



Interview with Jim Brown

Date: January 19, 1985

Interviewer: N/A

Camera Rolls: 42-44

Sound Rolls: 23-24

Team: N/A

Interview gathered as part of *Black Champions*. Produced by Miles Educational Film Productions, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, William Miles Collection.

Interview with Jim Brown, conducted by Miles Educational Film Productions, Inc. on January 19, 1985 for *Black Champions*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, William Miles Collection.

Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in bold italics was used in the final version of *Black Champions*.

[camera roll 42]

[sound roll 23]

[slate]

00:00:00:00 — 00:00:23:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Slate. Camera roll forty-two, sound-roll twenty-three, sound seventy-six.

00:00:24:00 — 00:01:17:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, great. Jim, I wonder if we could start this by, sort of get into this by talking about young Jim Brown: where you grew up, or what you remember about yourself as a youngster.

Jim Brown:

[laughs] That's a very broad question. I remember a lot of things. But I was born in St. Simons Island, Georgia—very beautiful island off the coast of Georgia, below Savannah and above Jacksonville, Florida. A real unique place because it's a small island—surrounded by water, of course—and pretty beaches, lot of fruit trees. Lot of love. I was brought up by my great-grandmother for about eight years. Then she died, I moved to New York. So my early days were spent in Manhasset, Long Island, New York; and St. Simons Island, Georgia.

00:01:18:00 — 00:01:53:00

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm. Were you always an athletic, competitive youngster? What do you remember about that part of yourself?

Jim Brown:

Well, from St. Simons we used to roll tires, you know; shoot marbles; climb trees; swim out in the pond; run races. I guess it's pretty typical, except that a lot of our things we did were indigenous to the island, you know, 'cause we used to do a lot of crabbin' off the docks, and games that didn't take a lot of equipment, [laughs] and things like that.

00:01:54:00 — 00:03:11:00

Interviewer #1:

When you got to Long Island, were you—how, how old were you when, when you went to Long Island?

Jim Brown:

Probably about nine years old.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Jim Brown:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

Was that a different kind of scene in that same regard? I mean, you, different set of games, did you play, or—

Jim Brown:

Well, totally different. I didn't play too much organized ball on St. Simons Island. When I moved to Manhasset, everything was organized, and that's when I really started realizing how much I liked athletics. I joined the police boy's club, which was very instrumental in my early development, because there was a patrolman called Peblo who took an interest in me. And I started playing, like, police boy's club baseball, and little basketball. And it sort of kept me in place, because at the time I was a little wild. And the school that I went to was called

Manhasset Valley School, and it was pretty rough, you know. It was in the Valley, which is the toughest part of Manhasset, and the older guys used to take the young guys, put 'em down in the gym, and throw tennis balls at their heads. So, I was one of the younger guys, so I had to fight, fight my way up so they wouldn't do that. And I beat up a lot of kids, and finally they left me alone. But at that time athletics took over, and I proceeded from there.

00:03:12:00 — 00:03:30:00

Interviewer #1:

Jim, was there a person instrumental in that time, in your development as an athlete? Was there an individual, a coach, or someone who could—

Jim Brown:

Well, at that time a patrolmen, Peblo—

Interviewer #1:

Hmm.

Jim Brown:

—with the police boy's club was very instrumental because he was a nice man, and he kept a lot of kids in line through sports, yeah.

00:03:31:00 — 00:04:52:00

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm. Can you tell us anything about your high school—

[missing frames]

Interviewer #1:

—career?

Jim Brown:

Well, high school is when I really started to develop, because Manhasset High School is probably one of the best high schools in the country. Per capita-wise, it's one of the highest income areas in the country, and they get really good coaches, good teachers. They get quality people, 'cause they can pay them.

