

Ground Breakers

Long after Jackie Robinson smashed the color barrier in baseball, these Southern college football pioneers desegregated a more violent sport, in a more violent place, at a more violent time

By Alexander Wolff

1. The University of Mississippi didn't lose a thing in the fall of 1962. Oh, the history books might say something different, telling as they do of a black man named James Meredith and the failed, violent efforts to keep him from enrolling at the school, and the beginning of the end of segregation in the depths of the South. But posterity also records that after the gun smoke and tear gas had blown from the campus, the Ole Miss football team went 10-0, even as it shared its practice field with the federal troops bivouacked there. It was no small balm to white Mississippians, who watched what they called "our way of life" come forcefully to a close. In his autobiography the coach of that undefeated team, John Vaught, described the effect in a chapter titled "Football Saves a School."

But for most white Southerners it was one thing to integrate their classrooms and quite another to desegregate their football teams. In the Southeastern, Atlantic Coast and Southwest conferences, and at such major independents as Houston, Florida State and Georgia Tech, to do so was to mess with the sacraments. To be sure, in the late '50s coach Bud Wilkinson had brought a black receiver named Prentice Gault to Oklahoma; Abner Haynes, a black running back, had starred at predominantly white North Texas State; and Leford Fant had briefly caught passes for Texas Western. But the Sooners played a largely Midwestern schedule, and North Texas and Texas Western cut only mid-major profiles on the regional margins. That left an unbroken swath of the South playing segregated football well into the 1960s, James Meredith be damned.

Not that most people put their defiance quite so indelicately. "What we need is a team that will work and pull and fight together and really get a feeling of oneness," Texas A&M coach Gene Stallings said in 1965, 27 years before he would win a national title at Alabama with a team on which every defensive starter was black. "I don't believe we could accomplish this with a Negro on the squad."

Meanwhile, blacks weren't exactly lining up for outrider duty. Those who'd heard tales from other parts of the country knew how Fritz Pollard, the black All-America at Brown during World War I, had learned to spin on his back and thrust his cleats in the air when tackled, to protect himself from late hits; how Iowa State's Jack Trice was trampled to death during a 1923 game against Minnesota; and how in 1951, on the first play from scrimmage, an Oklahoma A&M player broke the jaw of Drake running back Johnny Bright, forcing Bright to abandon football and causing his school to withdraw in protest from the Missouri Valley Conference.

So it was that the color barrier remained intact for SEC football until 1966. Logically enough, the task of breaking it fell to Kentucky, a border state that had desegregated its public schools in 1948. The Wildcats recruited defensive end Greg Page and receiver Nat Northington, and in those days of freshman ineligibility, the two spent a year patiently waiting for their breakthrough.

It was a high August afternoon in 1967 when Kentucky ran a pursuit drill, a staple of its preseason practices that was prejudiced against no one but the ballcarrier. In it, all 11 Wildcats defenders were to converge on the ball and get in a pop or a butt before dispersing. But this time Page fell to the turf and failed to rise. Something terrible had happened in that clattering of strong young men in helmets and pads and shorts, something that left Page paralyzed from the nose down.

At first events unspooled quickly: mouth-to-mouth, hospitalization, a tracheotomy, a respirator. And then agonizingly slowly, until, 38 days later, as the pastor at the memorial service put it, "the rudest of all constables whisked him away." Greg Page died on a Friday night. The next afternoon his roommate, Northington, became the first African-American to play in an SEC varsity football game, logging several minutes as a wideout in a home loss to Ole Miss. But within weeks he fled Lexington in a fog of distress and loneliness, leaving the Kentucky varsity all-white once more. "Nat said he'd just sit in his room and talk to the bricks in the wall," remembers Wilbur Hackett, a black linebacker who had been practicing with the freshman team on an adjacent field when Page went down. "Nat didn't feel close enough to anyone else, and nobody came to him. And the only reason I was at the school was because of Nat and Greg." Only Northington's pleas with Hackett and the other black freshman, Houston Hogg, to stay -- urgings as resolute as his own decision to go -- kept the two freshmen at Kentucky.

When Hackett told friends back in Louisville's West End that he would be returning to Kentucky for his sophomore year, they looked at him cross-eyed. "It was like, 'Man, you gonna stay where they killed Greg Page?'" he remembers. "That's what the feeling was."

