

The Black Bruins

James W. Johnson

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Johnson has created an important work of sports—and American—history.

In the 1930s, UCLA added five prominent black athletes to its football team, and they helped to turn the Bruins into a powerhouse. In *The Black Bruins*, James W. Johnson does an outstanding job of placing the athletes in their fascinating historical context.

To say that Kenny Washington, Jackie Robinson, Woody Strode, Tom Bradley, and Ray Bartlett led interesting lives is an understatement. Johnson nicely balances their biographies with the story of the football program they brought to life.

The early part of the book is very much the story of the quintet's time playing football, with gripping recaps of crucial games as well as painful stories of bigotry. While the players earned praise even from opponents, the myriad challenges that the men faced still hit home—from the racialized prose of period newspaper coverage to reminders that southern schools refused to play UCLA.

At the time, Los Angeles was still years away from having a franchise in major professional sports. The city was home to a growing African-American population, and discrimination was a problem. The team's significance is covered well, explaining the level of celebrity that the men achieved as students, with Hollywood stars among their fans and national newspapers tracking their stories.

Johnson also spends ample time on what all five athletes achieved after school. Robinson broke baseball's color barrier and became an all-time great in the sport; the book also covers his World War II experience, his post-baseball business career, and his multi-sport exploits while he was a Bruin.

Washington and Strode became the first African-Americans in the NFL, even before Robinson joined the Dodgers; though Washington, arguably the best athlete of the group, was by then past his prime. Strode had prominent careers in professional wrestling and the movies, Bradley became the first black mayor of Los Angeles and served twenty years in the job, and Bartlett became a police officer and a civic leader in Pasadena.

The Black Bruins packs a lot of great information into one book, covering a remarkable team and the individuals who formed it. Johnson has created an important work of sports—and American—history.

JEFF FLEISCHER (January/February 2018)

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