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Sour Tangerine

The Boston Globe

In show of unity, 1958 Buffalo team said no to bowl



Willie Evans in his college football uniform. He says he harbors no bitterness about the discrimination he encountered. (brenda brenon courtesy of Willie Evans/Boston Globe)

By Kevin Paul Dupont
Globe Staff / December 31, 2008

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BUFFALO - Some of the timeline and finer details escape him now, 50 years gone by, a half-century after the indignity of it all. But he remembers his disappointment, and how admirably all his teammates responded to the bigotry, and those are the important memories for Willie Evans.

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The sting of racism didn't hurt just Evans, it coursed through all his University of Buffalo teammates, but it has faded considerably during a lifetime spent raising five children

with his wife Bobbie, working some 40 years in Buffalo's public school system, coaching nearly every high school sport under the sun, and sharing in the collective thrills and disappointments of his young student-athletes.

Evans was only days short of his 21st birthday, the star black halfback of the UB football team, as the Bulls wrapped up a sensational 8-1 season in 1958. Bone-jarring hits their trademark under coach Dick Offenhamer, the Bulls were awarded the prestigious Lambert Cup as the best small school football program in the Eastern US, and for the first time in school history the modest university on the city's north side, a humble player on the national college football

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landscape, had a bowl invitation in hand.

The sun and fun of Orlando awaited. The Tangerine Bowl. This at a time when a bowl game carried the luster and cachet of a Cadillac's brilliant chrome grill and bumper.

"Oh, it was big to us," recalled one of Evans's effervescent teammates, Phil "Boom Boom" Bamford, raised in Methuen, Mass., in a tiny lakeside cottage where he slept year-round in a screened porch, awakening some winter mornings to brush snow off his blankets before dashing inside for the warmth of a pot-bellied stove. "The whole city was nuts."

But faster than one of Evans's off-tackle runs, the trip collapsed under the weight of bigotry. Now 71 years old, his neatly cropped hair a frosty white, the distinguished-looking Evans recalled how he first learned that the Bulls had been uninvited, and how it has never made sense.

"Dumb," he says, calmly and quietly flipping through the faded, brittle newspaper clippings tucked in a meticulous scrapbook he kept during that 1958 season. "Just dumb."

Getting the word

The '58 season complete, the seventh of James and Anna Evans's 10 children awoke that morning at the family's Purdy Street home and headed straight to Cook's, his favorite corner delicatessen, to pick up a copy of the morning paper, the Courier Express. Virtually everyone who lived on his street was black, and while he walked along the sidewalk, one of his neighborhood pal's mothers muttered something to him.

"Now you have to remember, this was a time when you didn't really have much conversation with your elders, black or white," said Evans, sitting at the dining room table of his tastefully-appointed downtown condominium. "You were told what to do, and all you did was listen. As I passed Mrs. Davis, all she said was, 'I guess they don't want you black boys down there.' That was it. I didn't know what she was talking about. I just kept walking."

Moments later, while he stood in Cook's with his Courier Express in hand, the front page story brought Mrs. Davis's words into focus.

"UB Rejects Tangerine Bid," read the headline. "Discrimination Is Cause."

The Bulls, with their two black players, Evans and Mike Wilson, a reserve defensive end from New Jersey, weren't going anywhere but back to the Main Street classrooms for the winter. According to the report, the Orlando High School Association, leaseholder of the Tangerine Bowl, forbade blacks and whites from being on a playing field at the same time.

This was an era in the South when blacks routinely were prohibited from using the same public drinking fountains and restrooms as whites and many hotels and restaurants banned African-Americans. The Bulls were free to accept their Tangerine Bowl bid. They could play in the game. But it would mean neither Evans, who lugged the ball 530 yards that season (an impressive 7.6 yards per carry) nor Wilson could be in uniform.

"No reason to harbor any bitterness about it," said the soft-spoken Evans. "I think we all felt that we had a very successful collegiate experience, and [not going to a bowl] wasn't going to deny us that fact."

It matters little to the overall dynamic of the story, but Evans's recollection of how he learned of UB's bowl fate differs slightly from that of a number of his teammates. They say they learned of OHSA's discriminatory policy during a team meeting called by the coaching staff in the basement of Clark Hall, its space also serving in those days as the Bulls' locker room, weight room, and also as ROTC classrooms.

The coaching staff and school president, the players say, left it to them to decide whether to accept the bid. The coaches briefed them, then exited the room after telling them to decide via team vote. The school and coaching staff would honor whatever their decision.

"And there wasn't any deliberation, not a second thought about what to do," recalled Nate Bliss, 71, who played defensive end and middle linebacker on defense, and then tight end on offense, typical of a squad that had a roster full of two-way players. "As a group, we decided the humane, sophisticated, enlightened thing to do - we said NO!

