, 1920, four days after Faulkner’s last translation of Verlaine appeared in *The Mississippian*, an anonymous paragraph probably published by Jiggitts exhorted students to “remember that all our poetry is ‘homemade’ and that always lends a charm that ‘bought’ or borrowed goods can never have” (qtd. in Blotner 82).

According to Ben Wasson, Faulkner was assured that he would “survive Jiggitts” and his constant barbs, but it is hard to imagine him responding with equanimity when, in 1924, Jiggitts

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Blotner cites Possum McDaniel, a high school teammate of Faulkner’s who went on to play four years at Ole Miss, as the inspiration for Labove (406).

won a Rhodes scholarship (qtd. in Blotner 81). Certainly, Faulkner could have found comfort in attributing Jiggitts's success as a law student to a Law School faculty led by General Hemingway, "a big hearty Taft-like man who was notorious for his easy grading of athletes" (Blotner 75). But for a young man who imitated European styles and was remembered by his campus friends as being "quite British," the knowledge that a campus rival, not to mention one of the "troglodyte mass of football" players, was experiencing life at Oxford University bred nothing if not jealousy (Wasson 25; Faulkner, "Innocent" 48). While it is perhaps too much of a stretch to suggest that Faulkner's own travels abroad in 1925 were carried out in order to quell his jealousy toward Jiggitts, there is little doubt that the former fullback was on his mind as he awaited departure aboard the *West Ivis* in New Orleans. In a letter to his mother dated July 6, 1925, Faulkner writes that there is "Quite a gang here to see us off. Hope they'll have sence enough to bring a band with 'em. I always wanted to go some where to the sound of poorly played cornets and drums. Too bad Jiggitts don't live in N.O. He's our man" (*Thinking* 191). Clearly, even half a decade after his brief career at Ole Miss, Faulkner still tried to get the last laugh over Jiggitts and the university milieu which embraced what the eventual Nobel Laureate found to be the merely provincial talents of a campus hero.

Unlike Faulkner, Labove eventually becomes an integral part of the Ole Miss football team and even attempts to adopt the customs of 1890s university life, though he plainly struggles to conceal his class origins. For example, as he considers Will Varner's offer of a teaching post in Frenchman's Bend, the narrator notes Labove's

perfectly clean white shirt which had been washed so often that it now had about the texture of mosquito netting, in a coat and trousers absolutely clean too and which were not mates and the coat a little too small for him and which Varner

knew were the only ones he owned and that he owned them only because he believed, or had been given to understand, that one could not wear overalls to a university classroom. (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 129)

Nowhere in the Labove sequence is his concerted, yet futile effort to assimilate the bourgeois standards of university life suggested more strongly than in this description of classroom garb. What is important, though, is that the class origins which cling to him on campus are not forgotten among his teammates. Unlike other poor farmers turned football stars in Southern fiction, Labove does not forge an intimate relationship with his coach or another player of aristocratic stock. Instead, Labove's humble origins work to isolate him from the rest of the Ole Miss team, as we learn that he was excused from practices "on alternate days, which afternoons he spent raking leaves in the five yards" which he tended as part of his scholarship (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 131).<sup>13</sup> Such constant reminders of his supposed inferiority, however, only seem to fuel Labove's "secret and ruthless ambition" to transcend his class position through indefatigable study and hardnosed performance on the even playing field of collegiate football contests.

Labove's "invincible conviction in the power of words" definitely contributes to his academic success, but he seems to realize that his prowess on the gridiron can be just as instrumental in improving his station in life. After all, football is what allows Labove to enroll for the university's fall and spring terms to pursue a law degree, even if it won't allow him to win one of the "girls who had apparently come there [Ole Miss] to find husbands" (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 135). But that is not to say that the "monastic" Labove disregards the allure of the

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that Labove does seem to share a close relationship with a classics professor, "in whose home he had built the morning fires," and from whom he receives "an original Horace and Thucydides" and "an Alma Tadema picture" as Christmas gifts (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 133, 135). In making a connection between Labove and a Classics professor, Faulkner most likely called to mind Alexander Lee Bondurant, whom Faulkner would have known from his own time at Ole Miss, and as the man who founded the university's football program in 1893.

modish football hairstyle of the 1890s and early 1900s. Indeed, his “straight black hair coarse as a horse’s tail” suggests that, like many other young collegians who helped establish the game in Mississippi, he let his “hair grow long, particularly because ladies admired the ‘football topknot’” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 127; Barner and McKenzie 5). More importantly, though, it is only during fall Saturdays that

despite his contempt, his ingrained conviction, his hard and spartan heritage, he lived, fiercely free—the spurning earth, the shocks, the hard breathing, and the grasping hands, the speed, the rocking roar of the massed stands, his face even then wearing the expression of sardonic not-quite-belief. (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 32)

Here, it is clear that more than adrenaline influences Labove’s response to intercollegiate competition. By becoming a central actor in a decidedly bourgeois spectacle, Labove is able to temporarily set aside his deep-rooted values and allow the “spurning earth” to release him from a life of subsistence farming.

Ostensibly freed from his class heritage and celebrated by those in “the massed stands,” Labove significantly recasts his humble aspirations to be a school teacher. In the scene directly preceding Labove’s introduction, for instance, Faulkner offers an intriguing exchange between Will Varner and Labove’s father. On a business trip to the “next county,” Varner is invited to stay in a hill farmer’s “bleak puncheon-floored cabin” in which he notices shoes resembling “no other shoes he had ever seen or heard of” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 124). After the elder Labove explains that the shoes are used for football and goes on to explain that his son plays the game in Oxford in order fund his education, he tells an interested Varner that “I reckon you’ll laugh when



you hear this. He says he wants to be governor.”<sup>14</sup> In response, Varner betrays an understanding of the way in which popularity on the football field can lead to political success, as he tells his host “I aint laughing. Governor. Well, well, well. Next time you see him, if he would consider putting off the Governor business for a year or two and teach school, tell him to come over to the Bend and see me” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 127). Though Varner does seem to be ignorant of how football is played, his apparent understanding of its political significance can be explained by a trend beginning to develop during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. As sports historian Gerald Gems points out, while privileged Ivy League athletes often assumed political office in the North, former players “from more humble origins also made their mark...In the South, Robert E. Lee Roy, a Texas player in 1893, became district judge of Fort Worth, while Louisiana and North Carolina claimed governors” who excelled on the collegiate gridiron (81).<sup>15</sup> Little wonder, then, that a man with enough political acumen to become “beat supervisor in one county and Justice of the Peace in the next and election commissioner in both” does not scoff at Labove’s gubernatorial aspirations (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 16).

