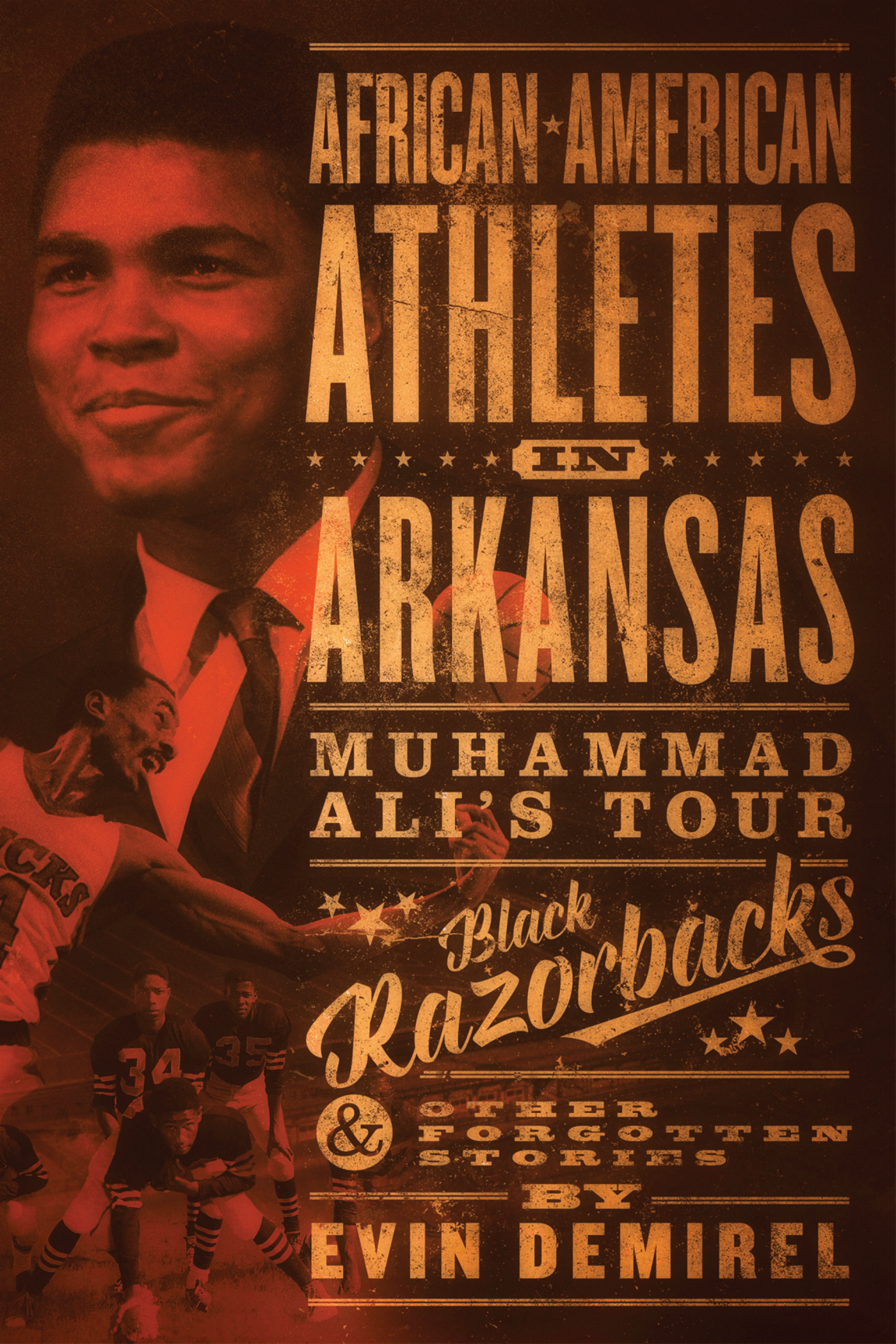


AFRICAN-AMERICAN ATHLETES IN ARKANSAS

MUHAMMAD ALI'S TOUR

Black Razorbacks

& OTHER FORGOTTEN STORIES

BY

EVIN DEMIREL

AFRICAN-AMERICAN ATHLETES IN ARKANSAS

AFRICAN-AMERICAN ATHLETES IN ARKANSAS

Muhammad Ali's Tour, Black Razorbacks, & Other Forgotten Stories

Evin Demirel

First edition: May 2017

Cover design: James T. Egan

Book design: H. K. Stewart

Printed in the United States of America.
This book is printed on archival-quality paper that meets requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences, Permanence of Paper, Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE FOLLOWING ARE PREVIEW EXCERPTS, NOT COMPLETE ARTICLES.

THE ORIGINAL BLACK RAZORBACKS

DECADES BEFORE ARKANSAS FOOTBALL INTEGRATED, A TEAM OF AFRICAN AMERICANS PLAYED ON UNIVERSITY GROUNDS, WORE OFFICIAL HOG UNIFORMS AND PLAYED AGAINST ALL-WHITE TEAMS.

Although Razorback linebacker Brooks Ellis had lived in Fayetteville his whole life, he'd never heard of the Black Razorbacks. Not that he's to blame. Hardly anyone, after all, remembers the group of young African-American men who donned used Razorback and Fayetteville High equipment during the Great Depression and played football across Fayetteville and the region. They represented northwest Arkansas against other all-black teams from Russellville to Joplin, Mo., forming a kind of regional "Negro Leagues of football" all but forgotten by Arkansans today.

These teams upend some modern conceptions of segregation in the former Confederate states. Not only did the Black Razorbacks scrimmage against white players from a then-segregated Fayetteville High School, but they did so on the grounds of the segregated University of Arkansas itself—under the

watch and tutelage of Razorback football coaches. Moreover, the white players in turn often played in Fayetteville's all-black neighborhood.

"That's awesome to hear about," Ellis said in August 2015, as he sat in the modern Razorbacks' locker room. His alma mater, Fayetteville High School, stood less than a mile away. Ellis, who is white, noted Fayetteville High School had in 1954 become the first high school in Arkansas to publicly announce its desegregation—"I take a little pride in that"—but he hadn't known African Americans were playing against the all-white Bulldogs decades before. He added, "It would be cool to learn more about, obviously."

