

The Migration of African Americans to the Canadian Football League during the 1950s: An Escape from Discrimination?

Neil Longley[†], Todd Crosset^{††}, and Steve Jefferson^{†††}

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Abstract

The institutional racial discrimination that existed in American professional team sports prior to World War II resulted in African American players effectively being barred from playing in the major professional leagues. Although the NFL color barrier did officially fall in 1946, to be quickly followed by the fall of the MLB color barrier one year later when Jackie Robinson made his debut for the Brooklyn Dodgers, these events were just the beginning of the struggles for African American athletes. Integration proceeded very slowly during the next two decades, and economists have shown that African Americans continued to suffer from a variety of forms of discriminatory treatment.

However, it is the argument of this paper that the literature that examines discrimination during this era is incomplete, in that it ignores the experiences of a small, but relatively significant, group of African American football players who actually chose to leave their own country – and correspondingly leave the racially-charged environment of mid-20th century America – to head north to play professional football in the Canadian Football League (CFL).

[†]Department of Sport Management, Isenberg School of Management, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts 01003, Phone (413): 545-5059, e-mail: nlongley@sportmgt.umass.edu

^{††}Department of Sport Management, Isenberg School of Management, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts 01003

^{†††}Department of Sport Management, Isenberg School of Management, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts 01003

Beginning in 1946, a steady flow of African Americans began to migrate to the CFL which, at the time, was a legitimate competitor league to the NFL. This paper attempts to test a perception seemingly held by some that, by moving to Canada, African American football players were able to escape the racial injustices they often suffered in the US. This view appears to have its roots in the notion that Canada is a “gentler”, more tolerant society, without the divisive socio-political history that characterizes much of the race relations in the US.

This paper tests these notions using a variety of empirical approaches. The results indicate that, while African Americans were better represented in the CFL relative to the NFL, African Americans still faced some level of entry discrimination in the CFL. In particular, African American players in the CFL outperformed their white counterparts on numerous performance dimensions, indicating the overall talent level in the CFL could have been further improved by employing an even greater number of African Americans. Additionally, the paper finds that those CFL teams that employed the highest percentage of African Americans were those teams that had the most on-field success. Finally, the paper analyzes prices of player trading cards from that era, and finds that cards of African Americans were undervalued, relative to white CFL players of equal talent.

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1. Introduction

Racial discrimination in American sports has been extensively documented and analyzed by academics in a variety of disciplines, and a vast, multi-dimensional, body of literature now exists on the subject.

This paper focuses on a somewhat narrow aspect of this discourse on discrimination, and examines the notion of “quitting America” as a possible response to discrimination.¹

Quitting America is often a sub-theme of historical biographies on African American athletes. Turn-of-the-century athletes like Jack Johnson, Jimmy Winkfield, Marshall Taylor, and Moses Fleetwood Walker, either quit or advocated quitting America. These biographies speak to the racial injustice of America, and by contrast, suggest the liberty that African Americans could find elsewhere.

However, in the major team sports such as football, basketball, and baseball, African American athletes have generally never had the opportunity to take their careers outside of America, largely because of the absence of professional leagues in other countries. These sports all originated in America, and their play at the major professional level has historically been restricted to America. Even now, with the existence of professional basketball leagues in Europe and professional baseball leagues in Asia, the representation of American players in these leagues is very small, and tends to be players not capable of playing in the major US leagues.

There is, however, an important historical exception to these generalizations. During the mid-20th century, African American football players had the opportunity to “quit” America and ply their trade in a relatively comparable professional league in Canada. Beginning in 1946, a steady, albeit relatively small, flow of African Americans began to migrate to the Canadian Football League (CFL).² For some of these players, the decision to move north was simply a business or career decision – at the time, and unlike today,

the CFL was a legitimate competitor to the NFL in the labor market, and it was not uncommon for the CFL to sign NFL-caliber players. For other African Americans who went north, the move represented a hope that life would be better in Canada, and that opportunities would exist that were not possible in the US.

In this sense, Canada and the CFL have often been viewed in idyllic terms when it comes to their treatment of African American football players. There is a perception held by some that, by migrating north to Canada, African American football players were able to escape the racial injustices they often suffered in the US. This view appears to have its roots in the notion that Canada is a “gentler”, more tolerant society, without the divisive socio-political history that characterizes much of the race relations in the US.

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, scholars have paid almost no attention to the experiences of this group of African American athletes who actually chose to leave their homeland – and correspondingly leave the racially-charged environment of mid-20th century America – to ply their trades in a foreign country. It is our intention to begin to fill this void in the literature and to more systematically address the crucial questions that arises – was Canada and the CFL truly a more hospitable environment for African American football players, or are such notions more myth than fact?

For the most part, the 1950’s predate any significant concern for racial justice by whites in American society. Serious efforts to integrate American institutions were nascent at best. For these reasons, the 1950’s gives scholars a relatively clean period to explore the CFL as an alternative to the NFL for African American football players.

