



THE VOICE OF "THAT TEAM": Wally Triplett, now 83, at home in Detroit. He's committed to ensuring the legacy of the '46 and '47 teams lives on.

LIONS

MEN among

In the years after World War II, a group of working-class kids and combat veterans teamed with two trail-blazing African-Americans to form one of Penn State's greatest football teams. Along the way, they made history.

THE BUS STOPPED ON the corner of College and Allen, in front of the Hotel State College, at the crossroads of town and campus. Fall Semester, 1945: Halfway across the world, war was winding down, and the veterans would soon be on their way home. Wally Triplett, 19 years old, a freshman with a state-funded senatorial scholarship to Penn State, stepped off the bus and ambled uphill, clutching his belongings and a letter addressed to a man known as The Hig.

Raised in the Philadelphia suburb of La Mott, Triplett was the son of a postal worker, a football star with such an outstanding pedigree that the University of Miami sent a letter offering him a scholarship, sight unseen.

By **Michael Weinreb '94 Com** Photo by **Roy Ritchie**

They did this under the assumption—given his tony address, and how much of his neighborhood was wealthy and white—that Triplett was also white. When they discovered he was not, they rescinded the scholarship. And so Triplett, too young to enlist during the height of the war, found himself here, on a campus with which he was completely unfamiliar, in a place with no more than a few dozen black students in a student body of nearly 5,000. His grades had earned him the senatorial scholarship, but he had so little spending money that upon seeing a sign for a dishwasher in a window at the local Greyhound post house, he immediately took it inside and offered his services. Then he went to meet up with The Hig...

Here, **Triplett '49 H&HD** pauses the story. "I want to make something clear," he says. He is 83 years old, and his memory sometimes reboots in unpredictable fashion; the edges are blurred, and yet the details he conjures remain startlingly vivid. He sits upright in a hospital bed in downtown Detroit, the city where six decades earlier he became the first African-American to be both drafted by and play for an NFL team. A baseball game drones on the television above his head. He looks restless and uncomfortable; he is wearing bright yellow

Penn State football: They voted not to play a game in Miami in 1946, because it would have meant leaving their black teammates behind; and then they chose to play—together—in the previously segregated Cotton Bowl on New Year's Day, 1948.

"I didn't do anything, you see," Triplett says. "It wasn't like I was the leader. This was America in that age, and that was the way things were, and you didn't question, and yet these guys took it upon themselves to say, 'No. We play all or none.'"

And so this is what Wally Triplett wishes you to understand, before he goes any further:

This is not his story. This is *their* story.

They came from all corners of the state of Pennsylvania, from the suburbs to the east and the coal-mining regions to the west and the rural hamlets to the south, from villages big and small. In the winter, at the end of the semester, they hitchhiked along country roads to get back home. They were the sons and daughters of Slav and Polish and Scandinavian immigrants who labored in mines, the hard syllables of their surnames betraying their bloodlines: Czekaj, Sarabok, Drazenovich, Wolosky.

They were so ferocious on defense that they used to argue amongst themselves when they gave up a five-yard run. Once, a referee pulled Triplett aside and asked, "Do you guys even like each other?"

pajamas. A few weeks earlier he collapsed into the arms of his wife, Leonore, and he is awaiting the results of tests on his kidneys and his heart. He would rather be discussing this at his house across town, but even here the words come pouring out of him. He worries often, as he and his teammates succumb to age, that the tale will be lost to history.

And here is what he wishes to make clear: This is not *his* story. This is a story about what he repeatedly refers to as "That Team," a group of men who played football at Penn State in 1946 and 1947, a group with such an inextricable bond that they rose above the tensions and preconceptions and prejudices of the era, a group who stood up for civil rights out of loyalty to the bonds they forged on a football field. Collectively, That Team made two of the more momentous decisions in the history of

Mostly, they came out of the armed services, flocking back to Penn State in the fall of 1946, on a campus that was suddenly so crowded that the government shipped in a hundred trailers, previously used to house defense plant workers. This was Triplett's sophomore year; it was also the year an African-American end named **Dennie Hoggard '49 Lib** returned from three years serving the Army in India.

