

Remembering DUKE SLATER



MATT FALL

1931 Chicago Cardinals team photograph with Duke Slater (91) in the third row, far right and teammate Ernie Nevers (44) in the middle row, fourth from the left

Neal Rozendaal

It seems almost impossible to believe that one of the most powerful linemen in the NFL in the 1920s was also one of the league's very few African Americans. What's even more incredible is that Fred "Duke" Slater's story is almost completely unknown to the average sports fan today. It's time to properly recognize Duke Slater, someone who was, without exaggeration, one of the most remarkable men to play the game of football.

Anonymity certainly wasn't a problem for Slater back in the 1920s. As a senior at the University of Iowa, he earned All-American honors while leading the Hawkeyes to an undefeated season and a Big Ten championship in 1921. Many college football observers regarded Iowa as the best team in the country that year, which gave Slater's role on the 1921 Hawkeyes cultural significance: it was the first time in college football his-

tory that an African American played such a prominent role on a legitimate national title contender.

Because of his collegiate success, Duke Slater entered the NFL with substantial acclaim. He became the first black lineman in NFL history in 1922 when he suited up at tackle for the Rock Island Independents. Slater earned four All-Pro selections as an Independent—the only player in franchise history to do so—and led Rock Island to several very successful seasons.

From a team standpoint, 1924 was Slater's best year in Rock Island. Bolstered by an aging Jim Thorpe in the backfield, the Independents surged to the top of the NFL standings a month into the season. Their dream season came to a halt on October 26 in Kansas City, when the previously winless Blues shellacked the Independents, 23-7.

Duke Slater was not in the lineup that day. The league had a "gentlemen's agreement" that black play-

ers didn't participate in games in Missouri, a state notoriously hostile toward African Americans. Three weeks later, the teams had a rematch in Rock Island, and with Slater playing his usual stellar game, the Independents handed Kansas City a decisive 17-0 loss. But the damage was done. The Independents finished the year with two losses, one more than the league champion Cleveland Bulldogs.

Slater became famous in Rock Island for his durability. With the exception of the aforementioned Kansas City game in 1924, he played all sixty minutes of every Rock Island contest from 1922 to 1926. That's an incredible display of stamina, especially considering that Slater, as an African American, was almost certainly the target of the occasional cheap shot from opposing players.

When the Independents went bankrupt in 1926, Slater was quickly signed by the Chicago Cardinals. The Cards represented Chicago's rough South Side, and the large African American population there cheered Slater's arrival. But a sinister side of the NFL was emerging by the end of the 1926 season.

Nine African Americans played in the NFL from 1920 to 1926, and in 1926, there were five black players on league rosters. By contrast, African Americans had been banned from the highest levels of pro baseball for decades, and by the late 1920s, many NFL owners were intent on following baseball's lead. In 1927, every black player had been kicked out of the NFL—except for Slater.

There are several reasons why Slater remained in the league. As a lineman, he seldom stole the spotlight (or the newspaper headlines) away from his white contemporaries. He was intelligent, humble, and by all accounts, he was admired and respected by his teammates. He was also the most talented black player in the NFL and in the prime of his career. Slater received All-Pro recognition in 1924, 1925, and 1926, and in each of those seasons, he was the only African American to earn All-Pro honors.

For most of the late 1920s, Duke Slater was the only black player in the NFL. His presence in the league single-handedly delayed a color ban from taking place in pro football for seven years. From 1928 to 1933, four other African Americans eventually joined the NFL and had short-lived careers; each of these men undoubtedly owes a debt of gratitude to Duke Slater, who kept the NFL door open long enough for them to walk through it.

As a lineman for the Chicago Cardinals, Slater main-

tained his consistently outstanding play. The Cards performed poorly in his first two full seasons with the team, but in 1929, they turned their fortunes around with the acquisition of Ernie Nevers. For three seasons, Slater paved the way for Nevers, and the two men remained lifelong friends after football.

Nevers famously set the longest-standing NFL record on November 28, 1929, by scoring 40 points with six rushing touchdowns in a 40-6 victory over the Chicago Bears. Slater was the only Cardinal lineman to play all 60 minutes in that game, opening the holes that made Nevers's legendary day possible. Such record-setting performances were not foreign to Slater. Nevers's six rushing touchdowns broke the single game record of five established by Rock Island's Jim Conzelman in a 1922 contest; Slater, then a rookie with Rock Island, played all 60 minutes in that game, too.

By the end of his career, Slater was the most famous black athlete in America. While Fritz Pollard, in 2005, became the first African American from that era enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, at the time of his retirement, Duke Slater was widely recognized as the most accomplished black NFL player ever—and it wasn't all that close.