[missing frames]

Jim Brown:

—and that's where I—

[missing frames]

Jim Brown:

—met Ed Walsh. Ed Walsh is probably the finest man that I've ever met, character-wise. And at the time I wasn't a good student, when I first got there. He had them give me an IQ test, and found that I had an high IQ, and encouraged me to go to classes, took a great interest in me, developed me as a football player, as a basketball player; and pretty much took over my life, because I had so much respect for him. In fact, one Easter I had just enough money for a suit. I didn't know what to buy, you know. I was living with my mother at the time, and she was working very hard to take care of me. So he decided he'd go into Harlem with me, went to 125th street, to shop for the kind of suit I wanted, and I was standing on the corner with my coach, you know, who was white, and never any sign of prejudice. Never any sign of anything other than goodness. So he represented my standard of goodness throughout my life, because I always knew what a good person was. **[Note Interview gathered as part of Black Champions; Episode 2]**

00:04:53:00 — 00:05:37:00

Interviewer #1:

How did you make the decision to—

[missing frames]

Interviewer #1:

—go to Syracuse?

Jim Brown:

Well, there was an attorney in Manhasset called Kenneth Molloy. He was my other mentor. Tough little guy, little Irish guy; been a lacrosse player, and helped a lot of kids. Graduate of Syracuse, played lacrosse, then wanted everybody to go to Syracuse. So, he, he engineered a method for me to get to Syracuse, because Syracuse didn't offer me a scholarship. I had about for-, forty scholarship offers, and I was thinking about going to Ohio State, but Kenny wanted me to go to Syracuse. So he organized a group in the community without my knowing it—

[missing frames]

Jim Brown:

—raised some money, and pretended that I had a sch-, a scholarship there. So I went to Syracuse because of him. Later on I found out that I didn't have a scholarship. I was on trial. And finally in my sophomore year they gave me a scholarship. [Note Interview gathered as part of Black Champions; Episode 2]

00:05:38:00 — 00:07:32:00

Interviewer #1:

Now this is a period—[coughs], excuse me—a period—when you've, go to Syracuse, is a period in American history when college and professional athletics, moving toward the television era, and sports, in fact, is about to become a gigantic industry in this country. How did that affect you? What do you remember about that period of your own development, and playing the ball, at Syracuse—

Jim Brown:

Well, you're a little ahead of me there, because my feelings had nothing to do with sports becoming a TV entity. It really had to do with the emerging of the black man into college ball, because at that time, black man couldn't get the Heisman Trophy. They didn't want too many guys on the team. In the southern part of the country, you had no black players on white teams, like Alabama and Mississippi. And *when I went to Syracuse*, that was my biggest problem. My biggest interest was the fact that they had a quarterback before me that was black, and he left and went to Canada, and *they didn't receive me too well* because of that. *I was the only black guy on the team at the time. And so I went through four years there trying to bring about a change, first of all, to have them accept me, and then secondly, to have them recruit black players.* So—and thirdly, of course, you know, a couple of years after I left, Ernie Davis—who went to Syracuse—won that, was the first black to win the Heisman Trophy. So TV really didn't play much of a part. I know in my senior year, we did play in the Cotton Bowl, in Texas, and I got TV exposure, and that, that made me become, probably, a high draft choice, because that game was televised all over the country. So that's the part that I remember about TV. I really remember more about trying to break down barriers and be accepted.

00:07:33:00 — 00:09:23:00

Interviewer #1:

A number of written accounts have described you as the greatest player in the history of lacrosse. An article a couple years ago in the New York Times made that point. Tell us a little about your development in that area.

Jim Brown:

Well, lacrosse was a, a great love of mine, because the coach, Roy Simmons, was a very fine man. He was assistant football coach, and when I got to Syracuse he was the only coach on the football team that truly accepted me right a-, right away. You know, he said, come on, big Jim, let's get it, you know. And he was just a, a wonderful man. And he was the head lacrosse coach. But I played lacrosse before that at Manhasset junior high school. They had a coach by the name of Stranahan, who was an advocate of lacrosse. And so I was very familiar with the skills, and, and pretty good, you know, because I did have that background. Because they only play lacrosse in certain areas of the country, around Baltimore, Long Island, and places like that. So I had the skills, and I decided that it would be the fun sport for me. No pressure, good coach, good players. We had a, a great team in our senior year. We won twenty-two straights games; a lot of us went to the all-star game; the s-, the north won the all-star game. And we, in our senior year a lot of guys didn't want to play, but we played because of the coach. And it was such a loose situation, and so much respect, until we would go to certain games in convertible cars, stay in the fraternity houses, and things like that. And I became an All-American, I guess, two time All-American—see, I don't quite remember. Seems strange, but you know, it doesn't mean that much. And ended up in the all-star game in Baltimore, where they felt that we were gonna get killed because we were eastern. And we won that. And so, it, like, ended a wonderful career, because that was my one fun sport. No pressure, great coach.