Let us begin, then.

Much of the Black Razorbacks' story comes to us from accounts of their games buried in the archives of the *Northwest Arkansas Times*, a newspaper run by Fayetteville civic leader Roberta Fulbright—the mother of future U.S. senator William J. Fulbright. The most detailed known retrospect comes from Arthur Friedman, a white Fayetteville resident who attended Fayetteville High School in the early 1930s.

He often watched the Black Razorbacks' scrimmages and games, and considered those times "the highlight of my growing-up years and school," he wrote in a March 17, 1985 *Northwest Arkansas Times* article. Indeed he considered the African-American players, many around his age, as friends.

The east, central and south parts of Arkansas were home to many all-black high schools, but northwest Arkansas had none. Before the 1950s, black teenagers in Washington and Benton Counties seeking high school education had to leave home. They usually attended Lincoln High School in Fort Smith, where they boarded, or went to more distant all-black schools in towns like Hot Springs.

The lack of educational resources for older black students in northwest Arkansas in part reflected the overall scarcity of students in the area. But it also represented the state's allocation of fewer resources to its minority citizens. Consider that in 1928-29 the state spent an average of $35.05 per white student in its public schools compared to

$14.38 per black student, according to *Educating the Masses: The Unfolding History of Black School Administrators in Arkansas, 1900-2000*.

Some northwest Arkansas teenagers either didn't attend high school or did so sporadically. This may explain why the Black Razorbacks sometimes scheduled early afternoon weekday games during the school year.

Arthur Friedman fondly recalled as a teen feigning sickness to get out of class and attend one of those games against the all-black Joplin Pirates. But he failed to conceal the ruse from his parents. Friedman's father knew he'd been sent home yet never made it there. When he saw a recap of the Black Razorbacks' game in the paper the next morning, his suspicions of Friedman's playing hooky were confirmed.

