

GAME THREE: OCTOBER 11, 1947¹ UVA vs Harvard

He remembers the trouncing more than the risk

CONFEDERATE BATTLE flags waved in the clear autumn air. It was 1947 and Harvard's football squad had invaded the South for the first time in history. University of Virginia fans in Charlottesville wanted to let the Harvard players know where they were.

Rebel flags were in such demand that one Main Street shopkeeper sold out more than a week before the game. In the locker room before game time, Harvard coach Dick Harlow took Chester Pierce aside.

"You're going on the field with me," Harlow said, falling in protectively beside his 6-foot-4, 230-pound senior tackle.

As they walked, they heard cheers from perhaps 200 black spectators who lined up along a cyclone fence near the locker room exit. But after the team ventured onto the field, Harvard players recalled, catcalls of "damn yankee" and other insults showered down on them from

the white section of the hometeam's grandstands.

Just by stepping onto the playing field of Scott Stadium, Chester Pierce had made history.

Fifty years ago this month, on October 11, 1947, Pierce became the first black collegiate athlete to compete in any of the former Confederate states on a white college's home turf.

Despite the harsh words that came from the stands – "They were so anti-black it was frightful," one Harvard player recalled – the game came off with little fuss.

Virginia's newspapers downplayed Pierce's groundbreaking step, mentioning it in passing if they mentioned it at all. And on the field, both Harvard and Virginia players recall, there were no ugly incidents at all.

UVA's players treated Pierce just like they treated the rest of the Harvard athletes: They rolled over and around him on the way to a resounding Virginia victory.

"Maybe I should have stayed home," Pierce, a retired Harvard Medical School professor, joked a few years ago. "We got trounced – 47-0."

Members of that UVa team say they understood that the game was an unusual event, but they didn't realize at the time just how historic it was. They recall it as just another game – save for the fact that it signaled to the world that UVa could compete with any team in the nation.

Stuart Barbour, a burly tackle from Roanoke's Jefferson High who returned home after finishing UVa, says any excitement had to do with playing with Harvard, which in that era still retained an aura of athletic prestige.

As for Pierce's presence on the field, Barbour says, "I don't remember it being any big deal, one way or the other. I do remember talking to the janitor at my fraternity. He thought it was great."

But it was a momentous event, considering the history of football in the South.

Since early in the century, match-ups between lily-white Southern teams and integrated Northern teams had been tests of the South's Jim Crow system of segregation – and Northern colleges' willingness to stand by their professed commitment of racial equality.

In the 1920s, as more blacks began appearing on Northern

teams, an effective "gentlemen's agreement" had been forged: Northern colleges assented to hold black athletes out of all games with Southern schools.

Sometimes, schools went to strange lengths to honor this bargain. In 1934, Georgia Tech agreed to bench its star end Hoot Gibson if Michigan would bench one of its top players – who happened to be black – for a game in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Upset at not being able to use some of their better players, some Northern schools began to challenge the gentlemen's agreement. Charles H. Martin, a University of Texas at El Paso historian who is writing a book on the integration in college sports, says some Southern schools began making exceptions while playing in the North because they were worried about losing the exposure and money that came with intersectional contests.

The same year as the Georgia Tech-Michigan incident, the University of North Carolina played in New York against an integrated NYU team.

But the taboo against blacks playing against whites in the South remained firm. Boston College's black halfback, Lou Montgomery, was left at home for the 1940 Cotton Bowl contest against Clemson. He watched

the 1941 Sugar Bowl game against Tennessee from the press box.

Martin says segregationists worried that any retreat on the issue would eventually open the doors to complete integration. The logic being: "If you play against them in the North, why not play against them at home? If you can play against them at home, why not have one on your own team?"

But times were changing. In the summer of '47, the Brooklyn Dodgers' Jackie Robinson was battering down the color line in major league baseball.

Before the school year began, a few of the Harvard players wrote UVA to put the Cavaliers on notice that Harvard intended to bring Pierce to Charlottesville and play him.

