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BIG BEN: THE GENTLE REBEL

BRANDON ROOK, UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

MASTER OF ARTS IN JOURNALISM

MAY 2014

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## ABSTRACT

With the University of Mississippi having a deep and somewhat negative history with racial tension, the sole purpose of this study was to figure out if Ben Williams, the first African American varsity football player experienced any issues with racism while he attended school. Over the years Williams has stated that no issues have come about because of his race. After interviewing Ben Williams and over 10 others for the thesis project documentary entitled “The Ole Miss Black Athlete”, it can be predicted that Williams didn’t receive any racial tension on the campus of Ole Miss from the media or student body, faculty and staff. Although racial tensions were present at the time between Whites and Blacks, Williams never had issues because of his personality and athletic ability.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Robert “Gentle Ben” Williams, the founders of the Ole Miss Black Student Union and all other minorities that had to deal with racial tension during their time at the University of Mississippi.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to my thesis committee Dr. Nancy Dupont, Dr. Bradley Schultz and Professor Wenger. In addition, a big thank you to Provost Morris Stocks, the Meek School of Journalism for introducing and accepting m into this prestigious program. Lastly, I acknowledge Robert “Gentle Ben” Williams, the Ole Miss Media and Documentary department and Micah Ginn in the Ole Miss Sports Productions department for their assistance during this research.

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## INTRODUCTION

The University of Mississippi was chartered in 1844; the school's doors didn't open until 1848.<sup>1</sup> After 114 years of providing educational growth to the white public, the school integrated in 1962 when James Meredith enrolled in school on October 1, 1962.<sup>2</sup> The media's coverage of this incident was very important in the influence of the public. Some journalists denounced the ruling of the court's decision to allow Meredith into The University of Mississippi; there were some rabble-rousers and radicals who published stories that expressed a negative light towards integration.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, there was a group of journalists who did support the ruling or either had a neutral stance.<sup>4</sup>

These journalists portrayed the situation in a positive light or neutrally as if Meredith was just another individual going to school.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, riots evolved and the National Guard had to come to Oxford, Mississippi to protect and escort Meredith around campus. During those two historic days in the fall of 1962 two individuals were killed due to the uprising against desegregation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (The University of Mississippi, History.) Accessed November 19, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Bio. True Story, "James Meredith Biography." Last modified November 19, 2013. Accessed November 19, 2013. <http://www.biography.com/people/james-meredith-9406314>.

<sup>3</sup> William Chapman, "An Inside Look At The Ole Miss Campus: Student Opinions At Oxford." *Lawrence Journal-World*, October 16, 1962 accessed April 9, 2013 <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=az4yAAAAIABAJ&sjid=gOUFAAAAIBAJ&pg=4881,1348082&dq=negative+reports+on+james+meredith+integration&hl=en>

<sup>4</sup> Peter Edson, ("Longview on Mississippi.") *Ocala Star-Banner*, October 7, 1962 accessed April 9, 2013 <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=f3ZPAAAAIABAJ&sjid=GAUEAAAAIBAJ&pg=6030,1187211&dq=negative+reports+on+james+meredith+integration&hl=en>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid ("Longview on Mississippi.")

<sup>6</sup> Ibid ("James Meredith")



The University of Mississippi didn't integrate its athletic programs until the summer of 1970 when Coolidge Ball became the first African American athlete.<sup>7</sup> Ball signed his letter of intent to play basketball for Ole Miss, and he had much success as the first African American athlete by leading his team to three consecutive winning seasons for the first time since the 1930's, which made him a three-time All-SEC player.<sup>8</sup>

In 1893 The University of Mississippi football program began.<sup>9</sup> Ole Miss football didn't become integrated until the 1972-73 season. During that year Robert "Gentle Ben" Williams debuted with the Johnny Rebs varsity team against The University of South Carolina on September 23, 1972.<sup>10</sup> In 1972, the University's population only consisted of 3.5 percent African Americans,<sup>11</sup> now that number is up to 16.7 percent.<sup>12</sup> During the 2012-2013 season 60 percent of the Ole Miss football team was African-American.<sup>13</sup>

Robert "Gentle Ben" Williams was an African American football player from Yazoo City, Mississippi, he was recruited by Warner Alford to play football at the University of

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<sup>7</sup> ("Ole Miss to Honor its First African-American Athletes") This page was last modified on February 15, 2006. <http://www.olemisssports.com/genrel/021506aab.html>

<sup>8</sup> ("Legacy Of Three Men.") This page was last modified in February 2006 <http://www.olemisssports.com/genrel/021610aaa.html>

<sup>9</sup> ("Ole Miss Rebels Football." This page was last modified April 18, 2013. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ole\\_Miss\\_Rebels\\_football](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ole_Miss_Rebels_football).

<sup>10</sup> ("Everett et al, *Ben Williams Scrapbook*"), (1972,1973,1974,1975). Accessed April 7, 2013

<sup>11</sup> Wayne King, "James Meredith and Ole Miss: Decade After a Bloody Insurrection." *The New York Times*, October 1, 1972

<sup>12</sup> ("Fall 2012-13 Enrollment - All Campuses" ) [http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/university\\_planning/institutional\\_research/enrollment\\_data/2012-2013/index\\_all\\_2013.html](http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/university_planning/institutional_research/enrollment_data/2012-2013/index_all_2013.html)

<sup>13</sup> , ("Rebel Gameday), (Jackson: TeleSouth Communications Inc., 2012), 36,37,40,41.

Mississippi during the 1972 football season.<sup>14</sup> Robert Williams received the nickname Gentle Ben because of his huge physical appearance; he was 6'3, 250 lbs. The name came from a 1960's television series titled *Gentle Ben*.<sup>15</sup> Alford held the position of assistant Director of Athletics and Director of Recruiting.<sup>16</sup> Along with Williams, the 1972 recruiting class also consisted of James Reed, another African American football player from Meridian, Mississippi.<sup>17</sup> These two players were the first African American football recruits to commit in the University of Mississippi's history.<sup>18</sup> During that time Ole Miss had two separate football teams; the varsity team was known as the Johnny Rebs and the freshman team was known as the Baby Rebs.<sup>19</sup> During their freshman years Reed played for the Baby Rebs and Gentle Ben made the varsity team. This allowed him to become the first African American to integrate the Ole Miss football team.<sup>20</sup>

However, the 1972 football season was the first time the National Collegiate Athletic Association declared college freshmen eligible for varsity football.<sup>21</sup> This decision was made

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

<sup>15</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

<sup>16</sup> Ibid Everett et al, *Ben Williams Scrapbook*, (1972,1973,1974,1975).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

<sup>18</sup> Ibid ("Legacy Of Three Men.")

<sup>19</sup> Ibid Everett et al, *Ben Williams Scrapbook*, (1972,1973,1974,1975).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

<sup>21</sup>Maureen Downey, "It's madness to let college freshmen play. Restore NCAA freshman ineligibility rules.," *AJC Get Schooled* (blog), April 04, 2011, <http://blogs.ajc.com/get-schooled-blog/2011/04/04/its-madness-to-let-college-freshmen-play-restore-ncaa-freshman-ineligibility-rules/>.

because most colleges felt that they were losing too much money off of scholarships and expenses on freshmen players who were not earning their keep.<sup>22</sup>

Currently The University of Mississippi is part of the fourteen-member Southeastern Conference; in 1972 the SEC only consisted of eleven teams.<sup>23</sup> Integration of African American's in SEC football began in 1965 when the University of Kentucky recruited wide receiver Nat Northington.<sup>24</sup> Over the span of five seasons, (1967-1971) nine other SEC teams also integrated their teams. The only football teams without any African American players were the LSU Tigers and the Ole Miss Rebels; during the 1972 season both teams finally integrated.<sup>25</sup> LSU debuted two African American players, Mikell Williams and Lora Hinton, on September 16, 1972.<sup>26</sup> Ole Miss didn't debut Gentle Ben until September 23, 1972, which made the Rebels the last team to integrate in the Southeastern conference.

The purpose of this research is to examine the media coverage of the 1972 integration of the Ole Miss football team. In hopes of discovery, it will be beneficial to find out if the integration was blown out of proportion or if it was just another guy playing football. Along with finding out if Gentle Ben experienced any racism from the media coverage during his time in Oxford, it will be essential to compare if students, faculty or staff displayed racism towards

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid Maureen Downey, "It's madness to let college freshmen play. Restore NCAA freshman ineligibility rules.," *AJC Get Schooled* (blog), April 04, 2011, <http://blogs.ajc.com/get-schooled-blog/2011/04/04/its-madness-to-let-college-freshmen-play-restore-ncaa-freshman-ineligibility-rules/>.