Coverage from white-owned and staffed newspapers, the only kind of newspapers in northwest Arkansas, is a sign the Black Razorbacks benefited from biracial community support. So are reports citing attendance figures of up to 300 people for home games.

At the time less than 8,000 people including a few hundred black residents lived in Fayetteville. This means a significant percentage of the fans watching these all-black games would have been white residents.

End of excerpt

This feature will be originally published in
African-American Athletes in Arkansas.

THE ENDURING LEGACY OF LITTLE ROCK'S HILARIOUS JESTERS

In the 1950s, mandated integration began transforming Arkansas sports forever. Four African-Americans paved the way at the high school level in 1955 when they joined the football team at Fayetteville High School, making it the first integrated high school sports team in state history.

Two years later, a young man named Harold Hayes joined Fayetteville High's junior varsity basketball team to become the state's first black athlete to play against all-white high school competition in that sport, according to the Arkansas Activities Association, the state's governing body for high school athletics. Earlier that year, Hoxie High School had integrated its varsity track team. But while desegregation in sports happened here and there across Arkansas' northwest and northeast parts, it would take longer for it to take effect in the state's most populous region.

WHILE HISTORY BOOKS TEND TO FOCUS ON THE LANDMARK EVENTS LEADING TO INTEGRATION, THERE WERE OTHER MOMENTS THAT WENT LARGELY UNDOCUMENTED—SUCH AS THOSE THAT OCCURRED DURING A PICK-UP GAME OF BASKETBALL.

On this specific front, central Arkansas lagged behind the more northern towns. This gap appeared to widen when cameras from all over the world descended onto downtown Little Rock in 1957 to capture the hate and vitriol of all-white crowds protesting the entry of nine black students into Central High School. Despite much resistance, the students attended Central that year, but it would not be until 1962 that Kenneth Robinson—uncle to NBA Hall of Famer David Robinson—finally integrated Tiger athletics by joining the basketball team.

Across the nation, tides shifted. Integration happened, of course, through landmark events that have been chronicled and whose stories have been passed down through history books and official accounts. But so many of the acts sending pulses through the walls long dividing our nation's people were never recorded. In many cases, they were small, everyday encounters in shared spaces no administrator could fully control—perhaps at a swimming pool, or a park or a field. In Little Rock, this kind of mixing rarely happened, but in the 1940s and 1950s, more and more young African-Americans began venturing into public arenas previously closed to them. Love of competition—whether baseball, basketball or football—often prompted these forays. Segregation's crumbling didn't always happen this way, though.

The ball, as it were, sometimes bounced the other way.

★ ★ ★

Skin color didn't matter to Dave McPherson. He had grown up in the 1940s in what is now downtown Little Rock and attended what was then an all-white Central High. Growing to 6-1 and 198 pounds, he was especially smitten with basketball, honing his skills against top local talent—including a few Razorback basketball players, he says—at MacArthur Park and a court near War Memorial Stadium.

He says he had no issue with African Americans then, but like many other whites of this segregated era, he had limited reason to

interact with them. Korean War service changed that, as did an early 1950s stint in Orleans, France. On a U.S. Army base there, and elsewhere across France, he played basketball with blacks and whites alike. "I was assigned to detached service and just played ball," he says. McPherson even spent time off base playing with top French players of the era, including Fernand Guillou, a member of Frances' Silver Medal-winning 1948 Olympic team. On the whole, the U.S. military was more inclusive of African Americans than the segregated society he found upon returning to Little Rock.

The line Jim-Crow era laws had tried to draw between the races was beginning to blur, though, especially among that generation's young adults involved in recreational pursuits. One day in the late 1950s, when McPherson was in his mid-20s, he was shooting hoops outside East Side Junior High School when he saw a young black man across the court doing the same. McPherson introduced himself and said he'd like to scrimmage. Chester Lane, a former Arkansas Baptist College player three years McPherson's senior, was ready. The two men got it rolling with a 1-on-1 "slugfest" that lasted 2 1/2 hours and ended in a draw, McPherson recalled. Each athlete had made the other better.

