

## The man who integrated the SEC

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By Sam Heys

Take the 83 young black men who play basketball in the Southeastern Conference. Send them into a classroom and hand out a pop quiz. Ask them: "Who was Perry Wallace?" See if there's one correct answer.

Nobody wanted to talk much about Perry Wallace 20 basketball seasons ago. Or even acknowledge the taunts and the threats. He was the invisible basketball player, a black man in a white man's league. The folks who weren't yelling at him were looking straight through him.

So why should it be surprising that his courageous journey, walked with dignity, should be forgotten, even in a league in which 62 percent of the 134 players are now black?

Vanderbilt, his alma mater, has never called to say: "Come on down. Tell us of your time. What was it really like? Perhaps there is a message to be heard." No high school All-Americans have ever called for advice. Only a few nostalgic sportswriters.

That's OK. Wallace, 39, remains only remotely interested in basketball, which was never an end, only a means. "Don't mess with those sports unless it can help you get an education," his parents would repeatedly tell him when he was growing up on Nashville's, north side. "You want to go out there and get a chance to grow and get wise enough to be able to exist in this new world that will be more integrated."

He did that, compiling a B average at Vanderbilt with a double major of engineering mathematics and electrical engineering and then moving on to law school at Columbia University in New York. He has been a congressional lobbyist and a trial attorney for the U.S. Justice Department. He is a law professor in Baltimore now and a seemingly consummate man: poised, eloquent and multitalented enough to sing classical music in German, Italian and Spanish and hold a brown belt in karate.

It could have turned out differently, so great was the baggage that he had to carry through the South for four years, so naked the realities that had stared back at him. He had entered the Southern sanctuary of sport at 18 and left it integrated forever. And he had done it by himself.

In a day when the academic credentials of college athletes are questioned nationwide, there is indeed a message in the life and times of Perry Wallace.

Wallace was a high school All-American on the 1965-66 Pearl High School basketball team that didn't lose a game during a season in which it won the first integrated Tennessee state high school tournament, awing white spectators unaccustomed to its quick pace of play. He was also valedictorian of a class of 441.

He visited three Big 10 schools whose athletic programs were already integrated. "I saw these black athletes that sort of existed in a subculture unto themselves. A lot of them were illiterate and inarticulate," he said.

Wallace was impressed that Vanderbilt didn't even have a physical education major. The Commodores were interested, his academic ability could not be questioned, and Vanderbilt was under local pressure to recruit him.

"It was so unusual," Wallace said, "to have spent most of your life with people saying, 'You stay over on this side of town,' and then all of a sudden, somebody is saying, 'Come on over and

play basketball with us.' I was really pretty naive. I felt, 'Well, they say this is a good thing, and I would like to do a good thing by integrating the SEC.' "

Wallace and another black player, Godfrey Dillard of Detroit, were teammates on Vanderbilt's 1966-67 freshman team, which played before varsity games. The University of Mississippi, without explanation, canceled its home game against the Vanderbilt freshmen that year. Mississippi State University did not.

"Those people at Mississippi State were screaming and hollering and threatening us, and we sat there at halftime and held each other's hand just to develop the strength to go back out there and play well and not be destroyed by that flood of hatred," Wallace said.

### **Final citadel of segregation**

Dillard was injured and did not play as a sophomore. He was cut from the team the next year, partially, he believes, because he had become the outspoken president of the Afro-American Association on campus. Wallace was therefore left to integrate the SEC alone, venturing into one Deep South arena after another the next three years.

"Perry had a fortitude and strength that I obviously didn't have, because I couldn't take it anymore," said Dillard, now an attorney in Detroit. "Whenever I turn on a TV and see Alabama or Georgia playing and see the black representation on their teams, I think about what a terrific contribution Perry and other pioneers made. It's a contribution that has not been recognized."

Wallace doubts if today's SEC athlete has any comprehension of the '60s South. Sport, a cherished ground of honor on which only white males could tread, was the region's final citadel of segregation. Buses, theaters, restaurants, swimming pools and, in some places, even schools were integrated before college athletics.

Mississippi State was forbidden by state politicians from playing in the integrated NCAA tournament three times before finally sneaking out of state to play an integrated team in the '63 tournament. Baseball's proud Southern Association, the South's leading minor league, chose death before integration, and Bear Bryant declared on statewide TV that no blacks would play on his fine Alabama football team. Bryant would relent by 1970, after Perry Wallace had thrown open the door that Vanderbilt had cracked for him.

Kentucky actually made the first move to integrate the SEC, signing Greg Page and Nate Northington to football scholarships a few months before Vanderbilt signed Wallace and Dillard. During a practice before his first varsity season in 1967, Page was injured and paralyzed from his neck down. He died 38 days later. Northington, who had played in three games, left school.

Although SEC football was the South's Saturday religion, it was Wallace on the basketball court who took the leading role in the league's integration, his tours of the SEC played within spitting distance of opposing fans.

"Auburn and Mississippi State had those airplane hangar-type gyms then, and their fans got very close to you. They said the most hateful things I've ever heard in my life," he said. "The people at Ole Miss were more enthusiastic about the way they picked on you. They gave you standing ovations if you made a mistake."

