

Pass It On®...

Beyond the Game.

Willis Ward was benched on the Michigan Football squad for being Black. His teammate, Gerald Ford, stuck up for him and became his lifelong friend.

In 1934, Willis Ward was the only Black player on the University of Michigan football team. He was a very good student and an exceptional athlete. But when an opposing coach for Georgia Tech refused to play Michigan if they didn't bench Ward, the controversy engulfed the entire campus.

There were protests on both sides of the issue. Ward had broken through the race barrier. His teammates liked him. His newly minted coach liked him. But Civil War wounds in the South were still open, and the opposing coach remembered vividly the stories of his grandfather being killed on the Confederate side.

The situation was precarious. If Ward played, the Michigan athletic director threatened to boycott recruiting Black players. If Ward was benched, other teams could follow suit and not take the field against Michigan. Ward's loyalty was torn between his teammates and his Black community.

Ward's teammate Gerald R. Ford stood up for Ward, whom he viewed as no different than any of the other players, and he visited the coach to try and change his mind. It didn't work. The coach stood his ground. But the future President of the United States never forgot his friend or the lesson.

Conflicts raged around the country over racist attitudes. And then, the fractured nation, reeling from the Great Depression, entered World War II. The incident at Michigan had left Ward discouraged, but not bitter. He committed to a life of public service with a mission to fight for what is right. He served in the US Army during the war, earned a degree from the Detroit College of Law (now Michigan State University College of Law) and helped his former college athletic foe Jesse Owens secure a job at Ford Motor Company, where Ward worked.

As Ward rose up the ranks of the legal field to eventually become a judge, Gerald Ford was moving toward the vice presidency. When Ford entered the White House, he didn't forget his old

friend and the very personal fight he was waging. Ford leaned on Ward for advice. As a conservative, his more progressive stance on race could have cost him Republican support. But Ford pressed on, and Ward urged, "The President's civil rights program ... deserves the unstinting support of all conscientious voters."

Perhaps the progress helped Willis Ward recall a memory of the coach who benched him. Later that season, when Ward made a game-saving tackle, his coach embraced him. It was the first time he had ever hugged a Black player, Ward later recalled.

Ford never forgot about Ward. "I don't want future college students to suffer the cultural and social impoverishment that afflicted my generation ...," Ford wrote in 1999. "Do we really want to risk turning back the clock to an era when the Willis Wards were penalized for the color of their skin, their economic standing or national ancestry?"

Ward died in 1983 at age 71, but Michigan hasn't forgotten him. The state senate proclaimed October 20, 2012, as Willis Ward Day — exactly 78 years after he was benched for a Georgia Tech game — in recognition of his many accomplishments, steadfast character and significant contributions.

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