From that day forward, McPherson and Lane became fast friends, developing a lifelong relationship built on love of competition. They often spoke on the phone, played chess and kept shooting around at East Side, a few blocks from Little Rock's South Main Street, or other hot spots such as MacArthur Park and the Dunbar Community Center. They brought friends along, as well. Both black and white, the new additions had varying levels of basketball expertise, but they all had some serious bona fides.

More than a decade before interracial basketball competition in Arkansas' colleges became a common sight, McPherson, Lane and their friends were regularly playing pickup ball at MacArthur Park, which, in the late 1950s, was located in a primarily white neighborhood (though not quite as segregated as those all-white public parks that were farther west of central Little Rock). Tommy Staggers, one of the African-

Americans who played at MacArthur, didn't recall anyone making a fuss over who used the park: "I don't think that bothered us—as far as what society had struck on." The gym in the Dunbar Community Center had been created to serve a primarily black community, but a few whites like McPherson also began playing there. "To us, [color] really didn't matter," Lane says. "We just wanted somebody to play."

End of excerpt

This article ran in the November 2014 issue of Arkansas Life *magazine. The* Pulaski County Historical Review *republished it in summer 2015.*

THE WOULD-BE RAZORBACK PIONEER: EDDIE MILES

IN THE LATE 1950S, RAZORBACK COACHES ALMOST MADE NORTH LITTLE ROCK BASKETBALL SUPERSTAR EDDIE MILES (A FUTURE NBA NO. 4 DRAFT PICK) THE FIRST OFFICIAL BLACK RAZORBACK.

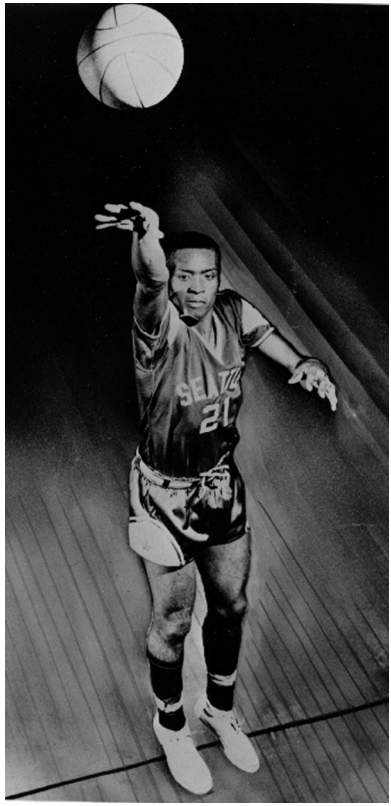
The state title North Little Rock High School won on March 9, 2013, in Little Rock was a long time in coming.

Forty two years in coming, to be exact. But after firmly wiping away any worries of a late-season collapse with a 64-52 win over Fayetteville High in the state finals, the only question remaining for the 2013 7A champion Charging Wildcats is whether its 28-1 season will ultimately mark the start of a dynasty.

The city of North Little Rock has already produced a few superb runs in prep basketball. From 1964 through 1971, North Little Rock High won four state titles in the Arkansas Activities Association's largest classification. And in 1948-1952, the city's all-black Scipio A. Jones High School won four state titles in the Arkansas State

Athletic Association—the organizing body for the state's African-American prep athletes—before it joined the all-white AAA in 1967.

But the most dominant stretch of all eras belonged to the Scipio Jones teams which played from the 1955-1956 through 1958-59 seasons. These squads won four consecutive state titles, beat some of the best teams from Texas, Illinois, Tennessee and Oklahoma and annually represented Arkansas at the National Negro high school tournament in Nashville, Tenn. There, Jones finished second in 1959.