Like many aspiring twentieth century politicians who rose from humble origins, Labove exhibits a sort of class pride as he becomes increasingly cognizant of football’s cultural importance. This pride is most clearly evinced when Labove explains how he acquires football cleats to send home to his family. Soon after he accepts the teaching position in Frenchman’s Bend, Labove tells a curious Will Varner that “I knew what the shoes cost. I tried to get the coach to say what a pair was worth. To the University. What a touchdown was worth. Winning

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<sup>14</sup> Lee Russell, who rose from humble origins to become a law partner with Faulkner’s grandfather and later the governor of Mississippi, may have been an inspiration for Labove. However, as Don H. Doyle suggests, Faulkner “may have found some inspiration in the Lee Russell story, but there were many who emulated his ambition for learning and self-advancement” (358).

<sup>15</sup> Ruffin Pleasant captained the LSU football team in 1893 and served as governor of Louisiana from 1916 to 1920. After being orphaned at a young age, Oliver Max Gardner went on to play football at North Carolina State University from 1899 to 1903 and serve as the state’s governor from 1929 to 1933.

was worth” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 132). While Cleanth Brooks is right to point out that Labove’s “sense of honor prevents him from claiming a pair from the athletic locker when his team loses,” the suggestion of further compensation is striking from Labove, for it belies his “not-quite-belief” that he can pay for his education by playing a game (*Country* 175). For Labove, it seems an awareness of football’s effectiveness in political campaigns stems from a deeper understanding of the game’s popularity and the profits represented by the “massed stands.” In demanding further compensation for his athletic prowess, then, Labove serves as an ardent defender of poor whites as he seeks to curb the exploitative business practices of bourgeois university officials who seek to capitalize on a naïve farmer’s labor on the gridiron.

However, Labove’s use of his football cleats also betrays his difficulty to negotiate a transition from his subsistence farmer roots into a position of bourgeois respectability. Initially, the “spurning earth” of the football field certainly seems to offer Labove a release from his subsistence farmer roots, but the ephemeral nature of this release becomes apparent during his final football season at Ole Miss. After his third year as Frenchman’s Bend’s schoolmaster, Labove resumes “the six fall weeks when each Saturday afternoon the spurned white lines fled beneath him” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 139). Also, as he reflects on his three years at the university, he remembers the “cleat-spurned fleeing lines of the football field” and “the spurned cleat-blurred white lines” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 135-136). In these two instances, the sense of freedom that Labove initially feels on the gridiron gives way to a desire to mark or work the earth much like he did on the family farm.

More specifically, Labove seeks to abolish the “white lines” that mark the land’s mediation by capital and render it an arena for bourgeois entertainment. The marks of capital intruding upon the land are significant, for as Richard Godden suggests, Labove is fettered by an

“apprenticeship to worked ‘dirt’ without apparent mediation by capital” and “the persistence within him of habits formed by an archaic mode of production which he seeks to quit” (53-54). Therefore for Labove, cleats are a sort of tool with which he can reconcile his class origins with his participation on the gridiron, as they allow him to symbolically resist the intervention of capital on the land while embracing the sense of inclusion in bourgeois life that football fosters. Furthermore, according to Godden, Labove even seeks to “‘cleat’ his peasant family to the ground” by sending them his football shoes (53). This sort of rootedness indicates that the sense of class pride Labove displays after recasting his career prospects develops into a stultifying class consciousness that jeopardizes his ability to realize his lofty ambitions.

While football cleats symbolically root Labove and his family to the land, they are central to the mythology surrounding another poor Southern farmer who would become a regional and national icon after his flight from the farm. Paul “Bear” Bryant, who historian Charles Reagan Wilson calls the South’s “modern saint of a civil religion,” grew up in an Arkansas sharecropping family and, despite his slightly lower class origin and eventual transcendence, his story has many intriguing parallels with Labove’s (35). According to the popular myth, Bryant’s humble origins motivated him to outwork other players and coaches from the moment that his mother used her meager earnings to have his only pair of shoes cleated by a local cobbler (Wilson 44). But unlike Labove, Bryant maintained his fear of returning to the land, as he cited the prospect of “going back to plowing and driving those mules in Arkansas and chopping cotton for 50 cents an hour” as a source of motivation until his retirement from coaching in 1982 (qtd. in Wilson 44). One could even suggest that the myth surrounding Bryant’s rise to national prominence during his twenty-five years as head coach at the University of Alabama provides a sort of corrective to Labove’s tale, for the legendary coach used football as a springboard to a

distinctively American rags to riches story that Faulkner's halfback is unable to fully realize. Moreover, Bryant's willingness to exchange a life on the land for the modern comforts of big time college athletics was significant for many Southerners, because "for a people whose heroes sometimes symbolized lost causes, Bryant was a change" (Wilson 46). In other words, Bryant was a hero who symbolized leadership and progress, as his notoriously demanding coaching style transformed the Crimson Tide into an exemplary football program that signified the supposedly backward South's cohesion with the rest of the country.

Interestingly, Labove moves Frenchman's Bend toward such cohesion in a Bryant-like manner during his first three years as Frenchman's Bend's schoolmaster. Before Labove's arrival, the Bend's schoolhouse was run by an "old man bibulous by nature" whose students' disrespect "passed the stage of mere mutiny and had become a kind of bucolic Roman holiday" (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 124). Within a year, Labove "had subdued with his fists the state of mutiny which his predecessor had bequeathed him," established a curriculum, and "was satisfied that it was motion, progress, if not toward increasing knowledge to any great extent, at least toward teaching order and discipline" (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 132,137). While his classroom strategies have prompted scholars to situate Labove "in a strictly Southern tradition of battling school teachers who defend book learning with their fists," his use of corporeal punishment and sheer physicality as a means "order and discipline" point to football's role in imbuing Frenchman's Bend with a sense of "motion, progress" (Grimwood 175).

