

Penn State Football Led Equality Movement

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Part 1

Three months before the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor launched the United States into World War II, two teenage brothers from a small western Pennsylvania steel town stepped onto the Penn State campus and wondered how their new teammates on the freshman football team would accept them.

Of the 6,500 students on campus that September of 1941, only a handful had the same skin color as Harry Alston and his younger brother Dave. They were known as Negroes in those days, a term that is no longer part of the lexicon. Before Harry and Dave arrived, no Negro had ever played football at Penn State.

Today, few Penn State fans outside of historians know their names. That's because a catastrophic set of circumstances changed their lives forever and the significance of what they did was lost in the chaos of World War II. But what the Alston brothers did in their brief time on campus helped turn Penn State into a leader against racism in college sports, a characteristic that continues into this new millennium.

In the 20 years that followed the Alston brothers pioneering debut, Penn State would integrate three major bowl games; one of its black players would become the first NFL draftee to play in the National Football League; and the entire team would refuse to play a major intersectional game in the south because they were told to leave their black players at home.

There were few blacks playing college football when the Alston brothers enrolled at Penn State. The best known at the time were two star running backs at UCLA Kenny Washington and Jackie Robinson. Washington had already graduated when the Alstons put on their first blue and white uniforms but Washington exploits were well known throughout the nation. He had become a hero in the black communities, his name spoken in the same vein as Paul Robeson, the most famous African American player at that time. Robeson was an All-American end at Rutgers in 1917 and 1918 and then became a world renowned actor-singer and Civil Rights activist. Jackie Robinson would eventually eclipse Robeson's fame by becoming the first black player in major league baseball.

Dave Alston seemed destined to become a black idol, too. He was one of those “can’t miss” players now known as a “Blue Chipper.” He had played football, basketball, baseball and track at Midland High School, earning four letters in each sport. In his



Dave & Harry Alston – Midland (PA) High School - 1941

senior year he not only scored 128 points on the football field but was the president of his class and valedictorian. Harry said later that Dave could have gone to Cornell but chose Penn State because they were a package recruited by a Pittsburgh area businessman named Casey Jones, a one time Nittany Lion player and close friend of coach Bob Higgins.

In that era, college freshmen teams played intense schedules to prepare their recruits for the varsity in their sophomore years. Dave Alston was an immediate sensation. At 6-foot-1, 198-pounds, he could do it all--run, pass, kick, tackle and break up passes. Higgins once said Dave “was a half a team himself.” Shortly after spring practice in 1942, the most popular and authoritative sportswriter of that generation, Grantland Rice, named Alston to his preseason All-America team in the Saturday Evening Post.

Unfortunately, the Alston brothers never played a down of varsity football. Dave died suddenly in August of 1942 from *complications stemming from a football injury in the preseason, and his death caused his distressed brother to leave school and never return. Another well known sportswriter Francis Wallace honored Alston as “sophomore of the year in memoriam” in the Saturday Evening Post.

The world was at war and the tragic death of Dave Alston got lost in the turmoil. America’s college campuses were being turned into way stations for military recruits. The military couldn’t keep up with the training, and so the War Department began using college campuses as sites to hold their best educated recruits and officer candidates before sending them off for advanced training. Recruits would come and go as players on the football field, some there for only a game or two before being sent elsewhere. Because the military was a bastion of segregation, black football players were shunted aside by everyone. It wasn’t until the war virtually was over that another black player was recruited to play at Penn State.

Wally Triplett had been a star at Cheltenham High School in West Philadelphia when Jones and Higgins convinced him to play football at Penn State. Wally did not have the instant success that Alston did. Freshmen were eligible in 1945 and Triplett started one game late in the season but didn’t play enough to earn a letter. In his sophomore year, he shared the wingback position with three veterans. By this time, he was joined on the team by another black from West Philadelphia, Denny Hoggard.

Hoggard had tried out for the team in 1942 but didn't make it and left for the Army before the 1943 season. He returned in 1946, wiser and more physically fit, and this time he suited up as one of the team's ends. That season would mark a turning point in Penn State's racial history when the team unanimously supported the cancellation of a December game at the University of Miami because Miami said State's two "negroes" could not play.

A year later, Triplett and Hoggard would be part of one of Penn State's greatest teams, and one that would make another definitive statement against racism. When the unbeaten 1947 team played SMU in the 1948 Cotton Bowl, Triplett and Hoggard became the first blacks to play in the game. However, Dallas was still racially segregated and the team was forced to stay in a one-time Naval Air Station nearby.

In 1949, Triplett and Indiana's George Taliferro became the first two African Americans drafted by the NFL and when Taliferro decided to sign with the rival All-American conference, Triplett became the first African American draftee to play in the league as a halfback for the Detroit Lions.

It would not be until 1954 that a Penn State team returned to play a game in Texas. This time, Fort Worth would be the place for the Nittany Lions to make another statement against racism.

Part 2

The rural, virtually all-white Penn State campus of the mid 1940s may seem an unlikely place for one of the most significant statements against racism in college football.

It was the fall of 1946 and the Penn State classrooms overflowed with veterans of World War II. Almost all freshmen were sent to California State Teachers College because there wasn't enough room for them at the main campus. Housing was such a premium for the 7,000 students that the government shipped in one hundred trailers once used to house defense plant workers.