2. Background: The CFL and African American Football Players

The CFL

Professional football in Canada has roots that go back to the late 19th century. The game evolved out of the sport of rugby, but became a distinct game with the adoption of the forward pass in the 1920s. The game of Canadian football is very similar to American football. There are some rule differences – for example, Canadian football has twelve

players per team on the field instead of eleven, has three “downs” instead of four, and plays on a field that is 10 yards longer and 12 yards wider – but fundamentally the two games are the same, meaning that American players do not generally face prohibitive adjustments when they move north.

In its early days, the game was played at the amateur level, but it started to become “professionalized” during the 1930s. At about the same time, the first American players started arriving in the CFL. Prior to that point, teams in western Canada, where the population base was smaller, were at a distinct competitive disadvantage compared to their counterparts in eastern Canada, who had the benefit of a much larger talent pool to draw from. In 1935, the Winnipeg Blue Bombers, a team from Western Canada, attempted to remedy this competitive imbalance by employing nine Americans on their roster. With these American players, Winnipeg won the Grey Cup that year – the first ever Grey Cup victory by a team from western Canada. With the success of Winnipeg, other teams also began to recruit Americans, and concern developed that American players would completely take over the Canadian game. These concerns prompted “import” restrictions on Americans – by 1946, for example, teams were prohibited from carrying more than five imports – i.e. Americans – on their roster.

As the Second World War ended, the CFL had stabilized at eight teams – four in the west and four in the east. These eight franchises, plus an additional team that was added in 1954, have provided the foundation for the league right up to the present. While today’s CFL occupies very much of a second-tier status to the NFL, such was not the case during the CFL’s “glory” days of the 1950s. It was during that era that salaries in the CFL were generally comparable to NFL salaries –college football still dominated professional football in the US, and the NFL had not yet become the dominating commercial force that it is today.

This relative salary parity meant that CFL teams could often compete for NFL-caliber players. For example, Frank Tripuca, a star with New York Giants of the NFL in the early 1950s, jumped to Saskatchewan of the CFL for a salary that was more than double the \$12,000 per year he was making in New York.³ The CFL also signed players directly

out of college – for example, Billy Vessels, the 1952 Heisman Trophy winner and first-round NFL draft pick, spurned an offer from the Baltimore Colts to sign with Edmonton of the CFL. During the 1950's, the CFL was the NFL's only competitor league – the All American Football Conference (AAFC) had folded after the 1949 season and the American Football League (AFL) would not begin play until 1960.

African Americans in the CFL

The CFL color barrier was officially broken in 1946, when the Montréal Alouettes signed Herb Trawick and Virgil Wagner.⁴ The Alouettes were a CFL expansion team in 1946, and their American general manager, Lew Hayman, no doubt used the signings as a means to gain an immediate competitive advantage over the existing teams in the league. These expectations were fulfilled as the Alouettes, led by Trawick and Wagner, won the 1949 Grey Cup in only their fourth year of existence.

Hayman's decision to sign Trawick and Wagner was apparently influenced by the positive reception that Jackie Robinson received while playing in Montreal. Robinson played the 1946 season for the Montreal Royals, the Brooklyn Dodgers top farm club, before making his historic major league debut with the Dodgers in 1947. Hayman felt that Montreal, which at the time was Canada's most cosmopolitan and diverse city, was ready for an African American football player.⁵

As basic microeconomic theory would predict, other CFL teams quickly followed Montreal's lead – if teams did not begin to integrate, they risked putting themselves at a competitive disadvantage on the field. Each team had their "pioneer" African American players. In 1948, Calgary signed Woody Strode who, along with Kenny Washington, had broken the NFL color barrier in 1946 when they played for the Los Angeles Rams. One year later, Calgary also signed Ezzert "Sugarfoot" Anderson. Anderson went on to have a nine year career with Calgary.

Calgary also brought Johnny Bright to the CFL. Bright – a first round NFL draft pick of the Philadelphia Eagles – played one season in Calgary, and then went on to an illustrious

career with Edmonton Eskimos. In Edmonton, Bright joined Rollie Miles to lead the Eskimos to three successive Grey Cup triumphs in the mid-1950s.

Bright was already famous in the US for being the victim of one of the worst incidents of racist behavior ever seen in US sports. In 1950, Bright, who was a star running back at Drake University in Iowa, traveled with his team to Stillwater, Oklahoma to play Oklahoma A & M (now Oklahoma State). What was significant was that Bright would be the first African American college football player ever to play a game in the state of Oklahoma. In the days leading up to the game, some Oklahoma A&M players threatened Bright with physical harm. On the first play of the game, an Oklahoma A& M defender hit Bright with a forearm to the head, breaking Bright's jaw. The incident was captured by a *Life* magazine photographer, who went on to win a Pulitzer Prize for the photograph. Bright was ultimately drafted in the first round of the 1951 NFL draft by the Philadelphia Eagles, but elected to sign with Calgary of the CFL. He played one year for Calgary, and then was traded to Edmonton for the 1954 season, where he went on to become the CFL's all-time leading rusher at the time of his retirement. Had Bright signed with Philadelphia, he would have become the first African American player ever to play for the Eagles.