Faulkner often equates motion with progress throughout his oeuvre, and football clearly becomes a part of this equation in *The Hamlet*. Indeed, it is Labove who seems to embody such an equation as his duties in Frenchman's Bend, at the university, and on the gridiron, require him to maintain what feels like a perpetual state of motion. Labove rides a horse "forty miles at night

to and from the university,” carries a football across “fleeing” lines, walks hurriedly to classes “one following another from breakfast time to late afternoon,” and, regularly boards a train for “football trips” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 132-149). That Faulkner should put a late-nineteenth century football star in a constant state of motion is not surprising, for, as historian Edward Ayers reminds us, many Southerners began to embrace sports “in the 1890s as the embodiment of everything new, youthful and wholesome in the United States” (310). Of course, read in the context of the late 1930s sporting culture in America, Faulkner’s unflaggingly mobile football star points to the way in which sport contributed to notions of a South ready to embrace the ideals of a national middle class and economic uplift during the Depression. Furthermore, football allows Labove to experience motion on the railroad, which Joseph Millichap identifies as the dominant “emblem of modernity in the South” throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century (6). Clearly, then, Labove’s state of motion works to connect him, and by extension Frenchman’s Bend and the rest of Mississippi, to the American mainstream.

But despite football’s importance to his own life, Labove turns to a newer game to supplement the sense of progress he establishes in the classroom. Directly after his first series of fall mid-term exams at the university, Labove exercises at least a modicum of influence over his boss when “he returned and hounded [Will] Varner into clearing land for a basket ball court” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 135). That Labove learns basketball, a sport invented in 1891, at a Southern university in the 1890s may initially be read as an anachronism, but the rapidity with which basketball spread across the country is hard to overstate. According Luther Gulick, the superintendent at the Springfield, Massachusetts YMCA training school where James Naismith developed the game, by 1892 it was “doubtful whether a gymnastic game has ever spread so rapidly over the continent as ‘basket ball.’ It is played from New York to San Francisco and from

Maine to Texas by hundreds of teams in associations, athletic clubs and schools” (qtd. in Gorn and Goldstein 173). To be sure, organized basketball was not introduced at Ole Miss until 1909, but it is more than likely that a rudimentary version of the game was being played during Labove’s undergraduate career.

But whether or not Faulkner constructs a deliberate anachronism by bringing basketball to the Bend is far less significant than what the game represents for Labove and his pupils. By Labove’s second year as schoolteacher “the team had beaten every team they could find to play against and in the third year, himself [Labove] one of the players, he carried the team to Saint Louis, where, in overall and barefoot, they won a Mississippi Valley title against all comers” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 135). Here, Labove’s efforts to shape a formidable basketball team in an area where “Federal officers went to...and vanished” indicates his most resounding success in establishing a sense of unity with the rest of the nation in Frenchman’s Bend (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 16). Perhaps an even more effective vehicle for nationalization than football, “Basketball became part of the Progressive, professional middle-class effort to channel, guide and Americanize immigrant youth through elementary and secondary extracurricular activities” from its inception, and by 1930 “national Serbian, Lithuanian, and Polish championships” were organized (Gorn and Goldstein 175-176). Basketball’s nationalizing role in Frenchman’s Bend, then, is analogous to the way in which it worked to unite disparate ethnic groups in urban centers. Significantly, Labove and his team triumph in an emerging urban center which is soon to “summarize the best of civilization and to explain the dynamics of continued progress for the twentieth century” (Gilbert 25). Even Will Varner recognizes St. Louis’ significance, telling his wife that “you and me will go to that world’s fair they are having in St. Louis, and if we like it by God we will buy a tent and settle down there” after Eula is married (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 120).

It is also important to note that basketball's efficacy in linking rural Mississippi communities with the national mainstream was illustrated in Southern fiction nearly four years before *The Hamlet* was published. Faulkner even seems to have lifted his backcountry basketball team from fellow Mississippian James Street, whose 1936 collection *Look Away!: A Dixie Notebook* includes an account of "a basketball team that went to Chicago for the high school national championship match. The Sullivan's Hollow boys were a little embarrassed. They never had played indoors or worn shoes while playing, and they didn't even have uniforms. But they were persuaded to play anyway, so they played bare-footed and in overalls" (qtd. in Holmes 82-83). That Street also has his fictional squad travel to a world's fair site suggests that Faulkner appropriated the brief episode for more than just its comedic effect. Indeed, by situating it in a sequence centering on a football star, Faulkner employs the basketball story to emphasize the pervasiveness of popular sport in the early twentieth century South and its value to a region that sought ways to combat a sense of alienation from the country's cultural landscape.

However, for Labove, neither his triumph on the hardwood nor his four years of college football offer any permanent connection with a world away from the Bend, as he completes his course at the university only to reassume his teaching post. Even with the promise of a legal job awaiting him after graduation, Labove admits "that the vision of that gate which he held up to himself as a goal was not a goal but just a point to reach, as the man fleeing a holocaust runs not for a prize but to escape destruction" (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 140). What effectively closes off Labove's path to Jackson is his own incapacity to curb his passion for Eula Varner, whom he wants only "one time as a man with a gangrened hand or foot thirsts after the axe stroke which will leave him comparatively whole again" (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 142). Because he loses his virginity to a Memphis prostitute after his initiation to the Bar, what Labove seeks in Eula is not

sex but a confirmation of his masculinity among the denizens of the Bend. Labove seems to understand that his athletic prowess can do little to win him favor among the Bend's older males, yet he only seems able to understand his masculinity in terms of sports and university values.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, what Labove seeks to do is mark the seemingly autochthonous Eula in much the same way that he spurns the lines of the football field with his cleats, as he struggles to reconcile his position in the Bend with the life of the land respected by its citizens.

Ironically, the bourgeois values that Labove grudgingly assimilates in Oxford and attempts to instill in the Bend's youths, prevent him feeling "whole again" by reclaiming a sense of masculinity among men whose class origins are similar to his own. Certainly, his position as schoolteacher is not a masculine one, as "his designation of professor was still a woman's distinction...Although they [adult males in the Bend] would not have actually forbidden him the bottle, they would not have drunk with him" (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 134). With book learning carrying almost no value among Will Varner's tenants, Labove turns to sexual conquest as a means to proving his masculinity, even if it comes at the expense of his life. In his ultimate pursuit of Eula in the schoolhouse, though, Labove can only marshal an inadequate bourgeois masculinity, as "He moved as quickly and ruthlessly as if she had a football or as if she had the ball and she stood between him and the final white line which he hated and must reach" (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 145). And when Labove is able to briefly take hold of Eula, he holds her "loosely, still smiling, whispering his jumble of fragmentary Greek and Latin verse and American-Mississippi obscenity" before she escapes his grasp, physically overpowers him, and casually leaves the schoolhouse (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 146). Here, a university education, football

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<sup>16</sup> Even after his picture and name appear in a Memphis paper after a Thanksgiving Day contest against Mississippi A+M (Miss. St.), "he did not even bring the paper back with him" to the Bend because of community's indifference to his athletic prowess (134).



skills, and the “American-Mississippi” unity which it promotes, do no cohere to forge a masculinity that can threaten Eula. Her indifferent response to Labove’s pawing leaves Jody, her brother, with no reason to offer a proper response to the assault, a violent response which will at least be “Proof in the eyes and belief of living men that that happened which did not. Which will be better than nothing” (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 148).