North Little Rock native Eddie Miles became a prolific scorer for Seattle University and the Detroit Pistons. (Credit: Seattle University Athletics Department)

Ron Ingram, Sr., former head basketball coach at North Little Rock High, is familiar with the best players of that era and the modern one. He believes the late '50s Jones teams were "head and shoulders above a lot of these teams coming out" today. They shot better than today's players, he said, and perhaps no shooter in any era of the state's largest classification was more prolific than Jones' do-it-all star Eddie Miles.

"He could drop 50 on you whenever he wanted," Pine Bluff Merrill High's Clifton Roaf told the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette in 2001. "Sidney Moncrief was good, but he was no Eddie Miles."

As a 6-4 freshman in 1955-56, Miles averaged 21 points a game and helped lead the Dragons to a 58-56 win over Pine Bluff Merrill for

the state title. He accompanied junior standout Charles Thompson, a 6-3 center with an ambidextrous hook shot, in a complementary role similarly filled this season by North Little Rock High's 6-3 shooting guard KeVaughn Allen.

In 1956-57, Jones went 30-4 as Miles and Thompson both averaged more than 25 points a game. Other starters included captain John Wesley Smith, Norman Handy and Michael Carpenter. Again, Jones beat Merrill in the finals, this time 54-52. In the national tournament, Jones beat Bluefield, W. Va. 53-43 before a 64-51 quarterfinal loss to Middleton High of Tampa Bay, Fla.

In the next two seasons, Jones didn't lose a game to an in-state opponent. It knocked off defending negro national champion St. Elizabeth of Chicago, 40-34, at its home gym in January 1958. William McCraw, who played on the Jones varsity 1956-58, said the gym—a small, rickety structure known as "The Barn"—gave an unusual advantage to the home team.

"The rafters hung sort of low and sometimes if you threw [the ball] too high it would hit the rafters," McCraw said. He added while the Dragons were used to this quirk, their opponents weren't.

Head Coach Albert Booker Calvin, who went by "A.B.," was a far more important reason for Jones' success. The epitome of old-school, Booker was a take-charge disciplinarian who firmly insisted on rigorous practice of the game's fundamentals. "I used to call him Coach ABC," McCraw said.

End of excerpt

This article ran in 2013 in the North Little Rock Times.

VANISHING ACT

IN 1985, ARKANSAN AFRICAN AMERICANS HELPED LIFT THE RAZORBACKS TO THE COLLEGE WORLD SERIES WITH A RECORD FIVE BLACK STARTERS. DECADES LATER, BLACK BASEBALL STATEWIDE IS DYING. WHAT HAPPENED?

The late 1970s were a significant turning point in Arkansas's athletic history. Sidney Moncrief, a basketball star, became the first African-American college athlete embraced by the entire state. African Americans Leotis Harris, Ben Cowins and Jimmy Walker helped Arkansas football achieve a national standing unequaled until recent years. Meanwhile, Arvis Harper and Hank Thompson became the first blacks to play for the Razorbacks baseball team.

Throughout the next decade, blacks' role in all three major sports grew. By 1985, Arkansas baseball became the first College World Series team with five African-American starters, a high mark that still stands. On the surface, it appeared as if African Americans' contributions to these sports would continue to increase. That happened—but only in basketball and football.

Razorback baseball has surged in popularity in recent years, reaching record numbers in attendance and revenue, but black players have not been part of the equation. No blacks are on this year's team, which on Saturday began a best-of-three series against Baylor in the NCAA Tournament Super Regionals. Rick Fires, who covers Hogs baseball for the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, estimated there had been four black baseball Razorbacks in the last 14 years.

This trend has not escaped the notice of D'Vone McClure, a highly touted African-American Hogs signee who played baseball at Jacksonville High School. McClure says his black friends often joke with him: "They're like 'Why are you playing baseball?' Not many of them even like baseball. They just don't see what I see."

McClure, a 6-3, 190-pound outfielder, is good enough that he may bypass college altogether for an early start in professional baseball after the Cleveland Indians picked him in the fourth round of last week's draft. He, along with his parents and agents, have a few weeks to negotiate the signing bonus that would supplement his contract. "Is it gonna be worth not going to college? If it's gonna be a better opportunity for me to go to college, I still have a full scholarship to an awesome university that turns out awesome players." No matter which path McClure chooses, it will be one increasingly less traveled.