### **Walking a very fine line**

Wallace was hit in the eye by a Rebel after grabbing a rebound in his first game at Ole Miss in 1968. He knew he could never hit back, or even push back. He also couldn't appear overly aggressive. "You had to walk a very fine line. If I wasn't aggressive enough, I was lazy," said

Wallace, whose performance slumped during 1968 when he had mononucleosis. The fans at Vanderbilt noticed. "You'd have people just screaming, 'Jump, boy, jump,'" he said.

Wallace felt he had to play with great control at all times, or else be accused of playing in an undisciplined style that many whites referred to as "nigger ball." He could have awed audiences with his dunking ability, but the NCAA took that opportunity away before his first varsity season, banning the dunk in reaction to the emerging dominance of black players.

Despite playing in a virtual straitjacket, Wallace, a 6-foot-4 forward, averaged 12 rebounds and 13 points per game during his varsity career. He believes his inconsistent performance as a sophomore and junior resulted from stress, including wondering whether he might be shot while running up the court.

He probably would have transferred to another school if it hadn't been for the commitment he had made. Knowing other blacks would follow him into the SEC, he wanted to leave a positive example. A misstep could slow integration or even postpone it until another SEC school took the big gamble. He became the ultimate organization man. When reporters interviewed him, he said all was well.

That's what everyone at Vanderbilt wanted to believe anyway. His coach, Roy Skinner, and other school officials would not acknowledge the harassment Wallace received from opponents' fans. Nor would his teammates.

"I just wanted somebody to say, 'Hey, you're not crazy. I heard those people out there calling you "nigger" and threatening to hang you, and I just want to let you know I'm with you,'" Wallace said. "They wouldn't even say anything to me when I made a stupid play." Still, they elected him captain.

An All-SEC selection as a senior, Wallace totaled 29 points and 27 rebounds in his final game. The next day, he told a Nashville newspaper reporter about his life on campus. He said that although his fellow students had elected him "Bachelor of Ugliness," the highest honor a male undergraduate could receive, they had been more interested in celebrating his presence than getting to know him.

Vanderbilt, a private school with an affluent student body, had only about two dozen black students when Wallace entered and perhaps three dozen when he graduated. "These people hadn't seen blacks function in any roles above ditch diggers and maids. So a lot of times, there was simple amazement that you could do things like make an A in physics," he said.

"There was a friend of mine who wanted to show me and some of his other black friends off to his parents. He brought them over and then he said to me, 'Say something. Just say something,' because he wanted to show his parents that I could speak grammatically correct English."

Wallace was branded an ingrate for speaking out in the paper. Neither blacks nor whites could understand why he had done it after everything had apparently gone so well.

"I didn't realize that the lives they (blacks) had on campus was as difficult as it was until Perry talked to the newspaper about the problems he had," said Skinner, his coach, who now owns an insurance company in Nashville.

"Any institution would like to be able to say, 'We took the risk and everything worked out fine,'" Wallace said. "I wanted to too, and that's why I never really said anything about it until it was over and I began to realize there would be other people coming along and that if they didn't find out what it was like, they could be traumatized by coming into that experience."

Wallace really didn't realize how traumatized he had been until he left Vanderbilt. "Quite honestly, I had to spend some time making sure it didn't have a bad effect on me. After I got

some time to think on it, it became quite clear to me that I had done something that was needed," he said.

Drafted by the Philadelphia 76ers, Wallace was released in preseason, played a few months in the Eastern Basketball League and retired from the game. He spent a year with the National Urban League and then entered law school.

After graduating from law school in 1975, he spent two years as a legislative analyst for then-mayor Walter Washington in Washington, D.C., lobbying in Congress and the City Council, and then three years at George Washington University, in teaching and administration. He decided to join the Justice Department in 1980 to give himself the best credentials he could possibly have.

### **Striving to be the best**

"I had been getting a bad assessment of how people viewed black professionals, and that was not as professionals at all. People thought that affirmative action had gotten you your job or gotten you in law school," he said. "It was important to me to have the best skills I could have, to be the best lawyer I could be and not be seen as the black who got a job because he was black. This was as important to me then as it was when I went to Vanderbilt."

One of the reasons Wallace went to Vanderbilt was to prove that blacks could be intelligent and productive. When he left the South, he discovered he didn't leave the stereotypes behind. "I got up to New York and found there were a lot of similarities between how people viewed blacks in the South and the North," he said.

Wallace left the Justice Department in 1985, preferring not to travel as much after marrying Karen Smyley, an associate dean and French professor at Howard University in Washington, in 1983. Still living in Washington, he specializes in corporate and securities law at the University of Baltimore and enjoys counseling students in career planning. They are unaware that he altered the history of Southern athletics.

He follows basketball "just a little bit" but has kept up well enough to know how quickly the racial makeup of SEC basketball teams changed after he graduated from Vanderbilt. There was only one other black varsity player in the league (Henry Harris of Auburn) during his final season. Four years later, 52 percent of all SEC basketball recruits were black, and eight years later, 83 percent were black. His example helped swing the door open wide.

Twenty years later, Wallace is quietly but fiercely proud of what he did. He is thankful for the risk Vanderbilt took. He is most thankful, however, for his education.