

## Chapter 6 Excerpt

**A**fter a triumphant senior college season, Rosey Grier was looking forward to his first postseason game. Penn State had finished with a 7-2 record, its best in four years, and the future All-Pro defensive tackle had made third-team All-American and first-team All-East. So when Coach Engle invited him to his office at the end of the season, Grier had every reason to expect good news. In reality, Coach Engle had anything but good news. He began, in tones that Grier later described as “strangely foreboding,” by congratulating the man who would become famous around the world for capturing Sirhan Sirhan—the man who assassinated Robert Kennedy—for helping to “put Penn State on the map ever since you got here.”

The somber-faced coach then assured the suddenly apprehensive Grier that the season had confirmed his place as “one of the finest football players to have attended the school.” He had earned the right, the coach said, “to participate in at least one of the postseason games.” Clearly uncomfortable, the coach paused before adding, “But I have to tell you you’re not going to get an invitation to any of them.” When asked for an explanation by his bewildered player, Coach Engle blamed the college quota system. “Rosey,” he said, “it’s a shame on college football, but the powers that be have ordained a quota system. Only a certain percentage of the students selected for the special games can be colored. The rest have to be white.”

The year was 1954, and the National Football League had been integrated eight years earlier with the signing of Kenny Washington and Woody Strode by the Los Angeles Rams in 1946. That year, Willie Mays won the batting title in the National Baseball League and was named Most Valuable Player in the league, and an Associated Press poll named him Athlete of the Year. But in football, highly restrictive racial quotas and other methods of limiting the involvement of black athletes were still commonplace on both college and professional teams. In fact, it would be another eight years before the Washington Redskins, under intense pressure from the Kennedy administration, would sign Bobby Mitchell in 1962 and become the last team in the NFL to sign a black player. In those early years, professional teams typically not only restricted the number of blacks to six or eight, but also frequently stacked several of them at just one position.

Jim Brown, the great running back who entered the NFL in 1957, explained how the system worked in his book *Out of Bounds*: “When I entered the NFL—1957—there was a quota for blacks. I doubt it was written, you probably couldn’t prove it in court, every owner would deny it, but it was there. We always knew each team would have six, perhaps eight, blacks on a roster. Never seven though: it was always an even number, so none of the white guys would have to share a room with a black. Once we went on the road, had an odd number of black guys and an odd number of white guys; one of the black players was back in Cleveland with an injury. Rather than pair off the extra black with an extra white, management bought each player a separate room. They were willing to pay for an additional room in order to preserve the color line.

I never had to worry about making the team, but I still hated final cuts. The last few days of cuts I’d walk around the locker room, silently counting the remaining brothers. I knew they’d get pared down to six or eight. I knew some great black ballplayers would lose their jobs. There were even restrictions within the quotas. Some teams would stack up three or four of their black guys at the same position. If a team had three black receivers, they’d stack them at one particular spot—typically flanker—so blacks wouldn’t occupy all the receiver spots. We’d see guys who were second and third string, running back

punts and kickoffs, and know they should be starting across the board.”