

Forget the Titans. Remember the Bulls.

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By Conrad Collaco, [CBC Sports](#)



Bulls coach Turner Gill, a former star quarterback for the Montreal Concordes, is one of only four black coaches in the 119-team first division of the NCAA. (David Duprey/Associated Press)

Finally, the University at Buffalo Bulls will go to the big game.

On Jan. 3, the Bulls will take on the University of Connecticut Huskies in the International Bowl at Toronto's Rogers Centre.

The University of Buffalo earned the berth with a surprise win over undefeated Ball State in the Mid-Atlantic Conference Championship in early December.

But the International Bowl isn't the only football game on Buffalo residents' minds. Many will be thinking about the bowl game that was never played.

When you remember the Titans, remember the 1958 Bulls too. They were invited to Orlando to play the Florida Gators in the Tangerine Bowl. The invitation had a catch: the team could play, but their two black players couldn't.

Running back Willie Evans and defensive end Mike Wilson were not welcome. The Orlando High School Athletic Association owned the field, and they wouldn't let blacks and whites play together.

Racial divides

American college football in the south was a whites-only game. In 1962, James Meredith became the first black man to attend the University of Mississippi, and he was ushered in under protest and armed guard.

That year, despite death threats, Darryl Hill became the first black football player in the Atlantic Coast Conference, made up of mostly southern teams.

In Buffalo there was racial tension too, but things were different.

"Buffalo was a very ethnically divided city," Evans said. "But the athletic teams moved from one section to the other. That's how you got respect going into another neighbourhood. You could go to the west side, the south side, the east side. You got respect if you performed."

Evans performed all right — he was a star running back. The Bulls finished the 1958 season with an 8-1 record and an invitation to the Tangerine Bowl.

'They were our brothers'

The coach and the university let the players decide if they would go without their black teammates.

Back then, Joe Oliverio was a 19-year-old quarterback.

"It was dreadful," Oliverio said. "Awful. Somewhere in our country people were treated differently based on the colour of their skin. We were insulted.

"We were told we could come if we could leave our two teammates home. They were our teammates—they were our brothers. We had to show them we wouldn't do that. We voted and decided not to go unless we all went.

"We were hurt and wanted to hurt them back," he said.

The 1958 Bulls took their ball and stayed home. They made a goal-line stand against racism. It was the only Bowl invitation in the school's history, and they turned it down.

Last October, members of the 1958 team went back to school. The university was commemorating the team's 50th anniversary.

Hero's welcome

When they returned, they discovered that they were still big men on campus. They came back as heroes to players young enough to be their grandsons. After the MAC Championship victory, Evans was invited into the locker-room.

"It was humbling." Evans said. "I was in the locker-room and the players, to a person, as they approached me said that contest was for us. It's unbelievable that they would have this much integrity to single out our team from 50 years ago to say, the victory was for us, on our behalf."

When the 2008 Bulls get off the bus at the Rogers Centre, they'll be heroes too. They will play in the school's first bowl game in its 114-year history.

Gill turns Bulls around

They can thank former Montreal Concorde quarterback Turner Gill for leading a remarkable turnaround. Gill played two seasons in the CFL before retiring due to injuries. He took over as Buffalo's head coach in 2006.

Before Gill, the Bulls had 10 wins in 10 years, and were one of the worst teams in division one football. Since then, they've had steady improvement.

And now, this year, they have their first winning season since 1996, and a surprise bowl game appearance.

All this success earned Gill a nomination for the NCAA's coach of the year award. In a crowd of NCAA football coaches, Gill is easy to spot. He's one of four black coaches in Division 1.

That's four out of 119 coaches, in a game where half the players are black. His boss is Warde Manuel, one of just 11 black athletic directors.

Fifty years later, and the University at Buffalo Bulls still lead the way.

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Fed-Up Even More wrote: Posted 2009/01/01

at 5:34 PM ET U.S. College football has come a long way since 1958 with respect to racism, but has yet to complete the journey by giving African Americans the opportunity to coach at the NCAA Division 1 level. It's not that there is a lack of talent capable of doing the job. There are a host of reasons, one of which is the influence college alumni. The "OLD BOYS" network can be very powerful and old habits die hard, but die they will eventually.

The NFL has also made great strides in hiring African Americans as coaches who have had great success, Tony Dungy for example. However, one area still lacking is in team management and ownership, but that too will change.

Hats off to the 1958 University of Buffalo Bulls who refused to play in their first Bowl game out of respect and support for their two black teammates. They were an even greater team off the field and contributed more to the sport than all of the big name schools put together.

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