Labove's inability to conquer Eula, or at least intimate that he has, once again betrays his struggle to escape his class origins. In pursuing Eula as a means to masculinity in the Bend, Labove attempts to symbolically overcome his yeoman heritage by proving that the bourgeois masculinity fostered in Oxford is enough to tame or mark a surrogate for the land. Indeed, as he ruminates on Eula’s future husband, he imagines a man who will

not possess her but merely own her by the single strength which power gave, the dead power of money, wealth, gewgaws, baubles, as he might own not a picture, a statue: a field say. He saw it: the fine land rich and fecund and foul and eternal and impervious to him who claimed title to it, oblivious, drawing to itself ten fold the quantity of living seed its owner’s whole life could have secreted and compounded, producing a thousand fold the harvest he could ever hope to gather and save. (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 142-143)

In this sort of prophecy, which works to foreshadow Eula’s eventual marriage to Flem Snopes, it is clear that Labove’s powerlessness to conquer Eula represents an inability to sever his ties to the earth developed during his hill farmer upbringing.

However, though he perhaps does not have the power to relinquish such ties himself, he is able to be released from them. Immediately before he encounters Jody in hopes of dying at his hands, Labove looks at

A paper placard advertising a patent medicine, half defaced— the reproduction of a portrait, smug, bearded, successful, living far away and married, with children, in a rich house and beyond the reach of passion and blood's betrayal and not even needing to be dead to be embalmed with spaced tacks, ubiquitous and immortal in ten thousand fading and tattered effigies on ten thousand weathered and paintless doors and walls and fences in all the weathers of rain and ice and summer's harsh heat, about the land. (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 149)

Here, Labove encounters a life of progress and bourgeois respectability, the life his legal career, and perhaps political success, would surely provide, and the one in which he could leave the Bend and flee to. Faced with such a prospect, Labove still enters the store to die rather than flee to a life devoid of the "passion and blood's betrayal" which stifled his ambitions. But when death is denied him, Labove feels "a furious disinclination, a raging refusal, to die at all," hangs up the key to his schoolhouse and sets off for Jefferson. It is clear, then, that, Labove's rejection by Eula, much like the "spurning earth" of his early football contests, offers him the possibility to live "fiercely free" of the class consciousness that kept him rooted in the Bend. In the end, the "ruthless ambition" and belief in progress which Labove fosters at the university, and particularly on the football field, are restored and allow him pursue a role in a world beyond the Bend. Significantly, Labove flees the Bend with a symbol of his gridiron career: "the overcoat which his football coach had given him six years ago" (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 147). Instead of cleating himself to the earth, it is as though Labove is now cloaking his "blood's betrayal" in a reminder of his bourgeois status that allows him leave behind the rest of his property "on the road to Jefferson. He already had the overcoat with him" (Faulkner, *Hamlet* 151).



## Chapter 3

### “THE TROUBLE WITH FOOTBALL”: POSTWAR FAULKNER AND THE PRECARIOUS POSITION OF SOUTHERN ATHLETICS

Sport's role in bringing the South into the national mainstream, which William Faulkner illustrates in *The Hamlet*, was plainly evident for the better part of the 1940s. With the country at war in Europe and the Pacific, President Roosevelt encouraged the continuation of civilian entertainments to bolster morale and remind troops of what they were fighting for. Among the numerous public diversions of the World War II years, college football received especially ardent support because of the game's ostensible impact on the war effort, as many agreed with University of Wisconsin head coach Harry Stuhldreher's suggestion that the “stamina, teamwork, and coordination football men are getting on the gridiron will help make them better soliders” (qtd. in Kemper 8). However, so many “football men” were becoming soldiers that football programs at many universities were suspended to help meet manpower needs overseas by 1943. Interestingly, of the five most prominent football conferences in 1943, the Southeastern Conference was the most responsive to the war effort, as seven of its twelve members suspended athletic operations for the season.<sup>17</sup> While a suspended season seemed to suggest a patriotic fervor among Southern collegians, many voiced the same sentiment as *New Orleans Item* editor Fred Digby, who condemned the “softies who would kill football and competitive sports” under

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<sup>17</sup> While all major conferences played abbreviated seasons, the Pacific Coast Conference, which saw six of its ten institutions suspend athletic operation in 1943, was the only other major conference in which institutions declined to participate in intercollegiate athletics.

wartime circumstances and went on to imply that suspending football was tantamount to treason (qtd. in Kemper 9).

This brief moment of tension surrounding the continuation of athletics in the Southeastern Conference was quelled by 1944, and its prompt resolution indicates the importance of sports in bolstering a sense of nationalism in the South. Unlike the Pacific Coast Conference, which competed without six of its ten members in 1943 and 1944, the SEC enjoyed the athletic participation of all twelve of its members in 1944 and continued to enjoy a place of prominence on the gridiron. Avoiding another five-team season was crucial for both the SEC and the entire Southeast, as another watered-down football season would have prevented the region's full participation in an element of American culture in which it played a distinct and integral part. Indeed, as the uniquely American spectacle of college football moved into a new decade after the University of Southern California defeated the University of Tennessee in the 1940 Rose Bowl, Grantland Rice celebrated the Volunteers' "magnificent charge in a lost cause. It was Pickett at Gettysburg. It was an outclassed team giving it everything they had" (qtd. in Oriard, *King* 93). As Rice's metaphor suggests, college football in the early 1940s was an arena in which Southern tradition and myth were not cited as evidence of cultural backwardness, but lauded as the quality without which the region's teams would not be worthy to share the national stage. For many in the South, then, college football attested to the region's distinctiveness while reinforcing its place in a larger narrative of American exceptionalism.

While postwar Southern football continued to thrive with Alabama's Rose Bowl victory after the 1945 season and the Texas Longhorns' top ranking to close the 1946 campaign, the end of the 1940s brought an increased recognition of football's national significance that led to a de-emphasis of the South's prominence on the gridiron. Despite Alabama's triumph in Pasadena

nearly a year earlier, in November of 1946 news broke of a clandestinely negotiated agreement between the Pacific Coast Conference and the Big Ten Conference to compete against each other in the annual Rose Bowl game. As historian Kurt Edward Kemper points out, “the sports sections of virtually every major newspaper in the United States howled with criticism” over the secret contract, which excluded a majority of the nation’s teams from contending for a spot in college football’s most prestigious contest (17).