00:09:24:00 — 00:10:09:00

Interviewer #1:

You, you, you describe it as a fun sport. Had there been a, professional lacrosse at that time, do you think you might have inclined toward that as, as opposed to football?

Jim Brown:

Well, it would've been a temptation, because most people don't realize that I'm an all-around sportsman, and sports was never first in my life. You know, I'm a, I'm an activist, I, I believe in economic development of minorities, and I was, I always had that thought, and always a thought of, why am I considered a first-class athlete and a second-class citizen? So, because of the nature of lacrosse and the approach to it by the coaches, and the fun that we had, I probably would have considered it very carefully, because even though I was a real good football player, it wasn't necessarily my favorite sport.

00:10:10:00 — 00:11:05:00

Interviewer #1:

As a football player, what do you see as the elements in your game that gave you a capacity for dominating a game; in some instances, in dominating an entire season? What about Jim Brown's game gave him that capacity?

Jim Brown:

Well, there are a lot of things, but the first thing is that God gives you certain gifts. We all have certain things that are, we're endowed with, that we had nothing to do with, you know. *So if you have size, and you have speed, and you have quickness, and you have strength, that's a rare combination. And I had those things. That's not a bragging thing, it's just an observation of the tools that were given me. Then after that, it becomes how you apply those tools, you know, the application of those tools. So I felt that I analyzed myself carefully enough so that I could apply my tools properly.*

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild audio]

Jim Brown:

But I think the main thing is—

Interviewer #1:

Jim, we're out on this reel.

Jim Brown:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

OK, cut.

[cut]

[camera roll 43]

00:11:06:00 — 00:11:39:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

—seventy-seven.

[clapper]

Interviewer #1:

All right. Thank you.

Jim Brown:

The, but the most important—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Hold it.

Jim Brown:

[pause] OK. The most important attribute, I would say, would be attitude, *the positive attitude, 'cause with the right attitude you can play nine years at a certain level; you can play with a broken toe, broken fingers; and that allows you to set a level that's very hard for other people to follow.* And I think that I have a very tough attitude.

00:11:40:00 — 00:13:17:00

Interviewer #1:

A lot of people who followed your career, and I certainly was one—on the one hand, we were very disappointed when you stopped playing because we wanted to see you play more. But I think many people felt, this is a remarkable decision for someone to make. Was it something you had anticipated years before? Had you said to yourself, when I've played nine years of ball, then that's it? I'm gonna get into other things, because there are other things I'm more interested in. How did that decision come about?

Jim Brown:

Well, it was a very easy decision, because what most people didn't know is I worked, that I worked for Pepsi-Cola for nine years. I worked in every aspect of their company—you know, marketing—

[missing frames]

Jim Brown:

—special markets. *You know, I, I dealt with their advertising agency, and I rode trucks. I learned the business and I did public relations for them, and that was in my off-season. So I never took a vacation. And then I was probably the first player to be, to have his contract negotiated by an attorney, which was my attorney, Molloy. Then I had a coaching and consulting contract with the Browns. And I also had a situation where I deferred payments. So I had about five years of income coming after I retired, even if I never did anything else.*

[missing frames]

Jim Brown:

But then I had a three picture contract with Paramount, you know, before I retired, and was just finishing up The Dirty Dozen. So it didn't take a, a, a Rhodes Scholar to realize that when I retired, my salary would go up, I wouldn't be getting bumps and bruises anymore, and I'd have the opportunity of playing opposite stars like Jacqueline Bisset and Raquel Welch. So timing is everything, and, and I think versatility is very necessary in a lot of cases. I know I'm interested in a lot of things, so it was a very simple decision for me.
[Note Interview gathered as part of Black Champions; Episode 2]

00:13:18:00 — 00:14:15:00

Interviewer #1:

A game that produces a very high rate of injury. You were seldom injured, you were always prepared to play, you always came to play. We see a lot of players today, and a lot of players during the period you were playing, didn't have that kind of toughness, didn't have that kind of durability. What do you attribute that to?

