



Bobby Grier (center), the first Black player to participate in a Sugar Bowl, reading headlines with his Pittsburgh teammates prior to the 1956 game against Georgia Tech.

4

As players, we were naïve. We wanted to play the best team, Syracuse, regardless of the color of any player's skin, but forces beyond our awareness were at work — political maneuvering to which we were oblivious.

In November 1955, Fred Digby — the Sugar Bowl founder and general manager — and Monk Simons traveled to Pittsburgh to watch the West Virginia Mountaineers play Pittsburgh. The men intended to extend an invitation to the No. 6 Mountaineers to play in the January 1, 1956 Sugar Bowl.

But what Digby and Simons saw that day changed history. Pittsburgh, ranked No. 17, destroyed West Virginia. The two men were so impressed with the victory that they decided to invite Pittsburgh to play in the Sugar Bowl against Georgia Tech, rather than West Virginia.

What Digby and Simons didn't witness that day was Pittsburgh star running back Bobby Grier, a Black player who happened to be sidelined that day with a knee injury.

Much to the credit of Digby and Simons, when they discovered

that Pittsburgh had a Black player, the two men clarified that the invitation was issued “without conditions.” They openly invited a Black player to the Sugar Bowl, knowing he would be playing in the formerly segregated Tulane Stadium, and staying in the segregated St. Charles Hotel, and dining with the team in segregated New Orleans restaurants. They also agreed to allow both Blacks and Whites to sit together among the ten thousand tickets reserved for Pittsburgh (this all took place two weeks before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery).

Many in Louisiana were unhappy about the committee’s choice to invite an integrated team to play in the Sugar Bowl, but the loudest opposition came from Georgia Governor Marvin Griffin. He demanded that Georgia Tech rescind their invitation to the Sugar Bowl. He held a news conference and announced —

“The South stands at Armageddon. The battle is joined. We cannot make the slightest concession to the enemy in this dark and lamentable hour of struggle. There is no more difference in compromising integrity of race on the playing field than in doing so in the classrooms. One break in the dike and the relentless enemy will rush in and destroy us.”

The Georgia Tech football coach took a poll of his football players. Every single player wanted to play in the game. The students were so appalled at the governor’s demand for a boycott, two thousand angry young men and women marched to the Georgia governor’s mansion and burned an effigy of Griffin. Even the students at the University of Georgia, Georgia Tech’s arch rivals,

jumped on the bandwagon issuing a statement, “for once we are with Georgia Tech.”

In reaction — and in opposition — to the governor’s demands, the Georgia Tech board of regents voted 13-1 to allow the game to proceed as scheduled.

As a result, on January 1, 1956, a Black man played in the Sugar Bowl (he was the game’s leading rusher). And Tulane Stadium hosted thousands of Black fans who mingled freely with everyone else in the stadium.

After that game, at the postgame banquet, Bobby Grier received the largest ovation . . . from both teams. And after the ceremonial dinner, five of the Georgia Tech players told Grier, “you are going out to eat with us.”

This all should have been the beginning of something wonderful, but it turned out the politicians in Louisiana didn’t like what they had seen. At the next session of the legislature, the elected representatives quickly passed Act 579, the Louisiana Anti-Mixing Statute of 1956. Governor Earl K. Long signed the bill the day it arrived on his desk.

Washington Post columnist Shirley Povich wrote, “The Sugar Bowl will become nothing more than a sectional contest to settle some kind of Dixie championship.”

And he was right. Another Black player wouldn’t play in the Sugar Bowl until 1965 — not until the United States Supreme Court upheld a district court ruling that Act 579 was unconstitutional.



In 1956, the Ole Miss Rebel basketball team was told, by Coach Country Graham, to walk off the court and forfeit because Stanley Hill (sitting, center) played for the opposing team, Iona College.

But it wasn't just the Louisiana Anti-Mixing Statute of 1956 that kept us from playing Syracuse. Mississippi's politicians had also adopted a strict policy of segregation in collegiate sports.

On January 2, 1957, the Ole Miss basketball team traveled to Louisville, Kentucky, to compete in the All-American Holiday Basketball Tournament.

