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100 yards closer to freedom



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OLD WARRIORS REFLECT ON THEIR STRUGGLE TO INTEGRATE FOOTBALL IN ALABAMA.



A downtown church on a Saturday night is an unusual place to talk football. Nevertheless that's what happened last Saturday night at the landmark Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, and I wish you'd been there to hear what was said.

The occasion was a panel discussion of the integration of football in Alabama, and the participants were nine men who helped make that happen. On stage right, there was James Owens, the first black player to wear an Auburn football jersey, sitting next to Bill

“Brother” Oliver, who coached at both Alabama and Auburn. Terry Henley, Auburn’s All-American rusher, was seated next to Sylvester Croom, the helmet-busting Alabama legend who broke another barrier when he became Mississippi State’s head coach in 2004. The fellow in the middle was Alabama’s Ricky Davis, who had the idea for the event in the first place, next to two more Tide stalwarts, Coach Jack Rutledge and fleet-footed Ralph Stokes. The panel was completed by two more AU nonpareils, Secdrick McIntyre and Thom Gossom, Jr.

Radio’s Paul Finebaum — tanned, rested and ready — proved an ideal moderator by [being unobtrusive](#) as these old warriors told their tales. Indeed, the integration of football in Alabama is a story of war, and the black men brazen enough to earn their places on white-only teams should be acknowledged as foot soldiers, as though they had been sitting-in at lunch counters or marching against Connor’s dogs.

Organized sport was one of the last bastions of segregation in Alabama. Six years after the stand in the schoolhouse door, the state’s SEC teams were still lily-white, and though he had won three national championships, not even Paul “Bear” Bryant had the clout to effect change. His Crimson Tide had played an integrated Penn State team in 1959 and he had invited black players to try out as early as 1967, but his cross-state rival beat him to history.

Sad-eyed Ralph “Shug” Jordan became the first state university football head coach to upend tradition when he brought James Owens into the Auburn program in 1969. Owens, who was also the first black player at Fairfield High School — “I wasn’t welcomed very well there,” he said — told a funny story Saturday night about his recruitment. It seems Alabama brought him in for a campus visit first, but Tuscaloosa’s Gulf States paper mill made the wrong impression on the youngster. “The stinkingest thing,” Owens called

it. “I couldn’t imagine waking up every morning and smelling that place.”

By contrast, the Loveliest Village on the Plains was more pleasantly aromatic: “They had the cows out there.”

Bryant was able to sign black players more easily after an integrated Southern California team humbled the Tide 42-21 in the 1970 season opener at Legion Field. Players such as Wilbur Jackson, John Mitchell, Croom and Stokes helped rejuvenate a flagging Alabama program, while at Auburn, McIntyre and Gossom joined Owens to make the Tigers more competitive.

At both schools, the football experience for black players was tinged with loneliness and alienation.

“We went through some things there,” Owens recalled. “We were called some things that a lot of people wouldn’t have wanted to be called. I took it. I learned at an early age that it wasn’t about me. It was about all the young people that were coming up behind me.” McIntyre remembered racist catcalls from fans in the stands during the traditional Tiger Walk, but instead of responding, he took Coach Jordan’s advice to concentrate on the game.

They kept cool. They hung together. Every black player at Alabama and Auburn in the early Seventies had to, for the sake of the great social experiment. “We couldn’t do dumb things. We couldn’t do things that reflected negatively on us, on our families, on black people,” Gossom said. “We didn’t allow it.” So, when an erstwhile Auburn fan accosted Gossom and Owens in a Burger King one night, slinging the N-word among other invective, rather than crushing him like the bug he was, the two players bagged their food and returned to the dorm.

It would play well in a movie, and Thom is no slouch as an actor, but he was undertaking a more serious role in real life. “If you had gone through the integration experience, there were still things to deal with after you’d left the university,” Gossom said. He found himself repressing his memories, reluctant to discuss them with his wife and stepson.

As the 30th anniversary of Auburn’s 1972 “Amazin’s” (10-1, ranked fifth in the Associated Press poll and 17-16 victors over Bama) neared, Gossom thought back to one particular teammate. “This guy and I weren’t friends,” he said. “When I was a freshman, we would fight almost every day at practice; he’d zing me with the N-word and we’d start fighting. Didn’t necessarily want to fight him, but I wasn’t going to let him run me off.”

At the reunion, Gossom was nervous about running into his old adversary. When he spotted him approaching from across the room, Gossom grinned and told his wife, “I might have to fight him again.”

Instead, Gossom found himself in an embrace. “And it wasn’t one of those man-hugs, it was a hug-hug,” he said. “We hugged for the longest, and we didn’t say a word. And from that point, it was gone from me. I could move forward and learn to be friends.”

I couldn’t be sure from my vantage, but I believe there were tears in Thom’s eyes as he told that story. It turned out that we had not really been talking about football, but about respect and how to earn it, about grace and how to share it, about how to behave humanely toward one another in a time of inhumanity. Which is exactly what you might talk about in a downtown church on a Saturday night.