Winnipeg had Tom Casey from 1950-55, and he was joined in 1955 by Leo Lewis, who starred for nine years as a running back. Hamilton signed Bernie Custis in the early 1950s – in 1953, Custis became the first African American to ever play quarterback in the CFL. In Toronto, both Ulysses Curtis and Bill Bass were signed in 1950. One team – the Saskatchewan Roughriders – was slow to integrate. One African American player – Gabe Paterson – appeared for the team during the 1948 season, but it was almost 10 years before another African American player would play regularly in Saskatchewan.

Over the past half-century, the CFL has continued to be perceived as place that offers increased opportunity for African Americans. African American starting quarterbacks were commonplace in the CFL during the 1970s, almost two decades prior to them gaining prominence in the NFL. The first African American head coach in the CFL – Willie Wood, who starred with the NFL's Green Bay Packers in the 1960s – was hired in

1980, almost a decade before the Oakland Raiders made Art Schell the first African American head coach in the NFL. More recently, during the 2005 season, there were two African American head coaches in the 9-team CFL (22%), an absolute number almost equivalent to the three African American head coaches found across all 117 NCAA Division I-A football programs that year (2.5%).

3. A Motivating Framework: Perspectives on Canadians and Race

This paper is motivated by what appear to be widely contrasting perspectives on Canadians and race.

On one side, a typical American view of race and Canadian football is expressed by Harrison:

*Canada has historically been a place where African-Americans have felt more comfortable and welcomed. Whether in regards to freedom from slavery or in regards to better and increased playing opportunities on the field; Canada has always been perceived as a place where African-Americans can turn to for freedom, opportunities, and success. is there something different about the organizations of sport and society that would enable African-Americans to express their talents on Canadian territory?*⁶

Much of the Canadian social-historical sport literature does not challenge these assumptions. Discussion of racism is often either completely absent or is presented only in contrast to the United States to highlight the positive aspects of Canadian culture (see, for example, Howell, 2001). Similarly, Humber (2004) argues:

*“The Canadian Football League survived the post-war popularity of the National Football League by providing opportunities for minorities to assume leadership positions. American Black, George Reed, a great running back with the Saskatchewan Roughriders in the 1960’s played an important role as a player representative and union organizer.”*⁷

This type of framing of Canadian sport, and Canadian football in particular, fits with a popular notion of Canada as a place of refuge for African Americans. Beginning with the American Revolution, Canada has provided Africans with an alternative to the American

slave system. The British provided safe and free passage to over 3,000 escaped slaves and freedmen from New York to Nova Scotia at the end of the American Revolution in 1780.

After the War of 1812, the British again offered freedom to escaped slaves fighting on behalf of the English. About 2,000 African Americans crossed the border. In 1829, after three days of riots in Cincinnati, Canada offered resettlement into a community they called Wilberforce. American slaves and free blacks began to call Canada the "Promised Land," especially after slavery was banned in 1834 throughout the British colonies. By the mid-nineteenth century, Canada had about forty black settlements.⁸ The "underground railroad" led to the Canadian border, particularly after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act – historians estimate that 30,000 African Americans emigrated to Canada in the years leading up to the Civil War.

However, what is often not emphasized in this framing of Canadian history is that, by and large, these migrations were temporary. Many of the Africans seeking refuge in Canada after the American Revolution opted to return to Africa with the British-sponsored Sierra Leone Company. It is estimated that the thirty years of Black migration to Canada prior to the Civil War was reversed in less than a decade, as 30,000 black "Canadians" left during and after the Civil War to fight with the Union Army and be reunited with their families. Few, if any, of the Black American immigrant communities in Canada, like Wilberforce, succeeded. Indeed, less than 100 years after Canadian officials welcomed blacks to settle Wilberforce, Canadian officials traveled to Oklahoma to discourage black farmers from resettling in Canada.

By the 1950s, Canada was a very homogenous society, with the great majority of its residents being of European descent. Blacks, or any other persons of color, comprised an extremely small percentage of the population – according to the 1951 Canadian census, over 97% of Canadians identified themselves as being of European origin, with the next largest group being those of Asian origin, who comprised about 1% of the population. And, while Canada does not share the long history of state supported slavery with the US, Canada's mid-century immigration and segregation policies were not unlike that of the United States.⁹

This counter-notion that Canada was/is far from open on matters of race is further supported by some of the literature on Canada's primary spectator sport, ice hockey. A significant body of literature exists that point to the struggles faced by African Canadian hockey players.¹⁰ Furthermore, ethnicity has also been shown to be an issue in Canadian sport, with considerable evidence to suggest that French Canadians have been the victims of discrimination in the NHL.¹¹

In addition, there is considerable anecdotal evidence to indicate that Canada and the CFL were not the havens from discrimination for African Americans that some may portray. George Reed, an African American running back who played from the early-1960s to the mid-1970s with Saskatchewan, was particularly noteworthy for being vocal about the racism he faced in Canada. He rejected the idyllic view that Canadians often have of themselves, and noted that "a lot people in Canada kind of shut their eyes and think discrimination doesn't exist".¹² Reed's views on racism are particularly influential because he was not just any ordinary player – a 2006 survey by the Canadian TV network TSN voted Reed as the second greatest player in the entire history of Canadian football (after white American Doug Flutie).

In a 1967 interview with the *Toronto Telegram* newspaper, Reed spoke out about the off-field problems he faced.