<sup>23</sup> ("The Integration of Football in the Southeastern Conference.") Last modified May 9, 2012. Accessed April 20, 2013. <http://www.teamspeedkills.com/2012/5/9/3008248/the-integration-of-football-in-the-southeastern-conference>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid ("The Integration of Football in the Southeastern Conference.")

<sup>25</sup> Ibid ("The Integration of Football in the Southeastern Conference.")

<sup>26</sup> Ibid ("The Integration of Football in the Southeastern Conference.")

Gentle Ben as they did towards James Meredith in 1962.<sup>27</sup> In regards to the media, the term “blown out of proportion can be defined as something that is advertised and published in a much worse way than what the situation really is. Newspapers, movies, and documentaries that focused on different variations of integration and sports became the type of media coverage reviewed for the research. The *Clarion Ledger*, *Daily Mississippian* and *Oxford Eagle* were the original targeted newspapers for review but due to the lack of information found, the research extended to other newspaper articles found on Google’s Newspaper Archival Project. The *Clarion Ledger*, *Daily Mississippian* and *Oxford Eagle* were originally targeted because they had a local connection to the University of Mississippi and Ben Williams.

This topic is important because 2012 represented the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the football team integration at Ole Miss. The Ole Miss football team was the last team in the SEC to integrate their football team and it would be a great comparison to see if that caused a lot of national and international attention like the James Meredith situation ten years prior.<sup>28</sup>

Over his four-year tenure Gentle Ben accomplished many accolades such as becoming the first African American football captain and the first African American “Colonel Reb”<sup>29</sup> in Ole Miss history. “Colonel Reb” is the former title of the favorite campus personality for a male at the University of Mississippi; now the title is “Mr. Ole Miss”. The research consisted of a thorough analysis of primary sources compiled through newspaper articles, magazine articles, yearbooks, scrapbooks and interviews between 1972 and 1975.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid (Chapman, "An Inside Look At The Ole Miss Campus: Student Opinions At Oxford.")

<sup>28</sup> Ibid (“James Meredith”)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout American history many concerns have surfaced because of indifferent attitudes toward racial inequality and integration. Media coverage of integration was very important during these times of trial and error. Segregation was a part of American sports as well. With the ghosts that are still associated with Mississippi and its racial inequality;<sup>30</sup> this research was designed to find out how the media covered the integration of Robert Gentle Ben Williams joining the Ole Miss football team during the 1972 football season. Therefore, this literature review looked at the 1.) The definitions of racial inequality and integration, 2) Post Civil War leading up to the Jim Crow South, 3) Integration in educational facilities 4) James Meredith's role in integrating The University of Mississippi, and 5) The integration of American sports.

### **Racial Inequality and Integration**

The terms "racial inequality" and "integration" were frequently used during the decades between 1950 and 1980. Many Civil Rights activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Medgar Evers fought for the equal rights for all Americans to be treated equally,<sup>31</sup> not just African Americans. Racial inequality can be defined as a disparity in opportunity and treatment that

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<sup>30</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of love, labor of sorrow: Black women, work, and the family, from slavery to the present.* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 69.

<sup>31</sup> Russell Adams, *Great Negroes Past and Present*, (Chicago: Afro-Am Publishing Co., 1963),

occurs as a result of someone's race.<sup>32</sup> Integration can be defined as the bringing of people of different racial or ethnic groups into unrestricted and equal association, as in society or an organization, also called desegregation.<sup>33</sup> An example of racial inequality would be a group of Hispanics attending a better school than other races because the school only permits Hispanics. An example of integration would be allowing Caucasians to become members of a historically black fraternity. The first example shows racial inequality because the better school is only allowing a door of opportunity for one ethnic group. Only allowing a door to be opened for a certain culture and excluding others only because of their race isn't a fair act of equality or progression in education. The latter is an example of integration because it includes more than one race in the group. Fraternities and sororities were historically established as social organizations for students. Some of these organizations were historically established through race. In relation to the progression of these social organizations founding principles, over time more fraternities and sororities began to integrate.

### **Post Civil War and The Jim Crow South**

On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which abolished slavery.<sup>34</sup> After the Union defeated the Confederates during the Civil War, racial tension was still apparent between Caucasians and other minority races. Jim Crow laws

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<sup>32</sup> ("Racial inequality," ) Last modified March 29, 2013, <http://www.yourdictionary.com/racial-inequality>

<sup>33</sup> ("Integration," ) Last modified March 29, 2013, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/integration>

<sup>34</sup> History, ("Emancipation Proclamation.") Accessed November 19, 2013. <http://www.history.com/topics/emancipation-proclamation>.

were established in the Southern states in 1876. Jim Crow laws reasserted White southerners' dominance by denying African Americans basic social, economic, and civil rights, such as the right to vote.<sup>35</sup> These laws lasted for almost a century; Jim Crow also hit education in the African American communities very hard because they didn't have the same type of education offered to Whites. These laws affected workplaces, public transportation, housing, and other entities that led to extreme racial segregation in all aspects of life.<sup>36</sup> The beginning of the end for Jim Crow came in 1954 after the Supreme Court heard the *Brown v. Board of Education* case.<sup>37</sup> Thurgood Marshall represented the plaintiffs and he argued that African Americans and Whites were inherently unequal because of separate school systems.<sup>38</sup> Segregated schools violated the "equal protection clause" of the United States Fourteenth Amendment. Marshall argued that segregated schools shouldn't be acceptable because that system has a tendency of making African American children feel inferior to White Children.<sup>39</sup> Over time The Supreme Court heard the case and concluded, "...in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal..."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> ("Jim crow laws," ) last modified March 29, 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim\\_Crow\\_laws](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Crow_laws)

<sup>36</sup> Ibid ("Jim crow laws," ) last modified March 29, 2013, at 14:33  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim\\_Crow\\_laws](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Crow_laws)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid ("Jim crow laws," ) last modified March 29, 2013, at 14:33  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim\\_Crow\\_laws](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Crow_laws)

<sup>38</sup> ("The Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts on behalf of the Federal Judiciary," ) last modified August 15, 2013, <http://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/get-involved/federal-court-activities/brown-board-education-re-enactment/history.aspx>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid ("The Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts on behalf of the Federal Judiciary," ) last modified August 15, 2013, <http://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/get-involved/federal-court-activities/brown-board-education-re-enactment/history.aspx>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid ("The Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts on behalf of the Federal Judiciary," ) last modified August 15, 2013, <http://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/get-involved/federal-court-activities/brown-board-education-re-enactment/history.aspx>

The 36<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson eventually ended Jim Crow after he signed the bill for congress to pass the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.<sup>41</sup>

### **Integration in Educational Facilities**

Before he became an Associate Justice for the United States Supreme Court, Thurgood Marshall was the winning lawyer of the milestone case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. While fighting for the integration of African American students, Marshall used an example from the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. He argued that “separate but equal” has no place in America's public schools because being separate doesn't technically mean that there is equality.<sup>42</sup> The ruling in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case became a big achievement for the Civil Rights movement. As a result of this case, integration in all aspects of life became very possible while Jim Crow crumbled to defeat.<sup>43</sup> Just like many other states in the Jim Crow South, African American Mississippians benefitted from integration. It was now illegal for an educational facility to deny someone access into an institution because of race, color or creed.

### **James Meredith and The University of Mississippi**

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<sup>41</sup> ("Lyndon b. johnson," ) last modified March 29, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/lyndonbjohnson>

<sup>42</sup> (Bio. True Story, "Thurgood Marshall Biography.") Accessed November 20, 2013. <http://www.biography.com/people/thurgood-marshall-9400241?page=2>.

