



PRENTICE GAUTT: A SOONER'S STORY

By CAROL J. BURR

When the University's Centennial Commission gathered in the Union this spring, in attendance were a number of superstars—those whose undergraduate triumphs still linger in the minds of their admirers and whose post-graduate accomplishments shine with a little extra glitter. One of the most sought-after introductions was to the associate commissioner of the Big Eight Conference.

A handsome, soft-spoken man in his late 40s, he moved through the crowd of distinguished alumni with the tell-tale grace of the former athlete to whom the intervening years have been kind.

"I've always wanted to meet Prentice Gantt," one of his fellow Centennial Commissioners remarked. "But I'd pictured him as being so much bigger."

To those who watched his gridiron heroics on Owen Field in the 1950s and thereafter followed his professional career with the St. Louis Cardinals, Prentice Gantt was a very big man indeed.

Strangely, his name does not appear in Sooner record books, although he was a two-time selection as an All-Conference back, once as Academic All-America. Bigger, faster, more talented players have rewritten the lists many times since then. But no one who has ever worn OU Red has surpassed the dignity, integrity and strength of character which an 18-year-old from the ghetto of Oklahoma City brought to the greatest challenge of his life.

Prentice Gantt was the first black to play football at the University of Oklahoma.

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The color barrier at OU had been lowered for graduate students in 1948, eight years before an excited yet fearful Gantt stepped out of a car at the main entrance to the campus ready to register for classes. A small group of blacks had attended nonsegregated classes since 1950, but the last restrictions on undergraduate enrollment had been removed only the year before, on May 15, 1955. Very few black undergraduates lived on campus. In the dormitories, they roomed together, two to a house. In the athletic dorm, Gantt would room alone.

In his book, *Forty-Seven Straight*, Harold Keith recalls that Gantt was not the first black to try out for the football team. Two years earlier three Dunjee High School players had made the attempt while commuting from Oklahoma City. Without the financial means to continue, two quit school; the third was injured and eventually transferred to Central State. Gantt was better prepared for the struggle ahead.

At Oklahoma City Douglass High School, Gantt had been a superior student, member of the National Honor Society, president of the senior class, recipient of the Civitan Award for scholarship and activities and the DHS All-Around Boy Award. On the football field he was a legend.

During Gantt's junior and senior years, Douglass ran up a 31-game win streak against the major black high schools in a five-state area. Douglass also played Oklahoma City Capitol Hill High School in the first integrated

**Seldom can an
alumnus look back
on undergraduate
days knowing that
he changed the
course of history.**

game ever staged in Oklahoma, losing 13-6 with Gantt scoring his team's only touchdown. He was the first black to participate in the state all-star game, a last-minute substitution playing with special permission when both North fullbacks were injured. With only two days practice, Gantt dazzled the crowd, scoring three touchdowns, including a 90-yard kickoff return.

Equally important, Gantt had support, both moral and financial. A group of black doctors and pharmacists in Oklahoma City had funded a four-year scholarship for a scholar-athlete who could make the grade at OU. Gantt was their choice. He was also Sooner Coach Bud Wilkinson's choice. Very quietly, in October of Gantt's freshman year, Wilkinson returned the private money and put Gantt

on a regular athletic scholarship.

Gantt had other scholarship offers, several from out-of-state and even one from Oklahoma A&M College, but OU was the collegiate big time and playing on Owen Field was his dream. Looking back, Gantt realizes that with the talent OU was recruiting each year, Wilkinson didn't need the Douglass star and the controversy that accompanied his addition to the team. But in this quiet, confident coach, he found the quality which he later recognized as the key to mutual acceptance.

"When I walked into Bud's office," Gantt explains, "I saw a secure person who felt pretty good about who and what he was. He could say to me, 'You can be a part of my program. Regardless of what other people think or feel or do, I want you to be a part of my program.' So, because he was secure, whenever I was around him, I felt secure; I felt comfortable."

Others were not so willing to set aside their prejudices and accept Prentice Gantt as a person. Freshmen were not eligible for varsity competition in the '50s, and some members of the freshman team objected to playing with a black; one even left OU. After a freshman game in Tulsa, Gantt was refused service in the restaurant where the team was scheduled to eat. His teammates abruptly left and found an eating establishment that would also serve Gantt.

Such expressions of support became increasingly important as Gantt struggled to make the team as a sophomore. The strain of transferring from an all-black to an all-white environment was taking its toll. At one point Wilkinson cautioned Gantt that he might not make the traveling squad. When he did qualify, he encountered additional problems on the road.

