

Breaking the football racial barrier

Marion Motley and Cleveland Browns teammate Bill Willis, along with Los Angeles Rams Kenny Washington and Woody Strode, helped break pro football's color line for good in 1946. A year later and with a good deal more media coverage, Jackie Robinson toppled baseball's unwritten mandate excluding black players from playing in the major leagues. Motley, a former Wolf Pack fullback and linebacker competing for Nevada from 1940 to 1942, was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1968 for his superior running, powerful blocking and aggressive tackling. In an April 1992 interview with Helen M. Blue for the University of Nevada Oral History Program, Motley talks about the difficult days of racial discrimination he faced while competing in road games with the Wolf Pack. Named as one of the seven best running backs on the NFL's 75th anniversary team in 1994, Motley died in 1999 at age 79.



Photo courtesy University of Nevada Special Collections

Marion Motley (41) was a pioneer for Nevada athletics in many ways. He lettered in football for the Wolf Pack from 1940 to 42, but gained his biggest claim to fame in 1968 with his induction to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. He is the only Nevada athlete so honored.

[Due to technical difficulties during the recorded interview, Motley's account opens with his description of the Idaho coaching staff, just before the kickoff, informing Wolf Pack head coach Jim Aiken and black first-year player Motley that he would not be allowed to compete in the 1940 Nevada-

Idaho football game, played in Moscow, Idaho. During the interview, Motley apparently confused 1940 Idaho coach Ted Bank with Francis Schmidt, who took over the Vandal

The University of Nevada Oral History Program produces and preserves primary-source oral histories that document the history and culture of Nevada and the Intermountain West. Visit <http://unr.edu/oral-history> for more information.

program in 1941. The edited version of the transcript below reflects that correction.]

Marion Motley: [Idaho Head Coach Ted Bank] called Jimmy Aiken over and said, "Well, Marion can't play the first half. He can't play." That's what he told him; I couldn't play because I was a freshman. Jim got very aggravated and called me over. I went over

there, and I was standing there talking to him. When he told Jim that I couldn't play, I had to grab Jim and pick him up around his waist and hold him off the ground and keep his feet up. He was going to punch this guy in the mouth; he was going to fight him. I said, "Oh, no need of that, Jim. You guys go ahead and play the game. I can sit on the bench."

Before the game started, though, the stands were roaring, "Get that nigger! Kill that nigger! Kill that alligator bait!" They were saying all that type of stuff. It didn't bother me because in those days you were used to it. When you were in Rome, you did like the Romans do.

But Jim and this guy and Bank were discussing it, and Jim told me, "Motley, go over there and tell all the football players, 'Come on, we're going home.'" He told Bank, "You let me bring my football team up here and wait right to the game time to tell me that." He said, "You go out there, Motley, and tell them," and I started out.

Then Bank said, "Wait a minute. Wait, wait,

wait." The stands were full, but they were supposed to beat us 30-0! Then he said, "Marion can't play the first half, but he can play the second half."

Jim thought about it and said, "Well, that sounds reasonable."

So I didn't play the first half, but the game for us started in the second half, because the first time I put my hand on the ball, I went to the goal line. When I dropped the ball down, it was a touchdown. I looked back, and the referee was beckoning me to come bring the ball back.

I ran about 50, 55 yards. Then about three or four plays later I went to about the 6-yard line, and they brought the ball back! In all, they only beat us 6-0, and if I had played the first half, they wouldn't have beat us that bad. They wouldn't have beat us! But that was one of the incidents I had during my college career with the University of Nevada.

Blue: *Were there any other instances like that?*

Motley: When I went to Brigham Young,

[in Provo] Utah [seven weeks before the Idaho game], the kids used to follow us around on the street when we were out walking before the game, and they were asking me, “Where’s your tail? You’re supposed to have a tail.”

I said, “If you don’t get away from me, I’ll put my foot in your” Then I told the guys, “Well, look, I’m going back to campus. I’m not going to have this kind of carrying on. I can avoid it by going back to my room.” So I went back to the hotel. Then we played the game, and they beat us 6-0 [the two teams actually tied 6-6]. Those guys were supposed to beat us 30 or 35-0. We played them right up to the hilt with 15 players, and they had about 60 or 70 players out on the football team.