<sup>43</sup> ("Definition of jim,") last modified March 28, 2013, <http://www.chegg.com/homework-help/definitions/jim-crow-laws-43>



Eight years later James Meredith faced great odds when he began the process of becoming a student at The University of Mississippi. Before 1962 other African Americans were being admitted in small numbers to other White colleges and universities in the South without too much incident.<sup>44</sup> Other schools in the north and around the country were integrating as well.<sup>45</sup> For example, The University of Maryland integrated its law school in 1936, Arkansas desegregated its state university in 1948 and the University of Georgia admitted two African American students in 1961.<sup>46</sup> The ruling from the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case began to change American views on integration. In 1956, 49 % of Americans agreed with allowing Whites and African Americans to attend the same schools, 61% of those were Northerners and 15% were Southerners.<sup>47</sup> After being denied entry to Ole Miss twice, Meredith brought a lawsuit against the school for denying him entry because of his race. After reaching the U.S. Court of Appeals, a decision was made in June 1962 ordering the school to admit Meredith.<sup>48</sup> The court's decision caused a lot of controversy, and the 1962 Ole Miss race riots occurred on September 30. The National Guard along with U.S. federal Marshals were called upon to help manage the riots in Oxford, Mississippi.<sup>49</sup> Two individuals were killed and many others were injured because of

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<sup>44</sup> ("Integration of Ole Miss") last modified March 29, 2013, <http://www.history.com/topics/ole-miss-integration>.

<sup>45</sup> ("BROWN V. BOARD: Timeline of School Integration in the U.S." Spring 2004)

<http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-25-spring-2004/feature/brown-v-board-timeline-school-integration-us>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid (BROWN V. BOARD: Timeline of School Integration in the U.S." Spring 2004)

<http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-25-spring-2004/feature/brown-v-board-timeline-school-integration-us>

<sup>47</sup> Ibid (BROWN V. BOARD: Timeline of School Integration in the U.S." Spring 2004)

<http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-25-spring-2004/feature/brown-v-board-timeline-school-integration-us>

<sup>48</sup> Nick Bryant, "Black Man Who Was Crazy Enough to Apply to Ole Miss," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 53 (2006): 60-71.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid ("James Meredith")

the uproar over integration. However, Meredith was still able to matriculate and break down barriers at Ole Miss after completing his studies and graduating from Ole Miss in 1963.

During Meredith's time at Ole Miss the campus environment was more than tense. He was harassed daily by dorm mates, he received hate mail and he also had to be escorted by The National Guard.<sup>50</sup> He was an outcast.

Coincidentally that same year the Ole Miss football team went undefeated in 1962 winning the NCAA National Championship.<sup>51</sup> While other schools around the nation began integrating their football teams, the Ole Miss football team didn't recruit African American football players until the 1972-73 season.

### **The Integration of American Sports**

Jackie Robinson (MLB), Willie O'Ree (NHL), Fritz Pollard (NCAA Football and NFL) and Earl Lloyd (NBA) all have one thing in common: they were the first African American athletes to break the color barrier in their respective sports. All of these transformations occurred between 1916 and 1960, which were times of the Civil Rights era. The integration of major pro sports was controversial because owners didn't know if signing an African American would be

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<sup>50</sup> ("Ole Miss Integration" ) last modified November 22, 2012, [http://crdl.usg.edu/events/ole\\_miss\\_integration/?Welcome&Welcome](http://crdl.usg.edu/events/ole_miss_integration/?Welcome&Welcome).

<sup>51</sup> (Mitchell, 2012) watched March 28, 2013.

positive or negative for the teams.<sup>52</sup> The media's coverage of these events informed the masses of what really went on behind the scenes and locker rooms of these athletes.

Arguably Jackie Robinson was one of the greatest baseball players in American history. Breaking the color barrier in Major League Baseball was very similar to the controversy caused by Meredith integrating Ole Miss. Their situations were similar because both individuals received hate mail, death threats and weren't welcomed.<sup>53</sup> Willie O'Ree was the first African Canadian to play for the National Hockey League: he broke the color barrier by playing for the Boston Bruins during the 1960-61 season. His career in the NHL only lasted two seasons although he continued to play hockey for other professional leagues like the WHL, EPHL and the AHL.

Fritz Pollard was a pioneer for African-Americans in sports and outside of sports. He the first black football player for Brown University, an Ivy League school where he starred at running back.<sup>54</sup> In 1916, he played in the first ever Rose Bowl game and became the first ever African-American to be named to the Walter Camp All American team. After his college career in 1920 he went on to become a pro football player for the Akron Pros in the American Professional Football Association.<sup>55</sup> The APFA eventually transformed into the National Football League. While playing pro football Pollard had to be resilient due to other White

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<sup>52</sup> ("Integration milestones in,") Retrieved from <http://espn.go.com/gen/s/2002/0225/1340314.html> on March 28, 2013.

<sup>53</sup> ("Baseball, the color line,") last modified March 29, 2013, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/collections/robinson/jr1947.html>

<sup>54</sup> "Films Encore: Fritz Pollard," Web, <http://www.nfl.com/videos/nfl-videos/09000d5d827295d2/Films-Encore-Fritz-Pollard>.

<sup>55</sup> ("Fritz Pollard Alliance , "Fritz Pollard." )Last modified November 19, 2013. Accessed August 26, 2013. <http://fritzpollard.org/in-memoriam/fritz-pollard/>.

players not wanting him to play in their league. Being of a small stature (5'9, 165 lbs), he had to deal with other players trying to break his legs, arms and "take him out".<sup>56</sup> Eventually he earned their respect due to his good play, the following year he became a player coach.

<sup>57</sup> Earl Lloyd was the first African American basketball player to play for the NBA. Although he entered the league with three other African Americans in 1950, he was the first to play in an NBA game due to scheduling. While playing with the Washington Capitols his team debuted first. Although he was called the "Jackie Robinson" of the NBA, Lloyd claims that his transition to the NBA wasn't as hostile as Jackie's due to the NBA being a such a new league and with Washington D.C. already accepting integration.<sup>58</sup> Lloyd was accepted by his teammates as well because he played on the same skill level with them. The mentality of the NBA was different it wasn't as hard because in Lloyd's inaugural season he wasn't the only African American in the league and fans were used to seeing integrated teams at the college level.<sup>59</sup> During the integration season of 1950-1951 Lloyd technically became the first African American to play in the NBA because of scheduling of season openers.<sup>60</sup> His debut with the Washington Capitols occurred on October 31, 1950, this date was one day before Chuck Cooper's debut with

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid ("Films Encore: Fritz Pollard,)

<sup>57</sup> ("Legends of hockey," ) retrieved on March 28,2013 from <http://www.legendsofhockey.net/LegendsOfHockey/jsp/SearchPlayer.jsp?player=13894>

<sup>58</sup> (D, 2008) retrieved on March 28,2013 from <http://www.totalprosports.com/2008/11/06/top-5-african-american-firsts-in-sports/>

<sup>59</sup> ("Lloyd, Earl. Notable,")\_last modified March 30, 2013, [http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Earl\\_Lloyd.aspx#1-1G2:3407900333-full](http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Earl_Lloyd.aspx#1-1G2:3407900333-full)

<sup>60</sup> (National Basketball Association, "Earl Lloyd: A Basketball Pioneer." Accessed November 20, 2013. [http://www.nba.com/sixers/community/earl\\_lloyd\\_050208.htmlpic/Earl\\_Lloyd.aspx](http://www.nba.com/sixers/community/earl_lloyd_050208.htmlpic/Earl_Lloyd.aspx)

the Boston Celtics and four days before Nat “Sweetwater” Clifton’s debut with the New York Knicks.<sup>61</sup>

## PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The primary purpose for this research is to examine the media's role in the coverage of the Robert Williams' integration in 1972. Facts about his transition from high school to college will be discovered as well. Being the historic figure that he is Williams accomplished a lot while attending Ole Miss and after Ole Miss. It will be interesting to discover if he suffered the same abuse and criticism from the media like James Meredith and Jackie Robinson or if he experienced a transition as smooth as Earl Lloyd's.<sup>62</sup> Integration was a key goal of the Civil Rights movement. Many Civil Rights activists fought for the equality of all Americans. The connection between integration at The University of Mississippi and African Americans will forever be a part of the American Civil Rights movement. The following findings of Gentle Ben's four years at Ole Miss will try to explain the culture and life of the first African American football player and how he was portrayed in the media.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid ("Earl Lloyd,")

<sup>62</sup> Ibid ("Lloyd, Earl. Notable,")

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

The media's coverage on the integration of James Meredith, associated with the racism he encountered during the 1962 school year at the University of Mississippi, was very influential in the theoretical perspectives used to develop the following research questions:

RQ1: What was the reaction of the media coverage towards the integration of the Ole Miss football team?

RQ2: Did Ben Williams personally experience any racism during his time at The University of Mississippi?

