Bob Mitchell on pro sports: 'Road to riches or dead end'

(1st of 2 installments)

A quarter of a century ago Jackie Robinson broke the color line in professional baseball.

Since then blacks have moved into virtually all the major sports, and last summer one major league baseball team fielded an all-black squad.

Some questions still remain, however. Are professional sports really free of racial prejudice? Can blacks go into management with the same facility as they move into the ranks of players?

Is it realistic for minority youngsters to pursue a career in professional sports to the exclusion of other endeavors?

* * *

To get the answers to these and similar questions, Manpower Magazine interviewed Bobby Mitchell, who retired in September 1969 after an outstanding 11-year career in the National Football League.

A 1958 graduate of the University of Illinois, where he starred in football and track, Mitchell played four years with the Cleveland Browns and seven years with the Washington Redskins as a running back and flanker.

His career total yardage for rushing, pass receiving, and punt and kick returns of 14,077 has been surpassed by only one other player in professional football history—Jim Brown.

Mitchell, who has a bachelor's degree in marketing, now owns a Washington, D.C., insurance agency, is a consultant for Pepsi-Cola, a scout for the Redskins, and a paid after-dinner and inspirational speaker.

He lives in Washington with his wife and two children.

Q. Mr. Mitchell, because of the Willie Mayses, the Wilt Chamberlains, and the Bobby Mitchells, many minority youngsters think athletics are the road to fame and fortune. What is your view?

A. It's partly true, of course. These youngsters read about the great name athletes and think that they can do real well financially in sports.

But it's misleading. A lot of youngsters who get a shot at a professional sport never make it. For the few, athletics is a step to security and fortune but all the majority get out of it is a great deal of confusion.

Q. What happens to those who don't make it?

A. This failure often has a real adverse effect. Many of them end up going back home and they can't seem to find their niche in life because they are still thinking about becoming great athletes and they can't seem to shake it.

But those with college backgrounds often go on to jobs in other fields. There are quite a few guys who didn't make it in sports and it turned out to be the best thing for them.

These men turned out to be fine businessmen, lawyers, and so forth.

Who's to say that, in these cases, failure in sports wasn't a lucky break?

Q. So a young man would be well advised to continue his education or learn a skill rather than gambling everything on making it big in athletics?

A. Definitely. In some sports, like baseball, a youngster can go straight from high school to the pro ranks.

The smart ones keep going to school and working toward a degree too. They know they might not make it, or they may not become a star and get into the big money.

The kid who gets an athletic scholarship to college ought to try to bear down on his studies. Making it big in athletics is a real long shot.

Take a man who plays varsity football. He's just one of 20,000 players among the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) teams.

The National Football League will draft about 440 players a year and of these maybe 170 will survive the cut.

So all of a sudden we're down from 20,000 to 170. And even that's not the whole story. Of the 170, how many will survivet he first season?

Some kid will say, "I'm a positive thinker. I know I'm going to make it." I signed a lot of them this past year and they were some of the first kids who went home.

The coaches, the scouts, and the players know that it's just talk. Action is what counts in the big leagues.

Q. Did you have any doubt that you were going to make it?

A. I'm not a very good example, because pro football was the furthest thing

I was very excited about baseball in high school and turned down a baseball contract to go to college. You see, if I didn't make it in baseball I would have been considered a pro anyway and couldn't have gotten an athletic scholarship. And I was determined to finish college.

All through college I had one thing in mind other than my education. That was to go to the Olympics in track, which was my favorite sport.

I took football by chance and when they offered me a pro contract, I thought I'd try it and if I could play 2 years, I'd be the happiest guy in the world. So I played 11 years.

But when I started out, I never thought I'd be playing professional sports.

Q. What are the pay scales in professional football?

A. They're a disappointment to youngsters who read about those $100,000 contracts. You can count those on one hand quick—in any sport.

The average in football falls around $20,000. And keep in mind longevity. The average player lasts only 4 or 5 years. So it behooves a kid to protect himself with a good educational background.

Q. Let's talk about injuries. Do they blight the prospects of a great number of young men?

A. Yes. Sometimes a great athlete gets hurt in high school and it plagues him forever. It's really bad if it happens, say in the third year of college. Then he has a decision: Should I try to overcome the injury or should I forget sports and start hitting the books?

But you can't make up three years of lost study in 1 so he convinces himself he can overcome the injury, and I cut him the first day in camp. Now he's back home and didn't protect himself in school by hustling and he has no job.

Q. Do athletes injured in training have any contract protection?

A. Yes. All our players are protected by a standard clause that says anyone hurt during training or the regular season will receive his salary for that year.