*"There is flagrant discrimination against Negroes in Regina (Saskatchewan). I have come face-to-face with more racial problems in my five years in Regina than I ever had living in a suburb of Seattle. In the beginning I couldn't find anyone who would rent me an apartment... My five-year-old son, who never knew what discrimination was, is suddenly called names he doesn't understand. My wife has become so defensive that when she leaves the house she's like a coiled Cobra that's ready to strike at anybody. Regina is like living in the heart of Alabama as far as I'm concerned"*¹³

The *Telegram* article was seeking Reed's reaction to comments made earlier that year by Ted Watkins. Watkins, who had played for the Ottawa Rough Riders since 1963, had told a CBC-TV interview that "I have had many problems in Ottawa which made me feel like I was in Mississippi somewhere."

Years later, Reed said he wouldn't retract a word, and didn't regret his comments, even though they drew a strong backlash at the time.

*"The Regina media were all over me. Reginsans who thought their city was just fine were outraged that I had said otherwise. Molson (the major Canadian brewer who was his off-season employer) demoted me and almost fired me I have never said I hate Canada. I've never said I dislike Canada. What I have said is, don't say those problems don't exist."*¹⁴

Ezzert "Sugarfoot" Anderson, an early African American pioneer for Calgary in the late 1940s, noted that double standards often existed in Canada.

*Our country club here in Calgary didn't allow Jewish people or black people, but they said Woody (Strode) and myself could come. That kind of struck me as a little odd and I never did go. If I hadn't been a Stampeder, they wouldn't have let me in, so I just didn't go up.*¹⁵

Racism was sometimes very overt. On a road trip to Winnipeg, Calgary coach Les Lear (one of the few Canadian coaches in the league since WWII) threatened to pull his entire team out of a hotel when he was told that Anderson and Woody Strode, Calgary's other African American player at the time, couldn't stay at the hotel. Winnipeg coach George Trafton reportedly acted similarly in an incident involving Tom Casey.¹⁶

There were also complaints from some African American players about discrimination in securing off-field jobs. Willie Fleming, a star running back for British Columbia in the late 1950s and early 1960s, stated in 1967 "the Negro is a hero on the field, and a bum off it, when it comes to getting work".¹⁷ Winnipeg's Leo Lewis, who played during the same era as Fleming, said "In all my years in Winnipeg I was never offered a job that was worthwhile. It would have been different if I were white".¹⁸

Conversely, however, some African Americans were adamant that conditions for blacks were much better in Canada than the US. George Dixon, who played with Montreal from 1959 to 1965, felt that he enjoyed a lifestyle in Canada that was not available in the US. He commented in 1967:

*"I go to the best country clubs....., the plushiest restaurants, and I live in a fine neighborhood.... My wife and I have the kind of social relationships we couldn't have in Connecticut"*¹⁹

On the field, there were also issues – a persistent theme of African American players from that era was the view that CFL teams had unofficial quotas limiting the number of African American players per team. Ralph Goldston, who played for Hamilton in the 1950s and was later an assistant coach for Montreal, said in a 1967 interview “some cities, some coaches are afraid to play too many Negroes”.²⁰ Emery Barnes of BC noted that “it looks strange when players change from year to year, but the number of non-whites remains constant”.²¹ Such a notion was even indirectly supported from the management side, when Ottawa general manager Red O’Quinn once noted “you might have a clique develop, say, if you have more than five colored players.”²²

Beyond these unofficial quotas, the attitudes of team management and coaches also often manifested themselves much more directly and overtly. Saskatchewan’s first African American player was Gabe Patterson in 1947 and 1948. He had a brief, and apparently unhappy and lonely, stay with Saskatchewan, and Saskatchewan would not employ another African American for almost ten years. There were rumors that Patterson met hostility from the southern US players on the team and from the team’s coach, Alabama native Fred Grant.²³ Herb Trawick, discussed earlier as the first African American to play in the CFL, apparently met with similar hostility when Douglas Walker took over the Montreal coaching duties in 1952. Walker, who was a southerner, and a longtime coach at Wake Forest University in North Carolina before coming to Montreal, was reported to have been contemptuous towards Trawick.²⁴

Rollie Miles, who would later star for Edmonton, actually came to Canada to play baseball in Regina, Saskatchewan in 1950. Kelly (1999) contends that, while the Saskatchewan Roughriders were aware of Miles’s ability as a football player, they were not interested in him because he was black. The Edmonton Eskimos, whose management had a more tolerant attitude, soon discovered Miles and quickly signed him to a contract.

