Pollard served as a backfield coach for the Wildcats, becoming the first known African-American assistant coach in the Big Ten. Two other notable African-American pioneers of Northwestern football include James Turner, one of the first 13 black players in the NFL, from 1918 to 1920 and Bennie Jefferson, who helped the Wildcats to a Big Ten title and later flew with the Tuskegee Airmen, from 1936 to 1938.

African-Americans in Big Ten Football – Minnesota

Bobby Marshall starred for the Minnesota football team from 1904 through 1906. He earned two All-American selections, just the second African-American to do so. He is often erroneously called the first African-American Big Ten football player (he was preceded by Washington and Lattimore), but he was the first known African-American to letter for a Big Ten football team. Along with Fritz Pollard, he was the first African-American to play in the NFL in 1920.

Minnesota’s second black football player did not appear on the team until the 1930s, but that decade had a few highlights for black Gopher athletes. Ellsworth Harpole lettered for the Gophers from 1931 through 1933. Dwight Reed played for two Big Ten championship teams in 1935 and 1937, but he’s probably best known for being benched for a game against Tulane and watching the contest from the press box. Horace Bell was an excellent player for the Gophers as well from 1936-1938.

Of course, Minnesota had a few unfortunate racial incidents during this era as well, particularly against Jack Trice in 1923 and Ozzie Simmons in 1934. But they were also one of the leaders in opportunities for African-Americans in the 1950s, culminating with Sandy Stephens being recognized as one of college football’s first great black quarterbacks in 1960.

African-Americans in Big Ten Football – Ohio State

Ohio State joined the Big Ten in 1912, but they had at least two African-American Buckeye football players before that. Fred Patterson earned three letters for the Ohio State football team from 1891 through 1893, just the second African-American to play for a Big Ten school (after Michigan’s George Jewett). Little is known about him other than the fact that he left Ohio State without a degree after not being satisfied with conditions in Columbus. A decade later, Arthur Carr played a season for the Buckeyes in 1904, although he did not receive a letter. William Bell is often erroneously labeled as the first African-American Ohio State football player, but he was a terrific lineman for the Buckeyes from 1929-1931. There was considerable controversy when he was benched for two games, as a junior against Navy in Baltimore and as a senior against Vanderbilt. He sat out both games to avoid offending the southern sensibilities of the opponents. Bell went on to have an outstanding career in the Air Force, rising to the rank of lieutenant colonel.

Of course, you can’t talk about great African-American football stars at Ohio State without mentioning Bill Willis, the two-time All-American tackle in 1943 and 1944. Willis went on to help break the color barrier in pro football, signing with the AAFC’s Cleveland Browns in 1946 and going on to a Hall of Fame career. Jim Parker, one of the greatest linemen in football history who starred for the Buckeyes from 1954-1956, deserves a mention as well.

African-Americans in Big Ten Football – Michigan State

Michigan State’s first African-American football player was Gladon Smith. Smith played for Michigan Agriculture College (as it was then known) from 1913-1915. He had a solid career for the Spartans and then became the first known black lineman to play professional football, participating in one game in 1915. Smith later went on to coach football for two decades at Hampton University, stepping down as one of the greatest coaches in that school’s history.

James McCrory and Albert Bakor were standouts on the Michigan State football team in the mid-1930s. Both men played for the Spartans in 1934, and both were left behind when Michigan State squared off in Texas with the Texas A&M Aggies. McCrory, in particular, appeared to have a promising football future ahead of him when his athletic career was cut short by injury.

The Spartans then only had one black player for a decade until halfback Horace Smith arrived in the program in 1946. But the real change for Michigan State would come with the arrival of Coach Biggie Munn. Michigan State joined Big Ten football in 1953, and Munn (and his successor, Duffy Daugherty) invited Iowa’s Forrest Evashvili and Minnesota’s Murray Warmath as leaders in stockpiling the conference with African-American players throughout that decade.

African-Americans in Big Ten Football – Wisconsin

The University of Wisconsin doesn’t have a particularly notable history of African-American...