

Pitt's Grier helped desegregate college football

Posted: Saturday, February 21, 2015 12:00 pm

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Bobby Grier isn't angry. He wasn't angry then and he's not angry now, years later, when he's had time to reflect. Instead, there's a lingering question, one he asked 60 years ago and might never have an answer to.

Why?

That's what he was wondering in December 1955 when Georgia Gov. Marvin Griffin insisted that Georgia Tech boycott the 1956 Sugar Bowl against Pitt unless Grier, a black player, didn't participate.

"The South stands at Armageddon," Griffin, a segregationist, said then to the Georgia State Board of Regents. "The battle is joined. We cannot make the slightest concession to the enemy in this dark and lamentable hour of struggle."

While Grier wrestled with his question -- Why are they doing this? Why is he doing this? -- a multitude of other reactions spread among Pitt's players. Mostly shock, some confusion. One opinion, though, was seemingly unanimous: If Grier couldn't go, the Panthers weren't going, either.

But not because of anything Grier said.

"I just told some of them, I said, 'Hey, if you have to get rid of me, no problem,'" Grier said. "I knew back then it was real hard to get to a bowl game and this might be the only chance. I didn't want to stop them."

Still, even though Grier didn't want his teammates to miss out, they refused to leave him behind.

“It was a shock,” said former Robert Morris coach Joe Walton, who played on that team.

“Growing up in Beaver Falls, I had a lot of black friends. I was just shocked that they even had something like that enforced. It was crazy. We were all shocked and disappointed.

“(Bobby) was a good teammate and a good player. We collectively were very strong about saying we didn’t want to go if he couldn’t go. I thought he handled it like a gentlemen.”

So, the Panthers stood their ground. And even though they lost the game 7-0, they won. Grier did play in that game, making the Sugar Bowl the final major bowl game to desegregate behind the Rose Bowl (1916), Cotton Bowl (1948) and Orange Bowl (1955).

Grier didn’t grasp the historical significance of his participation as it was happening. All he wanted to was play football. Time, though, provides perspective. It’s not hard now to see how he helped fuel change.

“Things back then were a lot different than they are now,” he said. “I tell people, you look back then, that Georgia Tech team had no blacks on it at all. You look at it now, it’s like 75 percent of the team.”

While Lane Demas, a history professor at Central Michigan who wrote “Integrating the Gridiron: Black Civil Rights and American College Football,” said in an email football was quickly integrating in the upper South and Midwest at the time -- Grier even participated in games in other Southern states -- the Deep South remained firmly pro-segregation. And the Sugar Bowl was the region’s biggest bowl game.

That’s why its integration played such a key role in tearing down the “gentlemen’s agreement,” which meant that Northern schools benched players for games in the South, while Southern schools agreed to play against integrated teams in the North.

But from 1956 on, Demas said, no matter where the game took place -- and no matter how much Southern schools insisted -- the agreement was no longer a given.

Grier's participation, though, had wider implications than just football. Demas called it a "turning point" for integration and one black national newspaper, the Baltimore Afro-American, called Griffin's demand to stop the game one of the most important events of the year, second only to the murder of Emmett Till.

"It also fueled the South's backlash to the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in Brown v. Board of Education," Demas said. "Within two years, some state leaders and white citizens' councils were demanding complete bans on interracial sporting events of any kind, and they referenced Grier's participation in New Orleans."

As Griffin's statement made headlines, Georgia citizens and Georgia Tech students joined Pitt in speaking out against him, which helped spread the controversy across the country. More than two thousand students rioted for several nights with anti-Griffin signs in hand. Police used tear gas to disperse them.

"However, it's too simple to paint all the students as racial integrationists standing up for Grier's civil rights," Demas said. "A few were, but many others were pro-segregationists who simply wanted their school to participate in a major football game and didn't see the threat."

In the end, though, Demas believes integrating cultural activities, like football and other sporting events, did indeed have broader ramifications, even if the students didn't realize it at the time. The effect came later, as integration spread to public schools and voting booths.

Despite all the controversy leading up to the game, Grier has nothing but fond memories of his time in New Orleans for the Sugar Bowl, save for a controversial penalty call against him in the first quarter that led to Georgia Tech's game-winning touchdown.

While Grier couldn't stay with the rest of the team, or attend many of the parties, he went to events at the local black colleges. More or less private parties, he called them. Walton joked that Grier probably had a more enjoyable time than any of his teammates.

"He ate well, probably ate better than we did," Walton said. "We had bed check every night, all kinds of rules that we had to follow. I think Bobby did pretty well."

He did pretty well in more ways than one.

As the story spread across the country, it garnered more attention than the boycott of public busses in Alabama by the likes of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr.. It wasn't, Demas said, just making the sports page. It was front-page news.

And when it came to public perception, Grier couldn't have handled himself better.

"Grier and his teammates said all the right things and responded to interview questions appropriately -- even in New Orleans, where he was followed by a throng of media," Demas said. "Meanwhile, Gov. Griffin's statements fell flat and the attempt to ban Georgia Tech was a public relations disaster for his office.

"Not only did many people around the country write letters to their newspaper praising Grier, but in the South many white segregationists complained that Griffin made them look stupid."

Before Pitt played in 1956, the last integrated team to receive an invitation to the Sugar Bowl was Rutgers in 1941 and the Scarlet Knights agreed to bench star player Lou Montgomery.

The pressure to sit black players was strong, so strong in fact that in 1934, when Georgia Tech played an away game at Michigan, the Wolverines' sat out their only black player. Pitt, though, refused to follow suit. Looking back now, Grier recalls seeing the mindset of the college football world starting to change. And it didn't start with politicians, it started with people even more powerful than that: Football coaches.

"I remember some of the great coaches back in that time, they were tired of it," Grier said. "The one coach from Alabama said he's tired of going up North and getting beat up North with all players from the South. All the black players were going up North and playing. He said they're the ones that are beating us."

The pushback to segregation in college football had to start with the coaches, the players, the students. And while sometimes they fought back, all too often they gave in. Pitt didn't.

In the end, that made all the difference for Grier, and helped change the tide of sports history.

“Pitt’s officials, students and white players from that year should all be celebrated along with Grier for how they supported him,” Demas said. “It really is a story the entire Pitt community should be proud of because other major universities in the North made decisions during that period that they regret to this day.”