"There wasn't even a vote. I think it took us all of five seconds to say, 'We're not coming!' We said a few other things, too, but none of that can be printed. But our answer was, 'Hell, no, we won't go,' and then we were out the door."

Bamford, 74, who played his high school ball at the Edward F. Surles High School in Methuen, has the same recollection. No votes were cast.

"Something like that, heck, it's not even a question of right or wrong," said Bamford. "That was just stupid. The kind of team we had, I don't think there's a better way to put it than I don't think Willie and Mike knew they were black, and we didn't, either."

Dick Van Valkenburgh, 72, another Bulls running back, to this day can't believe OHSA's position, that it "had the nerve to say it out loud." Wherever the Bulls traveled, he said, wherever they played or gathered or ate, they did it as equals.

"I was in disbelief; you can imagine how big this was for us," he said, recalling how a local clothier, Kleinhans, was going to give all the UB players new sport jackets for the trip, and that the Buffalo Evening News offered to sponsor the school's marching band. "But I was proud that we said no, and we did it without ranting, raving, or screaming.

"I didn't make the realization then, but as time has passed, looking back it, I have this sense of, 'Wow, that was a really neat thing we did.' "

Still a close-knit team

A half-century later, today's Buffalo Bulls have earned the school's second bowl bid. This time they're going, no questions, no caveats, no conditions, no poorly veiled bigotry. Coached by a black coach, Turner Gill, the former Nebraska quarterback and Heisman Trophy candidate, the 8-5 Bulls will face the 7-5 Connecticut Huskies Saturday in the International Bowl in Toronto.

A good number of the members of the '58 squad plan to board a chartered bus here with their spouses tomorrow for the 90-minute drive north for three days of festivities. Evans and his wife will be on board. Wilson, never heard from again by teammates after returning to New Jersey, is presumed deceased by his former teammates.

The '58 team remains a very close-knit bunch, but not because of the Tangerine Bowl incident. Most still live in the area and gather at Brunner's Tavern, a classic Buffalo Bar just north of the campus, every homecoming weekend, a reunion that most of the out-of-towners usually make, too. Many of the same players, including Evans, played the following year and again went 8-1. But hopes of a second Lambert Cup were dashed when it was awarded to Delaware.

"We were told that the committee wanted to spread it around," shrugged Bamford, both a fullback and linebacker, a man who has rounded neither consonant nor vowel off of his Merrimack Valley accent. "They didn't want to give it to the same school twice. Never made much sense to me, but . . ."

When they gather each autumn at Brunner's, the topic isn't what happened with the bowl bid. Instead, they dwell on their back-to-back 8-1 seasons, the Lambert Cup, touch briefly on the losses to Baldwin-Wallace in '58 and Bucknell in '59,

and get updated on the collective 1,000-plus years they've lived since their glory days on the gridiron.

Truth is, the bowl subject didn't come up for decades, in large part, Evans and Bamford both say, because they barely gave it a thought after it happened. They immediately pointed their energies toward having a successful '59 season, surviving Offenhamer's grueling practices, figuring out romances and careers, finding their way in a sometimes baffling America.

"I think we all saw the Lambert Cup as a much bigger deal," mused Evans. "That knocked the bowl thing right out of the park as far as we were concerned."

Nonetheless, when the UB newspaper, The Spectrum, ran a story a year ago on the bowl plight of the '58 Bulls, media attention began to gain traction. Rocco Versace, an attorney in Rome, N.Y., with ties to the Bulls teams of the '50s and '60s, wrote a book, "Brothers Tonight, We Sing the Chorus Free," centering on the Tangerine controversy. A local TV station aired a report over the summer, leading to ESPN print and broadcast coverage. "ABC Nightly News" and the CBC have been here in recent weeks to tape interviews with Evans and his teammates.

Something the Bulls players themselves opted originally to give almost no nevermind, and rarely thought of since, has turned into something of a cause celebre, the chance for America once more to reexamine a piece of its shameful past.

East Texas State defeated Missouri Valley, 26-7, in the Tangerine Bowl of Dec. 27, 1958. But it was the team that forged a goal line stand in Buffalo, opting not to waste its time in a town where it wouldn't be fully embraced, that picked up the day's real "W."

"Let's not make something out of it that it isn't," cautioned Evans. "I know folks say it is significant and all, and I can go along with that to a certain degree. But I also know my football days are long since past. Our record that year speaks for itself, and I think that's the way it should be."

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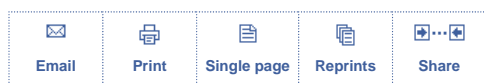
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