That first day on campus, sitting in the office of football coach **Bob Higgins '18 Lib**, Triplett had heard all about Hoggard. The Hig told him they'd get along well; in fact, The Hig said, the two of them rather looked alike. This set Triplett off. He had grown up in a town where whites and blacks freely intermingled. In high school, he met the actor and activist Paul Robeson backstage after a speech, and Triplett took up Robeson's



MEN OF '47: The Cotton Bowl team featuring Triplett (left) and Dennie Hoggard (89) finished 9-0-1 and ranks among Penn State's greatest.

attitude toward civil rights. He was not afraid to ask why things were the way they were, and now, sitting here with The Hig, he thought, *Wasn't this just so typical of white America to presume that all black men looked alike?*

The Hig, flustered by Triplett's spirited retort, tugged on his nose, as Triplett recalls he was wont to do when flustered, and he tried to set the situation right. Still, he and Triplett were never quite on the same page. One day, when Triplett got in a fight with a classmate who kept pushing him during a pickup basketball game at Rec Hall, The Hig called him into his office and said, "You're going to have to learn to take that."

The Hig also invoked the memory of a young man named Dave Alston, Triplett and Hoggard's predecessor on the football team. Alston was a star on the 1941 freshman team, a potential All-American who died of complications from a tonsillectomy in 1942 [see sidebar, page 49]; he and his brother, Harry, had been the first black football recruits in Penn State history. Triplett knew all about Alston. But Triplett also assured The Hig that he was not here to fill Alston's shoes, that he would be his own man.

During an English class that first year, Triplett kept getting failing grades from an instructor he suspected of racism; when he gave his next assignment to a brilliant



black grad student, **Roger Kenton Williams '40 MS Lib, '46 PhD Edu**, to complete under his name, he got another failing grade and informed his adviser. The instructor's contract was not renewed.

"Now you're getting faculty fired?" The Hig chided him.

It was impossible to block out the tensions between player and coach. But this was always about something much more consequential than a single relationship. And

when Triplett met Dennie Hoggard, he realized they wore the same horn-rimmed glasses, and they had similar faces. Years later, they would continue to laugh about it, about the way even their teammates sometimes called them by the wrong names.

About this, even Triplett had to admit The Hig was right: They *did* look alike.

In the fall of 1946, as soon as Triplett saw the schedule for the upcoming season, he braced for trouble. Penn State was due to play its season finale at Miami, at the school that had rescinded Triplett's scholarship once it found out he wasn't white—and which, like other Southern schools at the time, wouldn't allow its teams to compete against opponents with integrated rosters unless they left their black players at home. "This country wasn't even close

to being civil,” Triplett says.

Penn State may have been more tolerant than that, but equality remained a pipe dream in State College. The barber shops didn’t take black customers (once, Triplett allowed Hoggard to cut his hair, and he wound up wearing a woolen cap for weeks afterward). There were certain places, like an upscale teahouse near The Corner Room, where you knew you weren’t welcome. Until the dorms were integrated after the war, a number of black students lived in Lincoln Hall, a boarding house off Atherton Street. Inspired by Robeson, Triplett helped start a chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha, a national black fraternity, as a way of achieving solidarity with his African-American classmates.

Triplett spent months worrying about what would happen when it came time for the team to decide whether to make the trip to Miami; a few weeks before the game was scheduled to be played, Miami officials said it would be “difficult to carry out arrangements for the game” if Penn State brought its black players. Triplett had gotten to know his teammates pretty well, and he thought they respected him, and he knew they adored Hoggard, who was more easygoing and carefree than he was. “Denny would get along with the devil, see,” Triplett says.

Many of those who had come back from the service still carried their admiration for Dave Alston, too.

But a trip to Miami was appealing: State College in late November was frigid and miserable, and Miami was not, and some of them would say things like, “Oh, man, can you *imagine* that sunshine down there?”