The research was designed to show the media coverage of the decision made by the University of Mississippi to allow African Americans to play on their football teams. The research questions were analyzed over a eight month period.

To measure the significance of the media coverage a qualitative study was conducted by Brandon Rook reviewing over 14 primary sources that consisted of newspaper stories and a video interview that was published or related to the four-year period between 1972-1976, the years Williams attended Ole Miss. A collection of scrapbooks with numerous newspaper articles, pamphlets and yearbooks pertaining to Ben Williams collegiate football career was used as well as primary sources. These documents are under William's possession at his home in Jackson, MS. The researcher also gave an in-person interview with Robert "Gentle Ben" Williams at his home in Jackson, MS on April 7, 2013 and September 21, 2013. Twelve other video interviews were also conducted between September and October of 2013. The interviews were used for the thesis paper and thesis documentary project.

The original plan was to research all information dealing with the 1972 inaugural season

of the Ben Williams integration. However, due to a lack of available information in the primary sources, the research was expanded over Williams' four-year career to give a more deep and accurate explanation of how he was covered in the media.

Some of the news media reviewed by the researcher came from *YouTube*, *New York Times*, *The Clarion Ledger*, *The Daily Mississippian*, *The Hattiesburg American*, *Jackson Daily News*, and *The Greenwood Commonwealth*. Most of the previous listings were acquired through four scrapbooks belonging to Ben Williams. Evelyn Everett, Elizabeth Pittman and Lillian Baxter Loggans created the scrapbooks; they were three ladies that were loyal Ole Miss fans. They created these scrapbooks as a gift and gave them to Ben Williams after each football season between the 1972 and 1975.<sup>63</sup>

Through microfilm provided by the J.D. Williams library, the researcher reviewed the sports section issues of *The Clarion Ledger*, *Jackson Daily News*, *Daily Mississippian* and *Oxford Eagle* were all reviewed between the months of August 1972 and January 1973. These newspapers were evaluated during those months because they are the months that football is usually in season. Keywords such as “integration”, “football”, “Ole Miss” Ben Williams and Gentle Ben were searched in hopes of getting useful information pertaining to research. Other stories on African American college football players such as Condredge Holloway, Walter Payton, Doyle Orange and Melvin Barkum were observed by Mr. Rook to see if there was any comparison or contrast to the way they were covered by the media.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook



The researcher acquired other sources through stories provided by Google's Archival Newspaper Project. The same keywords listed above in this program as well. Due to Google's Archival Newspaper Project being connected to the AP wires, other non-local papers like *The Lawrence Journal-World*, *The Gadsen Times*, *Spokane Daily Chronicle* and *Ocala Star-Banner* were used as primary sources offering valuable information on how the media covered the Ben Williams integration at Ole Miss. A majority of the primary sources were localized except for the newspaper articles used through Google's archival Newspaper Project.

A fifteen-minute YouTube video interview as well was analyzed as well. Mississippi Public Broadcasting provided the interview and it was on the topic of Integrating Ole Miss.<sup>64</sup>

Ben Williams's in-person interviews were held on April 7, 2013 and September 21, 2013. The first interview lasted for 25 minutes and the latter was about 40 minutes long. The following questions during the interview:

During the interview the researcher asked Williams several questions dealing with the integration which included different ways the media reported on him during his inaugural year at Ole Miss, racism in the 1970's from the Oxford community, on being "Colonel Reb", his relationships with students, (both African American and White) and his feelings towards having his own slice of African American history

It was discovered that the media press coverage of the Ole Miss' football integration showed a time where college football was in the midst of transformation. Researching and finding out the different ways of media coverage gives explanation to the importance of Ole Miss integrating their football team. The researcher also discovered that Ben Williams was a man that initiated his right to explore better opportunities and his bold act broke the color line.

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<sup>64</sup> Morris, David Rae, "Robert "Gentle Ben" Williams," *Integrating Ole Miss | MPB* , Robert "Gentle Ben" Williams interview, Web,

## FINDINGS

During an in-person interview with Ben Williams, Williams was asked about the ways of the media's coverage during his integration season of the Ole Miss football team, the following answer to the question specifically addressed the answer for RQ1. Having to be a big deal because of the James Meredith situation a decade earlier, the researcher found that media influence has suggested that media sometimes has the power to affect public's perception.<sup>65</sup> After talking to Robert Gentle Ben Williams about his role during the integration of the Ole Miss football, it was concluded that the reaction of the media towards his integration wasn't a big issue. Williams replied, "They really didn't have much issues with it you know... I don't think it was really that serious... I was a football player and I had to prove myself worthy just like every other player on the field... because when you play football you gotta compete no matter what you do." <sup>66</sup>

For research question one, a conclusion of the results from newspaper resources indicated that there was much anecdotal evidence supporting Gentle Ben's response. During the 1972 season Williams wasn't even associated with The University of Mississippi Johnny Rebs football team until a September 20, 1972 *Clarion Ledger* story titled "Kinard Says Rebel Injury List Shorter."<sup>67</sup> The Wednesday article stated that four freshman have now been practicing with the varsity team since Monday. Included in the list of four freshmen were Ben Williams and James

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<sup>65</sup> "The Media Effects Theory." Last modified January 16, 2012. <http://www.slideshare.net/Fludvd/media-effects-theory>.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

<sup>67</sup> Larry Guest, "Kinard Says Rebel Injury List Shorter." *The Clarion Ledger*, sec. Sports, September 20, 1972,

Reed. It was found that being the first Black football players to participate on the Ole Miss football team wasn't associated with that first story. Mr. Rook says the previous article supports the claim that being Black on an all-White football team wasn't a big issue at all.

Research discovered that the first time Gentle Ben's race was apparent was in a story occurred in a September 21, 1972 *Clarion Ledger* story entitled "Rebels Brace For G'Cocks."<sup>68</sup> Above the headline included two pictures of Reed and Williams face; the photos clearly showed that both players were Black. The subhead stated "Up From Freshman Ranks." The article referring to the Rebels preparing for a matchup against South Carolina briefly stated in the last paragraph of the story that "Reed and Williams are the first Blacks ever to play football at Ole Miss." This was the only reference discovered through research that mentioned Williams' race when talking about football. It was also found that Williams' was associated with the Johnny Rebs football team in *The Daily Mississippian*<sup>69</sup> on September 20, 1972, it was a general story, and no race was brought up.

The researcher found the first DM story explaining specific descriptions about Williams' physical appearance on a article published two days later on September 22, 1972. The story was entitled "Rebs cocked for Saturday's game," it was written by Sports Features Editor Dudley Marble.<sup>70</sup> In this story Williams was referred as a "Gigantic freshman...230 pound monster that is pushing hard for a starting position." It was found that Williams' race was never a talking

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<sup>68</sup> "Rebs Brace For G'Cocks." *The Clarion Ledger*, , sec. Sports, September 21, 1972, 2E

<sup>69</sup> AP, "Kinard to try more freshmen." *The Daily Mississippian*, , sec. Sports, September 20, 1972.

<sup>70</sup> Dudley Marble, "Rebs cocked for Saturday's game." *The Daily Mississippian*, , sec. Sports, September 22, 1972, 12.

point when described in *The Daily Mississippian*. Mr. Rook did find that the first time Williams was mentioned in *The Oxford Eagle* came in a September 28, 1972 story entitled “Shutout by Ole Miss is Noteworthy Mark”.<sup>71</sup> In this recap of the 21-0 win over South Carolina, Williams’ race was not mentioned either. Williams was put in a positive light as one of the top defensive players to shut down the Gamecocks offense.

RQ2 asked if “Williams experienced any personal racism during his time at The University of Mississippi.” In response to one of the questions Williams stated, “ I didn’t have any problems with racism. I promise you I didn’t...I was a big brother you know?” Williams was 6-3, 250 pounds. The first report associated with Williams race in *The Clarion Ledger*, Williams was referred as a “one of the state’s premiere lineman” in high school.

