

## ***Journal of Issues in*** ***Intercollegiate Athletics***

### **Strong Inside: Perry Wallace and the Collision of Race and Sports in the South**

By Andrew Maraniss. Published 2014 by Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, Tennessee. (467 pages).

---

Reviewed by

**Adam Love, Ph.D.**

*Mississippi State University*

---

*Strong Inside* provides a biographical account of the life of Perry Wallace, the first African American basketball player in the Southeastern Conference (SEC). Wallace grew up in Nashville, TN, where he was born in 1948. As a senior in high school, he helped lead the Pearl High Tigers to a state basketball championship in 1966, which was the first fully desegregated state tournament in Tennessee's history. Wallace also excelled academically, graduating as class valedictorian. Given his basketball skills and academic prowess, Wallace was recruited by a number of universities throughout the nation. Despite giving serious consideration to several schools outside of the Southeast, he ultimately decided to remain close to home by attending Vanderbilt. In the book, the author paints a portrait of Wallace as a somewhat reluctant pioneer, who chose Vanderbilt, "not because of the fact that he would be a trailblazer, but in spite of it" (p. 102). However, Wallace was not the only black student-athlete to arrive at Vanderbilt in the fall of 1966. He was joined on the Commodores' freshman basketball team in the 1966-67 season by Godfrey Dillard, a man from Detroit for whom, unlike Wallace, the idea of breaking the SEC's "color barrier" was a primary motivation for heading south. After a year competing together on the freshman team (freshmen were ineligible to play on the varsity squad at that time), Dillard badly injured his knee in practice just days before the beginning of the 1967-68 season and, ultimately, ended up leaving the university. This left Wallace as the lone black player on the varsity team as he officially desegregated men's basketball in the SEC.

On campus at Vanderbilt, the book paints a portrait of daily life being defined largely by isolation for Wallace and other black students. Vanderbilt had admitted its first black undergraduate students in the fall of 1964, two years before Wallace's arrival. Although outright racial hostility did exist on campus, it was often the subtle forms of racism that had a more pernicious impact on the lives of black students. As one of Wallace's peers, Eileen Carpenter, described, "I guess I didn't understand the very subtle forms of racism where you just don't exist, where you're just kind of ignored. That's what was happening [at Vanderbilt]" (p. 132). While Wallace may be described as a somewhat reluctant pioneer, he ultimately played a key role in organizing black students on campus to speak up about their struggles. In the spring of

1967, he led a group of black students who met with the university chancellor, Alexander Heard, detailing their daily experiences with racism on campus. The author suggests that the voices of those such as Wallace played a role in helping Chancellor Heard realize that “paying no special attention to the school’s first waves of black students, but then subjecting them to racist professors, hostile classmates, and a segregated Greek system was...a form of cruel and unusual punishment” (p. 198).

In comparison to the often subtle forms of racism he experienced on the Vanderbilt campus, Wallace frequently had to endure virulent racial abuse when the Commodores played on the road, particularly in the Deep South. With Wallace and Dillard on the team, the University of Mississippi cancelled its two games against the Vanderbilt freshman team in 1966-67. This left a game against Mississippi State University in February 1967 as the team’s first trip to the Deep South. While Wallace and Dillard had endured racial abuse during previous away games, the book includes a chapter that recounts in vivid detail the new level of hatred they experienced during their first game in Mississippi. Describing the level of racial abuse during the game as worse than any he had previously experienced, Wallace recalled that, “it was the first time I’d ever dealt with this kind of stuff” (p. 163). One of the things most striking to Wallace was that none of his white coaches, teammates, or other staff members ever seemed to acknowledge the racial abuse taking place. As Wallace explained, “Nobody was saying anything about it, and that was always part of the insanity” (p. 164). Upon completing his playing career, Wallace remarked in an interview with the Vanderbilt student newspaper, “I am very disappointed that no one has been willing to mention until now the problems I’ve had at other schools in the South. Nobody, the newspapers or any other media, has openly attacked these people and places for allowing overt prejudice to be demonstrated” (p. 361).

