

All-Americans In Every Sense

By Francis Kinlaw

Throughout its history, the sport of college football has encountered controversy and faced a variety of problems. But, though issues ranging from drugs to questionable recruiting practices continue to exist, troubling facts should be balanced against the positive aspects of participation in a generally wholesome activity. This article discusses a pair of former stars who can still serve as worthy role models for young men pursuing athletic or non-athletic goals. For, more than half a century ago, Charlie "Choo Choo" Justice of North Carolina and Doak Walker of SMU demonstrated that a true brotherhood is possible even in the glare of public adulation.

Justice and Walker were All-Americans from the same era (the late 1940s), and both captured the imagination of gridiron fans across the country. The widespread popularity and notoriety of the two competitors is reflected by the fact that, within a one-year period in the pre-television age, each appeared on the cover of Life magazine when such a distinction indicated that the subject was truly a headliner on the national stage.

Justice, a triple-threat tailback who served as the backbone of outstanding Carolina football teams from 1946 through 1949, displayed a seemingly unlimited measure of talent. He ran, passed, punted, returned punts and kickoffs, and was a very dependable defensive player.

Walker was, like Justice, a man of ordinary size. And, like Justice, he was remarkably elusive in the open field. Perhaps his most memorable performance came against Texas Christian during SMU's undefeated 1947 season. In that game, Walker accounted for a total of 471 yards by rushing, passing, and returning kicks. With less than two minutes remaining and his team trailing, 19-13, Walker returned a kickoff 56 yards and then made a miraculous catch on the nine-yard line to set up the tying touchdown. But, proving that he was indeed human, the hero of the day missed the extra point that would have given the Mustangs the victory.

Throughout the late 1940s, Justice and Walker competed from a considerable distance for almost every individual honor that could be earned by a college football star. In 1948 alone, Justice won the National Player-of-the-Year Award from the Washington Touchdown Club, the Walter Camp Memorial Trophy, and the Teague Award (as the outstanding athlete in North Carolina). But he did not win the Heisman Trophy, which was presented to Walker after he garnered 778 votes to Justice's 443. This result marked the first time that junior season players had finished one-two in the balloting for college football's most famous individual prize.

Leon Hart of Notre Dame won the Heisman in 1949, with Justice again coming in second and Walker third in the voting. Both players had experienced somewhat disappointing seasons, as Walker was injured in SMU's third game and Justice was weakened by illness in mid-season. But even with a 7-3 record during the regular season, the Tar Heels were invited to play in the recently expanded Cotton Bowl in Dallas on January 1, 1950. Attributing the invitation to the effect of Walker's fine career and to the inevitable comparisons of the two legends, Justice later

said: “We didn’t deserve the bowl trip. The Cotton Bowl invited us so my playing could be measured against Doak Walker...Texans had seen Doak play all season but hadn’t seen me, so this game gave them the opportunity.”

After their college careers had ended, Justice and Walker appeared together in two additional games as collegians. They were pitted against each other as headline attractions and opposing captains in the initial Senior Bowl game, which was played in Jacksonville, Florida on January 7, 1950. Justice starred, throwing a 15-yard TD pass to UNC great Art Weiner, as the South won, 22-13. Seven months later, on August 11, 1950, “Choo Choo” enjoyed several of his greatest moments in the College All-Star Game in Chicago’s Soldier Field, as Walker played a minor role in the collegians’ stunning 17-7 victory over the world champion Philadelphia Eagles. Justice gained 133 yards with runs of 47 and 28 yards, set up a touchdown and field goal, scored a touchdown on a 60-yard pass play, and was voted the game’s Most Valuable Player.

Doak Walker’s professional football career with the Detroit Lions would be more impressive than Justice’s struggles as a member of the Washington Redskins, but the joint legacy of these two examples of the athletic ideal would be established only when their active participation in sports had ended. They had expressed heartfelt admiration for each other while active as players, and after removing their shoulder pads for the final time each contributed to society in a multitude of ways and consistently acted in a gentlemanly manner.

Justice would derive the most satisfaction whenever he was recalled as being a “team player,” and Walker would state: “My achievements in football and honors received when I played are past history. Anyone who thinks you can live on past laurels is sadly mistaken or grossly misled.” Playing in an era of big bucks and big egos, today’s stars would do well to reflect upon the character of these two members of the College Football Hall of Fame.

James Dildy

Mr. James Dildy, former star tackle at the University of Alabama, passed away on July 9, 2001 in Ozark, Alabama at age 89. Under the direction of Coach Frank Thomas, Dildy played for the Crimson Tide in the seasons of 1932-34; lettering in 1933 and 1934.

