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The Black Bruins: Reviewed by Jack Ryan, Gettysburg College

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Abstract
Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* opens with a nearly wordless fifteen-minute sequence in which three gunmen do nothing more than wait for the arrival of a train at a remote frontier station. Leone, Dario Argento, and Bernardo Bertolucci constructed the film's screenplay out of portions of their favorite classic westerns, and the opening is a homage to *High Noon*; however, Leone's three gunmen look nothing like the actors in *High Noon*. Jack Elam and Al Mulock look like they emerged directly from the desiccated landscape surrounding them, and Woody Strode emits a dusty elegance. Elam tracks a fly buzzing over his face, and Mulock cracks his knuckles with vengeance. Strode stands beneath a water tank dripping water on his hat. Each actor is captured in vivid close-ups. Strode, though, stands out. His face is chiseled to perfection, and when he is featured in a full-shot, his body bulges with athletic strength. While his partners look like ragged malcontents, Stode appears like a model from a Ralph Lauren photoshoot. Strode made more than fifty films, three made-for-television movies, and thirteen extended television productions. He acted in films directed by Cecil B. DeMille, John Ford, Richard Brooks, Budd Boetticher, and Stanley Kubrick. In fact, Strode stayed at Ford's home at Ford's request while the director was recovering from a life-threatening illness. Strode starred opposite Kirk Douglas in Kubrick's *Spartacus*, earning a Golden Globe nomination in 1960 for his portrayal of Draba, a gladiator who chooses not to kill Spartacus after a magnificent fight; rather, Draba scales a twelve-foot-high wall and confronts the Roman emperor, played by Laurence Oliver. Peter Ustinov, who won an Academy Award for Spartacus, called Strode "frightfully athletic" because of his strength and physical grace (178). Strode was forty-five years old at the time, and he did not use a stunt double. [*excerpt*]

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Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* opens with a nearly wordless fifteen-minute sequence in which three gunmen do nothing more than wait for the arrival of a train at a remote frontier station. Leone, Dario Argento, and Bernardo Bertolucci constructed the film's screenplay out of portions of their favorite classic westerns, and the opening is a homage to *High Noon*; however, Leone's three gunmen look nothing like the actors in *High Noon*. Jack Elam and Al Mulock look like they emerged directly from the desiccated landscape surrounding them, and Woody Strode emits a dusty elegance. Elam tracks a fly buzzing over his face, and Mulock cracks his knuckles with vengeance. Strode stands beneath a water tank dripping water on his hat. Each actor is captured in vivid close-ups. Strode, though, stands out. His face is chiseled to perfection, and when he is featured in a full-shot, his body bulges with athletic strength. While his partners look like ragged malcontents, Stode appears like a model from a Ralph Lauren photoshoot. Strode made more than fifty films, three made-for-television movies, and thirteen extended television productions. He acted in films directed by Cecil B. DeMille, John Ford, Richard Brooks, Budd Boetticher, and Stanley Kubrick. In fact, Strode stayed at Ford's home at Ford's request while the director was recovering from a life-threatening illness. Strode starred opposite Kirk Douglas in Kubrick's *Spartacus*, earning a Golden Globe nomination in 1960 for his portrayal of Draba, a gladiator who chooses not to kill Spartacus after a magnificent fight; rather, Draba scales a twelve-foot-high wall and confronts the Roman emperor, played by Laurence Oliver. Peter Ustinov, who won an Academy Award for Spartacus, called Strode "frightfully athletic" because of his strength and physical grace (178). Strode was forty-five years old at the time, and he did not use a stunt double.

Film links a number of the men chronicled in James W. Johnson's *The Black Bruins: The Remarkable Lives of UCLA's Jackie Robinson, Woody Strode, Tom Bradley, Kenny Washington, and Ray Bartlett*. Robinson and Washington starred in *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950), and Washington appeared in six other films, including the once controversial *Pinky* (1949). Tom Bradley became the mayor of Los Angeles, the capital of American commercial filmmaking. Strode, Robinson, Washington, and Bartlett all played football at UCLA, among other sports; Bradley ran track. This remarkable quintet were barrier-breakers, not only at UCLA but for professional sports, politics, civic life, and film. According to Johnson, "The families of Kenny Washington, Woody Strode, and Ray Bartlett were longtime residents of Los Angeles. Jackie Robinson and Tom Bradley moved from the South to Southern California with their families in search of the elusive Promised Land" (5). Each of these men found promise first because of their athletic abilities, which allowed each to display noteworthy intellect, enormous stamina, and supreme athletic skill in a variety of sports. While Strode, Robinson, Bradley, Washington, and Bartlett loved athletic competition each was more than an athlete, and each, as Johnson describes, took his competitive drive far beyond athletic fields and

arenas. Still, they started as UCLA bruins and helped to make UCLA into a competitive west coast athletic powerhouse.