In 1975, African Americans made up 27 percent of major league baseball rosters. That's dropped to 8 percent. Arkansas is part of the Southeastern Conference's western division, which in 2010 had 186 student-athletes in baseball. Six (3.2 percent) were black. Meanwhile, in this division, blacks made up 72 percent of the football rosters and 80 percent of the basketball rosters.

Each state has its own story of the decline of the African-American baseball player. Taken together, the overarching narrative is one of significant cultural loss for all races. How did this happen?

Overall interest in baseball in the black community has fallen for decades. This trend started with the integration of professional baseball in the late 1940s and 1950s, which caused the disintegration of black-

owned baseball leagues. For more than half a century before then, such leagues and affiliated teams had flourished across the nation, cultivating strong interest in the sport from the communities supporting them.

Arkansas was no exception.

Baseball here, as in the rest of the South, was a mostly segregated affair. The first known mention of the sport played among black Arkansans comes in 1873. By 1885, at least two all-black teams had emerged—the Little Rock Reds and the Cadet Baseball Club.

The game also took root in northwest Arkansas. In 1912, Fort Smith and Bentonville had teams in a regional all-black league. By the 1920s, northeast Arkansas was also fielding its own teams, and their opponents included Cubans as well as blacks. While blacks couldn't play alongside whites, some Native Americans did. A Newport team, for instance, included on its 1925 roster Moses Yellowhorse, a one-time pitcher for the major league Pittsburgh Pirates.

For all races, Hot Springs became a hotbed of professional players and their teams in the early 1900s. Major league greats such as Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, and Logan County native Dizzy Dean descended upon Hot Springs for annual spring training, and so did some of the best black players starting in the late 1910s—speedy center fielder "Cool Papa" Bell and power hitter Josh Gibson likely among them.

The state's most successful all-black team emerged in the 1930s after businessman John C. Claybrook established an eponymous town based on his farming and logging operations in southern Crittenden County. He built a stadium, too, and paid elite Negro League players from Memphis and St. Louis to fill it. The culmination of his efforts came in 1935 and 1936, when the Claybrook Tigers became champions of the Negro Southern League.

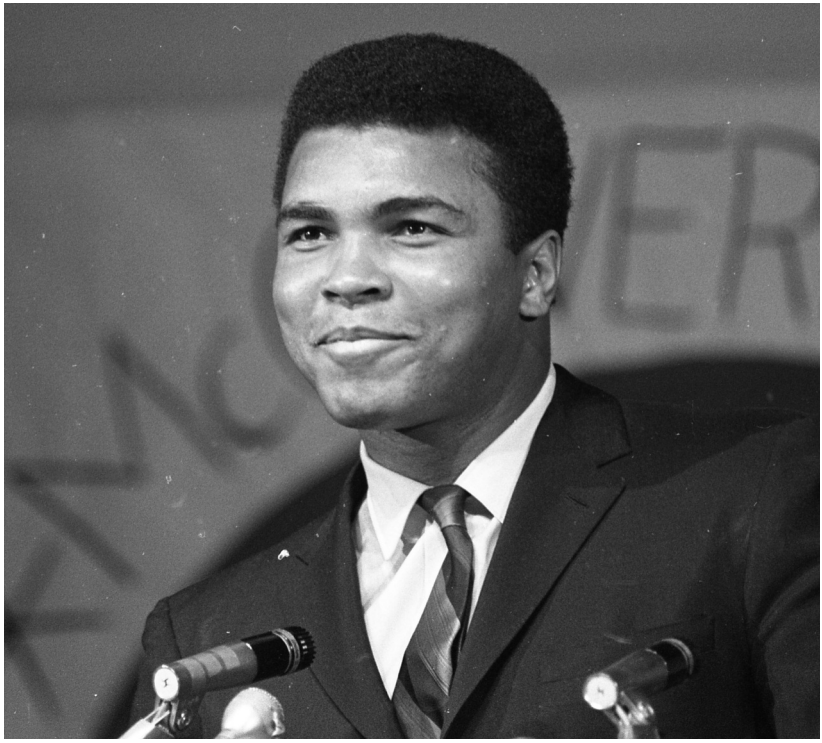
End of excerpt

This feature was published in the Perspective section of the June 10, 2012 Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