Slater retired from pro football with a slew of accolades. In 1930, he became the first lineman in NFL history—of any race—to make seven All-Pro teams. Slater's consistency was astounding, having been elected every season from 1923 to 1930 except for 1928,

African Americans in Pro Football, 1920–1945

Player	Seasons	Games	Games Started	All-Pro	"Official" All-Pro
Duke Slater	10	99	96	7	6
Fritz Pollard*	6	49	36	2	1
Inky Williams	6	37	34	1	1
Sol Butler	3	23	13	0	0
Joe Lillard	2	18	12	1	0
Paul Robeson	2	15	13	1	0
David Myers	2	13	11	1	0
Bobby Marshall	2	12	9	1	1
Dick Hudson	3	8	7	0	0
John Shelburne	1	6	6	0	0
Ray Kemp	1	5	0	0	0
James Turner	1	3	2	0	0
Harold Bradley	1	2	1	0	0

*Elected to Pro Football Hall of Fame

when financial difficulties forced his Chicago Cardinals to play only half of an NFL schedule.

Longevity? His ten seasons in pro football placed him third in NFL history at the time of his retirement. Durability? Slater never missed a game because of injury, playing all 60 minutes of the majority of his games in his long professional career. He also cracked the starting lineup in 96 of his 99 career games played in the NFL/AFL. His percentage of missed starts to games played (3.03 percent) is the smallest of any player who completed his career before 1950 (minimum 80 games).

So why is Slater not in the Pro Football Hall of Fame? Why have most football fans never even heard of him?

If Slater's successful playing career has been too often overlooked, his coaching career has been missed almost entirely. Slater actually received his first coaching offer in 1922 after he graduated from the University of Iowa. His college coach, Howard Jones, tried to hire him as a line coach. The job at his alma mater strongly interested Slater.

Walter Flanigan, who owned the local Rock Island Independents, wanted to land the big lineman for his NFL team. Perhaps in an effort to trump Jones, Flanigan stated that in addition to playing for the Independents, Slater could serve as *his* line coach. This NFL assistant-coaching job disappeared, if it ever truly existed at all, when Flanigan sold his interest in the Independents after the 1922 season. But Duke Slater obviously possessed coaching potential, which he would draw upon in the 1930s.

The NFL enacted an unofficial color ban in 1934, just two years after Slater retired from the game. To fight against this injustice, men like Fritz Pollard, Duke Slater, and others assembled all-star teams of African Americans. These teams played contests against teams of white players to demonstrate that athletes of all races could compete amicably.

Fritz Pollard's efforts in this area have been well-documented and aided his candidacy for the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2005. Slater played on several of Pollard's teams, including Fritz Pollard's All-Stars in 1922 and the Chicago Blackhawks in 1928 and 1931-32. With the advent of segregated play in the 1930s, Slater went into the coaching field as well.

Slater served as the head coach of the Chicago Negro All-Stars in 1933, Chicago Brown Bombers in 1937, Chicago Comets in 1939, and Chicago Panthers in 1940. These all-black semi-pro teams provided athletic oppor-

tunities to African-American football players in the face of the NFL's lamentable color ban. Slater coached Sol Butler, Ozzie Simmons, Joe Lillard, Kenny Washington, and many others excluded from the NFL.

Perhaps the highest profile interracial game during this period took place in 1938, when the Negro All-Stars took on the Chicago Bears in an exhibition at Soldier Field. Slater served as an assistant coach of the Negro All-Stars under head coach Ray Kemp, but he did the

Professional Head Coaching Record

1933 CHICAGO NEGRO ALL-STARS (Known Record: 0-2)

DATE	OPPONENT	SCORE
10/1	@ Harvey Yellow Jackets	0-17
10/22	@ East Chicago Gophers	0-20

1937 CHICAGO BROWN BOMBERS (Known Record: 1-6-1)

DATE	OPPONENT	SCORE
10/10	Calumet All-Stars	6-7
10/26	Cicero Silver Arrows	N/A
10/31	@ Des Moines Comets	0-7
11/3	Brandt Florals	7-7
11/7	@ La Crosse Lagers	3-7
11/18	Alderman Kells	N/A
11/21	@ La Crosse Lagers	0-7
11/23	Chicago Spokes A.C.	0-19
11/30	@ Des Moines Comets	0-7
12/3	@ Nashville Silver Streaks	13-7

1939 CHICAGO COMETS (Known Record: 4-1)

DATE	OPPONENT	SCORE
N/A	Joliet Devils	38-0
N/A	Winkler A.C.	24-0
N/A	Macomb Eagles	10-0
10/29	@ Des Moines Comets	0-33
11/5	@ Spring Valley	N/A
11/26	@ Kenosha	28-12

1940 CHICAGO PANTHERS (Known Record: 5-2)*

DATE	OPPONENT	SCORE
9/11	Waukegan Collegians	42-0
9/29	@ Sioux City Olympics	Win
10/9	@ Merrill Foxes	Win
10/12	Detroit Pioneers	0-2
10/14	Toledo Grills	N/A
10/20	@ Des Moines Comets	7-20
10/23	Jefferson Park Bulldogs	19-6
10/27	Edison Park	18-13
11/3	@ Fort Madison Prison	N/A

*One former Panthers player claimed the team's record was 9-2

majority of the coaching from the bench after Kemp was forced to enter the lineup himself early in the game. Although the Negro All-Stars were obliterated, 51-0, the contest proved that black and white players could play football against one another without any nasty racial incidents.