Blue: *What about the Arkansas A&M [now Arkansas-Monticello] game? There was some flap about that, too. I don’t think there was anything where they were trying to prevent you from playing, but I heard somewhere that you really wiped them out. They were calling you names.*

Motley: Yes, we did beat Arkansas pretty bad. I don’t remember what the score was, but we did beat Arkansas pretty bad.

Blue: *Of any of the teams you played when you were here at UNR, were there ever other black players on other teams?*

Motley: San Jose had some. San Francisco had one or two. I think College of the Pacific had one or two, but the other colleges didn’t have any.

Blue: *Were there any other black students at the time here at UNR?*

Motley: No.

Blue: *You were the only one for that first year? [Motley said another black student, Ray Freeman, came for the academic year 1941-1942, but left after football season concluded.]*

Motley: Yes. I was treated very well. No one gave me any flak; no one called me names. I think that Jim being from the East meant he had coached a lot of black players. I think he sort of paved the way for me coming in. Everybody was nice.

Blue: *You left here, then, in 1942? You stayed and played that season, and then you left?*

Motley: Yes, I left then and came to Can-

ton, my hometown. I brought my family with me, and I was inducted into the service right here in Akron, Ohio.

Blue: *OK. Can you just go through again real briefly how you came to be with the Cleveland Browns?*

Motley: What happened is that when I was at Great Lakes [Naval Training Station in Illinois] I heard that a team was forming, because a couple guys on the team that later came out for the Browns had contracts. They were signing players during the war in 1945, and in 1946.

Anyway, I was playing football for Great Lakes. I was supposed to get out in July or August, and Paul Brown [who coached the Browns from 1946 to 1962] asked me to stay to help him out with the football team to get through the season. I stayed and played football for him, and then December the third, I was released from the service and went back home.

When I got back home, Jim Aiken tried to get in touch with me to get me to come back to school, which I was contemplating. Then Paul Brown called me one night about three weeks after the training camp had started in Bowling Green, Ohio, and he asked me if I would come up to try out. I said I’d love to come up and try out.

I went up the next day, and they had practice at three. I got there about one, and we had wind sprints, so we ran and did things of that sort. Then he told me I made the team! That was the beginning of playing for the Browns.

Blue: *Were you one of the first black players?*

Motley: In this era, yes. Bill Willis and I were the first two. We played all of 1946. As a matter of fact, we got another one in 1947. We got Horace Gillom, who played at University of Nevada [in 1946]. He was a punter and an end. In the middle of the season in 1947, he came out of the service, and we picked him up [to play for the Browns].

Blue: *Being the first black at UNR and then later in the NFL must have been a big deal [Arthur James of Elko is the earliest documented black football player to play for Nevada, lettering in 1921].*

Motley: Well, the deal wasn’t so big as

the type of treatment we got. Bill and I were there the first year. We were really battered from side to side with the referees not calling anything when they saw it, but we were just determined not to jump up and fight and get kicked out of the game, so we just stayed and took it. We punished them just as well as they punished us, though. “If you hit me, I’m going to hit you back. I might not get you this game, but I’ll get you the next game.”

Blue: *Did you feel that way when you were here at UNR?*

Motley: Well, our players didn’t have a problem; it was the other players. They called us names and everything, and I just wouldn’t even talk to them. If I caught one in my way, I ran over him. I ran smack over him. I tried to take him going in one end and coming out the other, so we got a lot of respect that way. They finally just went along with our program because we were going to be there.

In the pros we had guys doing the same thing. They called us all kinds of names and hit us when we turned our backs. The referee would be standing within looking distance and never call it, but when I got my chance to hit one of those guys, I hit him! I didn’t let up on him. I hit him right through the elbow and tried to bash his brains. Those were the times when you had to make the best of it. It was tough; it was rather rough.

Motley’s emergence at the University of Nevada inspired Aiken to recruit Horace Gillom and Bill Bass, two black players who played for the Wolf Pack in 1946. In 1947 and 1948 under head coach Joe Sheeketski, Alva Tabor and Sherman Howard suited up for Nevada. In their second season with the team it appeared they would be barred from playing in a game against the University of Tulsa, but Sheeketski would not relent. He started Howard at fullback and brought in Tabor to relieve All-American quarterback Stan Heath in the second half. Nevada won, 65-14, and Howard and Tabor were the first blacks to compete in college football in Oklahoma.

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE THAT YOU'RE MOST PROUD OF?