Jim Brown:

Well, I don't know. I, *the attitude that I talked about was just one that, it was there. You know, it's like, I don't like to give in and give up on anything*, you know. *And*, you know, *I didn't care about—*

[missing frames]

Jim Brown:

—the money as such. I wanted to play the game, I wanted to produce levels of excellence, and try to be as good as I could, for myself, and I always had my own standards. I don't worry about the public or the media.

[missing frames]

Jim Brown:

And of course, I wanted to play every game, which I did; I wanted to be at every practice. I think I was probably at every practice. And that was my pride, you know. It was just for me—not the coaches, not the other players; just something that I wanted to do for myself. And— *[Note Interview gathered as part of Black Champions; Episode 2]*

[missing frames]

Jim Brown:

—it came about because of, I said,—

[missing frames]

Jim Brown:

—the attitude, you know.

00:14:16:00 — 00:15:47:00

Interviewer #1:

It's documented that you had your differences with coaches. Paul Brown had a concept of the game, and in that concept was Jim Brown. Jim Brown had a concept of the game, in which there was Jim Brown. What do you remember about that particular period? What were those, how did those differences affect you, if at all?

Jim Brown:

Well, the first thing that anyone is gonna have a problem with me with me—

[missing frames]

Jim Brown:

—with, is as, if they don't feel that black folk's equal. And Paul was a pioneer, because I think he had black players before anyone did. And, you know, his organization was as advanced as anyone, but it wasn't as, advanced enough for me. And so I was a politician as well as, as a football player, because I organized the black players so that we would be treated fairly, and equal to anyone else. And of course, that always caused you a problem, because at that time—you know, you're talking about late fifties, early sixties, and whenever we'd talk we have to understand that that was my era; and that was a revolutionary era. So, we had differences mainly based upon equality; not about playing.

[missing frames]

Jim Brown:

Of course, I had my own ideas about how to develop my talent; because I think coaches only know what they've been taught, and once you learn that, you've gotta go further if you're gonna excel over a period of time, because the defense is always trying to find a way to stop you. So, I would say race—you know, equality—and then extending my talent to my potential, would be the differences.

00:15:48:00 — 00:17:58:00

Interviewer #1:

How has—Jim, as you look back, you talk about the fifties and the—late fifties, early sixties—how do you think Jim Brown's changed since then, since those seasons of football? What's different about you, as you see yourself?

Jim Brown:

Well, you can't relate to my past from the standpoint of seasons of football. I'm a man first. And as I said, football was never my first occupation. That, my first occupation was economic development of, of minorities. I had my own organization as far back as '64, and had those thoughts before that. I had an organization called the Black Economic Union, which is based upon the utilization of capital and expertise; which was way ahead of its time, because at the time blacks were talking about singin' and kneeling, and overcoming, or either shooting; which is very unrealistic for this country because neither one of those techniques were gonna work. So, I've changed quite a bit, but the change is natural. The change is a certain maturity, more knowledge, less physicality, and, you know, knowledge and understanding the system better, and knowing how to bring about change in a better way. For example, I was always struggling with my concept of white people, because the greatest man that has been in my life was a white man. Yet I used to always feel that the white race as a whole was perpetuating racism on blacks. And so, when you talk about one man as if you're talking about the whole race, when you talk about the whole race as if you're including this great man. So, I divided into two parts. I said, the, there was a personal and a politics. If I went on national TV and there was gonna be forty-million people watching me, I had to talk about politics; I had to talk about what the white man was doing to the black man. But I had then decided that on a personal level, I could express the fact that any man would be judged by what I saw in him as an individual. And once I arrived at that, to a point where I could explain it, it made a lot of things easier.