To help house the athletes, a group of Pittsburgh alumni raised \$19,000 to buy an old fraternity house off campus. Many of the football players lived there, except for the two black players, sophomore halfback Wally Triplett and army veteran Denny Hoggard, who had tried out for the team in 1942 as a freshman.

When Triplett reported to practice in September he saw the revised football schedule posted over the outside door of the locker room and he knew there would be trouble. The Lions were now scheduled to play at Miami in late November and he knew from personal experience that "negroes" were not allowed on the Miami team. Miami had tried to recruit him in his senior year at Cheltenham High School in Philadelphia until they found out he was black.

Triplett and Hoggard talked and wondered what their teammates would do. They knew some of the players did not like blacks. The extra hits underneath the piles in practice was proof. "It was an agonizing period and I didn't sleep well on many nights," Triplett recalled a few years ago.

The day before the fifth game of the season against Fordham on November 1, *The Daily Collegian* reported a "rumor" that Miami would not allow Penn State's blacks to play in the game. The following Monday, Coach Bob Higgins brought up the subject after the players had their regular lunch in Old Main. He discussed the situation in detail, and then said the decision to play the game without Triplett and Hoggard was up to the players. There was some mumbling in the room, and the look on some of the player's faces showed that they were perturbed about their dilemma. Then someone shouted "We don't need Miami." Another player said Triplett and Hoggard should leave the meeting before they voted, but future All-American end Sam Tamburo spoke up: "No, they're part of the team and their vote counts."

"You could have knocked me over when they said what they said," Triplett remembered.

When the vote was taken, they agreed to make it unanimous. Two days later Penn State officially cancelled the game. "At the time," Triplett said, "the players didn't understand the significance of what they did. I didn't either." A year later, Triplett and Hoggard become the first blacks to play in the Cotton Bowl and the team made another stand against racism by refusing to stay in segregated Dallas without their teammates.



Wally Triplett – 1948 Cotton Bowl

After Rip Engle took over as Penn State's coach in 1950, he and the assistant coaches who had been holdovers from the Higgins regime placed an emphasis on recruiting black high school players. By 1953, he sometimes had four blacks in the starting

lineup: junior lettermen Rosie Grier and Jesse Arnelle at tackle and end, respectively, and sophomores Lenny Moore and Charlie Blockson in the backfield. In 1954, Grier, Arnelle and Moore would become the first blacks to play a game in Fort Worth, Texas, against Texas Christian, even though they and the rest of the team had to stay at a ranch 15 miles away. (Blockson missed the game because of a wisdom tooth problem.) All four players would achieve fame in their adult years.

Grier would become an entertainer and political activist after an All-Pro NFL career with the New York Giants and Los Angeles Rams. Arnelle, who would also lead Penn State's basketball team to the Final Four as the school's first 1st team All-American, would become a prominent attorney and president of the Penn State Board of Trustees. Moore would enter the Pro Football Hall of Fame as a star for the Baltimore Colts and then

dedicate his life to the troubled youth of his adopted city. Blockson would become a distinguished professor and one of the foremost authorities on the history of African Americans.



1954 Penn State Football Team – Arnelle and Grier (Front Row), Blockson and Moore (Second Row), and Hill and Wiggins (Fourth Row). **Note:** Only half the team players are pictured above, but all Black players are included.

As segregation continued in the south and southwest and pockets of the north and midwest through the 1950s and into the late 1960s, the Penn State football team continued to help their black teammates achieve equality. When the 1959 team played Alabama in the first Liberty Bowl in Philadelphia, tackle Charlie Jannerette became the first black to play against all-white Alabama. Two years later, end Dave Robinson would become the first black to play in the Gator Bowl. Both players would go on to stellar careers in the NFL and Robinson would later be inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame.

As the country evolved into an integrated society throughout the 1970s and 1980, racism on the football field dissipated. Although some problems sometimes still arise, the overt racism of the past is scarcely an issue these days. The racial obstacles that Wally Triplett and Denny Hoggard encountered at Penn State 60 years ago have given way to the adulation that a Lenny Moore, Franco Harris and Ki-Jana Carter now receive when they return to the campus to mingle with the Nittany Lion fans.

Today, the dynamic leadership of quarterback Michael Robinson has helped propel the 2005 Lions back into the national limelight and it's rarely mentioned that he happens to be black. And why should it be? Penn State's last eight first team All-Americans, dating to 1996, were also black players, so there is nothing unusual anymore about a black player, wearing one of those plain, blue and white uniforms. Dave and Harry Alston would be quite proud of the legacy they created that day in 1940 when they first walked onto the football practice grounds alongside Beaver Field. Penn State fans should be proud, too.

***Note:** The official cause of death for Dave Alston was complications following a tonsillectomy operation at Centre County Hospital on August 15, 1942. Shortly following the operation, a blood clot formed and caused his lungs to collapse. Many in the State College Black community believed that the Navy football team deliberately hurt Alston in an April 1942 preseason game, and that the injury contributed to the blood clot and his untimely death during a normally routine operation.

Photo Credits: 1) Dave and Harry Alston photo per 1941 Midland (PA) High School Yearbook. 2) Wally Triplett and 3) 1954 Football Team photo is courtesy of the Penn State Archives.