It was hard to know if they were joking. Some weren’t; Triplett had taken enough extra hits during practice pile-ups to know it. He just didn’t know how many there were. The way he recalls it, during a team meeting at Old Main, they put it to a vote: Knowing what they

knew of Miami’s stance, they would either make the trip without two of their teammates, or the whole team would stay home. Neither Triplett nor Hoggard had any idea what to expect. They feared the worst. Someone suggested that Triplett and Hoggard should leave the room, but Triplett remembers another teammate’s reply: “Why should they go outside? They should have a vote.”

They voted. The result was overwhelming. They’d play with everyone, or they wouldn’t play at all.

“From a personal point of view, I never thought of anybody else being different than I was,” says one of the voters, **William “Rip” Scherer ’49 H&HD**, a back who mostly played behind Triplett and became one of his closest friends.

Says another voter, **Joe Sarabok ’50 H&HD**: “There was no second thought.”

The team re-voted to make it unanimous, and the few holdouts changed their votes. In this manner, it was decided: The game was canceled. There would be no need for more meetings like this, declared **Steve Suhey ’50 H&HD**, an All-American lineman, when the issue arose again the following season. It was all or none. “We

are Penn State,” he said, and Triplett and others would like to believe that this phrase somehow worked its way from

LOOKING FOR DAYLIGHT:
Triplett, seen here running against SMU in the Cotton Bowl, also caught the third-quarter touchdown pass that tied the game.



Suhey's mouth into Penn State's enduring mythology; that even if it is mere coincidence, it still echoes as an invocation of the school's embrace of modernity and civil rights.

Either way, the trip to Miami was no more.

Eventually, most of the players moved into the Football House, a once and future fraternity house on Hamilton Avenue (now home to Delta Tau Delta) that was vacant and bought for \$19,000 by a group of Pittsburgh-area alumni. There were a few among them who pledged and lived in various fraternity houses, but most of That Team resided in their own personal house, and living together meant they had no choice but to accept each other. They went 6-2 in 1946, and in 1947 they were older and more experienced and, many believe, better than any team that had come before.

Their dominance was evident from the start. They trampled Washington State and Bucknell and Fordham and Syracuse and Navy; they went 9-0, rose to No. 4 in the national rankings, and shut out five teams. They allowed 3.8 points per game, gave up 17 yards rushing per game, and rushed for more than 2,700 yards as a team, led by the elusive Triplett. They became known as the "Men of '47," a nod to their age and maturity—some of the war veterans were in their mid-20s, with wives and children—and they were so ferocious on defense that they used to argue amongst themselves when they gave up a five-yard run. Once, a referee pulled Triplett aside and asked, "Do you guys even like each other?"

In fact, they spent most of their spare time together, too. They huddled outside of Graham's newsstand on Allen Street, clustered around a bench reserved for lettermen. They played the pinball machine inside (Ed Czekaj '48, '54 MEd H&HD, who would later become Penn State's athletic director, won the tournament,

A LEGEND LOST

ON A SATURDAY MORNING IN AUGUST 1942, DAVE ALSTON CHECKED INTO Centre County Hospital in Bellefonte to have his tonsils removed. Alston was 20 years old. He had come to Penn State the year before, along with his brother Harry. They were a package deal, recruited by a Pittsburgh-area businessman to become the first two black football players in school history.

Dave Alston had been a three-sport star at Midland (Pa.) High, as well as valedictorian of his class. He was well-liked, a pre-med major, the son of a Baptist minister, and, according to a teammate, "one of the cleanest-living boys I have ever known." At a time when few blacks were playing college football—among the most prominent was a young UCLA running back named Jackie Robinson—Alston had seemed destined to become Penn State's first black superstar. The renowned sportswriter Grantland Rice had named Alston to his All-American team; one expert called him "the best since Jim Thorpe."