Lockwood Frizzell, a Charlottesville native and UVA's captain, talked with some of his teammates and then wrote back with an answer: Bring him on.

Frizzell says that response wasn't so surprising when you consider that most of UVA's top players weren't Southerners. They hailed from places like California, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

"Only three of our 11 starters were from the South," Frizzell

recalls. "If we'd have had 50 percent of the team from Alabama or something like that, we might have had more trouble."

In addition, three-fifths of the team's players were World War II veterans. There were older and had been exposed to more of the world than the average collegian. Frizzell himself had served alongside Hispanics in the Pacific, a new experience for a young man from Virginia. And while blacks still served in segregated units, Frizzell and other white soldiers were aware that blacks had fought and died in the struggle for democracy abroad.

In September, three weeks before the game, the issue hit the press and controversy erupted. Harvard players recall that UVA athletic officials called and tried to persuade Harvard's athletic director of leave Pierce behind.

After the issue heated up publicly, Frizzell says, he brought it up at a team meeting and "as I recall, there were a couple of guys that murmured." But when they saw how everybody else felt, he says, they quieted down. "So it was a unanimous thing. I think most people just said: 'It was a football game. This man is black and what difference does it make?' "

When Harvard arrived the day before the game, Virginia officials had arranged to put the team up in a hotel – with the exception of Pierce.

Pierce, a native of Glen Cove, N.Y., recalled that UVa wanted to put him up in “separate-but-equal” accommodations – “a whole mansion” behind the hotel “so nobody could say I didn’t have a nice place to stay.”

Harvard coach Harlow crossed the hosts up and put his top 22 players, Pierce included, together in the mansion. “I thought that was a great act of courage,” Pierce recalled. Harlow also refused the hosts’ request that Pierce enter the team’s dining room through a back door.

But the next day, there were no problems out on the playing field.

“I don’t recall a hint of anything racial on the field at Virginia,” Pierce told Harvard Football News almost a half century later. “I remember nothing different in that game from any other I played in at Harvard.”

Both teams came in with identical 2-0 records, but Virginia clearly outclassed Harvard. The Cavaliers scored early and often.

The game films shows Pierce slamming into UVa opponents without incident, but looking a bit tentative on some plays, trailing the action. On many, he was untouched as Cavalier ball carriers blew through big holes in the Harvard line.

The next morning’s Roanoke Times didn’t give headlines to the history-making nature of the game. Its story did, however, note: “Chester Pierce, Harvard’s big Negro tackle, played outstanding ball for about 50 minutes of the game and received a big hand from the Virginia stands as he left the field in the fourth quarter.”

Pierce was elected a marshal by the Harvard Class of ’48 and became an internationally known psychiatrist. A mountain in Antarctica – Pierce Peak – was named after him in recognition of a decade’s worth of biomedical research he did around the South Pole.

A soft-spoken man, he had talked publicly about the UVa game only once, in a 1991 interview for Harvard Football News with George Sullivan, a water boy on the ’47 squad. Since then, he’s declined interviews on the subject. “The game happened a long time ago, and it’s not in my temperament to keep talking about it,” he told a columnist for the Daily Progress in Charlottesville.

The first integrated Cotton Bowl was held in Dallas less than two months after the Harvard-Virginia game. On New Year's Day 1948, Southern Methodist went head-to-head with a Penn State team that included two black players.

But other Southern colleges didn't necessarily run to imitate Virginia's example of racial tolerance, Martin says. The barriers came down slowly, sometimes under the force of law.

In 1963 Wake Forest and Maryland became the first Atlantic Coast Conference schools to integrate their football teams. Virginia waited eight more years before putting its first black scholarship players on the field – making it the last ACC school, along with South Carolina, to integrate its varsity.

It wasn't until after it began full-scale recruiting of black athletes that UVa returned to the national football prominence it had gained in the years after World War II.

More than half of its returning players this fall are African Americans.

¹Article written by Mike Hudson
Roanoke Times
October 5, 1997