Miles was apparently outspoken about race issues, perhaps costing him the league’s first-ever MVP award. By many accounts, Miles was the best player in Canada in 1953, but did not win the award because of racism.²⁵ The football reporters of Canada, perhaps influenced by Miles’s outspoken views on race, voted his Edmonton teammate Billy

Vessels as the league's MVP. Another of Bright's teammates at the time – a star Asian Canadian player named Normie Kwong – later commented that “conditions in the country then weren't conducive to a person of color winning awards”.²⁶

African American players also had to deal with teammates. When Leo Lewis came to Winnipeg in 1955, the beginning of a ten year CFL career, there was only one other black player (Tom Casey) on the team. Lewis recalls:

*“There were some negative experiences. I think any racial problems we had with Canadian ballplayers were brought about because of Americans from the southern states. I do believe that. Generally speaking Winnipeg was a good town. There wasn't much racism that I could see. Canada was a great place.”*²⁷

It was reported that Herb Trawick often faced hostility from his teammates – in fact, one report claimed that Trawick actually faced more racial slurs from his Canadian teammates than from his American teammates.²⁸

Awkward situations would often develop when there were an odd number of African American players on the team. In Ottawa during the mid-1960s, the team had only three African American players, so one of them – Bo Scott – roomed alone when the team traveled, despite the fact that there was one “leftover” white player as well, who also roomed alone. Scott said “Nobody ever asked me if I prefer to live alone”.²⁹

In Calgary during the mid-1960s, African American Lovell Coleman claimed that “there were ... white players ... who made sure black players didn't hear about their parties”³⁰. Also on that Calgary team was Eagle Day, a white American quarterback from Ole Miss, who, unlike his white teammates, was quite willing to express his views on race. Day reportedly told a magazine writer of the day that he (Day) believed segregation was the only successful racial policy.³¹

In summary, then, the cumulative evidence on the discriminatory tendencies of Canadians is mixed and often contradictory – on one hand, there is the somewhat idyllic view of Canada as a country largely free of such problems, while on the other hand there is considerable evidence that race and ethnicity issues have been significant factors in

hockey, and some anecdotal evidence that CFL players of the 1950s experienced considerable discrimination. These contrasting perspectives make it difficult to have conclusive and decisive *a priori* expectations about what the experiences may have been of those African American football players that migrated to Canada in the 1950s, and suggest the need for empirical investigation.

4. An Economic Framework: Identifying Possible Sources of Discrimination

The above discussion can be more systematically framed by employing Becker's (1957) approach. He identifies three possible sources of labor market discrimination – employers, coworkers, and customers. With the former, it is the employer himself/herself who holds the discriminatory preferences towards a certain group, whereas with the latter two it is the firm's employees and customers, respectively, who hold the discriminatory views, with the employer simply being forced to respond to these views for fear of alienating the firm's other employees or its customers.

In the context of this paper, Becker's categorizations can provide insight into the type and extent of discrimination that African Americans may have been expected to find in the CFL, relative to their experiences in the US. In this regard, a key question is this: how did the composition of these three groups – customers, co-workers, and employers – differ in Canada, relative to the US, and to what extent would these differences have resulted in Canada providing a more favorable playing environment for African Americans.

With the customer group, the differences are most clear – the fans of the CFL were predominantly white Canadians, while fans of the NFL were predominantly white Americans. To what extent, then, could these two groups of fans be expected to have different attitudes towards African Americans?

Perhaps most importantly, the histories of the two countries with respect to racial issues are very different. As a result, white Americans during this era – particularly those in the South – were products of a very different socio-cultural environment with respect to these issues. This environment undoubtedly impacted the beliefs and values of some Americans in ways not generally seen in Canada, and could be presumed to lead to

African Americans experiencing more racist behavior in the US compared to Canada. In other words, white Canadians could be expected to be more accepting of African American players on their favorite team, compared to those fans in the US.

However, this is certainly not meant to imply that one would expect African American players to be free of racism in Canada. Racism is pervasive across countries, cultures, and races, and one would not expect Canada to be any exception. Further, during the 1950s, Canada was a very homogeneous, white European society, and could not generally be considered either multicultural or multiracial. To the extent that racism is based, in part, on a fear of “differences”, Canada during the 1950s and 1960s would seem to have been ripe for racist behavior. The very fact that African American players in Canada were so identifiably different from the population as a whole made them “stand-out”, and no doubt made them potential targets of discriminatory behavior. In fact, in some Canadian cities, particularly those in the Prairie provinces, there were almost no other blacks residing in the city other than the African American football players.

Turning to coworker discrimination, for African Americans playing in the CFL during the 1950s, their “coworkers”, i.e. teammates, included two groups – white Canadians and white Americans. A league rule enacted in 1946 limited teams to only five imports on their roster at any one time; this number was subsequently increased to seven in 1950. This meant that most of the teammates of African American players during this era were actually Canadian. Almost invariably, and unlike today, these Canadian players were white, reflecting Canada’s homogenous population at the time. The issues here, then, are relatively the same as they were for fan discrimination: in particular, to what extent do white Canadians – in this case football players and not fans – hold prejudicial views against African Americans? As was hypothesized in the previous section, while there may be reason to believe that African Americans would still face some level of racist behavior from white Canadian players, this may, in general, be less than what they would have faced from white American teammates if they had played in the NFL.

This leads to the next complicating issue – some of the teammates of African American players in Canada were, in fact, white Americans. Thus, to the extent that African

American players would face discriminatory treatment from white teammates if they played in the NFL, they would presumably also face such treatment from their white American teammates in the CFL. The only situation where this would not be the case is if the white American players in the CFL had fundamentally different racial views than the white American players in the NFL, something for which there is no *a priori* reason to believe.

While it was true that the African American player in Canada had many fewer white American teammates than did the African American player in the NFL, these white American players in the CFL were generally “star” players, and often held considerable influence and power beyond their numbers.