00:17:59:00 — 00:19:45:00

Interviewer #1:

I, we were talking earlier, before we set up, about performance by athletes, in, in relation to the game tomorrow. Are there people you'd pay to see play ball? I mean, if somebody said, pick six, or three, or two champions or outstanding athletes who Jim Brown would pay to go and see, who would those people be?

Jim Brown:

You mean modern day—

Interviewer #1:

Yes.

Jim Brown:

—or throughout history?

Interviewer #1:

Modern day or from your own, from your own era.

Jim Brown:

Well, Jackie Robinson was one, because he was a pioneer in baseball, and a fierce competitor. Very intelligent individual, and a man who stood under pressures that I probably couldn't have stood under. I mean, this man had to perform under the worst conditions in the world, and did it. I think it probably was the reason he died at the age he did. On the other hand, Joe DiMaggio was just the opposite. I looked at him as a smooth athlete, very graceful. Just his style I liked. I know nothing about his politics, anything like that. I don't know, after those two it's very difficult, because I didn't have a lot of sports heroes. If I look out there today, oh, it's very difficult for me, because most guys are so interested in money until [laughs] it turns me off. I loved Carl Lewis when I first saw him operating. I knew the kid knew what he was doing, I knew he was a champion. I loved everything about him. And then, when the Olympics came up, I got so disappointed because he became like Mark Spitz when Mark's, came from the Olympics. It was almost like, I didn't have to talk to talk to Carl anymore, I could talk to his agent, and that would be like talking to Carl. So I thought the individuality was gone, and the commercialism [sic], commercialism took over. And I just brought that up because I thought it'd be a good example of how I think.

00:19:46:00 — 00:20:49:00

Interviewer #1:

Sure. Wally Jones, who was a basketball player for a number of years—Philadelphia and Baltimore—once said to an interviewer, ball is just ball; that's all. I wonder if you'd comment on that statement.

Jim Brown:

Well, it's a great statement, because it's a game, on one hand. It's a game. But on the other hand, it has tremendous effects upon the populace at large. So, on one hand you can play it as a game, and it's only a game; on the other hand you must realize that it can be utilized to perpetuate hoaxes. And—for example, if you teach kids, black kids in the ghetto, that, just go to school and learn how to play ball, that means one percent of them might make pro ball. OK? So it can be used for devious things. So, it, it's, I guess, there's a saying in Granada, you know, if you don't use politics, politics will use you. So, like I say, it is a game, but you'd better be very careful on how you approach it, because it can affect the lives of a lot of people.

00:20:50:00 — 00:20:53:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Vinnie, can we cut?

Interviewer #1:

Sure.

Camera Crew Member #2:

What have we got—

[no picture]

Camera Crew Member #2:

—left?

[cut]

[camera roll 44]

[sound roll 24]

00:20:54:00 — 00:23:10:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Slate, sound seventy-eight.

[slate]

Interviewer #1:

So, I wonder if you'd comment on a period of history that you were very much involved in. And that was the, I'm talking, how Muhammad Ali, the boxing champion, refused to report for the draft. And as I recall, the, a number of athletes were very supportive; and of course, there were some people who felt that that was a little dangerous; that maybe you should have just let it go.

Jim Brown:

[laughs]

Interviewer #1:

What do you remember about that?

Jim Brown:

Well, actually at that time I worked with Ali, 'cause we'd put a company together called Main Bout, which involved Herbert Muhammad—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Jim Brown:

—Robert Arum, who is now the big promoter—that was his first start. And Bob Malitz—Michael Malitz, excuse me. And at the time, Ali decided that, as a Muslim, you know, he could not go in the service. It was strictly based upon his religious beliefs. They gave him a hard time, so I got a call in London from, from Herbert, to explore the situation with Ali, and see how he felt about going in the service, because if he wanted to go in the service they would more or less not criticize him. And I thought it'd be good to explore it, because if Ali was convinced that he wanted to go into the service—and I felt he should do that, because I knew it would allow him to keep making a living as heavyweight champion. On the other hand, if he didn't want to go in the service, I felt we could support that position. So ***I called about twenty-some athletes—Kareem was one of them; Bobby Mitchell, Willie Davis. And we all met in my office in Cleveland, which was the Black—***