There are three facets of my life that make me proud. Professionally, I am proud to have started our winery with my husband, John, in 1973. It was a time when there were fewer than 30 wineries in the Napa Valley and the wine business had not yet earned "cottage" industry status.

To have played and to continue to play a major role in the development of Trefethen Family Vineyards, is very rewarding. Our Chardonnay was recognized as the "best in the world" in Paris in 1979 [at the Wine Olympics organized by the French food and wine magazine, *Gault Millau*], and again in 1980. This year, *Decanter* magazine has judged our Cabernet Sauvignon the best, red Bordeaux varietal in North America. Terrific accolades! It is also very fulfilling to go to a restaurant and see people enjoying their evening with a bottle of our wine. To think that in some small way I have contributed to the enjoyment of their day is a real turn-on.

Personally, I beam when I think of my crazy, splendid family. My wonderful husband, John, has entered his third or fourth childhood (I've lost track) and is now racing Porsche GT3 Cup cars. He's among the top racers in his division. I am proud of the way we have passed on our values to our grown children. They have integrity, compassion and respect for others and a passion for life. Our son, Loren, is a Stanford graduate, and has recently joined the winery with energy, enthusiasm and a sense of humor. Our daughter, Hailey, will graduate from Santa Clara University in 2008. Currently in Costa Rica working with primates, she is mature, thoughtful and compassionate beyond her years. They are splendid people who contribute to the lives of those surrounding them.



Photo Courtesy of Janet Trefethen

One of the first female chief executive officers for an American winery, Janet Trefethen, '71 (journalism), owns a world-class winery in California's Napa Valley. A former resident of the University's Manzanita Hall, Trefethen manages, with her husband, John, the only 19th-century, wooden, gravity-flow winery surviving in Napa County. Trefethen Vineyards, <http://www.trefethenfamilyvineyards.com/>, in the Oak Knoll district, has been in business since 1968. It produces 60,000 cases a year exclusively from the family's own vineyards.

Our dinner table is usually stimulated by good conversation and delicious wines.

Another feather in my cap was finishing in the top 5 nationally in 2005 on my cutting horse, Wholly Cats. What a thrill to succeed at cutting!

WHAT DO YOU MOST REGRET?

For someone like me who is passionate about life and wants to do so many things, there can be all sorts of regrets. I wish I could take art classes, play the piano, be multilingual and have a master of business administration degree... climb Mount Everest... and win the Tour de France. The list could go on and on.

But, specifically, I wish I had pursued a double major at Nevada. I regret not having a business degree in addition to one in journalism.

I wish I had said "yes" when John wanted to buy land in Sun Valley, Idaho, 30 years ago.

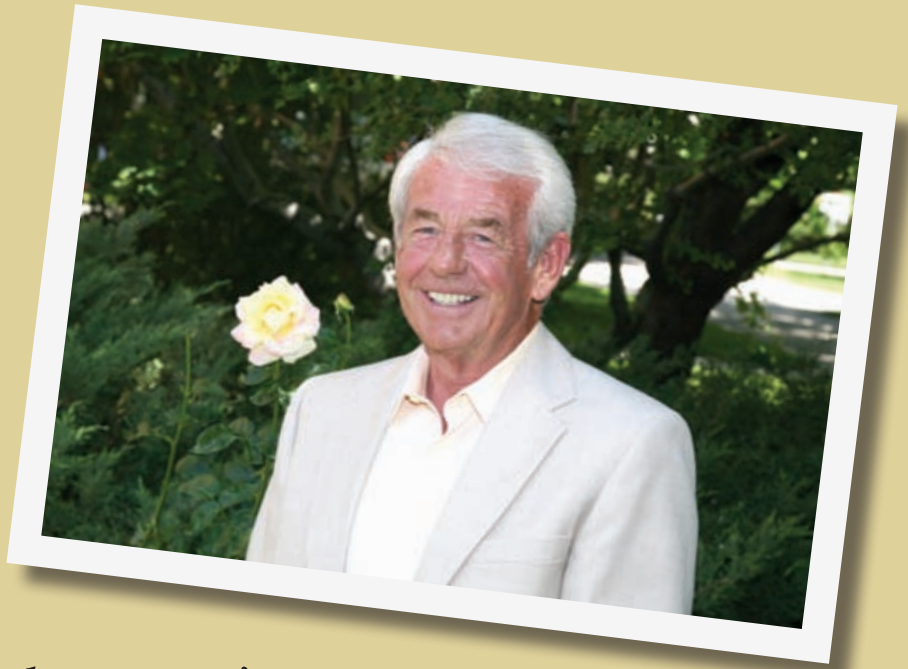
I regret that we have not found a way to share our sustainable farming practices with the Chinese farmers and others. But there is life left to live, and perhaps some of those regrets can become accomplishments.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOMEONE JUST STARTING OUT AFTER COLLEGE?