Moreover, it was found that Williams’ eventually made the team, by playing during the second week of the 1972 football season.<sup>72</sup> James Reed didn’t suit up or play in the game versus South Carolina.<sup>73</sup> The researcher found that Reed didn’t play for the varsity team for the remainder of the season due to a multitude of running backs already available on the varsity team. That technically allowed Williams to become the first African-American to integrate the Ole Miss football team. Gentle Ben played well against the South Carolina Gamecocks. In a September 26, 1972 follow up story about the 21-0 victory for Ole Miss, Rook found that *The*

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<sup>71</sup> "Shutout by Ole Miss is Noteworthy Mark." *The Oxford Eagle*, , sec. Sports, September 28, 1972.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

<sup>73</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

*Daily Mississippian*, referenced Williams as an “anchor of a defensive line that only allowed 27 yards rushing.”<sup>74</sup>

Throughout the sought out media coverage, there weren’t any findings of Williams’ race being associated with his physical abilities on the football field. Throughout the rest of the season Williams was mentioned numerous times in either a neutral or positive light in *The Clarion Ledger*, *Daily Mississippian* or *Oxford Eagle*. There weren’t any findings of media coverage displaying Gentle Ben in a negative light for his race or performance. Williams was a good football player. There were no findings of the media coverage being racist towards Gentle Ben or bringing up his race as a negative factor in effects to the academic community or local community. Research discovered that stories throughout the remainder of that 1972 football season either mentioned Williams as a key member on the Ole Miss defense or displayed his football statistics.<sup>75</sup>

Throughout his freshman year Williams registered 35 tackles and 6 sacks.<sup>76</sup> He ranked second amongst SEC freshmen in tackles and the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* named him to the 1972 All-SEC Rookie Team. Ole Miss finished the year 5-5.<sup>77</sup>

Brandon Rook also created a documentary to go along with the thesis project. The following script from the documentary entitled *The Ole Miss Black Athlete* helps further explain the findings from this research project.

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<sup>74</sup> Dudley Marble, "Offense, defense battling for prestige." *The Daily Mississippian*, , sec. Sports, September 26, 1972, 12

<sup>75</sup> Ibid Everett et al, *Ben Williams Scrapbook*, (1972,1973,1974,1975).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid Everett et al, *Ben Williams Scrapbook*, (1972,1973,1974,1975).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid Everett et al, *Ben Williams Scrapbook*, (1972,1973,1974,1975).

## THE OLE MISS BLACK ATHLETE SCRIPT

### **Brandon Rook:**

“Former Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett led the charge of keeping the University of Mississippi segregated.”

### **Curtis Wilkie:**

“The state was starting to become a frenzy and quite frankly I thought it was not inconceivable that the state would try to secede from the union again, that’s how crazy it was. The mood on campus among the students would have been largely supportive of Barnett if you would have had a vote on campus, I’ll bet that 90 % of the student body would have said we’d rather stay all white.”

### **Brandon Rook:**

“Curtis Wilkie a Ole Miss 1963 graduate and Overby Fellow in the Meek School of Journalism recounts the racial tension that began to stir right before the school integrated on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1962.”

### **Brandon Rook:**

“Barnett displayed his feelings with the infamous “I love Mississippi” speech during halftime of the Ole Miss vs. Kentucky game in Jackson. That event occurred on the day before the deadly Ole Miss riots.”

### **Brandon Rook:**

“But James Meredith did break the color barrier at Ole Miss and the college experience for an African-American male at the University of Mississippi today is very different.”

“Yet, it hasn’t always been easy. The protests and marches in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. The school’s dis-association with the rebel flag in the mid 90’s and the recent protests on campus during the 2012 presidential election, these are just some of the few incidents that have shown the racial problems that still haunt the University of Mississippi until this day.”

### **Dr. Khayat:**

“I don’t think we ever had anything that resembled what happened in 1962 of course but that was a blemish that was a mark.

The message to me there is that once something like that happens on your campus it’s going to be a long time before people think of you differently.

I think Penn State is stuck for a long time with Joe Paterno and that assistant coach. That’s just the way it is, the negative stigmas attach and they’re hard to get rid of. I was Chancellor for 14 years and Gerald Turner preceded me and he was Chancellor for 11 years and I worked with him. So I know that for 25 years we worked hard on changing that perception.”

**Brandon Rook:**

That perception has been a long hard fought battle for the University. The University is more diverse than you can imagine and the University has had some success in changing their public perception. Especially among African-Americans over the years instead of feeling more like a visit, more African-American students show appreciation towards Ole Miss. This has been a step forward even though at times places like the grove and greek system may have seemed unwelcoming to African-Americans and minorities.”

**Dr. Ross:**

“Now it seems like black have more ownership so here we’ve had several black student body president’s, in fact last year we had the first African-American female student body president, first African-American female to be voted homecoming queen. The fact that these individuals would run to even think that they would be able to achieve that kind of position in itself is revolutionary, arguably in some ways. And the fact that our sports teams now particularly football and basketball are heavily permeated by African-American males and I think that just seeing black males move across campus.

I think that now black students feel like, I’ve got every right to be here. My family pays taxes, this is a state institution, I have a right not only to come here and get an education but I also have a right to be involved in student activities, student organizations, socialize with my friends and do some of the things that college students do on a regular basis.”

**Brandon Rook:**

“That comfort level has taken some time for African-American students to achieve. James Meredith was abused, taunted and heckled by students, Cleve McDowell, the first Black law student felt like he had to carry a gun on campus for protection and was expelled for it, and Dr. Don Cole says he had many experiences of injustice and isolation himself.”

**Dr. Don Cole:**

“Oh I can remember a number of circumstances, very typical for me to be walking along to class or somewhere on campus and a group of white guys would block the way. And so if you will would make me get off the walk and walk around. There was some who would sort of pass me purposely and bump me and knock me off of the walk.

Rather than that when we would go to football games it was a real interesting experience something that I never figured out. We’d go to football games and if the University of Mississippi would score we’d cheer for them, my school. That’s a natural thing to do but upon them getting a touchdown or score we would be pelted with different objects being thrown at us. You know paper cups, or plastic bottles or whatever they would sort of throw at you at the time and that was very confusing to me because I was saying “Do I not cheer for my team? Do I cheer for the other team? Why is it?” That one I never quite figured out, but I could probably give an instance after instance or occasions for which that kind of indicated that I was clearly unwelcomed here.

One of the stories that I often tell is about a chemistry class and I can’t remember whether it was the first day or second day but early in the class the professor mentioned that the books weren’t all there, not everyone had the books. So for those who had books and for those who didn’t, why don’t you pull up next to somebody with a book. I just remember being in class and I sort of looked on this row to my right and there was nobody on that whole row. Then I turned and looked to my left and there was nobody on that whole row. Matter of fact there was nobody on the row ahead of me or there was nobody on the row behind me. And so as I kind of looked around, I was a little island in that particular class. So it was probably very unpopular to be seen with me. There were people who were good will people who would often speak, particularly in the dorms were nobody was around, you know they would come and say hello and have a few words with me. Conscious of their surroundings to make sure that nobody else saw them. And so from the students perspective I could feel the “unwelcomeness.”

**Brandon Rook:**

“But one African American man attending the University of Mississippi says the feeling of being unwelcome never surfaced. In the fall of 1972 during a time when there was obvious racial tension between black and whites on the campus of Ole Miss, Robert “Gentle Ben” Williams a 6’3 250 lb defensive tackle from Yazoo, City Mississippi was recruited along with James Reed a running back from Meridian, Mississippi to become the first signed Black football recruits in Ole Miss history. Progress and change was occurring at the University.



That progress at Ole Miss was built on the backs of other African-Americans at other schools such as Condredge Holloway at the University of Tennessee, Melvin Barkum at Mississippi State University and Nathaniel “Nat” Northington who became the first African American player to integrate SEC football in 1967. He played Wide receiver for the University of Kentucky Wildcats.”

**Nathaniel Northington:**

“I was being recruited by some other major colleges, I was kind of leaning towards those until the governor called me down to his mansion. The governor’s mansion with myself, my entire family, Mother, Father, sisters and brothers. He had a lunch there for us and expressed to us the very very significance that it would be to integrate the SEC, UK.

He let me know of all thee benefits they would have for African-Americans and I felt like that was the right thing to do at that time, So that’s the reason why I decided to go ahead and accept the scholarship.”

**Brandon Rook:**

“The opportunity to get a good education and play on the football field was there. At first Northington was welcomed by his teammates and acquaintances. Even when racial issues came about he was supported by his colleagues.”

**Nathaniel Northington:**

“The first road trip that we took my sophomore year was to Auburn, Alabama. And there of course in the time of 1967 you could not really in some places you could not stay. So the team had been accustomed to staying at a certain location when they went there every year and because of me being on the team. The only African-American, they could not stay there. So we had to make alternate accommodations because of me being there.

