



A VERY GREAT MAN WHOM VERY FEW PEOPLE HEARD OF

By Kerry Schmidt 04-08-2007

Yes, that certainly sounds like an oxymoron, even more so. It sounds like impossibility. But it is true.

Outside of the football world in general, and the Deep South in particular, few people had never really heard of Eddie Robinson. Coach Rob as he was called.

Robinson was arguably the best football coach of any color, and certainly the best combination of coach and mentor.

Coach Rob was head coach at Grambling College for 57 years, and compiled a record of 408-165 and 15.

He sent well over 200 players to the NFL in his career, a career wherein he had to live through and overcome hatred, racism and numerous unspeakable acts, yet he always held his head high and never complained.

In fact, throughout his life, he steadfastly preached to his players – “my extended family,” as he called them, that America was the greatest country in the world and they were blessed to be an American.

Many a black American probably felt differently during those times of racial hatred and segregation, but he was steadfast in his beliefs and his methods, thus he turned out some of the finest men in those 50 plus years.

Extremely humble, and frequently embarrassed at the accolades bestowed on him, he could sum up the “success” of his life in a simple sentence.

“I have had one job and one wife in my life, and that is what I am most proud of.”

The majority of you reading this column probably only know about racism from what you have read, or studied in schools. It is certainly not a segment of America that we are proud of, but it happened.

I am 62 years old, and I guess I can be called naïve, but I think it was my upbringing. My father’s career was spent in the diplomatic service, which meant that we moved roughly every two years. As such, I pretty much grew up in places like Turkey, Japan, Thailand and Europe.

I only mention this because my younger, defining years were spent in places where I was the minority. Now while I don’t remember experiencing any of the hatred that occurred during the segregationist times here, it was clear by my interactions that I was “not one of them.”

This was particularly true in Japan. I lived there shortly after the war, when we occupied the defeated country, and many pretty much distained my origin.

It was not until I moved back to the states for my high school years, in Virginia, when I got my first exposure to racism. And even then it was not much, since I lived just outside of Washington D.C., and most of the kids I went to school with were from military families or other Foreign Service work, so when there were no blacks at my high school, I simply never thought about it.

It wasn’t until I went to college in North Carolina in 1962 that I crashed rudely into the abyss that was the segregationist, racist life that was part of the times. And I have to



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admit, I was shocked. Yes, as I said, you could call me naïve, but I had just never been exposed to it.

I will always remember the first time I befriended a black student at the school, and soon after was very rudely confronted by other whites and told that I was definitely not to even speak to these “niggers,” let alone befriend them. I was aghast at this initial confrontation, and it was not until shortly thereafter that I was tagged a “nigger lover,” and was ostracized and even threatened.

I was shocked when I went to a burger joint and saw the signs that said “whites only.” Same with toilets and drinking fountains.

Thus, while I quickly became exposed to this horrible way of life, I had to endure it. But if I disliked it, I cannot even begin to imagine what it had to be like for the blacks that were the focus of the violence, hatred and even killings.

But it was under these times that Coach Eddie Robinson endured, and thrived. How, one can wonder, could a black man withstand and excel under such horrible circumstances? Well, Coach Rob not only survived, he excelled.

Doug Williams, one of his players who went on to become the first African-American to win and be named the MVP of a Super Bowl, said it best.

“He was a proud American, one who just happened to be black. He totally believed in America and all that it stood for.

He quietly went on with his life despite the unbelievable injustices that were forced on him.

“He told his players that America was the greatest thing going. He told them that despite the horrible injustices cast upon them, that they should never shortchange themselves by believing that there were goals they couldn’t reach because of the color of their skin.”

“Nobody in America, not even the president – there ain’t nobody out there that can out-American Eddie Robinson. He loved to wave that flag said Williams.”

His life and beliefs were simple. His way was one of total commitment. For example, he was married to his wife for 63 years. He loved the game of football and all the aspects of life that were in tangent with “this great American game.”

He was not just a football coach. He was, first and foremost, a life coach.

Robinson did not have his choice of players. Only black players. And he was told who he had to play and where he had to play. But he never complained. Yes, he did teach football, but first and foremost, he taught his players how to be good Americans and, in whatever endeavor they decided to move into after college, to do the absolute best they could do.

“He was truly a father figure, a spiritual advisor, a guidance counselor and mentor,” said Charlie Joiner, now an assistant coach with the Kansas City Chiefs, and one of the great players that Coach Rob sent to the NFL.

Everson Walls, who played corner back for Robinson and went on to star in the NFL added, “He gave us a way of life. He used to say the first one to cry was a sissy, that was his way of saying there are no excuses. He always wanted us to look for a way to succeed, not a reason to fail.

James Harris, another of Robinson’s players who also went to the NFL, said , “Coach



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Robinson was certainly a father figure to everyone, and as great a human being as I've ever met.

"He taught them to excel in life,' and that, he said, 'began with going to class and graduating. Every player he recruited, when he went into their living rooms, he promised their parents that, one, they would go to church every Sunday, and that they would get a college education."

Besides the 222 players he sent to the NFL, many others became doctors, lawyers, college presidents and corporate executives.

Perhaps the ultimate example of the caring and love he had for his players was with Tyronne Jones, now a WR with the New Orleans Voo-Doo. During his junior year at Grambling he told Coach Robinson he was going to leave college, because his younger brother, Jonathan, had been murdered in the Desire Housing projects. "Coach Rob got me in his car and he drove with me to New Orleans. That really inspired me. I mean, he did not even know my brother. That really showed how much love he had for me, and all of his players."

Whether it was due to his color or not, Robinson never won the prestigious Football Writers of America Award. But ironically, that award is now named after him.

You could go on forever about this wonderful man. But make no mistake about it. While most of those who have heard of him simply know of him as a "football coach at a black college," all the individuals whose lives he touched think of him as a great, caring man who just happened to be a football coach.

Perhaps Williams summed it up best. "I doubt that Coach Robinson really ever understood the huge impact he had on people.

"I think the reason for that was the way he was brought up. He was such a humble type of individual that he didn't bask in his success; he didn't wear it on his shoulders. I really don't think (he) got the just due he deserved, and he certainly didn't understand the impact he had on my life, Harris' life and the many other players who are what they are today because of him."

There have been many, many other successful football coaches, and probably most of them are more widely known. And yes, the reason is that he was black and worked under the worst of times for black Americans.

But he never, ever complained. He simply took what life and God gave him, made greatness out of the sadness of a bad era of American history, and he not only rose to the top of this life, he left his indelible impact of hundreds, if not thousands of young men who were lucky enough to come under his wings.

Had Robinson been white, he would have been one of the most well known coaches of all time. But he was not white. Regardless, he is still one of the greatest coaches of all time, but more importantly, one of the greatest human beings of all time.

I know I will never see another like him in my lifetime.