Q. In August, the National Basketball Association announced six players were eligible to be drafted under the hardship rule. What do you think of this new rule?

A. It's both good and bad. For years, professional football and basketball have followed the rule against signing college players until they finish their schooling or until their class has graduated. This helped discourage players from dropping out of college.

But the National Basketball Association this past summer adopted the hardship rule on a trial basis to allow exceptions.

A man can be drafted earlier if he's in financial trouble, is making bad grades, or can't find work in other fields.

There's a whole set of criteria. In football we're sticking to the old rule, with no exceptions.

In other words, we would not take any kid until his class has graduated. So if a youngster thinks he's going to play professional football by bypassing college, he can forget it.

I don't like the idea of going onto campuses and getting these youngsters before they are ready.

Being a black man, I can well understand how the hardship rule can help some of the black kids. my family didn't have that much and I turned down a pro baseball contract and I believe that some of these hardship cases could hold on, too.

Q. What are the chances of setting up a special fund to help these hardship cases finish school?

A. Well, you have a problem. You've got so many schools now going a little past the NCAA rules to keep these kids in school.

Subsidization is reaching the point where some of the players are getting a little more than they should be getting. It's making the kids money hungry and you can see the problems we are running into now in the National Football League signing them to contracts.

This might sound strange coming from me, because when I played I wanted everything I could get, too.

But there is a limit and it's stupid to go to the courts and to hire agents to try to get money beyond what is there. It all stems from kids being subsidized too much in college.

He gets in the habit of always reaching for more and then ends up getting hurt because eventually the club has to say, "That's it." He plays no more. He doesn't even reach his longevity.

(To be continued next week)

T-Shirt night

Tonight (Friday) when the Bullets face Seattle, will be "T-Shirt Night" at the Civic Center. All youngsters, 14 and under, accompanied by a paying adult will receive a coupon which can be exchanged for a Bullets' T-Shirt at any of the 20 participating Read's Drug Stores.

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Baseball gets ultimatum on return to DC by '73

PHOENIX, Ariz. (UPI) — A delegation of Washington, D.C. officials, headed by five congressmen, has told major league baseball it "must" put another team in the nation's capital to replace the departed Washington Senators by the start of the 1973 season.

"We impressed upon them how to do it," said turning baseball to Washington and we left it up to them how to do," said Rep. Rep. B F.. Sisk (D-Calif.).

The delegation, which said its bid to the top officials of the game was received in a "friendly manner," arrived in Phoenix late Tuesday night and was closeted with baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn and other baseball officials until 1:30 a.m. (MST).

* * *

"There are three ways by which a new team could be found for Washington," said Rep. Frank Horton (R-NY). "The first would be through expansion of the major leagues; the second would be for a present big league owner to move a currently existing team to Washington. The third would be for a group in Washington to purchase a team and move it.

"We told them we are prepared to do it anyone of those three ways," Horton said. "We left it up to them how they will do it."

* * *

Spokesmen for the group which also included Washington Mayor Walter Washington, said the group "impressed on the baseball people that this must be done, that the majority of the Congress insists that it be done."

The delegation was asked whether its insistence that the return of baseball to Washington "must" be accomplished was accompanied by any threat of Congressional action, such as a review of baseball's status under the anti-trust laws.

"We did not go into that," Sisk said. "We simply indicated what had to be done."

* * *

Sisk said that Kuhn and other baseball officials explained again the financial reasons why Washington was left without a team when the Washington Senators were transferred by owner Bob Short to Dallas-Fort Worth at the end of the 1971 season.

Horton said that the Washington group's ability to finance a new team now was "accepted at face value."

The Washington delegation travelled here in a 10-passenger chartered plane, the four congressmen in the group paying their own way. The other congressmen were Rep. Joel Broyhill (R-Va.) and Rep. Melvin Price (D-Ill.).

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BUFFALO BOMB THREATS—Although the Buffalo Bills are not setting the NFL afire this season, they do have an array of threats which could offer problems for the Colts Sunday at the Stadium. From left are wide receiver J. D. Hill, quarterback Jim Harris, running back O. J. Simpson and wide receiver Haven Moses. The strong-armed Harris could hit any of these three excellent catchers and runners to spell trouble for the Baltimore eleven at any point in the contest.

Dec. 4

The Mother's Club of the Druid Hill YMCA will hold a rummage sale from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. today at the YMCA branch, 1619 Druid Hill Avenue.

New and old clothes will be on sale as will lunch and dinners.

