So in Black History the Cleveland Browns stand proud when 67 years ago Paul Brown signed Bill Willis and Marion Motley to play for his first Browns team in 1946.

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By JAMES W. WADE III
Staff Reporter

The Cleveland Browns celebrated Black History Month with a special panel at the Cleveland Browns Stadium ***in conjunction with the Pro Football Hall of Fame on Thursday. The discussion moderated by Pro Football Hall of Fame President and Executive Director Steve Perry, included former Browns greats Bobby Mitchell, John Wooten, Pa ul Wiggin and Greg Pruitt .***

The Browns felt **Black History Month would be the perfect time to tell the story about the early years in Browns history. The Browns led the way with Blacks on their team with two Pro Football Hall of Famers, middle guard Bill Willis and fullback Marion Motley. The two were in the starting lineup in the first regular-season Browns game ever played, a rousing 44-0 victory over the Miami Seahawks on Sept. 6, 1946 before a then pro football-record crowd of 60,135 at Cleveland Stadium, they permanently broke the color barrier coming out of World War II not just in pro football, but in pro sports overall.**

Being in a smaller viewing market Willis and Motley were playing a less-popular sport in a smaller market, It is easy to see why Jackie Robinson got placed onto the front page while Willis and Motley were pushed to page 2 doing that time.

But the importance of what Willis and Motley did comes with the realization that when Robinson got called up from the Dodgers' Class AAA team in Montreal, he called Willis and Motley for any pointers they could give him since they had already been through the challenging experience he was about to undertake. That is, Willis and Motley were the real pioneers.

The panel focused on the struggles and racism they faced, except for Pruitt, who Wooten referred to as "the baby among us." Wooten felt that Coach Paul Brown was they key in the way Blacks got a chance with the Browns.

In 1950, the Browns' first year in the NFL after the AAFC went out of business, Brown added another standout African American and HOF defensive end Len Ford. On and on it went, Brown signing one African American player after another while a number of teams in the league had yet to integrate themselves.

Even after Paul Brown left Cleveland, their progressive efforts in diversity continued. In 1969, a year after he had retired as a Cleveland Browns Legend running back, Ernie Green was hired as running backs coach. As such, he became one of the first African American coaches in NFL history. The man who hired Green was head coach Blanton Collier, who was an assistant under Brown from 1946-53 when he was signing all those African Americans. So Collier had seen first-hand how being open-minded can benefit a team.

In 1972, the Browns added another African American assistant when they hired Al Tabor as their first special teams coordinator. Even then, three years after Green's arrival, there were not many African American coaches in the NFL.
Mitchell who left the Browns to be the first Black player for the Washington Redskins shared how he remembered traveling on a train and being the only person riding in the caboose because he was not allowed to mingle with the Whites.

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