At 11:45 on that August morning, Alston was pronounced dead. According to reports, a blood clot formed after the operation, cutting off circulation to his lungs. The reaction on campus was shock and disbelief. Coach **Bob Higgins '18 Lib** called it "an unspeakable loss to his parents and to his race." The *Saturday Evening Post's* Francis Wallace, as a tribute, named Alston "Sophomore of the Year In Memoriam." Wrote Wallace: "Weighing 200 pounds and six-one in height, he could run the hundred in ten seconds flat, he was one of the finest passers ever, and his snake hips made him a running wonder back..."

Soon after Alston's death, his distraught brother left Penn State and did not return. But Dave Alston's impact would be felt a few years later, when **Wally Triplett '49 H&HD**, an African-American prospect from the Philadelphia suburbs, chose Penn State in large part because of what he'd read about Alston in those glossy magazines. "He could do everything," Triplett recalls. "I worked in the drugstores, and I'd read the write-ups. I revered Dave Alston." —MW

Triplett recalls), and they paged through the magazines. The wealthier students hung out at The Corner Room or on the wall across College Avenue, but the football team, all those veterans and tough guys from working-class backgrounds, knew exactly where they belonged.

They beat Pitt 29-0 for their ninth win, and then they waited. They knew their options would be limited: There were only a handful of bowl games at the time, and most were in the deep South. In keeping with their pledge the previous fall, Higgins insisted that they would play with all or none, that Triplett and Hoggard would either come with them to a bowl game or there would be no bowl game at all. For that reason, the Orange Bowl, in Miami, was out; so was the Sugar Bowl, in New Orleans. The Cotton Bowl was in Dallas, but Dallas was also a segregated city—meaning black and white players

PENNSYLVANIA STATE COLLEGE vs. SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY

Annual *How Eisen* NEW YEAR'S DAY COTTON BOWL CLASSIC

1948

DALLAS, TEXAS

50c



BMOC: The main draw for the 12th annual Cotton Bowl was SMU's All-American back, Doak Walker.

wouldn't be allowed to room or eat together—and no team with black players had ever been invited. Still, that summer Jackie Robinson had broken the color barrier in baseball; sports had become an engine of social change. Southern Methodist, led by the all-everything back Doak Walker, said it would welcome Penn State as its opponent. "After all," SMU coach Matty Bell said at the time, "we're supposed to live in a democracy."

And so it was off to Dallas, where That Team anticipated a week of parties and girls and relaxation, all the spoils of the bowl season. Instead, they found themselves cut off, relegated to Dallas Naval Air Station—nine miles from the city—as none of the hotels in town accepted blacks. Triplett and Hoggard had been invited to stay with some black ministers while their teammates lived in a downtown hotel, but the issue had been decided a year earlier: It was all or none. They would

not separate now.

They arrived just before Christmas. The Hig, who had cited written threats to his black players from extremists on the right and communist agitators on the left, kept the team occupied with two-a-day practices. The base was desolate and depressing. And yet Triplett and Hoggard found themselves the beneficiaries of Dallas's black community, which viewed them as pioneers. They were shepherded to various events each day after practice. At one point, Triplett judged a beauty pageant. "I went out to see as many girls as I could," he admits. He was shadowed by Lem Graves Jr., a correspondent from a black newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, there to chronicle the first black players in Cotton Bowl history.

Some of their white teammates, relegated to the naval base, felt betrayed. A few hopped the fence and made their way into town, where they found girls and nightclubs. The pull of segregated life threatened to tear the team apart. It was understandable. They were young, they had fought for their

country, and they conducted themselves so carefully on campus—an assistant coach, **Joe Bedenk '24 Lib**, used to insist they wear sports coats to class, says Joe Sarabok, so they

wouldn't appear like "dirty athletes." Upon their return to Pennsylvania, the friction between them and the stories of their carousing would make the papers—a *Centre Daily Times* writer would accuse them of "giving Penn State and the East a black eye"—but ultimately, it didn't change anything between them. That Team held together. A captain, **John Nolan '48 Bus**, issued an apology to the *Collegian*, stating, "Everything [in the papers] is too distorted for anyone to believe." They would continue to hold together for the next 60 years.