President Emeritus George L. Cross recalls in *Presidents Can't Punt* that state law in Texas forbade housing Gantt with the team in the Worth Hotel in Fort Worth before the OU-Texas game. Since Oklahoma had no such law, OU officials were surprised when Oklahoma City's Skirvin Hotel responded to some patron complaints by refusing to let Gantt stay there with the team on the nights before home games. The team transferred to the Biltmore for the remainder of Gantt's eligibility.

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In this old wirephoto from the Associated Press, Sooner fullback Prentice Gautt turns upfield and heads for immortality as the first black ever to play for OU.

The out-of-town housing problems soon were resolved. Harold Keith reports that the athletic business manager, Ken Farris, cleared Gautt's acceptance with the hotels in advance. At first Gautt was booked into a single room, but teammate Jackie Sandefer put an end to that. Gautt and Sandefer were road trip roommates until the Texas halfback graduated the following year.

Although Wilkinson had never lost faith in Gautt's ability to be a major factor for the Sooners, many Sooner fans would have been pleased to see this highly touted black fullback fail. As a junior, Gautt quieted his critics on the opening day of the 1958 season against West Virginia.

Keith describes the events as "The Breakthrough of Prentice Gautt:"

"Six plays later fullback Prentice

Gautt broke down the middle and cut to the outside. One after another, three Mountaineer tacklers bounced off Gautt's hitting shoulder and his thick thighs like grasshoppers off a speeding automobile. Running 27 yards, Gautt scored standing. 'He had finally found himself and had the confidence he needed,' recalls halfback Brewster Hobby. 'I was so glad for him that I grabbed him by the legs and tried to chair him around the field.'

Gautt then proceeded to throw the block that sprang quarterback David Baker for the Sooners' first-ever two-point conversion, a scoring option which was new that season. The rest of Gautt's Sooner gridiron career is, as they say, history. In a day when the good ones played both ways, he was a formidable linebacker on defense as well as the best fullback in the Big

Eight for two years running.

Perhaps his most celebrated performance was in the 1959 Orange Bowl against Syracuse when he unleashed a 42-yard touchdown run on the second play of the game. He was the first black player to score in the Miami classic. George Cross quotes *Miami Herald* sportswriter Jack Bell's account:

"The best player on the field was Oklahoma's Prentice Gautt, the mighty Negro fullback. His touchdown run that put the Sooners on top was his most spectacular effort. But he reeled off several other long gains and his defense play was the mostes'. As a linebacker he was everywhere when needed."

In 1985 Gautt was inducted into the Orange Bowl Hall of Fame. His 15.7 yards per carry—six carries for 94 yards—still stands as the Orange Bowl record.

* * *

Even as he was earning the respect and admiration of his teammates and OU fans for his athletic prowess, Gautt was acutely aware that his acceptance off the gridiron was limited and far from universal. His social life, for instance, was practically nonexistent.

Although Gautt had grown up in an all-black environment, largely sheltered from direct racial confrontation until he came to OU, he knew the rules: "good" Negroes got by, kept their "noses clean," never confronted anyone who could "do something" to them, let the slights and slurs run off their backs. In short, young blacks of the '50s were taught to keep their places.

Gautt remembers playing with a white boy whose father ran a grocery store in his family's black neighborhood. "We would play around the grocery store every Saturday," he says. "There seemed to be a time when white and black were allowed to grow up together, then there would be a parting of the ways around 11 or 12 years of age. And that was what happened. After we got to the 6th or 7th grade, I didn't see him anymore."

Rule No. 1 for the young black man was never to talk to a white female. On a college campus just emerging from segregation, populated almost entirely by young people, such a prohibition was awkward if not impossible. Gautt still recalls his discomfort during his sophomore year at having

to avoid being seen with a female classmate in a late afternoon art course.

"When class was over, she would go back to the Quad (women's dormitories), and I'd go the same way to practice," he says.

Any other two students naturally would have walked together. One day they did, and Gautt was painfully aware of other people watching them, including his teammates. Thereafter he employed any delaying tactic he could devise to keep from leaving class at the same time.

"I can remember slowly putting up my brushes one at a time," he shakes his head, "washing them and washing them and thinking 'Holy cow, we have to do all of this . . .'"

Gautt's social life—when there was time for one—required him to climb into his old car and go back to his Oklahoma City neighborhood. The desire to belong and to have something to belong to was probably one reason for his decision to get married during his senior year. The marriage did not last.