In the second round of the tournament, Ole Miss was scheduled to play Iona College, the champions of the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference. The two teams warmed up prior to tipoff, and the Ole Miss coach, Bonnie "Country" Graham, noticed the Iona Gaels had traveled with a Black player.

Coach Graham alerted tournament officials that Mississippi's governor, J.P. Coleman, had decreed that no Mississippi teams could compete in integrated athletic contests. The tournament officials, of course, said that Iona had every right to play whatever players the coach deemed best for the team. And Iona had every intention of starting Stanley Hill, a Black player from New Rochelle, New York, at guard.

When Iona returned from their pregame meeting in the locker room, they were informed by tournament officials that the Rebels were forfeiting the game.

Young Stanley Hill was confused. He grew up in integrated New York. "They can't play because I'm playing?" he asked his coach.

That night, several of the Ole Miss basketball players went to

find Hill's hotel. From the lobby they asked if they could go to his room. Mortified by the actions of Mississippi's politicians, the Ole Miss players apologized on behalf of the university. They sat in his hotel room, drinking beer and commiserating over an unjust stance that hurt not just Hill, but also the Ole Miss players.

I couldn't begin to understand what Stanley Hill must have felt that night, but I imagine the trauma of racial insult lived with him long after the evening of January 2, 1957. But what I did understand, at a personal level, was lost opportunity due to abhorrent hatred and racism among Mississippi politicians.

The 1959 Ole Miss Rebel baseball team was one of the best in school history. Our regular season record was 16-5; we had outscored our opponents 135-61.

We clinched the Western division of the SEC when we defeated Mississippi State 6-2 and secured a spot in the SEC championship series against Georgia Tech.

After the game, we were ecstatic at the prospect of going to the SEC Championship series and, we hoped, to move on to compete for the national championship. Coach Swayze did not share our exuberance. He called the team together in the locker room. I'd never seen him look so sullen.

"Boys," he said, "if we win the SEC championship series, that will be the end of our season. We won't play in the postseason tournament."

Coach Swayze didn't entertain any questions . . . and he didn't

offer an explanation. That was just that. And Coach Swayze left the locker room.

Georgia Tech knew it was going to represent the SEC in the postseason play — whether it won the SEC title or not. For us, it would be the last series we played in 1959, regardless of the outcome.

After losing the first game in Oxford by a score of 4-3, we traveled to Atlanta to play game two, and we hoped game three, on the Georgia Tech campus. In the shadow of those tall Atlanta buildings, I hit a first-inning home run. When I reached our dugout, my teammate Frank Halbert walked over to me.

I was putting on my shin guards preparing for the next inning, when he said, “You just have to show your ass, don’t you? You can’t just hit a home run. You have to hit a grand slam.”

That’s when I realized it was a four-run hit. When I stepped up to the plate, I’d not realized the bases were loaded. The pitch was about waist high, and the left-field fence was three hundred and forty feet away. I made an ordinary swing, hit the ball in the sweet spot of the bat, and watched it sail over the fence. It was quite a thrill.

We won game two of the series 8-5. The following day, on May 21, 1959, we won game three of the series 11-7.

It was the first time an Ole Miss baseball team had captured an SEC title.

We flew back to Oxford and were greeted at the airport by fifteen hundred fans.

Our elation over the conference championship was chilled when we discovered why our season was over. Dan Jordan and several other players on our team discovered it was completely based on Mississippi's policy of segregation. Mississippi's top politicians — who exerted control over the Institutions of Higher Learning in the state — prohibited any Mississippi sports team from playing against an integrated team.

Our championship team was denied the right to compete in the NCAA tournament, and possibly earn a trip to the College World Series, because we *might* have encountered a team with Black players. Georgia Tech would play in our place and represent the SEC.

Just as Coach Swayze had told us: *Our season was over.*

As it turned out, there never was *any* hope we could have played Syracuse in a post-season bowl. Between the Louisiana statutes and the policy of Governor J.P. Coleman, a 1960 match-up between the two schools was an impossibility.

And Mississippi's future didn't look any brighter. The governor-elect, Ross Barnett — a man who would be inaugurated in fewer than three weeks from this New Year's Day — had an even more strict segregationist policy.

Barnett's anti-integration stances would ultimately reverberate in ways none of us could foresee.