But I had some teammates to say that there was a people that’s really troopers, you know state troopers with confederate flags in their gun holsters. They heard them talking about there going to do something, there going to kill somebody or whatever. And using the “N word” so yeah we kind of experienced some of those things.”

**Brandon Rook:**

“But unfortunately the tables quickly turned for Nat. During his sophomore year his best friend on the team Greg Page, a fellow African-American football player was paralyzed after a car accident. Page died the night before Nat integrated SEC football in a game ironically against Ole

Miss in Lexington, Kentucky on September 30, 1967. During the 26-13 loss to the Rebels Northington dislocated his shoulder. The toll from his best friend's death and injury left Nat depressed and alone."

**Nathaniel Northington:**

"I just didn't feel it anymore that I really had the total support that I needed. I guess I was going through some grief you know about losing my teammate and also I felt kind of isolated because I wasn't getting the support from the players or the coaches that I felt like I needed and finally I just decided that it was probably best for me to go ahead and leave and go and transfer to another school."

**Brandon Rook:**

"Northington eventually left Kentucky because of these problems and transferred into the University of Western Kentucky to finish out his football career.

Williams' career was also made possible by another brave athlete, two years prior to his signing on to play football for the University, Coolidge Ball from Indianola, MS integrated athletics at the University by receiving a basketball scholarship and enrolling in the fall of 1970. Coolidge Ball had a very successful career during his three seasons with the Ole Miss Rebels. Because of NCAA rules, he couldn't play during his freshman year but between 71 and 73 Ball earned all-SEC honors and led Ole Miss to its first consecutive winning seasons since the 1930's.

\*<http://vimeo.com/52557417> (1:18 clip where Coolidge Ball states that he barely had any racial problems.)

**Brandon Rook:**

"The first year that Ball came was the last year for Dr. Don Cole and seven others. During a time of racial indifference black students met daily to perform some type of protest whether it was in the cafeteria or in front of the lyceum. But one particular incident drew the line for Ole Miss administrators."

**Dr. Don Cole:** "That was a group that was to be on campus, it was a singing group, it was called 'Up with the people', an international group. We knew that that particular evening/night that much attention would be focused on the institution because that group was here. So decided to if you will march and protest that particular event. So 80 or 90 % of the people of color sort of marched and protested while that concert was going on in which is called Fulton Chapel here. We all protested out in front of it and then we entered Fulton Chapel the building and then we

walked up on the stage, we held signs up on the stage there, and then while the performance was going on we protested until during it and then we marched out of Fulton Chapel. The totality of all of us was immediately arrested. Most of us were carried to the local jail until it filled up and then the remaining individual characters DE parchment. That particular incident did indeed probably was highly publicized and as a result of that particular incident I think it was 8 of us who were expelled from the University. I was amongst those 8 that was expelled from the University.”

**Brandon Rook:**

“While this was going on Coolidge Ball had claimed that he didn’t experience any racial issues to confront on campus. Many factors could have played into him making those statements. One could be him being a successful African-American athlete. Because of his athletic ability he may have been treated with favor during his undergraduate years. Ben Williams also says that he didn’t experience problems while playing football for this university.

Gentle Ben and James Reed were part of the baby rebels freshman football team at the beginning of the 1972 season because of the NCAA changing the freshmen eligibility rules during 1972 it was possible for either Williams or Reed to play varsity football that year. Fortunately for Williams he got the call up to play with varsity team, they were shorthanded on the defensive line. Unfortunately for Reed he had to stay on the freshmen team because a multitude of running backs at the position.

These decisions made “Gentle Ben” the first African-American football player to integrate Ole Miss football. The last football team in the sec to integrate.”

**Eddie Crawford:**

“We wanted the good football players. It really didn’t matter who they were or where they’ve came from as long as they were good players and good students. And that was the thing that we were interested in more than anything else.”

**Brandon Rook:**

“Most reports just listed Williams as a huge defensive lineman, race didn’t seem like an issue in the media, by then it may have been the norm to have integrated teams in the NCAA and SEC.”

**Curtis Wilkie:**

“I think they were straight and if there was an editorial attitude it would have been “about time, let’s be competitive, let’s open thing up.” There may have been some disapproval by the Jackson

paper, it was still in the hands of the Hedermann family then but I would suspect virtually all of the press would have been supportive. I thought it was about damn time. I was at the game when Ole Miss played its first integrated team. I am almost positive it was against the University of Houston. They had a running back Warren McVea who was really good and he was a standout in the game. I can't remember whether we won or loss the game but I just remember that the biggest deal was "where finally playing against an integrated team. And by that time I think most people were ready for it, most white people said hey let's move on. I mean even the people who've might have been segregationists three or four years earlier said ok it's the law of the land. Our schools our integrated, let's get on with it and obviously the thought was let's get some of these fine athletes on our team instead of having to play against them."

**Brandon Rook:**

"As far as race goes, for quite some time Ole Miss athletic teams could not compete against other integrated teams. This rule had caused the baseball team to miss out on postseason play and also the football team from playing in certain bowl games."

**Dr. Khayat:**

"The state would not allow kids who went to the predominantly white, the white schools to play against black players and so I was on two southeastern conference championship baseball teams and we weren't allowed to go to the World Series because of fear that we might play against a black player. On it's face to me that was ridiculous. But secondly the only thing we could do about it but then third we played our last baseball game, my senior year around June 1<sup>st</sup> and beat Florida and won the SEC. So we were eligible to go to the College World Series only we were not allowed to go."

**Curtis Wilkie:**

"Oh yes, when they scheduled a school they would avoid playing any team that they knew would be integrated. You know we never played anybody really outside of the south and you know the stories of not just football but basketball and baseball teams that when Ole Miss won the SEC baseball championship, Mississippi State won the SEC basketball championship they were not permitted to compete for the national championship, the playoffs or college world series because they would have had to play against black athletes and that finally was broken by the Mississippi State basketball team in 1963."

**Brandon Rook:**

Ben Williams who suffered a stroke in April 2012 says by 1972 the environment was very different.

**Ben Williams:**

“As y’all can tell I’m a pretty good size individual you know so we really didn’t have any problems with racism you know or nothing like that. You know they had a degree of respect for me.

No, I was a good football player. I was a good football player. The fans loved me ok. I mean they really embraced me, the fans did. They did you know.”

**Warner Alford:**

“We never had any kind of a problem with Ben or James academically or getting along with other players. They were all welcomed in, they were football players, as I would always say “they are football players, they happened to be black but they can play.”

**Brandon Rook:**

“That respect that Williams is talking about is supported through anecdotal evidence. You see ben just wasn’t the first black football player on the campus of ole miss. He had lots of favor and clout because of his great personality and athletic ability. He was a dominant All-American at defensive tackle who became the first black football captain in ole miss history. He was also the first Black Colonel Reb in Ole Miss history, which is the title for the most popular male personality on campus. Being a charter member for the Eta Zeta chapter of Omega Psi Phi fraternity incorporated didn’t hurt his resume either.”

**Linda Williams:**

“He was very popular. Umm Hmm Aww Ben was always a favorite. He was always a favorite. With the black students and the white students.”

**Eddie Crawford:**

“Well Ben A was very intelligent player. Being a big defensive player as he was. He could adjust to all the systems well and he was a smart football player and he had good speed and good size and that was the thing that you were looking for in a big tackle like he was.”

**Warner Alford:**

“You never ever heard anything about Ben Williams doing anything other than being a real good football player, a good human being and a good student.”

**Brandon Rook:**

“Warner Alford was Williams’ defensive line coach in 1972 and he played a role in recruiting him to Oxford. They have always been close.”

**Warner Alford:**

“I told his mother first time I met her, I told her I said “I’m going to take care of him, I said don’t worry if you want me to know anything you pick up the phone and call me.” I said “but I’m going to look after him everyday and he’ll be right there.”

**Brandon Rook:**

“This sense of protection was one of the tools that allowed the African-American athletes to feel more welcomed and comfortable with the University of Mississippi and their coaches. Eddie Crawford would open his home to some Black student-athletes to stay in over the summer so that they would be allowed to take classes. James Reed, one of the best running backs in Ole Miss history was one of those athletes who reaped the benefits and favor.

During a time of racial tension some of the first athletes say that the tension was never directed towards them. So what does this mean? Because a black athlete can make a tackle or score a touchdown on the gridiron is he considered “better” than a educated black scholar who excels in the classroom?”

**Dr. Stollman:**

“I think that our black football players come in and the campus loves them because of their abilities. I think that they are celebrated that is on the field; they are celebrated for their physical abilities.