Although most of his associates thought the young black student-athlete handled his difficult situation with a good deal of class, Gautt himself is more self-critical. He recognizes that his personality, then and now, is not confrontational, not defiant. He wanted to be liked and to that end suppressed any trait he considered unlikely. He felt like only half a person.

"To this day," he admits, "whenever I talk about those experiences, I think that I really should have said something when this thing happened or that thing happened. But what would it have served? The only thing it would have served would be for me to vent my frustration, and more than likely I would have lost the opportunity to play at the University."

But Gautt is quick to emphasize that there are more positives than negatives in his memories of his collegiate days. He prefers to think of the professors, coaches and teammates who accepted and supported him and to forget the rest.

* * *

Football enabled Gautt to obtain what he wanted most—an education. He had been taught from childhood that classroom achievement was the only way to success.

"The role models for minority chil-

dren in those days were teachers," he insists. "They expected you to get your work, and it was reinforced; my mom expected me to do those things. I really didn't know any other way. If I were ever going to do something with my life, I first had to learn to read, to write, to compute. I wasn't the exception; everybody did it.

"They gave homework, and we were expected to have it ready. We read out loud, so if you didn't know how to read, you were embarrassed. You went to the board and did your math in front of God and everybody. It wasn't even a matter of saying, 'I have to get this work because I'm going to college.' I didn't even think about going to college; I knew that it cost money to go."

Just as the youthful Gautt had not counted on going to college, the college athlete did not anticipate a professional football career. In 1960 when Gautt received his bachelor's degree in education, there were only 12 NFL teams. He was drafted by the Cleveland Browns and after a year was traded to the St. Louis Cardinals where he played for seven more.

"I was really surprised to be drafted," he says. "I wanted to see if I could do it. I thought maybe one or two years and that would be it."

Gautt was drafted long before professional salaries made millionaires of untested college athletes, but even then he was dazzled. "It was the first time I had ever seen that amount of money," he confesses. "That's what gets you. You get hooked into having some of the niceties, and you don't think about what happens when you get injured. When you are young and crazy, you do crazy things."

After eight years, however, Gautt faced facts. "I was not that good. I happened to be in the right place at the right time; circumstances just fell together to keep me playing for eight years. But I realized, hey, this isn't going to last."

If Dan Devine, the head coach at the University of Missouri, had not offered Gautt an assistantship with the opportunity to continue his schooling, he would have looked for a job in Oklahoma and returned to OU's classrooms. As it was, he became one of only two black assistant coaches in the Big Eight.

Nevertheless, he never felt like a

token black on Devine's staff. He went to Missouri in 1968, a time in which black athletes at major white institutions were drawing up lists of grievances and demanding changes. Gautt, the black coach, was never asked to intercede with black players to put out the fires of discontent.

"Dan Devine's staff made a concerted effort to listen to the players," Gautt says, "and Devine responded very positively. He took care of it."

Although he remained on the athletic staff for six years, four coaching and two counseling while completing his Ph.D., Gautt decided early that coaching was not for him. "There was an aloofness between coaches and players at that time, not the rapport that I see, say, a Barry Switzer having with his players now. The head coach was farther removed. Since then coaching has changed immensely. Perhaps I would relate a little bit differently to coaching today."

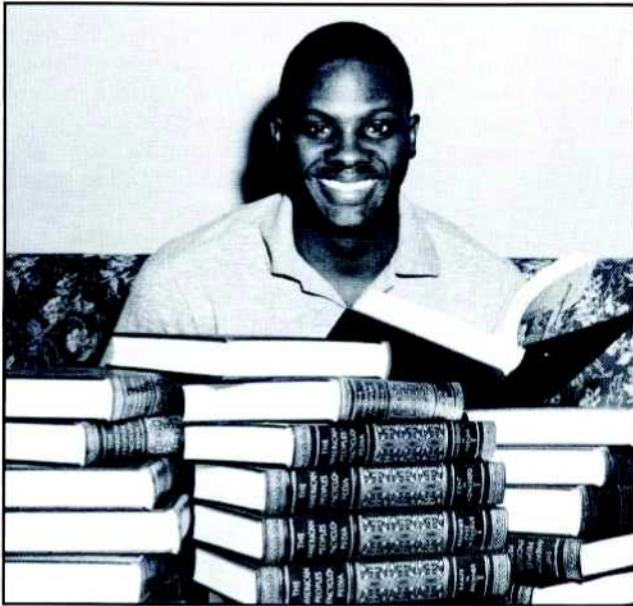
Gautt chose counseling psychology, earning two degrees at Missouri. In 1975 he was appointed an assistant professor in the department of education, serving as coordinator, trainer and supervisor for a variety of counseling programs, primarily involving minorities and athletes.