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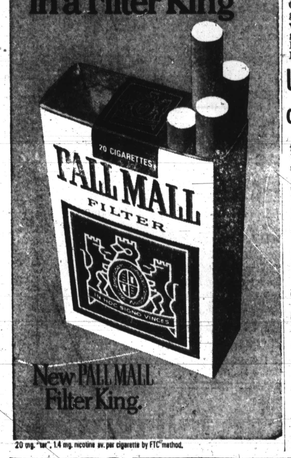

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Unseld heads career panel

Wes Unseld, star center for the Baltimore Bullets basketball team, will head up a special panel of business and professional people discussing careers at a career-guidance assembly of students at Fairmount Hill Junior-Senior High School, Tuesday.

The assembly takes its theme from the titles of two books written by successful professionals: "I Always Wanted to be Somebody," by Althea Gibson; and "Yes I Can," by Sammy Davis Jr.

Also appearing on the panel will be Mrs. Rose Byrd, cosmetologist, instructor at the school; Thomas Gregory, personnel director at Coca Cola Bottling Co.; Miss Mowana Debnam, recent graduate of the school; Mrs. Hattie Smith, cosmetologist, and Eugene M. Smith, of Coca Cola.

CLASSIC CHOICE—Defensive back Maurice Tyler of Morgan State College's MEAC champions, has been named to the East squad for the 1st Black Football Classic, to be played tomorrow (Saturday) in the Houston Astrodome.

Crack D.C. schoolboy 5 to play Bullets' prelim

DeMatha High School, touted as the best basketball team in Washington in the last eight years, has agreed to play two games prior to Bullets' games at the Baltimore Civic Center.

Coach Morgan Wottle's powerhouse will face Cardinal Gibbons High School of Baltimore, tonight (Friday) 6:15 p.m., prior to the Bullets' contest against the Seattle Supersonics.

Then, on Tuesday, Dec. 14, when Austin Carr and the Cleveland Cavaliers meet the Bullets here, DeMatha will return to test Loyola High School, also of Baltimore.

Last year, DeMatha won the annual Alhambra Tournament in Cumberland, Md., beating Mt. St. Joe of Baltimore by two points in the championship game. This season, the Washington quint is reputed to be even stronger than last year's club.

Recreation Bureau awards Sat.

The Baltimore City Bureau of Recreation's 13th Annual Volunteer Corps Award Banquet will be held on Saturday, dec. 4, at 1:00 p.m. at the Alcazar Hotel.

436 volunteers will be presented pins and certificates for their volunteer services at recreation centers and playgrounds throughout Baltimore.

These vounteers have contributed 93,213 hours this year to the recreation department. The 93,213 hours are equal to 49 full-time recreation leaders at a savings of $317,030.00 to the taxpayers of Baltimore City.

Outstanding service award pins will be presented to the Senior Volunteers following: Matthew Pyle at Brooklyn Recreation Center with a total of 12,250 hours; Mrs. Rose Spress, Hamilton Recreation Center with 4,500 hours.

Junior Volunteers: Stephanie Jenkins, Elmley Playfield with 2,250 hours; Larry Boston, Lexington Terrace Recreation Center with 2,000 hours.

Mr. A. L. Cottrill is Superintendent of the Baltimore City Bureau of Recreation.

HU awaits Penn State on road to soccer title

Howard University hopes to take the last remaining step in regional play here tomorrow (Saturday) enroute to the championship bracket of the national collegiate soccer playoffs.

The Bisons defeated Navy, 2-0 on Tuesday to qualify for a quarter-final birth against Penn State. The Nittany Lions upset Pennsylvania Monday to qualify as Howard's opponent.

By winning over Penn State, coach Ted Chambers' outfit can move into the semi-finals and finals of the NCAA tournament at Miami's Orange Bowl, Dec. 29-31.

Howard, the fifth-ranked team in the nation, has talentloads of it in a freshman and sophomore-dominated lineup. Only one player on the squad is from the United States.

Aqui is one of three top-notch forwards from Trinidad; the others are Alvin Henderson, like Aqui an All-American, and Ian Bain, a freshman.

Henderson, also a sophomore on the inside, scored the first goal against Navy at 7:46 of the first quarter.

Stationed on the left side, he took a pass from Aqui, who was in the middle, and sent a low 15-yarder past Tim Dantzig, Navy's Plebe goalie who played an outstanding game, making several incredible stops among his 10 saves.

It was Henderson's 19th goal.

Aqui scored the clincher at 6.17 of the third quarter when a Navy fullback failed to clear out a poor corner kick which bounced in front of the goal mouth.

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