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African-American athletes stand taller after Obama swearing-in

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By Steve Keating

DETROIT, Jan 20 (Reuters) - From the Australian Open to NBA locker rooms and playgrounds across the United States, African-American athletes stood a little taller on Tuesday as Barack Obama was sworn in as the country's 44th president.

It was with special pride that American sportsmen and women shared in the historic moment because it was on their fields and inside their arenas where some of the most important battles against prejudice and segregation have been waged.

But even as America embraced its first black president, there are signs that old prejudices remain at the highest level of U.S. sport.

On the momentous day that Obama stepped forward to take the oath of office, the NFL was still enforcing the "Rooney Rule" requiring all teams to interview at least one minority candidate for any vacant head coaching position.

Even the NCAA was not above the fray, fending off charges of racism sparked by the lack of black head coaches in top flight college football.

At NASCAR races the Confederate flag still flutters from motor homes parked in the infield even as America's most popular motor racing series tries to shed its "good ol'boy" image by reaching out to minorities with a driver diversity program.

While a few colour barriers remain to be broken, black athletes have transformed America's sporting landscape and along it with the social values and attitudes that helped clear Obama's path to the White House.

Jackie Robinson, who famously broke baseball's colour barrier in 1947, Willie O'Ree, the first black NHL player, Wayne Embry, the first African-American to be named general manager and then president of an NBA team, all nudged Martin Luther King's dream closer to the reality with their fearless determination.

Other notable achievers included Indianapolis Colts Tony Dungy, the first African-American to coach a Super Bowl champion, tennis player Arthur Ashe, the first black American man to win a grand slam title and golfer Tiger Woods.

Jesse Owens, who undermined Adolf Hitler's theories of Aryan racial superiority at the 1936 Berlin Olympics by winning four gold medals, while Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their clenched fists from the top of the podium at the 1968 Mexico Summer Games in a silent protest that was heard around the world.

ALI LEGACY

But perhaps there has been no more eloquent voice in the struggle against racial intolerance than world heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali, who tossed his Olympic gold medal into the Ohio River after being refused service at a 'whites-only' restaurant.

"For Muhammad, it's probably something he thought he'd never see in his lifetime," said Ali's wife Lonnie speaking for her husband at Kentucky's Bluegrass Inaugural Ball in Washington on Monday night.

"For Barack Obama to be sworn in as president, it's almost a dream, a fulfillment of Muhammad's legacy, everything he believed, everything he worked for.

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"Muhammad believes in the good of man. He believes every human being on earth has good in their heart.

"Sometimes you have to look a little deeper to find it. But it's there.

"It's going to be a legacy fulfilled not only for Muhammad but for so many Americans, and for so many people who have since departed this world such as Martin Luther King, who we should honour as well.

"It has been the work of all these people. Even names we do not know."

That anonymous group would include the 1958 Buffalo Bulls who rejected an invitation to the Tangerine Bowl because segregation policies would not allow two black players to participate.

DEFIANT STAND

Their defiant stand against racism went virtually unnoticed for nearly 50 years until the Bulls finally made it to their first Bowl game playing in the International Bowl against the Connecticut Huskies in Toronto on January 3.

During the buildup to the game tributes poured in from across the United States., civil rights leader Jesse Jackson making the trip to Toronto to honour the members of the 58 team at a kickoff luncheon hailing their stand as heroic, resulting in the "greatest game never played".

"There is a line from that university at Buffalo stand to Barack being elected president in 2008," said Jackson.

"Champions are different than heroes.

"There's a champion of every ball game. Whoever won the ball game is a champion. Champions are a dime a dozen.

"When you win the game the coach of a champion rides on the players' shoulders. Heroes ride on the people's shoulders." (Additional reporting by Steve Ginsburg; Editing by John Mehaffey)

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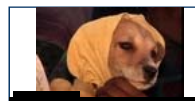
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