"I saw myself in a lot of them," he admits. "I knew the importance of having somebody to talk to, somebody to say, 'Yeah, I care.'"

On a personal level, Gautt found someone to share his life at Missouri. His marriage to Dr. Sandra Whayne-Gautt, a member of MU's special education faculty since 1971, brought together two very busy—and often divergent—careers. Somehow they have managed to make it work.

In 1979, Gautt was offered the assistant commissioner's job for the Big Eight Conference in Kansas City. He decided to go for a year to get the experience he needed in athletic administration but left the door open for a return to his Missouri job. He took an apartment in Kansas City while Sandy kept the couple's house in Columbia. At the end of the year, the Gautts made the two-home arrangement permanent.

"We get together on weekends," he says of the past eight years, "and she tries to meet me when I'm traveling. But lately she has been consulting and



Prentice Gaunt with a stack of books was a popular sports publicity shot. As a senior he made Academic All-America.

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New York Giant defenders converge on Gaunt in this 1967 AP photo taken near the end of his professional career.

doing quite a bit of traveling, too.”

Gaunt takes obvious pride in his attractive wife’s professional accomplishments as a specialist in early childhood development, behavior disorders and the like. He seems equally pleased with their life together.

“She’s quite a character,” he says fondly. “She’s the kind of person that you can be kind of crazy around because she can be that way, too. She’s a good person; I enjoy her.”

* * *

Now associate commissioner of the conference, Gaunt’s responsibilities lie in the currently hot areas of education, eligibility and enforcement. Gaunt acknowledges that intercollegiate athletics have been tarnished by public disclosures of lax academic standards and widespread recruiting violations, and he welcomes recent NCAA moves to regain control of the “runaway train.”

Gaunt has taken a special interest in NCAA bylaw 5-1-(j), which regulates the academic eligibility requirements for students entering an NCAA institution and sets subsequent standards for satisfactory progress toward a degree. Basically, if a high school recruit wishes to participate as a freshman at an NCAA division I or II school, he or she must have completed a “core” curriculum of college preparatory courses and have scored 15 on the ACT or 700 on the SAT.

“This thing was passed in 1983, but

not effective until August 1, 1986, to give people an opportunity to get on the path, to chart their course through the core curriculum,” Gaunt explains. “An NCAA flier went to some 22,000 high schools across the nation, plus our conference schools sent them out to local high schools in their areas.”

Nevertheless, last spring the Big Eight office was inundated with calls protesting the ineligibility of various athletes. “I didn’t realize that there were so many high schools that were not what you’d call college prep schools,” Gaunt says, “but there were quite a few of them.”

Gaunt is emphatic in his support of the core curriculum but admits that there are some legitimate concerns about standardized tests.

“Some of the traditionally black institutions are saying that the standardized test unfairly impacts the black student,” he says. “I can remember taking a standardized test—not to get into the University, just a placement exam—but I froze. You want to do your best but you feel so inadequate. I can see pretty sharp kids freezing, kids who lack self-confidence, whether they be black or white.

“I’m not sure that the standardized test is going to say that you’re going to graduate from college, but I will say this: the core curriculum is highly correlated with one’s ability to score higher on those tests. You have to have

that rich academic background.”

Gaunt terms the Big Eight’s enforcement policies a “preventive” program. He visits each member institution at least twice a year, meets with the coaches of all sports, discussing the rules and regulations, answering any questions the athletic personnel may have. With the tightening of NCAA restrictions on recruiting, particularly the participation of boosters and outside athletic interests, such information is the schools’ best protection.

“The message is loud and clear,” Gaunt stresses. “The student athlete is going to have to take the responsibility for the illegal things they get involved with. And we’re saying, ‘Coach, you’re going to stand responsible. We want to find out how you are spending your recruiting budget. We want an audit of all monies advanced through the athletic department.’ The NCAA has put some tough penalties out there. We think that if they have knowledge of the rules, they won’t violate them.”

The “preventive” program has worked amazingly well. Gaunt contends that the Big Eight polices itself with 75 per cent of all allegations coming from within the conference. Each allegation is written up by Gaunt and sent to the faculty representative of the institution involved, along with questions the conference office wants answered. If the response is not com-

plete, the school will get another list of questions from the associate commissioner to make certain there are no cracks in the information. Gautt also has the right to talk to any athlete at any school mentioned in the allegation.

