William Henry Lewis

Brief life of a football pioneer: 1868-1949

by EVAN J. ALBRIGHT

During a football game in 1904, William Clarence Matthews, the sole African-American player on the Harvard squad, sat on the bench while the team was losing. “Put in Matthews,” suggested William Henry Lewis, LL.B. 1895, a member of the coaching staff from 1895 to 1906. “He’s too light,” said the head coach. “Too light—and too dark,” retorted Lewis.

Only Lewis could get away with a comment like that. He, if anyone, knew about prejudice on and off the field. He was probably the only African-American coach of a predominantly white college in the Ivy League, if not the country. He never let race get in the way if he could help it. Inside the locker room and on the gridiron, at least, he showed no deference and treated all men as equals.

Born in Virginia, Lewis had entered the state’s first college for blacks, the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (now Virginia State University), at 15 and come under the influence of its president, John Mercer Langston, who helped him transfer to Amherst College. Students there were required to take up a physical activity, and Lewis chose football. He spent five seasons in uniform, three at Amherst—including two as captain—and two at Harvard while attending law school (which eligibility rules then allowed).

For most of his career, he played center. Although he weighed only 175 pounds, considered light for a lineman, his intelligence, quickness, and maturity gave him a substantial advantage; many considered him the best to have played the position up to that time. The noted sportswriter Caspar Whitney named him to the All American Team in 1892 and 1893, the first African American so honored. In his final Harvard game, with their captain sidelined by injuries from the Yale game the week before, Lewis’s teammates voted him acting captain. He led the Crimson to victory against the University of Pennsylvania.

After finishing law school, Lewis switched to coaching. His specialties were defense and the front line. During afternoon practices, he frequently put on his old uniform to demonstrate technique and mix it up with the players. Throughout his 12 seasons as a coach, Harvard was one of the nation’s three or four dominant teams, posting a record of 114 wins, 15 losses, and five ties. He wrote one of the first books on the game, A Primer of College Football (1896), which was serialized by Harper’s Weekly in its magazine for younger readers, and in 1904, Walter Camp, the de facto father of American football, asked him to contribute a chapter on defense to his annual bible of the sport, Spalding’s How to Play Football.

The pinnacle of Lewis’s coaching career came in 1898. The team to beat was the University of Pennsylvania, whose “guard’s back” formation, a Boston paper reported, shredded defenses like a “flying meat ax.” Lewis spent more than a year devising a counter play that, he claimed, had been adapted from a Napoleonic military tactic. Harvard not only crushed Penn 10-0, but also blanked Yale 17-0 to finish the season undefeated. At the celebratory banquet, the loudest cheers went not to the featured speaker, Theodore Roosevelt ’80, the newly elected governor of New York, nor to team captain Benjamin Diblee. “When W.H. Lewis entered, somewhat late, the ovation he received was deafening,” wrote the Philadelphia Inquirer. Cornell subsequently invited Lewis to run its team. (When he declined, preferring to remain in Boston, the job went to one of his players, future Harvard coach Percy Haughton ’99.)

Harvard’s athletic association appreciated Lewis’s efforts, even though he never held the top coaching job. Coaches always sprang from the alumni ranks in those years, and had been unpaid, but beginning in 1901, Lewis became Harvard’s first compensated coach, earning $500 a year (bumped up to $1,000 in 1903). This reflected less his value to the team—although that was high—and more the fact that, unlike other Harvard graduate coaches, he needed the money. He had no resources of his own and, during his coaching career, was also launching a law practice, marrying and starting a family, supporting his orphaned younger siblings, financing a foray into local politics, and entering the minefield of race relations in Massachusetts and nationwide.

Football, meanwhile, had
brought Lewis and Theodore Roosevelt together. Lewis spent a night at Roosevelt’s home at Sagamore Hill in August 1900, soon after the Republicans nominated TR for vice president, and had several long talks with the future president about the condition of African Americans in the nation and, no doubt, Harvard football’s chances. In 1903 Roosevelt appointed him assistant U.S. attorney for Boston, a first for African Americans. Yet Lewis’s coaching career lasted until Roosevelt promoted him in 1907 to assistant U.S. attorney in charge of immigration and naturalization for the New England states. Managing an office of several lawyers and administrative staff left no time for football, nor did Lewis’s subsequent career: as assistant attorney general of the United States under President William Howard Taft (then the highest federal position ever held by an African American) and later as a criminal defense attorney, heading one of the most successful practices in Boston.

But Lewis left a little-known legacy to college football. The sport’s bloody violence had made it a target for reform, and in 1905, President Charles William Eliot and the Harvard Corporation even voted secretly to ban football. As a pre-emptive measure, Lewis and other Harvard alumni called for rules changes to make the game safer. Lewis proposed a “neutral zone” rule, which required teams to be kept apart by the width of the football before the start of each play. At the time, players could crowd the imaginary, hair-thin line of scrimmage that supposedly separated the teams, but in truth hid a lot of slugging and holding from the officials. (As a player, Lewis himself once took advantage of that closeness during a Yale game by kicking the ball out of the hands of the Eli center. The officials thought the center had snapped the ball too early, and the play eventually resulted in a turnover for Harvard.) In 1906, college football enacted the neutral zone rule. It was no longer his game, but, Lewis noted philosophically, “The new game is a safe, sane, and wholesome sport.”

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The 1892 Harvard football team. William Henry Lewis is in the white letter sweater.