A similar issue arises when one considers the possibility of employer discrimination. While CFL teams were generally owned by Canadians – either as community-owned entities, or by private businesspeople – the coaching staffs of these teams were almost always white Americans. In fact, some CFL head coaches came to the league after having been head coaches in the NFL. For example, Jim Trimble coached Hamilton during the late 1950s after having been a successful NFL head coach with the Philadelphia Eagles. Steve Owen, who coached the New York Giants for many years, coached Saskatchewan during the early 1960s. Other times, the moves were in the opposite direction. Darrell Royal, who later went on to become one of the greatest head coaches in US college football history with the University of Texas Longhorns, was Edmonton’s head coach during the early 1950s. Bud Grant, the highly successful coach of the Minnesota Vikings during the 1960s and 70s, was previously the longtime head coach in Winnipeg.

What this means is that, while African American players that came to Canada may have been distancing themselves from white American *fans*, they were certainly not distancing themselves from white American coaches. To a lesser extent, they were not completely distancing themselves from white American teammates. In this regard, then, one might expect some of the barriers African Americans faced in the NFL to also be present in the CFL.

5. Empirical Analyses

This section takes a first-step towards empirically measuring the extent and type of discrimination that African Americans may have faced in Canada. The work here is very preliminary, and should be viewed as a work-in-progress.

Empirically analyzing this particular historical issue presents numerous challenges, the most important of which concerns the availability and reliability of data. Neither the quantity nor the quality of data from this era is comparable to what exists today. For example, in the CFL – as with other professional leagues – detailed and complete salary data is not available for players from the 1950s and 1960s, making it impossible to test for the presence of salary discrimination. Player performance data – used to test for a variety of types of discrimination – was also much more limited than it is today. The CFL did not even keep individual player performance data until well into the 1950s, and even this data was very limited in scope. In fact, simply determining the makeup of team rosters and attempting to track the comings and goings of players is a significant challenge.

Within the context of these data constraints, this section employs a variety of empirical measures in an attempt to gain some insight into the extent and type of discrimination that may have existed in the CFL during the 1950s and 60s.

Overall Representation Compared to the NFL

As a first test, the overall representation of African Americans in the CFL can be compared with their representation in the NFL. While such a comparison doesn't directly speak to whether African Americans experienced any discriminatory treatment in the CFL, it does provide insights into whether they were treated differently in Canada compared to the US.

Starting with the US, in 1950, only 14 blacks were employed in the NFL – an average of about one per team in the 13-team league. Furthermore, they were concentrated on just a few teams – not surprisingly, some of the most successful teams. Nine of the fourteen

African Americans playing in the NFL in 1950 were on the playing field for the championship game between the Brown and the Rams.³³ These 14 African Americans comprised only about 3% of the players in the league that year. Compare this to the CFL, where, by our research, there were about 7 African Americans in the league in 1950, also an average of about one per team. However, because of the roster limitations on imports, African Americans represented about 13% of the American players in the CFL, as opposed to the NFL's comparable figure of 3%.

By the late fifties, approximately 40 African Americans were playing in the NFL annually³⁴, representing about 10% of the league's players. In contrast, our research reveals that the CFL averaged about 14 African Americans per year, or about 25% of the slots allocated to Americans.

Fan Discrimination and Player Card Prices

One source of data that has frequently been employed by economists to test for customer/fan discrimination is to use player card prices.³⁵ The theory is that card prices are a relatively pure measure of fan preferences towards players. If, holding performance constant, players from the non-preferred group have, on average, lower card prices, this may be a reflection of fan-based discrimination. Card prices, unlike for example, a player's salary, are impacted only by fan preferences, and not by the preferences of team owners, coaches, GMs, or teammates.

In this regard, CFL player card prices are examined for three distinct seasons: 1954, 1959, and 1968. Card prices are taken from the 1998 *Charlton Canadian Football Card Price Guide*, and these prices are then regressed on a series of independent variables intended to reflect a player's performance, position, and race. Specifically, the following regression is tested:

$$\text{Price} = b_0 + b_1 \text{HALL} + b_2 \text{STAR} + b_3 \text{QB} + b_4 \text{RB-RC} + b_5 \text{IMPORT} + b_6 \text{AA}$$

where:

- HALL is a dummy variable equalling 1 if the player is a member of the CFL Hall of Fame, 0 otherwise,
- STAR is the number of times the player was a divisional all star during his career
- QB is a dummy variable equalling 1 if the player was a quarterback, 0 otherwise,
- RB-RC is a dummy variable equalling 1 if the player was a running back or receiver, 0 otherwise,
- IMPORT is a dummy variable equalling 1 if the player was an import (i.e. American), 0 otherwise,
- AA is a dummy variable equalling 1 if the player is African American, 0 otherwise.

All variables except AA are control variables. Both HALL and STAR attempt to measure the player's career performance. These broad-based measures of performance are necessary both because of the lack of detailed and/or reliable individual statistical information from that era, and because they allow players from different positions to be grouped together in a common measure of performance. Since one would expect that fans would prefer cards of players who were better performers, one would expect that the coefficients on both HALL and STAR to be positive.