While Wallace had spoken up about racism in somewhat private settings, such as the aforementioned meeting with the university chancellor, he generally refrained from speaking publicly about matters of race during his time at Vanderbilt. As his college basketball career neared its end, however, he began to think more about what he wanted his legacy to be. As a senior, Wallace earned a slew of honors, including being elected team captain; being named to the All-SEC second team; receiving the SEC Sportsmanship Award; being presented with Vanderbilt’s Jim Robins Award, which is given annually to the senior athlete “in whose life is evident devotion to learning, to honor, to participation in the manly sports and to service to youth and alma mater” (p. 346); receiving an award of appreciation by the university faculty; and being voted by his Vanderbilt classmates as recipient of the “Bachelor of Ugliness” award, which despite its odd name was considered the top honor a student at the university could receive. The Bachelor of Ugliness, which originated on campus in 1892, was bestowed to the male student who had “made the most significant contributions to the university” (p. 347). The book’s author describes the collection of honors as causing a great amount of angst for Wallace, because he did not want the final chapter of his time at Vanderbilt to be “white-washed with a happy ending that would forever hide the true nature of his experience” (p. 347). Looking back on the time when his senior year was nearing an end, Wallace remarked:

I began to feel that I needed to give people, give the world or whatever, some idea about how things really had been because there was so much that people didn’t know. People were about to wrap this thing up, this whole experience, into a nice, neat little package, just a quick civil rights success, like a pretty picture, and then put it away so they can forget about it and let it be like a trophy, as opposed to a work in progress where there is a tremendous amount of work that still remains. (p. 348)

Due to his desire to not have his Vanderbilt career wrapped up in a “neat little package,” Wallace decided to sit down for an in-depth interview with a writer at the *Tennessean* (a major Nashville newspaper) on the day following the final game of his senior season.

On the morning of March 9, 1970, just two days removed from his final game as a Commodore, a game in which Wallace received a resounding standing ovation from the 13,000-plus fans in Memorial Gymnasium, an article under the headline, “Lonely 4 Years for VU Star: ‘They Meant Well,’” appeared in the *Tennessean*. In the article, Wallace recounted his seemingly paradoxical story of experiencing such isolation on campus in the midst of apparent public adoration. As Wallace put it, “Over the years many people knew my name but they were not interested in knowing me” (p. 354). Speaking of dormitory hallmates, he said, “They respected my basketball ability but they still considered me a person who sweeps floors” (p. 354). In an interview with the Vanderbilt student newspaper a week later, Wallace further explained his desire to speak publicly about the racism he experienced during his career: “I don’t think it’s moral for me to have gone through this, for me to have seen the things I’ve seen, and for me to know the things I know about the people I’ve worked with and around at Vanderbilt, and to never say anything about it” (p. 360). Of course, Wallace knew that many in the Vanderbilt community would react negatively to his comments, accusing him of being ungrateful for the opportunity he had been given. Thus, with that, Wallace knew he had effectively written his ticket out of town.

Upon graduating from Vanderbilt in the spring of 1970, Wallace immediately headed to Philadelphia to join the 76ers rookie camp (he had been selected by the 76ers in the 5th round of the NBA draft). After spending a year with the minor league Delaware Bluebombers, followed by four months in basic training (he had previously enlisted in the National Guard), Wallace decided to end his competitive basketball career, taking a job with the Urban League in Washington, DC, while he prepared to apply for law school. Ultimately, he decided to attend Columbia law school, graduating in 1975 and initially accepting a job as a legislative aide in the Washington, DC mayor’s office. Since then, he has held positions at George Washington University, the U.S. Department of Justice, the University of Baltimore, and American University, where he has been a professor of law since 1991.

Over the years, Vanderbilt has slowly began to embrace Wallace, first inviting him back to campus in 1989 to speak at a Commodore basketball booster event, then in a jersey retirement ceremony in 2004, during which he was joined on the floor by Godfrey Dillard. Wallace was also an inductee to the first class of the Vanderbilt Athletic Hall of Fame in 2008. The author closes the book with an observation about how, despite all of his athletic accomplishments, visitors to Wallace’s office today will see very little evidence of his Vanderbilt career.

Overall, the book provides a tremendous amount of detail about an important, yet often unknown, story. I would classify the book as taking a primarily reconstructionist approach to history; it is written as a traditional narrative that uses interviews and historical materials as a means to provide seemingly objective knowledge about the past (Booth, 2005), and the author generally does little to integrate theory into his analysis. I make these comments not to impugn the worth of the book, but rather to inform potential readers of the nature of the author’s approach. The book is certainly informative and written in a style that is quite accessible to a general audience.

In assembling a narrative about Wallace’s life before, during, and after his time at Vanderbilt, the author, Andrew Maraniss, draws upon a range of archival documents and a

number of personal interviews with Wallace, his family, teammates, and others. Maraniss, himself an alumnus of Vanderbilt, first interviewed Wallace in 1989 for a black history class. After staying in intermittent contact with Wallace over the years, Maraniss was inspired by a family member to write *Strong Inside*, beginning what he describes as an eight-year process of research and writing. The result is a detailed portrait of Wallace that captures a great deal of nuance and complexity, making the book a compelling read for anyone interested in race and sport in the Civil Rights Era.

### Reference

Booth, D. (2005). *The field: Truth and fiction in sport history*. Routledge: New York.