



# prologue.

## Prentice Gautt just wanted to play football and get an education—then fate took him by the hand.

The late Dr. Prentice Gautt may not have been the greatest football player ever at the University of Oklahoma, although he was pretty darned good. Others before and since may have been stronger or faster or more talented; they would chalk up the school records and claim the Heismans. Still, in the history of the University, no one ever donned the crimson and cream who made a greater difference.

He was just a teenager from Oklahoma City's segregated Douglass High School in 1956 when a group of black physicians and dentists convinced him that he could be the first of his race to play for the Sooners of Coach Bud Wilkinson. He was the young man they had been seeking; he had all the credentials: the first black to play in the All-State football game and its MVP, senior class president, member of the National Honor Society. Gautt was intelligent, good-looking, polite and well-mannered—but he also had the quiet confidence and strength of character that would be required to survive in a lonely and often hostile environment.

Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher had broken the color barrier for graduate students at OU in 1948, and a few black students had attended non-segregated classes since 1950, but the last race restrictions for undergraduate enrollment had not been removed until 1955. Now Wilkinson was about to put a black player on Owen Field. He was prepared to weather the condemnation that would come his way, but Gautt's Oklahoma City backers sought to deflect some criticism of the coach by financing the young man's education themselves. A few months later, Wilkinson returned their money and put his new halfback on scholarship.

There were those fans who wanted Gautt to fail—even some on the squad who had never had a black teammate and did not want one. But failure was never an option, and the team eventually realized that Prentice Gautt was the real deal and united around him. When a Tulsa restaurant refused him service, the team found another eating establishment. When hotels refused to house Gautt with the team, OU officials found other accommodations.

In Norman, Gautt had a single room. On the road, two rivals for the same position traditionally shared a room. Junior halfback Jakie Sandefer insisted that his sophomore backup should have the same arrangement as the rest of the team. Sandefer and Gautt were road roommates for the next two years, even after Gautt was moved to fullback.

Sandefer had the last word when Gautt asked him to be his presenter at his induction into the Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame. "Was Prentice different?" Sandefer recalls saying. "Yeah, Prentice was different. He had more class than the rest of us, and he was a better student."

After a shaky sophomore year (freshmen were varsity ineligible in the '50s), Gautt broke through in 1958, starting at fullback and linebacker, leading the team to championships in the Big Eight and the Orange Bowl, where he was the MVP. His senior season was more of the same. He was all-conference twice and an academic All-American; his most vocal critics had to join the chorus of fans cheering Gautt's heroic performances.

Off the field was another matter. There were nasty comments he just had to ignore. He had no social life; on campus he walked on eggshells to avoid confrontations. Just talking to a white, female classmate, much less walking to and from

class with one, was risky behavior. His natural desire to be liked caused him to suppress any trait that he considered unlikable. "I felt like half a person," he recalled in a 1987 *Sooner Magazine* article. Still Gautt claimed more positives than negatives in his OU career, preferring to remember the supportive faculty, coaches and teammates who contributed to his success.

After receiving his 1960 bachelor's degree in education, he played eight years in the NFL. Dan Devine then offered him an assistant coaching job at Missouri, where he completed a master's and a doctorate in counseling psychology and later became an assistant professor of education. The Big Eight Conference came calling in 1979; he was first assistant, then associate commissioner, working in the areas of education, eligibility and enforcement. As an associate commissioner of the Big 12, he concentrated on helping athletes make the transition when their college playing days were over.

Official visits, reunions and speaking engagements frequently brought Gautt back to OU, but nothing compared to his 1999 on-field, halftime appearance, marking the opening of the new Prentice Gautt Academic Center for OU's student-athletes. The standing ovation went on and on with tears in the eyes and lumps in the throats even among those who knew little of the road that had brought the honoree to this place.

With Gautt's death at 67 on March 17, 2005, after a brief illness, the principals in the University's historic desegregation struggle are gone. But their legacy remains in the minority students who enter OU today on a playing field made much more level by their predecessors' courage and sacrifice. —CJB