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# National Football In The 1920s Through The 1950s

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While football was officially professionalized in 1892, professional football teams were born in 1920. A team of seven men came together and organized the first professional football league in Canton, Ohio. The meeting of these men soon led to the creation of the American Professional Football Conference. The conference was the predecessor for the largely successful National Football League. The league started with ten teams from four different states, all of which were participants of regional leagues in their possible regions. The league received the current name, the NFL in 1922. After decades of failed attempts, it was the first professional football league to be successfully established as a nationwide presence. Membership numbers in the league gradually and steadily stabilized throughout the 20's and 30's. A more progressive and more formal organization tactic was adopted by the league which led to the first official championship game in 1933.

The 1920's soon became known as the Golden Age of sports. This was due to the increasing numbers of people beginning to pay money in order to watch people compete in sports. A more fitting name for this decrease would be the 'Golden Decade of (White) Sports,' because Black and African American players were shut out and not allowed to participate. Racism was at a height in the 1920s. Lynching, riots and other racial violence punished African American athletes and made it nearly impossible for them to get access to the field. There were very few Black athletes that were permitted to play in the National Football League prior to 1920. The NFL stopped signing Black players in 1927 but reintegrated in 1946 following World War II. The American Professional Football Association had very few African American players. Only nine Black athletes entered NFL teams between 1920 and 1926, and after 1926, the Black players that were still in the NFL left the league. Multiple teams were thrown out of the league that year, and Black players were the first to be removed due to the substantial amount of talented and available white players. After this, the Black players that left never came back and over the next few years, a Black player would only occasionally appear on a team. The year 1933 was the last year of integration of the NFL. There were two players of color in the league, Ray Kemp and Joe Lillard, but they were both off the team by the end of the season. Joe Lillard was not invited back mostly because his propensity to get in fights despite the points he was responsible for earning during his time on the team. Ray Kemp quit playing for his own reasons, he wanted to start and pursue his own coaching career. Many people credit the exclusion of African American players to George Preston Marshall's arrival in the league in 1932. George Marshall was an American businessman who became the owner of the Washington Redskins in the NFL in 1932. He had strong beliefs which he openly and publicly exhibited, by refusing to allow any Black players on his teams. It was reported that he pushed for the rest of the league to follow in his actions to prevent African Americans from playing. All while he was openly promoting Native Americans joining the team. George Marshall's hostility and hate was blatantly directed towards the African American race making the odds stacked against them once again.

In addition to this, there were many external forces putting pressure on people of color.

The Great Depression had sparked a rise in racism and segregation across the country. In

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1933, the league suddenly banned Black players and by 1934 there was not a single African American on an NFL team and did not have one again until post World War II. The majority of Black player joined minor league football teams or all Black barnstorming teams, traveling to various small town participating in exhibition matches. They worked outside the framework of professional sports. Racial divisions made it difficult for Blacks to get a job, and even if they did it paid less than half of that of a white man. This made it even harder for Black athletes because they had an entire national institution to infiltrate just to do what they do best. They faced obstacles such as unemployment, discrimination, lynchings, and so much more that set African Americans athletes at a severe disadvantage when it came to playing the game. Segregation and racism was more than alive and well throughout these decades. African Americans were still bound by Jim Crow Laws and suffered public torture and harrassment in their daily lives.

It will be a very long time before the NFL can fully accept Black and African American players onto their fields. All African Americans that entered into the league excelled in their positions, yet still ended up banned from participation due to the color of their skin. The league gave athletes of color more than a hard time for being of color and simply wanting to play the same game that they do. The 1920's through the 1950's NFL was nowhere near ready to acknowledge Black players despite the fact that it leads the league to access to America's joint conscious that celebrates football as something that supports the ideals of democracy and merit. Instead the league refused to acknowledge the hardships, struggles, and pain of the African American race, even though they would eventually be the exact thing to make the league live up to its principles.

## **Works Cited**

1. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/professional-football-is-born>