PHOTOS

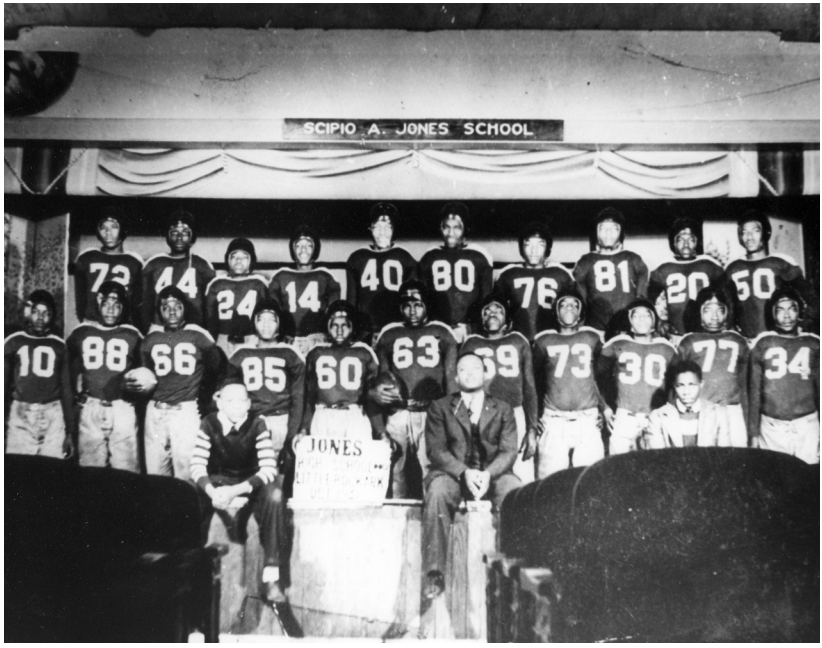
Logan County native Dizzy Dean (right) and Satchel Paige were among the best pitchers in the world. (Credit: NoirTech Research, Inc.)

Muhammad Ali at a reception held at the Unitarian Student Center, Fayetteville, March 12, 1969. (Ken Good, photographer. Courtesy *Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* and Shiloh Museum of Ozark History/*Northwest Arkansas Times* Collection—NWAT Box 21 69.34)



Muhammad Ali speaking at the University of Arkansas's Symposium '69 series, Fayetteville, March 12, 1969. (Ken Good, photographer. Courtesy *Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* and Shiloh Museum of Ozark History/*Northwest Arkansas Times* Collection—NWAT Box 21 69.34)

Caption: Future five-time Super Bowl champion Elijah Pitts (fourth from right, back row) starred at Philander Smith with future coaching pioneer Eddie Boone (#60 front row). (Credit: Eddie Boone)



North Little Rock's Scipio Jones High football team in October 1941. (Credit: Ralph Armstrong collection/Mosaic Templars Cultural Center)

ARKANSAS' RICH African-American sports heritage finally gets the attention it deserves with this one-a-kind anthology. The unprecedented collection showcases original features on Fayetteville's forgotten "Black Razorbacks" of the 1930s, Muhammad Ali's fascinating weeklong 1969 tour through the state and award-winning articles from *Slate*, *Arkansas Life* magazine, the *North Little Rock Times*, the *Arkansas Times* and more.

EVIN DEMIREL, a former Latin teacher and award-winning feature writer for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, has written for the likes of the *New York Times*, *Daily Beast*, *SLAM* magazine and *Arkansas Money & Politics*. The Little Rock native graduated from LR Central High and the University of Arkansas.