With respect to the variables QB and RB-RC, players who play the "glamorous", high-profile, positions like running back, receiver, and, especially, quarterback, should be more visible to fans, and hence may, all else equal, have higher card prices. Thus, the coefficients on both QB and RB-RC are expected to be positive.

The sign on IMPORT is *a priori* inconclusive, as it captures two opposing effects. To the extent that CFL fans prefer "home-grown", Canadian-born players, the coefficient on IMPORT should be negative. However, to the extent that the American players in the CFL were, generally, superior performers relative to Canadian players, IMPORT may be picking-up performance factors not already captured by either HALL or STAR. To the extent the latter is true, the sign on IMPORT would be expected to be positive. Finally, the variable AA – the primary focus of the analysis – captures the extent to which fans may be undervaluing the cards of African American players.

The results of the censored (Tobit) regression are reported below (t-statistics in parentheses).

<i>Variable</i>	<i>1954</i>	<i>1959</i>	<i>1968</i>
Constant	19.18 (5.37)	3.12 (5.01)	3.56 (10.61)
HALL	36.71 (6.80)	4.13 (3.35)	4.76 (7.11)
STAR	1.81 (2.25)	0.33 (1.73)	0.16 (1.73)
QB	16.61 (3.07)	5.29 (4.32)	3.09 (4.63)
RB-RC	8.87 (1.84)	-0.18 (-0.19)	0.56 (1.11)
IMPORT	5.31 (1.36)	0.24 (0.33)	-0.11 (-0.27)
AA	-19.00 (-2.83)	-0.53 (-0.45)	-0.15 (-0.25)
R ²	.65	.49	.58
N	80	88	131

For all three seasons examined, the coefficient on AA is negative, indicating that, *ceteris paribus*, the card prices of African American players are lower than the corresponding card prices of other players. However, only for the 1953 season is the coefficient on AA significant, with the coefficient being significant at the 1% level. With the 1953 regression, not only is the coefficient on AA significant, but the coefficient is of a relatively large magnitude.

While these card prices reflect current valuations by fans of past players, the card prices do not have any direct impact on these former players themselves, either now, or during the players' playing career. However, any fan biases against African American players would not only manifest themselves in current card prices, but would have probably manifested themselves in other ways during the player's career. To the extent these fan biases existed at the time, these biases would render African American players economically less valuable to their teams than their white counterparts – i.e. if fans prefer, all else equal, white players to

black players, teams will find it financially advantageous to respond to these preferences. This response may have taken the form of teams paying African American players less than white players, for a given level of talent (i.e. salary discrimination), or African American players being underrepresented on teams, given their talent level (i.e. entry discrimination)

While the absence of salary data means it is not possible to test for the presence of salary discrimination, the following sub-section makes a first effort to begin to assess whether African Americans may have suffered from entry discrimination.

Entry Discrimination

Economists define entry discrimination in sport as a situation where the non-preferred group of players are less likely to be hired, relative to their counterparts of equal talent in the preferred group, thus resulting in the non-preferred group being “underrepresented” in the workplace. Thus, to gain entry into the league, the non-preferred players must, on average, actually be superior performers to those in the preferred group. How much superior the average non-preferred player must be depends on the magnitude of the discrimination.

The following chart compares the average performance levels of African American players with white American players for the same three years examined above: 1953, 1959, and 1968.³⁶ Two broad-based performance measures are employed: whether the player was ultimately elected to the CFL Hall of Fame, and the number of times a player was voted a divisional All-Star during his career.

	<i>1954</i>		<i>1959</i>		<i>1968</i>	
	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>
Career All- Star Selections Per Player	2.06	3.63	1.81	3.11	2.50	3.24
Proportion Voted to Hall of Fame	.14	.63	.21	.22	.15	.29
N	49	8	52	9	60	21

The above table shows that African American players were consistently better performers than their white American counterparts – African Americans were more likely to be selected as All-Stars, and (with the exception of the 1959 players) were much more likely to be voted to the Hall of Fame. This implies that CFL teams failed to employ sufficient numbers of African Americans – in other words, by replacing some white Americans with African Americans, teams could have increased their overall talent level. Failing to do so implies that teams valued white Americans over African Americans for reasons other than their on-field talent – presumably indicating some type of racial discrimination at work.³⁷

Finally, following the notions developed by Goff, McCormick and Tollison (2002), if entry discrimination was, in fact, present, then those teams that integrated more quickly should have had a competitive advantage on the field. In this regard, teams in the CFL’s West Division were examined over the time period 1950 to 1961, and the following regression was run:

$$\text{WIN} = b_0 + b_1 \text{HOFWH} + b_2 \text{HOFAA} + b_3 \text{FE}$$

where:

- WIN is a given team’s win percent in the season in question
- HOFWH is the number of white players on the team during that season who were ultimately elected to the CFL Hall of Fame
- HOFAA is the number of African American players on the team during that season who ultimately were elected to the CFL Hall of Fame
- FE is a series of variables measuring team-level fixed effects

The results are reported below (t-statistics in parentheses).