More importantly, at the 1948 NCAA convention, the extremely influential PCC and Big Ten sought to resolve what was viewed as the largely Southern problem of unregulated recruiting. Dubbed the Sanity Code, a list of bylaws preventing excessive contact with prospective athletes, limiting athletic subsidies to need-based tuition waivers, and reserving the right to expel uncooperative institutions from the NCAA, was passed unanimously. But the Sanity Code was by no means unanimously embraced and complied with, as athletic officials in the South frequently joined Georgia Tech’s William Alexander in suggesting that “[the Sanity Code] is a policy that has originated out on the Pacific Coast and has been adopted by the Big Nine [Chicago had withdrawn from the Big Ten], and I don’t believe anybody else in the country gives a hoot about it” (qtd. in Watterson 210). Of course, Southern schools were very concerned with the new recruiting regulations and, as John Watterson asserts, “it is hardly surprising that athletic and college authorities in the South resented the Sanity Code as another attempt at control by the big-time schools in the Northeast and in the Midwest” (213). Indeed, according to Watterson, the need-based subsidy regulations, which relied heavily on student-athletes earning money from working campus jobs, were unabashedly intended to benefit “well-established football programs in the East, Midwest, and West Coast” where jobs were available and legally subsidized football could be afforded. For schools in states like Mississippi and Louisiana, where

abundant jobs did not exist on college campuses, the new regulations placed on athletic scholarships portended a descent into obscurity for their big-time athletic teams.

Although Southern schools did help to win the repeal of the Sanity Code by 1951, the NCAA continued its apparent effort to distance the South from the mainstream of collegiate sports in the United States. One of the more revealing instances of the NCAA's de-emphasis of Southern athletics came as the organization was attempting to manage television's threat to gate receipts and stadium attendance in 1951. Instituting a policy of restricted viewing and scheduled blackouts, the NCAA gave rise to what "became a grassroots issue that resulted in politicians delivering anti-NCAA tirades" when crucial games were not aired (Watterson 268). For example, in November of 1951, Representative Gerald Ford of Michigan told his constituency that he would protest the NCAA's refusal to televise a game between Michigan State and Notre Dame, and the NCAA promptly allowed for a local telecast and lifted its blackout of Washington, DC for that weekend. The following week, the NCAA scheduled a blackout of a matchup between Kentucky and Tennessee, the top two teams in the SEC. Expecting to once again see the NCAA suspend its blackout policy, Governor Lawrence Wetherby of Kentucky protested what he termed an NCAA "conspiracy," yet the week's pivotal SEC contest was only seen by those in attendance (qtd. in Watterson 269). As these events near the close of the 1951 season suggest, the South was increasingly marginalized on the national stage and was often the region over which the NCAA sought to legitimate its authority and protect some semblance of amateurism.

Even more influential than amateurism in shaping the NCAA's postwar treatment of the South was the image of American democracy being promoted as the Cold War mounted in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As historian Mary L. Dudziak illustrates, with the United States'

assumption of a position of unprecedented international influence following World War II, the glaring contradiction of American democracy was brought to the fore as domestic “civil rights protest led to international criticism of the U.S. government. International criticism led the federal government to respond, through placating foreign critics by reframing the narrative of race in America, and through promoting some level of social change” (13-14). Certainly, college football was an area of American social life that could support the narrative of racial progress in the United States, as the steadily growing number of black players in the Big Ten and Pacific Coast Conference during the 1940s and 50s fostered a sort of pride in numbers among African Americans and helped to counter the Soviet-led criticism of race relations in the United States (Watterson 308). It is not surprising, then, that during Nikita Krushchev’s 1959 visit to the United States, fans and journalists in Ohio suggested that he attend an Ohio State football game, claiming that a “Big Ten game would give him a good impression of the real spirit of America” (qtd. in Kemper 22). Clearly, an integrated and equal playing field represented “the real spirit of America” that many in the South were reluctant to endorse.

In December of 1955, shortly before the 1956 Sugar Bowl between Georgia Tech and an integrated Pittsburgh team, a final attempt to preserve racial purity on the gridiron ultimately revealed the way in which sport could be instrumental in integrating Southern society. Although he initially approved of Georgia Tech’s matchup with a Pittsburg team which included black running back Bobby Grier, Governor Marvin Griffin of Georgia sought to capitalize on the public attention the issue received by promoting his constituency’s resistance to desegregation and attempting to prevent Tech’s participation in the South’s most celebrated bowl game. Griffin’s resistance to an integrated Sugar Bowl game helped turn a sports story into a Cold War civil rights story, as the *Newark News* accused Griffin of aiding Soviet propagandists who



portray the United States as “an enemy of the colored people of the world” (qtd. in Oriard, *King* 309). Also, progressive Southern editors like those at the *Atlanta Journal* and *Atlanta Constitution* warned that “both Tech and U of Georgia will be wrecked athletically” if Griffin succeeded in preventing the contest, and their reminders that an integrated football contest did not signal the region’s future evince an agenda of gradual, unforced integration (qtd. in Oriard, *King* 310).

Furthermore, after Griffin’s resistance was squashed and Tech defeated Pitt 7-3, *Atlanta Daily World* writer Marion Jackson predicted that “In less than five years negroes are going to be playing on Tech’s Grant Field and Georgia’s Sanford Stadium or else both will be out of the football business” (qtd. in Oriard, *King* 312). Though Jackson would have to wait nearly fifteen years to see his prediction confirmed, his implication that big-time athletics could prompt an end to Southern segregation quickly became the focus of civil rights discussions. For instance, by 1959, historian Howard Zinn asserted that few areas of Southern life offered more cultural satisfaction and validation than high-profile athletic events, and that the South’s loss of a place in the national sporting landscape as a result of its racial policies would be “a fate worse than integration” (qtd. in Kemper 89).