Don't be in a hurry. People live longer today and there are different things to be experienced and enjoyed at different times in our lives. Take the time to find what you love. And that is as true for your work as it is for your lovers. Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. The only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle. Follow your heart and persevere and remember to enjoy each stage of life.

WHAT I'VE DONE WITH MY LIFE asks an alum who has been out of school for a while to answer the three questions above. Email your submission to silverblue@unr.edu, or send it via regular mail to: *Nevada Silver & Blue*, University of Nevada, Reno, Mail Stop 0007, Reno, NV 89557-0007. Include a phone number. Don't exceed 650 words. Submissions may be posted at <http://www.unr.edu/nevadasilverandblue>.

'I hope to convey my strong beliefs in the power of hard work and education to students attending the University of Nevada, Reno...'



Edward C. Coppin '62 (physical sciences) has created a scholarship at Nevada to provide financial assistance to students from Pershing County through a gift annuity with the University of Nevada, Reno Foundation. An annuity provides a fixed-sum income to a donor during his or her lifetime, and ultimately funds an area of particular interest. In Ed's case, his annuity will later fund the endowed scholarship bearing his name. During his lifetime, Ed has opted to fund the scholarship on an annual basis with his annuity income, and the first Edward C. Coppin Scholarship was awarded this fall.

Raised in Lovelock, Ed received the Josephine Beam Educational Scholarship to attend Nevada. His dedication to learning and hard work was instilled at an early age. "My mother was a strong believer in education and my father valued a strong work ethic," says Ed. "After graduating from Nevada, I received a National Science Foundation grant to attend graduate school at Indiana University and have always deeply appreciated the financial support I received throughout college."

Higher education led to a teaching career. Ed taught at Pershing County High School for a short period, Traner Middle School in Reno, and then Incline Village High School until he retired in 1993. He enjoyed a parallel and distinguished 29-year military career in the Air Force and Nevada Air National Guard, eventually retiring with the rank of colonel. Following his retirement from teaching, Ed became involved in the banking business and was instrumental in the formation and success of several banks in Lake Tahoe and Reno.

After several very successful careers, Ed now says he feels a responsibility to share his good fortune. "I hope to convey my strong beliefs in the power of hard work and education to students attending the University of Nevada, Reno and hope that they benefit from financial support as I did."

Ed is part of an ever-growing group of alumni and friends whose contributions make an incredible difference for students at the University.

A charitable gift annuity is a contract between the Foundation and the donor, whereby the donor makes an initial gift of cash or securities to the Foundation, and the Foundation agrees to pay the donor a fixed-sum income for the rest of his or her lifetime. The establishment of a gift annuity provides valuable tax benefits for donors, but perhaps more valuable is the satisfaction donors gain by helping students and continuing the mission and good works of the University.

To learn more about gift annuities, contact Lisa Riley or Bob Eggleston in the Planned Giving Office at (775) 784-1352 or giving@unr.edu.



University of Nevada, Reno
Foundation

GLORY DAYS

are here again!

HOMECOMING

107

OCTOBER 1-6



- Oct. 4** Homecoming Gala: 6 pm Cocktails · 7 pm Dinner & Program · Reno-Sparks Convention Center
- Oct. 5** Blue Flu Free Community BBQ: 11:30 am to 1:30 pm · University of Nevada, Reno Quad
- Oct. 5** Old Guy's Night: 9 pm · Red's Little Waldorf Saloon
- Oct. 6** Nevada vs. Fresno State Football Pre-Game Party: 11 am Wolf Pack Alley (north of Mackay Stadium)
KICK OFF: 1:05 pm Mackay Stadium



HOME WEANS NEVADA

775.784.6620 : 888.NV.ALUMS
www.unr.edu/alumni

For a complete list of Homecoming events, turn to page 52 or go to www.unr.edu/alumni.

University of Nevada, Reno
NEVADA SILVER & BLUE
Reno, Nevada 89557-0053

Non Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Mendota, IL
Permit No. 166

CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED