

**“I May Just Want to Take the Chance of Being Fired”: Mississippi Southern’s 1960-1961
Basketball Season, the Unwritten Law, and the Press**

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ABSTRACT

During the civil rights era, collegiate athletics in Mississippi was cloaked in the considerable shadow of segregation. In 1955, the purveyors of Mississippi’s belief in white supremacy created the unwritten law, a gentlemen’s agreement between college administrators and politicians that prohibited the state’s segregated college teams from participating in integrated competition. In 1961, the Mississippi Southern College basketball team had amassed a 22-3 record on the hardwood and had positioned themselves for a berth in the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s small-college national championship tournament. However, an invitation never came, as the members of the selection committee told MSC head coach Fred Lewis that it was assumed the team would decline due to the unwritten law. In opposition, Lewis angrily told the press, “I may just want to take the chance of being fired by going into the playoffs.” This paper examines Mississippi newspaper coverage of the “Golden Giants” during the 1960-1961 season. While threats to the unwritten law posed by Mississippi State University in 1959 created a furor of debate within the Fourth Estate, the same could not be said of MSC. Overall, members of Mississippi’s mainstream press, including the local *Hattiesburg American*, covered the exploits of the Southerners in a minimalistic fashion, relying on wire-based accounts, and offering little to no opinion-based commentary concerning MSC’s possible venture into the integrated postseason. Except for the progressive efforts of *Jackson State Times* sports editor Jimmie McDowell, most members of the press took a silent approach to the issue, offering a level of legitimacy to the unwritten law and protecting the state’s racist social ideology.