In the 1930s and the 1940s the vast majority of American colleges and universities did not have black athletes. UCLA was an exception. Ralph Bunche, a basketball player at UCLA, graduated in 1927 before going on to international civic and political fame. James LuValle graduated Phi Beta Kappa in Chemistry in 1936, and that summer he took a bronze medal in the 400 meters in the Berlin Summer Olympics. Like the five "black bruins," Bunche and LuValle resided in Los Angeles and the Westwood campus offered them a more tolerant atmosphere. According to Johnson, each "black bruin" indicated that UCLA provided a mostly welcoming environment for them. "Whatever racial pressure was coming down in the City of Los Angeles, the pressure was not on me in Westwood," Strode recounted. "We had the whole melting pot, and it was an education for all of us. … I was just like any other athlete. And I worked hard because there was always an overriding feeling [that] UCLA wanted me" (xiii). What Johnson fails to do, however, is analyze why UCLA was different than its crosstown rival the University of Southern California or any other division one campus in the United States. Johnson credits the black press, the backbone of his research, civil rights organizations, and other progressive political groups that pushed to integrate sports at all levels as "part of a larger movement to improve conditions across America for African Americans" (xiv). Why UCLA was willing to welcome black athletes is explained with anecdotes, not scholarly research. What is clear, though, is that the UCLA athletes Johnson presents in this informative book were groundbreakers socially, politically, and athletically. That all five attended the same university makes their stories even more remarkable.

Robinson, of course, carries the greatest name recognition because he integrated Major League Baseball. As Johnson observes, Robinson, a four-sport star at UCLA and a great all-around athlete, did not excel at baseball, the sport at which he was least adept. Kenny Washington—a Heisman caliber football player when he was an upperclassman at UCLA—and Strode, both of whom competed successfully in multiple sports, were pioneers in integrating professional football, breaking the NFL color barrier in 1946, months before Robinson broke into Major League Baseball. Bradley was a college track star who became a vital member of the Los Angeles Police Department and, significantly, the first black mayor of Los Angeles. Bartlett remains the least well-known of the five men, but he was a multisport star who became a leader in race relations. Indeed, all five men had impressive careers as sporting and civic pioneers.

Johnson, an emeritus professor of journalism at the University of Arizona, and the author of two other books about sport, *The Dandy Dons: Bill Russell, K.C. Jones, Phil Woolpert, and One of College Basketball's Greatest and Most Innovative Teams* and *The Wow Boys: A Coach, a Team, and a Turning Point in College Football*, presents the UCLA portion of The Black Bruins in a clear, well-detailed fashion. Because he did not reach the level of fame that his football teammates or Bradley did, Bartlett occupies the least amount of narrative space. Collectively, these men turned UCLA into a magnet for west coast athletes of color, a university that began to rival USC because of the talent of its recruits. Once the five "black bruins" leave UCLA through graduation or to pursue more lucrative opportunities, Johnson's narrative loses some cohesion. Robinson, Strode, Bradley, Washington, and Bartlett no longer share a common place, and therefore their stories become singular, which requires Johnson to provide each their own chapters as

he moves toward the conclusion of this enlightening book. Robinson, as one might expect, occupies the bulk of the conclusion of *The Black Bruins*. According to Johnson, the "common legacy of the five superb athletes and their remarkable lives is that they broke color barriers or improved racial relations or both" (231). Robinson integrated baseball. Washington and Strode broke barriers in football. Bradley and Bartlett opened doors in politics and civic affairs. Strode also integrated professional wrestling and by working with Hollywood directors like John Ford helped to pull down racial walls in American cinema. In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), Strode portrayed a character named Pompey, an adult student of Jimmy Stewart's Ransom Stoddard, the film's protagonist. Multiple scenes featuring Strode question racial segregation, including in a classroom, in a saloon, and during an election. The election scene features Pompey in the lower left-hand portion of the frame, looking away from all the white men lined up to vote; he says nothing, but his position within the frame and downward looking gaze illustrate the condition of African Americans, especially at that time. Strode and the other four UCLA atheletes never took a lower position on the football field, the basketball court, in track and field, or in life. Johnson brings these five meaningful lives into full, vivid view, and he reminds his readers of their significant contributions to American sport and race relations.

Johnson, James W. The Black Bruins: The Remarkable Lives of UCLA's Jackie Robinson, Woody Strode, Tom Bradley, Kenny Washington, and Ray Bartlett. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 292 pp.

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