Though many began to see the potential of popular sport in promoting social change in the South after the 1956 Sugar Bowl, what follows will focus on William Faulkner’s subtle suggestion of such potential, which began to emerge in his fiction nearly a decade before the controversial matchup in New Orleans. While Faulkner never made any public statement explicitly linking sports with civil rights, I hope to show that as the NCAA began to usher the segregated South out of a place of national prominence, the author became increasingly concerned with the social impact of popular athletics. More specifically, I will argue that

Faulkner's engagement with sport in *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), *The Town* (1957), and *The Mansion* (1959) presents a coherent vision of integrated sport as a crucial element of the slow and gradual end to segregation that he espoused, as well as an arena in which the freedom, equality, and fair chance offered by American democracy could be reaffirmed and put on display.

#### Faulkner, Gradualism, and Baseball's "Noble Experiment"

For Faulkner, who detested the unabashed professionalism of the University of Mississippi's football team, the 1948 NCAA Sanity Code probably seemed a necessary measure to curb Southern recruiting excesses. However, he also probably understood that such efforts to condemn and control Southern schools were influenced by an American sporting culture that had changed drastically since World War II. As numerous big-time colleges outside of the South continued to recruit and showcase black athletes, the National Football League formally integrated in 1946 and major league baseball followed suit only a year later. Of these major postwar developments in the world of American sports, Jackie Robinson's success in breaking the "gentlemen's agreement" barring black players from major league baseball was undoubtedly the most significant. According to historian Robert Norrell, Robinson's 1947 season was "the most severe symbolic blow" to segregation, because Robinson's success and equanimity in the face of insult "suggested to whites the inevitable demise of segregation and a powerful precedent for believing that it could end without much difficulty" (139).

It should also be noted that before Jackie Robinson was an American popular hero, the Brooklyn Dodgers began to export him as a symbol of American democracy. Even before a tumultuous 1946 Spring training, in which a number of Florida cities and towns refused to allow

a team with a black player to set foot on their athletic fields, Dodgers' General Manager Branch Rickey decided to assign his new player to the team's minor league affiliate in Montreal. There was an obvious reason for Robinson's assignment, as an International League schedule guaranteed that he would not have to travel farther South than Baltimore. But also impacting Rickey's decision was what historian Robin Wind calls "the certain air of moral superiority" which characterized Canadian perceptions of American race relations (qtd. in Tygiel 123). Once again, in planning the Dodgers' 1947 Spring Training, Rickey looked to avoid complications in the South and promote American racial progress by sending the Brooklyn and Montreal teams to the relatively racially harmonious Havana, Cuba, where Robinson's success offered an optimistic image to black Cuban players eager to join their light-skinned countrymen in the major leagues (Tygiel 165). So, even before Robinson became a popular hero during the Dodgers' 1947 campaign, he was a major actor in what Dudziak calls the United States' "sustained effort to tell a particular story about race and American democracy: a story of progress, a story of the triumph of good over evil, a story of US moral superiority" that presented an ideal America to an international audience at the dawn of the Cold War (13).

Like Branch Rickey and those in the federal government celebrating America abroad, Faulkner came to understand the importance of ameliorating United States race relations as a Cold War measure. In November of 1955, Shortly after returning from to the United States after a three-month goodwill tour sponsored by the State Department, a well-traveled Faulkner stood before the Southern Historical Association in Memphis, listed the countries he had visited, and suggested that "the only reason all these countries are not communist already, is America...because of the idea of individual human freedom and liberty and equality on which our nation was founded" ("Address" 147). He then went on to suggest that integration and social

equality were inevitable changes that must be accepted, “so that all other inimical forces everywhere—systems political or religious or racial or national—will not just respect us because we practice freedom, they will fear us because we do” (“Address” 151). Here, perhaps as a result of his experience with the State Department, Faulkner importantly situates the South at the center of an international struggle and appeals to the staunch anti-communism of the region by suggesting that American freedom and world supremacy hinge on the acceptance of integration and social equality.

But despite Faulkner’s apparent conviction that integration was essential in shoring up the international reputation of the United States, his address in Memphis also evinces his undeviating espousal of gradualism and Southern initiative in implementing integration. Buried in the Cold War rhetoric in Faulkner’s address is an uneasiness about the forced integration of public schools mandated by the Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, for Faulkner claims that if the South could have granted its black citizens a “right to equal opportunity ninety or fifty or even ten years ago, there would have been no Supreme Court decision about how we run our schools” (“Address” 150). Only three months later, in an essay initially titled “Letter to a Northern Editor” and published by *Life* magazine as “A Letter to the North,” Faulkner noted his public opposition to segregation before stating that he “must go on record as opposing the forces outside the South which would use legal or police compulsion to eradicate it overnight” (“Letter” 87). In taking up what he describes as this “middle” position on the race question, Faulkner urges the “Northerner, the liberal,” and all groups clamoring for federal intervention and immediate integration, to “Stop now for a moment” so that the Southerner may see that integration will not be forced but that it must be accepted to prevent “an obsolescence in his own land” (“Letter” 91).

While the public certainly became familiar with Faulkner's approach to the race question in the mid 1950s, what is particularly intriguing about the author's gradualist stance is that he first began to articulate it in a novel he began writing shortly after Robinson and the Dodgers fell to the New York Yankees in the 1947 World Series. After starting work on *Intruder in the Dust* in early 1948, Faulkner wrote to his literary agent Harold Ober that he was working on a story, "the premise being that the white people in the south, before the North or the govt. or anyone else, owe and must pay a responsibility to the Negro. But it's a story; nobody preaches in it" (*Selected Letters* 262). Yet by the time the novel was published later in the year, Faulkner had inserted an extended monologue in which Gavin Stevens does indeed preach to Chick Mallison, his young nephew. In this diatribe on forced integration, Gavin, a Harvard and Heidelberg-educated attorney, understands the inevitability of integration, but suggest that it won't happen "next Tuesday" and criticizes those in the North "who believe it can be compelled into next Monday by the simple ratification by votes of a printed paragraph" (Faulkner, *Intruder* 160). Without the explicit Cold War rhetoric of Faulkner's 1955 speech in Memphis, then, the writer's espousal of gradualism and Southern agency in the integration process are plainly evident.

