White, Derrick E. *Blood, Sweat, & Tears: Jack Gaither, Florida A & M, and the history of Black college football*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. Xi + 303 pp. Illustrations, Tables, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

Reviewed by Duncan R. Jamieson, Ashland University

Dabney Coleman played the boss, Franklin Hart, in the 1980 comedy “9 to 5.” In one scene he explained to the women who worked for him they would never rise to managerial positions because they didn’t play football, which taught men teamwork and resilience, key leadership traits. Legendary football coach Jake Gaither (1903-1994) at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FA&MU), would have wholeheartedly agreed. In post-Civil War America the freedmen and women sought political integration for the resources that might accrue and racial autonomy for self-determination. As dejure segregation developed in the 1880s South, it did have one positive impact, and that was to encourage black autonomy. Founded in 1887 as Florida’s State Normal College for Colored Students, the institution benefitted financially from the Second Morrill Land Grant Act. The funds awarded allowed the school, soon to become FA&MU, to purchase the former plantation of ex-governor William D. Duval, located on a hilltop overlooking Tallahassee. During the 1920s Florida’s economic woes limited funds for the university and it limited employment for black high school graduates, who as a result decided to continue their education.

One of the Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), Florida A&M rose to dominance in football, which had been introduced to the school in 1899 by mathematics instructor, George M. Sampson. The sport was largely student led until 1926 when Frantz “Jazz” Byrd was hired as Athletic Director and head football coach. As a star player at Lincoln University (PA), Byrd was known as “the black Red Grange” and “the Phantom of the Gridiron.” Unfortunately the team, the Rattlers, did not turn around its losing record under Byrd.

In 1933 Florida A&M’s I. R. E. Lee organized the Orange Blossom Classic, a bowl game for the HBCU teams. Then in 1937, the same year Gaither earned his Master’s Degree at Ohio State University, FA&M hired him as assistant football coach, head basketball coach and athletic director. Gaither had several years’ experience playing football in both high school and college, during the era when play between high school and college teams was a common occurrence. The year before Gaither’s arrival head football coach William Ball began what became one of the most popular and successful football coaching clinics in the South. Taken over by Gaither, coaches both black and white came from far and near to attend the annual event. Thus began the decades’ long phenomenal success of its football program.

In 1937 FA&MU went 6-1-1, won the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference title as well as the Orange Blossom Classic. Their rise to prominence came at the same time football at the University of Florida was posting losing seasons, as well as being beaten by its arch rival, the University of Georgia. Looking for positive news, Florida’s sports writers latched on to FA&MU, publicizing the athletic prowess of the Rattlers. The HBCU’s excelled during segregation because black athletes were not welcomed on the predominantly white institutions (PWI) teams. Generally the PWI’s refused to play HBCU’s until integration strengthened the former while weakening the latter. Still, FA&MU beat the University of Miami just as integration began to take hold. FA&MU never repeated that success.

FA&MU’s hope for the future, however, was tempered when Gaither developed a brain tumor. While coaching Florida’s equally successful basketball team, Gaither began suffering debilitating headaches which revealed the tumor. Despite segregation and limited opportunities for blacks to receive competent medical care, Gaither went to Nashville where the tumor was removed successfully, though the recovery was slow.

With the outbreak of World War II the number of male students on all college campuses plummeted, but FA&MU continued its athletic prowess. Travel restrictions led to military teams playing college squads. The war created the Double V campaign: defeat the enemies of democracy abroad and defeat the enemies of democracy at home—segregation and racism.

Despite being appointed interim head football coach just before the 1945 season, which meant Gaither did not have an opportunity to do much recruiting, his team went undefeated in the regular season, putting his Rattlers atop the Black college polls. Gaither created “the sporting congregation, which combined athletes, fans, sports writers, coaches and administrators to further black achievement. At the conclusion of the war Gaither took over as head football coach, began his generation long winning dominance as he became one of the highest paid black coaches. Between 1957 and 1964 the team won outright or shared five national titles. The team motto, “Blood. Sweat, and Tears, which dated from 1945, came to symbolize his three platoon coaching strategy; Blood was a mostly offensive unit, Sweat went both ways, and Tears was predominantly defense.

The G.I. Bill of Rights brought new talent to FA&MU, but the civil rights movement of the 1960s began to dismantle segregation at the collegiate level, creating opportunities for talented black athletes at predominantly white Division I schools, but progress was exceptionally slow in Florida. Gaither did not approve of what he saw as more radical and confrontational activities, which made him appear as an Uncle Tom, an appellation he received when he agreed with FAMU’s president and other administrations who refused to sponsor Stokely Carmichael speaking on campus. He also opposed the Black protest at the 1968 summer Olympics in Mexico City.

Derrick White, visiting associate professor at Dartmouth College, has written an engaging biography of Jake Gaither. White analyzes succinctly the role of the HBCU’s, focusing on Gaither and Florida A&MU. White connects these schools with the impact civil rights had on their athletic programs. Rightly or wrongly, Jake Gaither believed in the positive role of football at black colleges and universities. Until now this has been an understudied aspect of sport history.