"Years later, all that stuff was gone," says lineman **Charles "Jiggs" Beatty '50 H&HD**.

And even in Dallas, they found a way to celebrate together: On their way back from an event hosted by a local Penn State alumnus, their bus passed a nightclub,

PENN STATE ALL-SPORTS MUSEUM

a place with leopard-skin doors and untold secrets beyond. (The club's owner, many of the players later swore, was Jack Ruby.) They wanted to go in. The bus pulled over. And then it dawned on Triplett: *This is Texas*. He told a team manager, "I don't think they're going to let me," and the manager spoke to the doorman, and the doorman went to get the owner. They explained who they were. They said they had colored players and didn't want to go where they weren't welcome. "Give me a few minutes," the owner said. He notified the crowd of the situation, then came back out. "We never had any niggers in here. But you come on in."

Overcome by modesty, Triplett ordered a Coca-Cola. Every time a dancing girl threw her legs into the air, he stared into the bottom of his glass.

The New Year dawned windy and frigid, and at first, the Men of '47 appeared taken aback by the stresses of the week, and by the dazzling and multi-talented Doak Walker. SMU took a 13-0 lead into halftime, but Penn State scored to make it 13-7, and then in the third quarter, Triplett caught a six-yard touchdown pass from **Elwood Petchel '49 H&HD**. Ed Czekaj came out to kick the extra point; it sailed high over the uprights, and after some deliberation, the officials ruled it wide right. On the game's last play, an SMU defender deflected a pass into the end zone, and it bounced off Hoggard's stomach, incomplete. A 13-13 tie. "To the 47,000 fans ... the encounter developed into just the slam-bang sort of affair that had been advertised," wrote George White of

Virginia. "Nothing happened," wrote P.L. Prattis of *The Pittsburgh Courier*, "except perhaps that thousands of individuals thought over the prejudices they had felt for years, decided that they were not quite in keeping, and ignored them. Prejudice is losing its sales appeal."

Six decades later, Leonore Triplett is standing in her kitchen, marking names on a phone list headed "1947 Cotton Bowl Team." She and her husband have owned the house for 50 years, and there are photographs of Wally in his football uniforms, of their wedding day, of their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. In the basement, Wally has gathered articles and photographs from the era; somewhere there is a photo of him with Jackie Robinson, Larry Doby, and Marion Motley, each pioneers in their sport. He spends his free time sorting through his memories and composing a scrapbook tribute to that era; when he comes home from the hospital in a few days, the project will continue.

Of course, there are fewer and fewer men on the phone list these days, and the reunions—which have happened consistently over the years—get smaller and smaller, and those who are left have a harder time conjuring memories through the haze of time. The last time was a few years ago, in State College. Joe Paterno showed up, as he almost always does; he declared to the media that Triplett was better than **Ki-Jana Carter '95 Bus**, better than **Blair Thomas '89 H&HD**, better even than Doak Walker himself.

And yet even Paterno recognizes that this is not a

At one point, Triplett careened into a group of photographers and heard a racial slur. Mostly, though, the game was uneventful. "Prejudice," a reporter wrote afterward, "is losing its sales appeal."

The Dallas Morning News.

Triplett rushed off without even shaking Walker's hand (though they would later become teammates with the Detroit Lions), on a mission to catch a plane back home so he could make up an exam. At one point during the game, Triplett remembers, he careened into a group of photographers and heard a racial slur. Mostly, though, the game was uneventful—not unlike earlier that season, when Harvard's African-American tackle, Chester Pierce, had played a game at the University of

story about one man. It never has been, not for any of them, not since the day they sat in that Old Main meeting room, held up their hands, and decreed their vote to be unanimous.

"Coach Paterno tells us," says Rip Scherer, "how that team turned around the entire football program." ▀

Michael Weinreb is the author of *The Kings of New York*. His next book, about the culture of sports in the 1980s, will be published next year.