Born on Feb. 27, 1912 in Nashville, Arkansas, Dildy attended Alabama after graduating from Nashville High School in 1930. While at Alabama, Dildy played a key role in getting high school star Paul (Bear) Bryant to Alabama to play end, and Dildy was a member of the Tide’s mythical national championship team in 1934. During his three years of football, Alabama compiled an overall record of 25-3-1, highlighted by a win over Stanford in the 1935 Rose Bowl. After earning his Masters degree in education, Dildy handled coaching jobs at several Arkansas high schools, interrupted by his three-year tour of duty with the U.S. Army Air Corps in World War II. In 1952 he entered the business world as a director with Arkansas Power & Light, for whom he worked 25 years. In 1976 he was named the Little Rock Man of the Year for community service.

Paul (Tank) Younger

Mr. Paul Younger, former football star at Grambling and for the Los Angeles Rams, passed away on Sept. 15, 2001 in Inglewood, California at age 73. Mr. Younger, nicknamed “Tank” in his college days, was born in Louisiana on June 25, 1928, but grew up in Los Angeles. A standout running back and linebacker in college, Younger played for the Rams from 1949 to 1957, and then 1958 with Pittsburgh. He finished his NFL career with 3,640 rushing yards and 35 touchdowns in 112 games, his best seasons coming in 1954 and 1955 as he rushed for 610 and 644 yards respectively.

Ozzie Simmons

Mr. Ozzie Simmons, former star running back for the University of Iowa in the 1930s, and one of college football's greatest black athletes, passed away on Sept. 26, 2001 in Chicago at age 87. Simmons achieved All-America honors in 1935 in spite of constant racial harassment that extended throughout his gridiron career.

Born on June 6, 1914 in Gainesville, Texas, Simmons and his brother Don were big high school stars in Fort Worth before moving to Iowa. In 1934, his sophomore season, Ozzie exploded onto the Big Ten scene as he rushed for 166 yards and added 124 more in punt returns in a 20-7 win over Northwestern. The longest scoring play of his collegiate career came in 1934 when he returned an intercepted pass 85 yards for a touchdown against Ohio State. But Simmons was already the target of racially motivated rough play, which would result in much of his career at Iowa being injury-plagued. In the 1934 game against Indiana he was knocked out three times.

The 1935 season proved to be the best of his career at Iowa, as Simmons consistently displayed his breakaway speed and maneuverability, while also becoming a top-flight defensive player. That season he scored five touchdowns on runs between 51 and 71 yards, and sportswriter Ralph Cannon of the Chicago Daily News was prompted to describe his "sleek, smooth weaving hips and the most perfect open field pivot probably in the game today." That season he received First Team All-America recognition from Ted Husing, while also making the Second Teams of Central Press, Associated Press, NEA, All-Players, and NANA, and the Third Team with Hearst.

In 1936 Simmons rushed for 583 yards; finishing his career at Iowa with 1,544 rushing yards and 14 touchdowns, as the Hawkeyes compiled an overall record of just 9-11-4 during his three seasons. His coach at Iowa, Ossie Solem, called him "the best halfback I've ever seen," while Ralph Cannon added that Simmons was "a master, a finished big league runner." But those were the days of the color line in the NFL, and so Simmons was reduced to touring briefly with his brother on an all-black team, later playing for the Patterson Panthers of the American Association. There he was a Second Team all-league player in 1937, and after sitting out the 1938 season, he returned and made the league's First Team all-stars for 1939.

Retiring from football in the early 1940s, Simmons became a physical education teacher in the Chicago public school system. Beginning in 1943 he served as a P.T. instructor for two years at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station, and then returned to his teaching career in Chicago. He and his wife, Eutopia, lived on the South Side of Chicago during their 41-year marriage, where she was part-owner of a funeral home. Simmons retired from teaching in 1979 after 38 years, and then worked with his wife. He was inducted into the Bob Douglas Black Sports Hall of Fame in 1984, and the National Iowa Varsity Club Hall of Fame in 1989.

Joe Thomason

Mr. Joe Thomason, a starting halfback for the University of Arkansas in the 1950s, passed away on July 5, 2001 in Taos, New Mexico at the age of 66. Mr Thomason played three seasons of college football (1953-55), and he began as a walkon in his sophomore season of 1953.

Born on Jan. 24, 1935 in Warren, Arkansas, Thomason grew up in Hot Springs before he lettered three seasons for the Arkansas football team; also lettering for the Razorback baseball team. In 1954 Thomason was the starting wingback in the single wing, as Arkansas won the Southwest Conference title under Coach Bowden Wyatt, but finished with an 8-3-0 record after a Cotton Bowl loss to Georgia Tech. He moved to halfback when Arkansas went to the "T" in 1955. After college Thomason became an Arkansas high school teacher and football coach from 1956 to 1990.