I have a fundamentally different opinion about how are athletes in particular are athletes of color are treated off the field.

That is that we gain so much from these athletes, they provide us with enormous pleasure, enormous visibility, they are often terribly good-natured. But there is football itself is an industry and in particular our program garners a great deal of money and the tens of millions. And so they become in some ways though people try to stop this, commodities. The ordinary African-American student on this campus suffers from what I would call everyday racism and micro aggressions.”

**Dr. Don Cole:**

“Well Ben I think experiences were probably framed in athletics. That was a totally different institution than the non-athletic side. Ben was coming in helping the team win football games and putting them on the map. I was helping their math department be a little better with being a student but that wasn’t as important as what Ben was doing. So I think the setting that he was in framed his experiences a lot more and I am pleased that he did have such a good experience because that made it a lot easier for other athletes to come and we have observed through years that athletics could lead in many other areas for which we probably could not have made near as much progress in the time that it took to make that progress.”

**Dr. Khayat:**

“I think that anybody who’s a good athlete is treated differently and I think that starts in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. As soon as it’s apparent that you can play sports then you start getting a little bit of different treatment.

I think that if Ben would have been white he would’ve been treated the same way because he has this incredible personality. The only thing that was noticeable about Ben being black was that he was a black person who was an All-American player who becomes Colonel Rebel. Now there’s something in congress about a Colonel Rebel being a black man. I mean it’s great that he was, I admit that meant the students thought that he was like Mr. Ole Miss. Which is what Colonel Rebel has always been and apparently that’s going to be the title from now on which will be just great. Ben was just so likable and so capable.”

**Dr. Ross:**

“I think in particular on this campus that football players of course are viewed as this kind of representative gladiator, representative individual who, I hate to use this cliché but I’ll use the cliché, someone that has transcended race. That when you see this outstanding Wide Receiver that we have Moncrief, you don’t necessarily see him as an African-American, you see him as this outstanding Wide receiver who makes these catches and we got to make these videos about him and we can embrace him so on and so forth. Would you be afforded the same kind of affirmation or to be embraced at the same kind of level, I’m not so sure that you would be able to that unless you were an athlete that kind of maybe ability like Moncrief.”

**Jamil Northcutt:**

“I think that the African-American students that attend this institution have a different experience. I think we’re somewhat revered at times and so it comes with some privileges. At the

same time too as it comes with those privileges it also comes with some perceptions that we have to fight.”

**Brandon Rook:**

Jamil Northcutt, a former linebacker and current Assistant Athletic Director at Ole Miss is referring to the dumb jock perception that most athletes get thrown at them on a daily basis. Even during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as a football player at Ole Miss he felt separate from the white population.

**Jamil Northcutt:**

“Is I think the normal student population had some different experiences with racism and just being apart of this culture. I mean you know it’s not a lot of us here in the city of Oxford and at least it wasn’t when I was here attending school. I could remember walking across campus at one point in time and in my mind I was thinking “where are all of the African-American people, where all the black people?” Then I was like “man they tricked me.” When I got recruited but I remember going across campus and I didn’t really see any other African-American people so that was a from of isolation that I experienced when I was here as a student. You know going to class and not seeing anybody that looked like me, not really having any administrators around that looked like me. Not having anybody to talk to when there were issues that were coming up. I thank God that I have a great mother and father but you know just having people there to communicate with that was an issue on this campus.”

**Brandon Rook:**

“Over the years sports have proved to transcend race.”

**Nat Northington:**

“Absolutely, without a doubt, I think that sports has done that, has brought people together of different races. It can really promote racial reconciliation, I think that a football game on Saturday’s is probably one of the most integrated times in our society.”

**Brandon Rook:**

“Because of “Gentle Ben’s” personality he never felt any isolation or racial problems but some may disagree to those statements. Some believe that even with his great personality and athletic ability, something should have occurred dealing with race or isolation.”

**Dr. Ross:**



“Oh yes, absolutely had too. I think that if he did not that’s a feat that’s monumental, that’s going to be difficult.”

**Dr. Stollman:**

“Here’s my opinion there are two ways with what Ben has said. First and foremost Ben like he’s mentioned in perhaps his congeniality and his personality. He may have been considered “non-threatening.”

It could be also operating that Ben was actually not aware of the conversations, the backstage conversations about him. Also it is possible and I don’t know, but it is possible that people were kinder to Ben because of what the University was trying to do with integrating Ben as the first football player of color. Which means that he may not have been subjected to the kind of scrutiny and racism that we’re talking about. I mean it’s a bit kind of a counterintuitive to say that he had no problems. One would want to investigate why he wasn’t either picking up on the cues or the cues that were coming to him he was not reading them in that way. He preferred and perhaps for survival, for personal enjoyment, of getting along on the campus. He may have not recognized them or not processed them. But I can’t, I mean we have to trust what Ben is saying but the literature says perhaps there are other things that play and that’s what I would suggest as a look to what’s going on around because there were surely conversations about how “what it was like” to integrate and have the first black football player and how to manage the process so that we don’t tip that balance of white hierarchy.

Robert “Gentle Ben” Williams is considered a great person and great athlete by many. He and other African-American athletes say they had a positive experiences during a time in the 1970’s where racial tensions were present on the campus of Ole Miss. Even though it wasn’t apart of his game. Gentle Ben was his name, a man that integrated Ole Miss football and didn’t let race define the outcome of how he would carry and involve himself to help transcend race.

Although positive steps have been made over the years. The fight hasn’t been won. It’s now 2013 and certain racial issues still surface.”

**Dr. Stollman:**

“The ordinary African-American student on this campus suffers from what I would call everyday racism and micro aggressions. I’m not sure they feel equally comfortable and empowered. You probably heard this, that there are many students of color who argue that this is not the most comfortable space. In fact we see it in the Daily Mississippian with Op-Eds, You see what happened with Kimberly Dandridge, You see what happened with Courtney Pearson last year with the Colonel Reb and the Mr. Ole Miss event.”

**Brandon Rook:**

“Whether it be through athletics or education, the road towards ending racial issues isn’t just a battle for the University of Mississippi. It’s a national dilemma that needs a solution.”

**\*End**

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research was designed to accumulate accurate information that explained the media coverage towards Robert “Gentle Ben” Williams breaking racial barriers at The University of Mississippi. This research was also designed to figure out if “Gentle Ben” experienced any racial issues or isolation during his time as a student at the Ole Miss.

Ben Williams told Rook that he was recruited to play football at numerous schools during his senior year at Yazoo City high school.<sup>78</sup> The list of schools Ben Williams said recruited him included other integrated football teams such as Kansas State<sup>79</sup> and Mississippi State.<sup>80</sup> Some of Mississippi’s Historically Black Colleges such as Jackson State and Alcorn State recruited him as well.<sup>81</sup> Williams said that he was aware of the controversy dealing with James Meredith’s integration a decade earlier, he said that the situation didn’t disconcert his decision to integrate the University of Mississippi’s all-White football team.<sup>82</sup> When asked about his decision to attend Ole Miss, Williams talked of how coach Warner Alford recruited him “hard”<sup>83</sup>; Williams said, “I wanted to do something different, I enjoyed the opportunity to get a chance to change the landscape.”

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, ("Robert "Gentle Ben" Williams," *Integrating Ole Miss* | MPB)

<sup>79</sup> ("Harold Robinson, 76; athlete broke Big Seven color barrier.") Last modified May 14, 2006. [http://www.boston.com/news/globe/obituaries/articles/2006/05/14/harold\\_robinson\\_76\\_athlete\\_broke\\_big\\_seven\\_color\\_barrier/?camp=pm](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/obituaries/articles/2006/05/14/harold_robinson_76_athlete_broke_big_seven_color_barrier/?camp=pm).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, ("Robert "Gentle Ben" Williams," *Integrating Ole Miss* | MPB)

<sup>81</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

<sup>82</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

<sup>83</sup> “Hard”-expressed a high level on interest in Williams

It was discovered that the results for research question #1 indicated that the media treated the integration as if Ben Williams was just another guy playing football. Throughout the all of the material covered there weren't any findings of the media coverage treating Gentle Ben different from any other athlete. It was seven years before when wide receiver Nat Northington integrated the SEC, he signed a letter of intent to play for The University of Kentucky. (Northington didn't play for the varsity team until 1967; ironically he debuted against Ole Miss on September 30, 1967.)<sup>84</sup> Northington had to wait until his sophomore year to play varsity football because of the NCAA freshman eligibility rules that didn't change until 1972.<sup>85</sup> The researcher suggests that by the time Williams suited up for the Rebels, African American athletes showed signs of success in intercollegiate and professional sports. Movies watched such as *42*, *Glory Road*<sup>86</sup> and *Ali* depicted the potential and success of African American athletes. Although these movies illustrated racial tension due to desegregation, the researcher suggests that the differences in geography and diverse cultures could have played a role in the amount of racism a particular athlete experienced.

