

The Jack Trice Story: A Symbol of Sports Idealism Rediscovered

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In 1984, Iowa State University's football complex was dedicated with two names: Cyclone Stadium (using the team nickname) and *Jack Trice Field*. That culminated ten years of fervent and controversial campaigning by ISU students for the single name "Jack Trice Memorial Stadium"—against the wishes of administrators and influential alumni who seemed content with any name *other than* Trice. The students' campaign garnered support: faculty, parents, state politicians, and public figures as diverse as Paul Newman, Hubert Humphrey, and Nikki Giovanni. Partial success came when ISU's president reluctantly offered the dual-name compromise. However, the Student Senate wasn't satisfied and created further memorials: a Trice Scholarship and, in 1988, a bronze statue of Trice.

What is remarkable in the sustained enthusiasm to memorialize the man is that Jack Trice wasn't prominent in Iowa State's athletic history, wasn't a Heisman winner or revered coach or wealthy donor. Indeed, when the campaign to honor him began in 1973, Jack Trice was virtually forgotten. Fifty years earlier he'd played tackle in only one football game for Iowa State.

What inspired those who rediscovered his story was the symbolic purity and tragic irony of his brief career—the beauty of valuing sports idealism above victory.

Jack Trice, Iowa State's first black athlete, was the only person to die competing for the school. On October 5, 1923, in a Minneapolis hotel awaiting the next day's Minnesota game, Jack wrote himself a letter. It would be found in his suit just before his funeral.

As he wrote, he must have wished his debut could have been witnessed by his father—who'd been born in slavery, fought as a Buffalo Soldier, and died working a scrub farm in Ohio. Jack inherited his father's tenacity and had become an ambitious student, working night labor to finance his and his new bride's education toward their goals of assisting southern black farmers.

The letter suggests the pressures he felt from being thought already a potential All-American and from being simply a black athlete, a rarity then in major colleges: not only a model for other black youth, but also a target for white bigots. He grew to adulthood in post-war America's dark years of race riots and lynchings. Before that season, one team asked that Trice not play against them. Trice was gentle, but combatting prejudice had steeled his determination, honed his talent.

Jack wrote of his need to excel for the honor of his race and family, to throw himself recklessly into his first game. Early in that game, Trice's collar bone was broken—but he kept it secret. Then on defense in the second half, he crashed dangerously into the rush of four blockers and was trampled. Fans claimed he'd been targeted. Led off against his wish and briefly hospitalized, Trice returned to Iowa with his teammates. Specialists were finally summoned, too late to treat the internal injuries and hemorrhaging. On October 8th, Jack Trice died. The college mourned and then forgot . . . for fifty years.