[missing frames]

Jim Brown:

—Economic Union. And it was so funny, because the night before, I talked to Ali, and he'd made it very clear that he was not going in the service. [laughs] But I carried the meeting on anyway, and then we got in the office, and he tried to convince a lot of guys to become Muslims. And they were all telling him the different pros and cons of not going in the service. And finally, we decided what we'd do is come out and as a block, as a unit, we would support his stand, strictly on his religious beliefs. So—

[missing frames]

Jim Brown:

—when we came out we presented that united front to the press, saying that we were totally with him, because, as a Muslim, he felt that he should not go against his religion and go in the service. [Note Interview gathered as part of Black Champions; Episode 2]

00:23:11:00 — 00:25:58:00

Interviewer #1:

Jim, this whole period, of course, outside your athletic career, includes many things, I'm sure, that, that are memorable, but that certainly being one of them. But over the nine year period that you were playing professional football, is there a particular moment or a particular period of time, in or out of ball, that you regard as particularly memorable? And let's say, a very special kind of period of time or moment for Jim Brown.

Jim Brown:

Well, yes. It doesn't have anything to do with ball, but it has a lot to do with ball-players. I think it was Jacob Javits, out of New York, proclaimed that Marshall County, Mississippi, was the poorest county in the United States at the time. That's not very far from the Lorraine Motel, where King was killed. We decided that if this was the poorest county in the United States, and as athletes who had money and a little influence, that we should do something about it. So my organization organized a unit called Food First. We're dealing with economics and all of that, but we decided that poor people couldn't really deal with economics if they weren't eating. So we developed this program called Food First, and once again organized about thirty of our top athletes—Irv Cross was one of 'em. And at their own expenses, we went to Marshall County, Mississippi, to meet with the black leaders there, and to formalize a situation where we would bring in foodstuff, and clothing, and monies, and try to entice industries to relocate there. And Maggie Hathaway, who was the original founder of the Hollywood Beverly Hills branch of the NAACP, was the only female that went with us. And at the time, the Supremes and Diana Ross were breaking up, and they had a song called "Someday We'll Be Together," and that was our theme song. And we went to Lorr-, Lorraine Motel to get in-, inspiration from the fact that King had died there, and then we went on a bus on into Mississippi. We were followed by troopers, we were harrassed. They hated it, because we were pointing up the fact that people were starving in that arena. And we, on, on, like, an hour's notice we could get all the people from the country to come to our meeting, and they were so happy that people were interested in them. And we did bring—and we left there, and went cross the country, and raised monies and foodstuff and sent it there; and went to the University of Colorado and raised monies, and stuff like that. And then behind the scenes we organized a political situation where they could elect a black sheriff there, because there were more black people than white people, and just riding in the, on that bus and hearing that tune, and being with those players and being with Maggie Hathaway, was a, a, a thrill that I'll never forget, and a very meaningful one, because we did adopt Marshall County, Mississippi, for a year.

00:25:59:00 — 00:27:21:00

Interviewer #1:

Jim, let's close this out by getting you to comment on how special you consider the category, champion.

Jim Brown:

Well, I think it's a very, a very special category—more special than the uses of the word, because we have, the uses of the word is now too loose. We have superstar—that's too loose. But a champion should be very special. It is very special to me. Joe Louis was a champion because he combined many things. *I think champions combine many things. I think there is a humility in—*

[missing frames]

Jim Brown:

—champions. I think there's an arrogance in champions. I think there's a toughness. And I think there is something that is spiritual in champions, because you can go to levels that you can't explain, as a champion, and other people can't identify with it, but another champion can. [Note Interview gathered as part of Black Champions; Episode 2]

[missing frames]

Jim Brown:

And a H-, a Harvard graduate would try to say that he could understand it because he's educated, but education has nothing to do with it. So, it is a special category, not to be diluted by common people using the word too often and applying it to too many things.

00:27:22:00 — 00:27:32:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

William?

Interviewer #2:

Cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

That's a wrap—

[sound cuts out]

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:27:32:00

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