More importantly, the novel also seems to offer a veiled suggestion of the way in which Jackie Robinson and the visibility of integrated sport might help to facilitate an unforced acceptance of integration in the South. Soon after Lucas Beauchamp, a proud black man, is incarcerated for the murder of a white man early in novel, he claims that he is innocent and asks Chick to exhume the body in order to absolve him of the crime. Unsure of how to unearth the body by himself, Chick solicits the help of Aleck Sander, his companion and the son of the Mallison family servants. Responding to the signal he and Chick "had been using to one other ever since they learned to whistle," Aleck Sander

came up, not even look at him [Chick] but past, over his head, toward the Square as if looking could make a lofting trajectory like a baseball, over the trees and the streets and the houses, to drop seeing into the Square—not the homes in the shady yards and the peaceful meals and the resting and the sleep which were the end and the reward, but the Square: the edifices created and ordained for trade and government and judgment and incarceration where strove and battled the passions for which the rest and the little death of sleep were the end and the escape and the reward. (Faulkner, *Intruder* 92)

Here, the narrator importantly suggests that if Aleck Sander did indeed have a supernatural sense of sight, his gaze would not focus on the “shady yard and the peaceful meal and the rest and the sleep which were the end and the reward” possible for white Jeffersonians willing to earn them. Instead, it is made quite clear that Aleck Sander would be drawn to the space in which white Jeffersonians like Gavin exercise an opportunity to earn the “shady yard and the peaceful meal and the rest and the sleep” that is denied to the town’s black population. Indeed, the narrator seems to imply that Aleck Sander can only conceive of such an opportunity for himself if he can envision an equal and integrated Jefferson, or “if looking could make a lofting trajectory like a baseball.”

To be sure, Faulkner would have been aware of how Robinson’s success led many black Americans to see new possibilities for themselves by 1948, but his loaded baseball simile in *Intruder in the Dust* points to a view of the integrated game shared by progressive Southern sportswriters . Much like the Atlanta journalists in 1956 who would assure readers that an integrated Sugar Bowl was not a threat to Southern tradition while warning them that resistance to the contest would severely jeopardize Georgia’s place in the national sporting landscape, some sportswriters in the South responded to the Robinson story in ways that fit a gradualist agenda.

For example, soon after Robinson signed with the Dodgers organization in October of 1945, W.N. Cox of Norfolk, Virginia, wrote that baseball fans “will lose sight of his color” if Robinson “hits homers and plays a whale of a game for Montreal” (qtd. in Tygiel 75). Also, Fred Maley of the *San Antonio News* asserted that “A star is a star no matter what his race, and I am not apprehensive over the consequences of the signing of Robinson” (qtd. in Tygiel 75). By reading no threat to segregation in Robinson’s signing and directing their focus to Robinson’s potential on the diamond, these writers implied that Robinson and other black players at least had a right to the same opportunities granted to white prospects.

For Faulkner, the equal opportunities like the one extended to Robinson were the crux of integration, and popular sport provided an ideal cultural arena in which the South might come to understand their necessity in time. In the same speech to the Southern Historical Association cited above, and later in an essay for *Life* magazine, Faulkner claimed that most white Southerners did not understand that “there is no such thing as equality *per se*, but only equality *to*: equal right and opportunity to make the best one can of one’s life within one’s capacity and capability, without fear of injustice or oppression or threat of violence” (“Address” 150). Importantly, professional baseball displayed this conception of equality throughout the 1947 season and instilled it in the American consciousness with little threat to established order in the South. After all, Robinson’s success did not force the numerous minor leagues in the South to accept integrated competition, nor was it another example of federal intervention in Southern race relations. Instead, baseball’s “noble experiment” provided an image of the future of sport in the United States which portended doom for segregated athletics and threatened to distance the South from a narrative of American exceptionalism embraced by many in the region during the Cold War.

Near the close of *Intruder in the Dust*, Faulkner even seems to illustrate what looking with “a lofting trajectory like a baseball” might reveal to white Southerners. Sitting in his uncle’s law office, Chick looks down on the Square much like the narrator imagines Aleck Sander doing earlier in the novel, and finds

the Square thronged and jammed as he couldn’t imagine it before...the sidewalks dense and massed and slow with people black and white come into town today as if by concert to collect at compound and discharge not merely from balance but from remembering too that other Saturday only seven days ago of which they had been despoiled by an old Negro man who had got himself into the position where they had had to believe he had murdered a white man. (Faulkner, *Intruder* 239-240)

What is striking in this passage is not necessarily the integrated public space, but the narrator’s claim that such integration occurred “as if by concert” in an effort to bring about some semblance of racial reconciliation. Here, the narrator casts Jefferson’s white citizens as Southerners who have come to acknowledge that they “owe and must pay a responsibility to the Negro” before integration and equality can become social realities.

While *Intruder in the Dust* contains a significant baseball simile, Faulkner’s offers a telling image of integrated baseball nearly ten years later in *The Town*. At a number of points in the Snopes trilogy’s second volume, Chick Mallison alludes to his participation in presumably segregated Saturday baseball games, but we are never introduced to his teammates or competitors. In fact, the only character with whom we know Chick plays baseball is Aleck Sander, who would have been barred from joining Chick on Saturday by Mississippi attorney general J.P. Coleman’s ruling that integrated play was against “public policy” (qtd. in Kemper



84). So it is not on a public diamond but in front of the Mallison home that Aleck Sander sits “with the ball and bat” and urges Chick to “Come on...I’ll knock you out some flies.” And after a despondent Chick shows little interest in catching pop-ups, Aleck Sander persists by telling his friend “All right, you knock out and I’ll chase um” (Faulkner, *Town* 332). Faulkner clearly uses this curious moment to illustrate the appeal baseball continued to hold for black Americans nearly ten years after the professional game was integrated, but he also points to a tension plaguing the South’s efforts to remain relevant in the nation’s sporting landscape. For instance, Aleck Sander confidently asks Chick to play yet maintains a tone of servility in making the proposal, initially offering to hit fly balls to hone Chick’s fielding skills and then agreeing to simply “chase” the balls that Chick hits. What Faulkner seems to suggest, then, is that by *The Town*’s publication in 1957, developments across the country made it possible to envision the integration of Southern athletics while a persistent sense of social inequality delayed its realization.

#### Gavin, Gowan, and the Gridiron

Perhaps another factor delaying the integration of athletics in the South was the way in which most of the integrationist rhetoric in popular sports centered on baseball. Despite the continued integration of college football in the Big Ten and Pacific Coach Conference, and the exploits of black NFL stars like Kenny Washington and, later, Jim Brown, Jackie Robinson remained the predominant hero of athletic integration for more than a decade after the 1947 season. But in the South, where professional baseball was limited to spring training and the minor leagues, baseball carried far less cultural importance than it did in other regions of the

country, especially the Northeast.<sup>18</sup> For example, Louisiana State University, which captured an SEC baseball title and qualified for the College World Series in 1961, refused to even send a team to Omaha because of the strong possibility of facing an integrated squad and encountered little criticism as a result (Kemper 105). The lack of controversy surrounding the LSU decision is certainly a far cry from the tumult that accompanied Georgia governor Marvin Griffin's resistance to an integrated Sugar Bowl in 1956, indicating the extent to which college football dominated Southern sporting culture.