<i>Variable</i>	
Constant	0.44 (7.85)
HOFWH	0.01 (0.50)
HOFAA	0.15 (2.45)
FE- BC	-0.22 (-2.45)
FE- EDM	-0.02 (-0.22)
FE-SASK	-0.02 (-0.34)
FE- WPG	0.02 (0.14)
R ²	.37
N	63

Given the absence of detailed performance-related data for that period, the Hall of Fame variables are one of the few ways to capture team quality. The empirical results indicate that team win percent was unaffected by the number of white Hall of Famers on the team, but was significantly and positively affected by the number of African American Hall of Famers. This would suggest that what separated team performance in that era was a team's willingness to integrate African Americans onto its roster.

In addition, ad hoc evidence would also support the above statistical results. For example, compare the fortunes of two teams – Edmonton and Saskatchewan. Over the 1950-61 time period, Edmonton had a .67 win percent, compared to Saskatchewan's .42 percent. Both teams had an almost identical number of white players who were selected as all-stars over this time period – Edmonton had 49 players, while Saskatchewan had 47. However, with respect to African Americans, Edmonton had 16 players selected as all-stars, compared to only 2 for Saskatchewan. This would lead one to speculate that Edmonton's much stronger on-field performance over this time period was not that its quality of white players was

fundamentally different than Saskatchewan's, but that Edmonton's much greater use of African American players was the distinguishing factor.

However, this empirical work is very preliminary, and further analyses are warranted.

5. Conclusions

The research presented here complicates our understanding of African American football players and their quest to play the game in Canada. Canadian professional football represented a viable alternative for highly skilled African American players who faced racial discrimination in the United States. Further, the fact that African Americans were much better represented, in a relative sense, in the CFL compared to the NFL suggests that the league was more tolerant to blacks than its American competitor. But the research also suggests that these players faced discrimination in Canada and in the CFL. The economic tests support anecdotal data that suggests players faced racial discrimination in the hiring practices of the CFL and in the community at large.

This research also suggests that the mid-century racial dynamics of the sport systems of Canada and the United States may have been more similar than they were different. The color barriers in sport that existed in the United States were also practiced in Canada. Indeed the color barrier in hockey remained in place until 1958. Further, the racial politics of the Northern US and Canada were also similar. During the mid-century, provinces were just beginning to pass anti-discrimination laws. Immigration laws and practices that barred or severely limited people of color entering Canada had not yet been challenged. For all these reasons, we contend the mid-century Canadian sports system was less a refuge for African American athletes than it is so often presented in the academic literature, and was more simply another employment opportunity within a North American system of white dominance. This is not to suggest that there were no differences between the leagues or the countries, but rather that those differences may be overstated.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ “Quitting America” is actually the title of a recent book by Robinson (2004), whose work draws considerable inspiration from W.E.B. DuBose
- ² Technically, the name “Canadian Football League” was not officially adopted until 1958, but, for convenience, the term is used here to describe professional football in Canada even before 1958.
- ³ Kelly, 2001, p. 166
- ⁴ Trawick and Wagner were first “official” African Americans in the CFL, although a team picture of the 1930 Regina Roughriders (forerunner to the Saskatchewan Roughriders) includes an African American player by the name of Stonewall Jackson. It was rumored that Jackson was an American porter working on the Canadian railway system and would occasionally play football as he traveled across the country..
- ⁵ Josh Bell-Webster, *Herb Trawick*: cfl.ca, retrieved January 29,2007
- ⁶ Harrison, 1998
- ⁷ Humber, 2004
- ⁸ Winks, 1997
- ⁹ Winks, 1997
- ¹⁰ See, for example, Fosty and Fosty, 2004; Harris, 2003; O’Ree and McKinley, 1999
- ¹¹ See, for example, Longley, 2003.
- ¹² Proudfoot, 1967, p.5
- ¹³ Chaput, pp. 213-14
- ¹⁴ Chaput, pp. 214-15
- ¹⁵ Kelly, 2001, p. 122
- ¹⁶ Kelly,2001, p. 123
- ¹⁷ Proudfoot, p.5.
- ¹⁸ Proudfoot, p.5
- ¹⁹ Proudfoot, p. 5
- ²⁰ Proudfoot, p. 5
- ²¹ Proudfoot, p. 5
- ²² Proudfoot, p. 5
- ²³ Kelly, 2001, p. 123
- ²⁴ Josh Bell-Webster, *Herb Trawick*, cfl.ca
- ²⁵ Kelly, 1999, p. 22
- ²⁶ Kelly, 1999, p. 22
- ²⁷ Kelly, 1999, p. 22
- ²⁸ Bell-Webster, *Herb Trawick*, cfl.ca, retrieved January 29,2007
- ²⁹ Proudfoot, p. 5
- ³⁰ Proudfoot, p. 5
- ³¹ Proudfoot, p. 5
- ³³ MacCambridge, 2005
- ³⁴ Ross, 1999
- ³⁵ For a recent example, see Scahill, 2005
- ³⁶ Players included in this analysis are only those that had a player card issued for them in the year in question. Constantly changing rosters and imprecise and inconsistent historical record-keeping for rosters make it extremely difficult to identify all players in a given year. However, by using player cards, one can be reasonably assured that most of the prominent players are being identified.
- ³⁷ This argument presumes that there was a sufficient supply of quality African American players that could have moved into these positions.