If anything significant is found, the institution has the option of having the Big Eight continue the investigation or of asking the conference to defer to the NCAA. Occasionally the two groups co-investigate. Whatever the decision, the conference must eventually notify the NCAA.

When Gautt talks about eligibility, recruiting, enforcement and penalties, his concern for the welfare of the student-athlete is obvious. He can only shake his head at the effect of high-pressure recruiting on an 18-year-old's equilibrium.

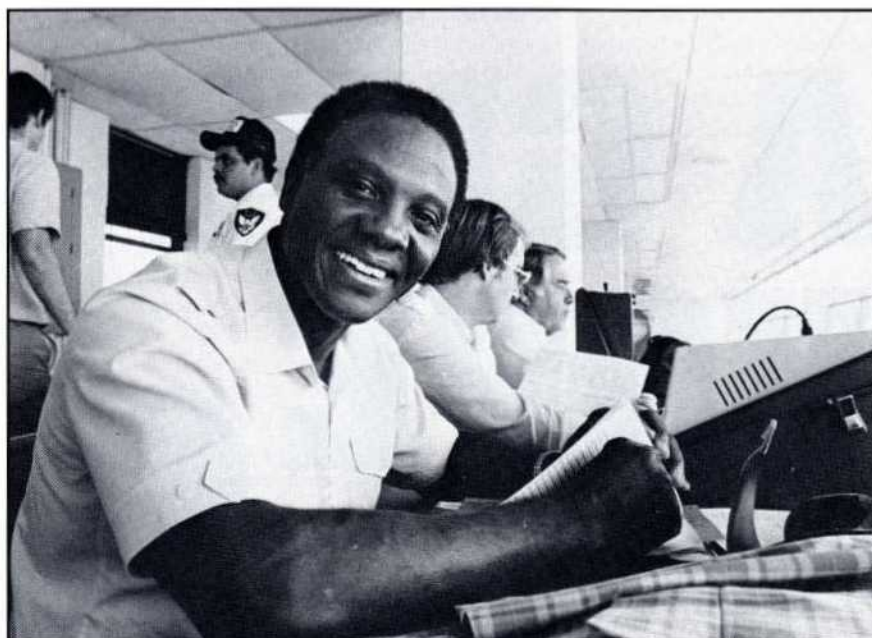
How can the high school superstar keep his head on straight? "Some of them don't," he says simply. "And then they get to the institution and find kids there who are just as good as they are if not better. Then there has to be somebody around to help pick up the pieces. Otherwise the kid may finally decide, 'I'm not as good as I thought I was,' and somehow just give up—and that's really sad."

Gautt leaves the impression that he might be thinking of what might have been 30 years ago if a black kid from Oklahoma City had succumbed to his own feelings of inadequacy.

Not surprisingly, Gautt periodically is asked to return to the University of Oklahoma in the role of alumnus, to share his insight and experiences with young people to whom the '50s are days out of time. Most recently he spoke at OU's Black Students Awards Banquet.

"I hope I can still relate," he says. "I talk about challenge—not just accepting challenge but your motivation in accepting it, how you accept it and what you do with it. Regardless of how far we've come, we still have a long way to go in terms of people relating to people."


"We're not talking about just black to white and white to black; we're talking about people relating, families, husbands and wives, kids and other kids. Underlying that is a message of love—what it really means to care for somebody."



Big Eight Associate Commissioner Gautt returns to the scene of his triumph to view last season's OU-UCLA game from OU's Memorial Stadium press box.



Serving as a commissioner of another kind, Gautt confers with Alumni Director Paul Massad at a planning session of the University Centennial Commission.

"Of course I give them some of the historical perspective from my life coming to the University of Oklahoma," he continues, "some of the things I experienced, some of the past. I hope that we can take the past and use it as just that—the past. There is nothing we can do about it except to say, 'Hey, that's heritage.' We need to think about the future and enjoy today, because you can only make the best of this day—just do your best." 

Editor's note: As this edition of Sooner Magazine goes to press, announcement has been made of the 1987 recipients of the Distinguished Service Citations, the University of Oklahoma's highest honor. The five honorees are Dr. Lowell Dunham, Mary Eddy Jones, Harold Keith, Alexander H. Massad — and Dr. Prentice Gautt.