Interestingly, Faulkner begins to address the race issues plaguing postwar college football in *The Town*, a novel published just over a year after the 1956 Sugar Bowl controversy. In the novel's first chapter, Gowan Stevens, Gavin's nephew and Chick's older cousin, "had decided to go out for the football team that fall and he got the idea, I dont reckon even he knew where, that a job shoveling coal on a power-plant night shift would be the exact perfect training for dodging or crashing over enemy tacklers" (Faulkner, *Town* 25). While Gowan may want to develop his physique by before trying out for a pre-World War I high school team, his perplexing notion that working in Jefferson's power-plant might prepare him for football seems to have developed out of Faulkner's engagement with college football throughout the postwar years.

Though only roughly one in every ten college football players were black in the 1950s, running backs Buddy Young and J.C. Caroline of the University of Illinois, along with Syracuse's Jim Brown, were among postwar America's most popular athletes. And as these men enjoyed success on fall Saturdays, sportswriters like Jim Murray of the *Los Angeles Times*

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<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that Southerners were not represented in the major leagues. As Jonathan Eig points out, "Big-league culture was so thoroughly dominated by white southerners that even rough Italian kids from northern cities experienced shock and isolation." New York Yankees shortstop Phil Rizutto, for example, was "struck by the dominance of southern players. They had their own dialects and customs, and they behaved as if those were the official dialects of major-league baseball" (4, 36).

attacked the quality of Southern football by joking that University of Alabama kept their best talent “in the boiler room” (qtd. in Kemper 141). Little wonder, then, that Faulkner’s aspiring football player comes to the conclusion that the best place to develop skills as a halfback is a power-plant where two black men fire the boilers. Indeed, Tom Tom Bird, the day fireman at the power-plant, is “a big bull of a man weighing two hundred” who fits the mold of a postwar running back, despite being “sixty years old but looking about 40” (Faulkner, *Town* 25). Unfortunately for Gowan, though, he gets a job helping Tomey’s Turl, who even when being pursued on horseback by Uncle Buck McCaslin, had never been “known...to go faster than his natural walk” (Faulkner, *Go Down* 10). With such a mentor, Gowan predictably gives up on football, but his unique preparation method evinces Faulkner’s concern with the mounting pressures placed on the South to integrate their athletic programs.

This concern becomes most apparent near the end of *The Town* in Chick’s relation of his uncle’s ruminations on football. Returning from the cemetery after watching the unveiling of a monument to Eula Varner Snopes, Gavin asks “Why don’t you [Chick] wake up and get out of that kindergarten and into high school so you can go out for the team?” because he’ll “need somebody I know on it because I think I know what’s wrong with the way they play it now” (Faulkner, *Town* 382). Perhaps Gavin’s unprompted discussion of football primarily serves to distract him from Linda Snopes’s departure for Greenwich Village, but his observations are more than a little intriguing. According to Chick, Gavin contended that

the trouble with football was, only an expert could watch it because nobody else could keep up with what was happening...the ball and everybody else moved at the same time and not only that but always in a clump, a huddle with the ball in the middle of them so you couldn’t even tell who did have it, not to mention who was supposed to have it; not

to mention the ball being already the color of dirt and all the players thrashing and rolling around in the mud and dirt until they are all that same color too. (Faulkner, *Town* 382-383)

In this passage, many of Gavin's complaints about the difficulty of following a football game are fairly common ones often aired by the sport's early radio broadcasters.<sup>19</sup> What is striking, though, is that they also function to draw attention to the more contemporary issue of segregation in Southern athletics. Specifically, Gavin's claim that the literal blackening of white football teams makes the game even more incomprehensible is suggestive of the sort of the desperate rhetoric employed to justify segregated playing fields in the postwar South. For example, amidst the uproar surrounding the 1956 Sugar Bowl, *Jackson Daily News* editor Frederick Sullens so feared the implications of an integrated contest on Southern soil that he warned against Georgia Tech's participation in the tilt by proffering that the NAACP had somehow infiltrated the Sugar Bowl committee and carefully selected a Pittsburgh team which would facilitate the organization's "mongrelization scheme" (qtd. in Oriard, *King* 310). In light of this and other outlandish arguments for segregated football, Gavin's diatribe can be read as a sort of parodic sports column highlighting the untenability of segregated sports.

Furthermore, Gavin's football musings receive another airing in *The Mansion*, where they more clearly reveal Faulkner's stance on athletic policy in the South and his understanding of its broader social significance. In relating events which occurred in *The Town*, V.K. Ratliff, an itinerant sewing machine salesman and raconteur, explains Gavin's assertion that

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<sup>19</sup> For instance, Graham McNamee, who formed sports radio's first commentary duo with Phillip Carlin, wrote that "Anyone who has ever attended a gridiron game and tried to pick out football, play, and player from an entangled mass of twenty-two young men, who are trying to mask their maneuvers, can realized something of the problem presented (qtd. in Oriard, *King* 46).

football could be brought up to date in keeping progress with the times by giving ever body a football too so ever body would be in the game; or maybe better still, keep just one football but abolish the boundaries so that a smart feller for instance could hide the ball under his shirt-tail and slip off into the bushes and circle around town and come in through a back alley and cross the goal before anybody even missed he was gone.

(Faulkner, *Town* 176)

Here, the coded concern with the problem of segregated sports evinced in Chick's relation remains, but Ratliff's recasting of Gavin's argument serves to emphasize the symbolic potential of integrated football in the South. Clearly, in providing an account of Gavin's argument which shifts the focus from football's incomprehensibility to the sport's struggle to keep "progress with the times," Faulkner alludes to the South's stubborn refusal to integrate their playing fields. More importantly, the claim that the sport's temporal lag can be rectified by "giving ever body a football so that ever body would be in the game" suggests that the problem with football in the South is not the way it is played but its failure to present an image of American democracy by not giving "ever body" an equal opportunity to showcase their athletic prowess. Read in this light, the "boundaries" to be abolished are not the sidelines or goal lines, but the persistent color line barring black athletes from big-time football in the South. For Faulkner, then, keeping "just the one football," and allowing everyone access to it, is the only way in which the South will not be left behind by a national sporting culture increasingly concerned with presenting an image of American democracy.

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