



DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARDS

Wallace Triplett III '49

To Wally Triplett for his trailblazing career as an African American athlete in college and professional sports.

Wally Triplett credits his “Gold Star” mother for his precedent-setting life. A great-grandson of an escaped slave from Virginia’s Triplett Plantation, Triplett grew up in historic LaMott, just north of the Philadelphia city line, surrounded by the estates of some of America’s wealthiest families. The fifth of six boys, Triplett first distinguished himself at Cheltenham High School where he excelled at football. College football scholarship offers followed, including one from the then-segregated University of Miami. Inspired by meeting Paul Robeson, Triplett “very pointedly” declined Miami’s offer, choosing to play for Penn State. A Senatorial Scholarship and part-time dishwashing job helped pay the cost.

At Penn State in the 1940s, Triplett remembers few other African American students on campus. He switched from his higher level English class to be with the one black girl he spotted and talked

to after being on campus for a week. He also encountered and dealt with prejudices common at the time. When Triplett suspected his English professor was grading his assignments lower than comparable students, he sought help from his rooming house friend, a doctoral student in psychology. The professor was reported and censured by the University, Triplett recalls.

In football, there was one other African American—Dennie Hoggard—also playing for Coach Bob Higgins. Another black player, Dave Alston, had died unexpectedly after his freshman year. Penn State’s acceptance of African American players affected the 1946 season. Ironically, Penn State’s final regular-season game was scheduled at the University of Miami, which would not allow African American players in its stadium. Coach Higgins called a team meeting where a vote was taken. Triplett says he was “proudly surprised” by the decision: “Play all or none.” Miami cancelled the game, but the incident prompted other schools to oppose segregation policies.

A year later, Penn State’s unbeaten and untied football team faced a similar issue.

Michigan was going to the Rose Bowl and the other bowls were all located in the South. Southern Methodist University prevailed on the state of Texas to set aside its segregation rules to play Penn State in the Cotton Bowl. Because Dallas-area hotels were still rigidly segregated, Penn State’s team was forced to stay and practice at a nearby air base in order to stay together. In the game, Triplett caught the tying touchdown pass in Penn State’s 13-13 stalemate with SMU.

After earning his degree, Triplett had a pioneering career in the NFL as the first black player drafted to the Detroit Lions in 1949. His single game kick-off return yardage record stood for 44 years and remains the second highest in NFL history. His football career was interrupted when he was the first NFL player drafted during the Korean War. Following his military service, he was traded to the Chicago Cardinals. He retired from professional football in 1953 and returned to Detroit.

Triplett followed his NFL years with success in insurance sales and management, real estate sales, teaching, management and safety at Chrysler, and as Michigan’s first black pari-mutuel clerk for horse racing. He also invested in making an automobile

designed for transportation in Africa and owned and operated a liquor store for many years. Triplett and his wife of more than 50 years, Lenore, raised four children in Detroit and have eight grandchildren.

Cheltenham High School inducted Triplett into its Hall of Fame in 1999. He is a life member of the Penn State Alumni Association.

