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# University of Buffalo football team, discriminated against in 1958, finally gets its trip to Orlando

### Mike Bianchi



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At last, they are welcome here.

Every single one of them.

A half-century later, they are getting their long-belated bowl trip to Orlando.

"This," says Willie Evans, one of the two black players on the 1958 University of Buffalo football team, "is icing on the cake."

Says an elated Gerry Gergley, one of his white teammates, "We finally made it!"

This may be the coolest story in the history of Orlando sports. And maybe, in some small way, it will help scrub away one of the most shameful stains in the history of Orlando sports.

Fifty-one years ago, the University of Buffalo Bulls were innocent victims of racial discrimination by Orlando leaders. Now, they will become the honored recipients of a civic celebration.

By now, you may have the heard the story of the '58 Bulls — a team that was enveloped by the dark cloud of racism in the segregated South all those years ago. A book has been written about them. An **ESPN** documentary has been done on them. I wrote a column about them last year — on the 50-year anniversary of that season when they were literally blackballed by Orlando.

The Bulls finished 8-1 that year and earned the first bowl bid in school history. They accepted an invitation to play in Orlando's Tangerine Bowl against Florida State, but later found out there was an ugly contingency clause: Bowl officials told them they could only play in the game if they left their two black players — Evans and Mike Wilson — at home. You see, back in those racially charged times, the Orlando High School Athletic Association, the organization that operated the Tangerine Bowl Stadium, did not allow integrated football games.

The white players on Buffalo's team voted loudly and unanimously that they would rather stay home in the cold than go to Orlando without their two black teammates.

The bowl trip was canceled.

"My teammates drew a line in the sand that I have never forgotten," Evans told me last year.

"It would have been great to get to go to Florida, but it was more important for us not to go," Gergley recalled. "These were our teammates and our friends. There was no way we were going to leave them behind."

Gergley, now a retired UCF professor and coach who lives in Winter Park, watched his Buffalo team take a stand for righteousness 50 years ago. And now he's seeing Team Orlando do the same thing.

We spend so much time in this space criticizing our public officials for their perceived wrongdoings; let's spend a few minutes today applauding them for doing something that is so incredibly right.

Let's credit Orange County Mayor Rich Crotty for seeing the ESPN documentary on the '58 Bulls and coming up with the idea of inviting them all to Orlando for a weekend-long celebration.

Credit UCF President John Hitt and Athletic Director Keith Tribble for making the celebration happen Sept. 19 at Bright House Networks Stadium when UCF hosts Buffalo.

Credit Steve Hogan and his staff at Florida Citrus Sports for using their business contacts to secure corporate

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And credit AirTran Airways for providing free airfare for the '58 team and Royal Pacific Resort at Universal for providing a free block of rooms

Tribble, who himself battled racism as a kid growing up in the South during the 1960s, put it best when he said, "I am personally humbled to be a part of this amazing gesture. ... Many times in sports you don't get a chance at a redo.

Tribble is absolutely right. Orlando finally has a chance not necessarily to rewrite this shameful part of our past but to at least revise it

The '58 Bulls were mostly just teenagers then.

Now they are old men.

But some things never change.

"We're still looking forward to having some pure, unadulterated fun down there in Orlando," Evans says and laughs.

It was a long time coming, but they are finally getting that bowl trip they earned and then spurned all those decades ago

"In 1958, we were just a bunch of young kids from Buffalo trying to do the right thing," Gergley says.

Now, more than 50 years later, a bunch of grown adults from Orlando are trying to do the right thing, too.

A sad chapter in our sports history was written a half-century ago, but now our leaders are thankfully and finally putting a rectifying footnote on the end of it.

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Buffalo played UCF in the Citrus Bowl THREE TIMES in the 90's. They are not "finally getting their game in Orlando. Where was this high and mighty need to honor the '58 team back then? The game against UCF this year isn't even in the Citrus Bowl! This is nothing more than ridiculous publicity for Crotty and Co. Knightshift (08/16/2009, 9:23 AM ,

From the article ... back in those racially charged times, .... It didn't have anything to do with the times. It had solely to do with the stupid ignorant redneck racist punks who ran the city then. The times were the same in upstate New York. It was the people not the times. Bianchi, after all this time you still can't call it like it was? TomLundy (08/16/2009, 12:14 AM)

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