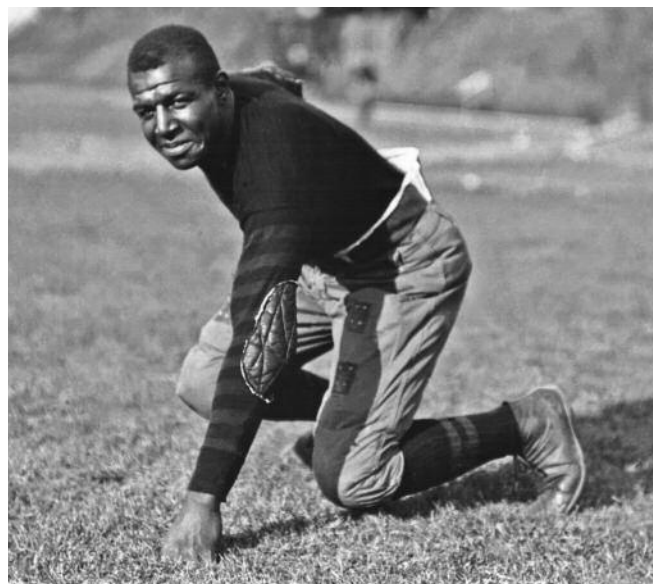
Slater hadn't really wanted to become a coach, but he did so out of necessity while African Americans were banned from the NFL. As years went by and the color ban eased, black football players continued to look up to Slater as a mentor and advisor. Pro football players like Emlen Tunnell, Buddy Young, Sherman Howard, and many others viewed Slater as the epitome of what an African American NFL star should be.

The notion that an African American athlete's skills were only in his arms and legs had a powerful rejoinder in Slater, who earned his law degree and, in 1948, became just the second African American ever elected as a judge in Chicago. Twelve years later, he was the first black judge elevated to Superior Court in the city and he eventually rose to the Circuit Court of Cook County.

Slater's popularity among football experts has been interesting to trace. He was widely recognized as one of the best linemen in the NFL when he played, and that popularity made Duke one of the league's top financial attractions during his career. But soon after his retirement, during the 1930s and 1940s, Slater's impact on pro football was downplayed. Columnists were hesitant to name Slater as one of the league's great players during the color ban, because any such statement would call into question the ban itself.

A resurgence of recognition of Slater's accomplishments took place in the 1960s as the civil rights movement progressed. When Duke passed away from stomach cancer in 1966, he was mourned as one of the true pioneers of the league. He was frequently mentioned as a serious Pro Football Hall of Fame candidate in the Hall's first few years and was a finalist in 1970 and 1971. But as time passed and his contemporaries were slowly silenced by death, Slater's Hall of Fame bid was silenced as well.

Thankfully, a few of his peers had gone on record about Slater's greatness. In 1959, Red Grange was asked to select his personal all-time All-Pro team. Grange picked 13 players he considered the NFL's best from the league's first 40 years. He named 12 current Pro Football Hall of Famers—and Duke Slater. The iconic George



CENTER FOR MEDIA PRODUCTION, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

Duke Slater, University of Iowa tackle from 1918 to 1921

Halas said it was absolutely useless to run plays at Slater's side of the line: "They talked about Fordham's famous Seven Blocks of Granite in the mid-1930s and what a line that was. Well, Slater was a One Man Line a decade before that. Seven Blocks of Granite? He was the Rock of Gibraltar." Ernie Nevers, Jim Conzelman, Fritz Pollard, Elmer Layden, Hunk Anderson, and many, many others agreed with that sentiment.

Slater was a humble person. It was said that you never heard of Slater's conquests from his own lips. When someone mentioned Slater's accomplishments to him, Duke would simply smile and say, "I was just doing my best." That modesty endeared him to his teammates. More than that, it helped him remain in the NFL during those dark years of the late 1920s by allowing racists to overlook his presence in the league. Slater was everything we want our star athletes to be—powerful and formidable on the field, humble and self-effacing off it.

Perhaps the ultimate irony is that this modesty and humility has contributed to Slater's lack of recognition as one of the NFL's greatest players. Maybe if he had trumpeted his accomplishments a bit more, we wouldn't have been so quick to forget about him. Whatever our reasons for overlooking him, Duke Slater's story is too good to relegate solely to the history books. We need to return Slater to our collective sports consciousness—and this time, to keep him there.

Neal Rozendaal is an economist for the Bureau of Labor Statistics in Washington, D.C. He lives in Alexandria, Virginia.