Between 1972-75, it was found that *The Clarion Ledger* pictured and reported on numerous African American athletes in a neutral or positive light.

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<sup>84</sup> ("Nat Northington.") Last modified November 8, 2010. <http://www.kaintuckeean.com/2010/11/nat-northington.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid Maureen Downey, "It's madness to let college freshmen play. Restore NCAA freshman ineligibility rules.," *AJC Get Schooled* (blog), April 04, 2011, <http://blogs.ajc.com/get-schooled-blog/2011/04/04/its-madness-to-let-college-freshmen-play-restore-ncaa-freshman-ineligibility-rules/>.

<sup>86</sup> "Glory Road".

- 2006 film, based on the events surrounding Texas Western's integrated 1966 NCAA Men's Division I Championship basketball team.

Along with Ben Williams, the researcher found that race wasn't an issue with the other athletes who were covered in the media. Other African American college athletes such as Melvin Barkum, (1972 Mississippi State starting quarterback)<sup>87</sup> and Doyle Orange (1972 USM starting tailback)<sup>88</sup> were two of the numerous athletes that weren't treated any different in the media coverage either.

The results answering research question #2 indicate that Gentle Ben didn't experience any racism from anyone or the media during his time at The University of Mississippi. The University of Mississippi Rebels reported for training camp on August 23, 1972.<sup>89</sup> It was noticed 28 days after the opening practice for the media to report on Ben Williams. During that report his race wasn't even a topic of discussion.<sup>90</sup> Over his four-year career at Ole Miss Williams accomplished many things on the football field such as being the first African American football captain, an All-SEC honoree and All- American.<sup>91</sup> Off the field he was a charter member of the Eta Zeta chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Incorporated<sup>92</sup>, Who's Who In American Colleges and Universities<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Larry Guest, "Barkum Is The Starter." *The Clarion Ledger*, , sec. Sports, September 6, 1972.

<sup>88</sup> Larry Guest, "USM Seeking 7th Straight." *The Clarion Ledger*, , sec. Sports, September 13, 1972.

<sup>89</sup> Larry Guest, "Rebels Assemble Monday." *The Clarion Ledger*, , sec. Sports, August 20, 1972.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid ("Kinard to try more freshmen.")

<sup>91</sup> Ibid Everett et al, *Ben Williams Scrapbook*, (1972,1973,1974,1975).

<sup>92</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

<sup>93</sup> Ibid Everett et al, *Ben Williams Scrapbook*, (1972,1973,1974,1975).

and the first African American “Colonel Rebel.”<sup>94</sup> There weren’t any findings of negative stories or words associated with Gentle Ben the researcher. Positive or neutral stories used words such as “outstanding”<sup>95</sup>, “great”<sup>96</sup> and “tremendous”<sup>97</sup> to describe Gentle Ben.

However, there weren’t any findings of Williams quotes in any of the media. Williams said, “I didn’t like to talk to reporters, I didn’t like the questions they asked me.”<sup>98</sup> He also said that he barely read the press during his time at Ole Miss.<sup>99</sup> The Black community at the University of Mississippi was still small during the 1970’s; Williams said, “We held together.”<sup>100</sup> A September 30, 1972 story discovered in *The Daily Mississippian* entitled “Integration: progress or tokenism?” stated that “the campus attitude towards Blacks has changed” over the past decade.<sup>101</sup> This article can support The University of Mississippi’s progress after integration, however, some of the non-athlete Black students said that they still felt isolated.<sup>102</sup> In the closing sentence the writer concluded with White students referring to integration as progress while the

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<sup>94</sup> "Black Wins Ole Miss Honor." *Ocala Star-Banner*, sec. People In News, November 7, 1975. Accessed April 9, 2013

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=FQUkAAAAIABJ&sjid=6wUEAAAAIABJ&pg=6642,1257095&dq=ben williams ole miss&hl=en> (accessed April 21, 2013).

<sup>95</sup> Patrick Zier, "Ole Miss's Kimbrough Alien In Mississippi." *Lakeland Ledger*, , sec. Sports, August 22, 1975. Accessed April 9, 2013

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=Y1VNAAAAIABJ&sjid=BvsDAAAAIABJ&pg=6506,5778327&dq=ben williams ole miss&hl=en> (accessed April 21, 2013).

<sup>96</sup> AP, "Ole Miss Lineman Honored." *Gadsen Times*, sec. Sports, September 12, 1973. Accessed April 9, 2013

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=obgfAAAAIABJ&sjid=utcEAAAAIABJ&pg=1005,2124118&dq=ben williams ole miss&hl=en> (accessed April 22, 2013).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid Everett et al, *Ben Williams Scrapbook*, (1972,1973,1974,1975).

<sup>98</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

<sup>99</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

<sup>100</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

<sup>101</sup> Burnice Morris, "Integration: progress or tokenism?." *The Daily Mississippian*, September 30, 1972.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid Integration: progress or tokenism?."

Black students called it tokenism.<sup>103</sup> The researcher suggests that White students at Ole Miss associated more with Ben Williams because he was a great athlete with an outstanding personality. Although he was treated well, racial tensions and isolation was still present on the campus of Ole Miss while Ben Williams attended. This conclusion was made after an interview with Dr. Don Cole in September 2013.

Gentle Ben said that he got along with his teammates and he still communicates with some of them till this day.<sup>104</sup> He was well respected amongst all Ole Miss football fans no matter the race.<sup>105</sup> Williams said that White sorority members became important factors in his campaign and victory for “Colonel Reb.”<sup>106</sup> He was a fan favorite who even wrestled a 700 lb. bear during the halftime show of an Ole Miss basketball game.<sup>107</sup>

Moreover, The Buffalo Bills drafted Williams in the third round of the 1976 NFL Draft.<sup>108</sup> He played 10 years in the NFL and retired in 1986. Williams made the 1982 Pro Bowl and at the time of his retirement he was the all-time sacks leader in Buffalo Bills history.<sup>109</sup> Williams has since been honored as a member of the Mississippi Sports Hall of Fame, the Ole Miss Sports Hall Of Fame and as a Legend of SEC Football.<sup>110</sup> He was the Owner and CEO of LYNCO Construction Company<sup>111</sup> based out of Jackson, Mississippi until 2011.

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid “Integration: progress or tokenism?.”

<sup>104</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

<sup>105</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

<sup>106</sup> Ibid Robert Williams Jr., (First African Football player at Ole Miss), interview by Brandon Rook

<sup>107</sup> Ibid Everett et al, *Ben Williams Scrapbook*, (1972,1973,1974,1975).

<sup>108</sup> (“Top 50 All-Time Bills, No. 48: DE Ben Williams.”) Last modified May 29, 2009.

<http://www.buffalorumblings.com/2009/5/29/888882/top-50-all-time-bills-no-48-de-be>

<sup>109</sup> Ibid (“Top 50 All-Time Bills, No. 48: DE Ben Williams.”)

<sup>110</sup> Ibid (“Top 50 All-Time Bills, No. 48: DE Ben Williams.”)

<sup>111</sup> (“Student Tailgate Highlights Week Of Homecoming Festivities” ) <http://www.olemisssports.com/sports/m-footbl/spec-rel/100108aaa.html>.

Mr. Rook's research showed that the media treated Robert Gentle Ben Williams just like any other athlete who deserved recognition for a good game. His race was not an issue in media coverage. During his days at Ole Miss, John Stamm from *The Clarion Ledger* wrote, "His name refers to being tame, docile, refined but that is hardly Gentle Ben on a football field. Just ask the opposing teams' centers. Or ask the quarterback who bears his heavy breathing on Saturday. For 6-3 and 255-pounds, his pursuit is phenomenal and nose for the football uncanny."<sup>112</sup>

All of the data for this research was collected over an eight-month period.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid Everett et al, *Ben Williams Scrapbook*, (1972,1973,1974,1975).



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