

The Johnny Bright Story

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) – Johnny Bright had every reason to hate after what happened to him on the football field 50 years ago. If he had become bitter, no one would have blamed him. But he was never was, friends say.

On Oct. 20, 1951, Bright had his jaw broken in a game at Stillwater, Okla., after being slugged by an opposing player, an episode that forever marked an extraordinary career.

Bright, a single-wing tailback leading the nation in total offense at the time, was among a handful of blacks on a Drake team playing an all-white squad from Oklahoma A&M.

Newspaper photos captured Oklahoma A&M's Wilbanks Smith twice delivering a forearm shiver to Bright's jaw after the Drake star had handed off the ball.

The first blow came on the first play of the game.

"I remember saying something like, 'Boy, they really got to John,' or some such comment," said Drake historian Paul Morrison, who was at the game. "I believe I was aware right off the bat they were after him. It was obvious."

Bright played only seven minutes and returned to Des Moines with his jaw wired shut, his football future in limbo, Drake's dream of an unbeaten season shattered.

"We learned at halftime his jaw was broken," said Keith Burgett, who played blocking back and tackle. "It just sent a shiver up your spine to think that actually happened. If you look at those pictures, there wasn't anybody facing him except this Wilbanks Smith, whose elbow was in his face."

To this day, Burgett and others from the team are convinced Bright was singled out because of his race.

"He was the best player and he was black," said Bill Pilkington, who was a wingback. "They didn't hit Bob Binette and he was a good receiver. Joe McClaran was the second leading receiver in the nation and they didn't hit him."

Binette and McClaran are white.

"It was 100 percent racial," said John Jennett, who played offensive guard.

Morrison saw it differently. Drake had played at A&M, now Oklahoma State, when Bright was a sophomore in 1949 and there was no trouble.

"I felt it was basically that he was a marked player and they had more chance for success if they got rid of John," Morrison said. "He could have been a polka dot guy."

The game was played before sports were integrated in the South. Bright and the team's other blacks were not allowed to stay in the hotel the team had booked nor at the A&M student union. They wound up staying with a local black minister.

Bright, according to his teammates, took all those slights in stride. He never showed any resentment – before or after the incident at A&M.

"He never expressed any vindictiveness against anybody and he very well could have," Binette said. "He was just the kind of guy who was happy to be alive. That stuff didn't bother him."

On the day Drake faced A&M, Bright was the NCAA career leader in total offense and Drake was 5-0. The Bulldogs were on track to win the Missouri Valley Conference title and Bright was a contender for the Heisman Trophy.

That all started to change with the first play. A six-frame sequence that ran the next day in The Des Moines Register shows Bright handing off to fullback Gene Macomber and everyone in the photos following the ball – except Smith.

The final four frames show Smith cutting in front of a teammate who was chasing Macomber and heading directly for Bright. He hit Bright with such force that both his feet were off the ground. The sequence won a Pulitzer Prize for photographers Don Ultang and John Robinson.

Bright was down for several minutes and got up rubbing his jaw. On the next play, he threw a 61-yard touchdown pass to Pilkington.

A later photo shows Smith hitting Bright again while the play is going the other direction. Bright was hit hard while gaining 4 yards on the next play and was helped off the field for good. Drake led 7-6 at the time and lost 27-14.

Jennett said the team felt Smith was in the game only to take out Bright.

"Our line coach had scouted them the week before and Wilbanks Smith did not play a minute of defense in that game," Jennett said.

Binette, who was lined up across from Smith, said Smith never rushed again after Bright left the game.

"It was just like he did what he was supposed to do and didn't care about coming in again,"

Binette said.

A&M coach J.B. Whitworth wrote letters of apology to Bright and Drake coach Warren Gaer, saying he did not know why Smith went after Bright.

"I want to assure you that no boy was coached to slug you," he told Bright.

A&M took no action against Smith. Athletic director Henry Iba said he was sorry it happened but there was no way to tell just when Bright's jaw was broken.

Angry when the conference did not punish A&M, Drake dropped out of the league for five years and Bradley did the same in support of its rival.

The Register photos later appeared in Life magazine and Bright became national news. He played once more that season, accumulating 204 yards in a 35-20 victory over Great Lakes Naval Training Station while wearing a special face mask.

"It was the first time I saw one and I'm thinking, 'What the heck is this?' " Binette said.

Not long after that, face masks became standard equipment.

Smith also wrestled at A&M and when he competed at Iowa State that winter, the fans booed him loudly, said Max Rauer, who was a Drake student then and attended the meet. Later, Rauer told Bright what happened.

"He said he had heard that and I said, 'Geez, they just rang the rafters,'" Rauer said. "He said, 'Oh, that's too bad.' I don't think John ever thought it was a racial thing."

Spurning an offer from the Philadelphia Eagles, Bright became a star in the Canadian Football League, playing on three Grey Cup championship teams. He retired in 1964 as the league's career rushing leader and is in the CFL Hall of Fame.

Smith is retired after a career in engineering and lives near Houston.

Bright died in 1983 of a heart attack while undergoing elective knee surgery. Burgett said Bright forgave and forgot.

"Through all those years, I never heard any talk from him about trying to get that guy or feeling it was anything more than an isolated incident," Burgett said. "He rolled with the punches."