Trailblazers at major universities all over the South endured on-field cheap shots, racial slurs from fans, and hate mail and abusive phone calls in their dorms. Many fielded death threats. Most had been plucked from the honor roll at segregated high schools as a result of Rickey-esque quests for prospects with the emotional armor to take any licking, physical or psychological. Yet back home friends often regarded them as Uncle Toms and wondered why historically black colleges like Grambling, Prairie View and Florida A&M suddenly weren't good enough. (Big Southern universities were passing up so much talent in the name of segregation that in the 1968 draft, NFL teams chose 11 players from Jackson State.) Time and again one of these forerunners would make a play to advance the ball near the goal line, only to be substituted for, lest he score a touchdown that might otherwise go to a white teammate -- if, that is, the black player hadn't already been moved to defensive back.

By asking Wake Forest freshman coach Joe Madden to stop calling him "Willie," running back William Smith ensured that he'd be called nothing but for all of the 1964 season -- and because Smith refused to answer to the name, every communication between coach and player had to pass through an assistant. A freshman game against Clemson, near his hometown of Greenville, S.C., sealed the end of Smith's brief career. Members of Smith's racially mixed Baha'i congregation had driven over for the game, and before kickoff Smith fixed them all with hugs. Furious, Madden refused to play Smith for weeks.

The following spring Smith left Wake and football for good. He organized lunch counter sit-ins in Greenville, served with distinction in Vietnam and, after collecting three degrees at the

University of Massachusetts, joined Emerson College in Boston as an administrator. "Wake's decision to integrate was less about social justice than athletic prowess, and nobody should confuse the two," he says today. "That experience showed me the value placed on my life. Without sports, it was clear I had no value. So I chose to assert my humanity in another way."

Growing up in Greenville, Smith had watched one day as his name came up on local TV during an interview with Clemson coach Frank Howard. "Coach Howard," the host said, "Wake Forest has recruited colored people like Billy Smith, who they say is faster than greased lightning."

Smith still recalls Howard's response: "I'll never have a nigra at Clemson."

Darryl Hill, the ACC's first black player, remembers Frank Howard too -- remembers the feeling, while kicking practice extra points before Maryland's game at Clemson in November 1963, of Howard's eyes boring in on him. For nearly 10 un-broken minutes, arms folded and cigar smoldering, Howard stood on the field at Clemson's Death Valley, steps from Hill, fixing him with a glare. Moments before kickoff a Maryland assistant coach told Hill, a sophomore wideout and kicker from Washington, D.C., that his mother was stranded outside the stadium because no ticket taker would let her in. Hill scurried under the stands to plead on her behalf, to no avail. He was on the verge of changing out of his uniform to escort his mother back home when Clemson president Robert Edwards showed up and invited her to be a guest in his box. Hill used the vapors of those indignities as fuel, catching a school-record 10 passes that day in a Maryland loss.

Hill recalls subtle gestures of respect, even support, from such white rivals as South Carolina's Dan Reeves, Wake Forest's Brian Piccolo and Duke's Mike Curtis. It was the fans who most often trafficked in venom, like those at South Carolina who, after Maryland ran out to a 13-0 halftime lead thanks in part to a 19-yard touchdown run by Hill, invaded the field during the intermission, throwing rocks and tomatoes, as the Terrapins swung their helmets to protect themselves on their way to the locker room.

Hill had arrived in College Park with several advantages. He was light-skinned, and he had already twice integrated a football team, as a plebe player at Navy, from which he had transferred to Maryland, and at D.C.'s Gonzaga High. "That's good," he replied after hearing out Lee Corso, the Maryland assistant tasked with recruiting him. "But you forgot what conference you're playing in."

Corso didn't blink. "We think you're the guy to do it."

"It all made sense," Hill says today. "I *was* the right guy. I wasn't afraid."

Moreover, Hill could count plenty of teammates who came from the Northeast, including a tailback and linebacker named Jerry Fishman. A Jew from Connecticut, Fishman quickly realized that Hill had a head for numbers and cut a deal with him: Get me through economics class, and I'll get you through your redshirt season." Fishman roomed with Hill on the road and came to relish his role as Hill's protector. After a South Carolina fan poured a drink on Hill's head during the riot in Columbia, Fishman pulled the man from the stands and walloped him with his helmet. At Wake Forest, after Hill was knocked woozy by a cheap shot, the sideline medics refused to administer oxygen, so Fishman ripped the mask from them and did it. In Durham to play Duke, a

dozen Terps, including Hill, sat down at a whites-only lunch counter. "We don't serve colored people," the soda jerk told them.

"We didn't order colored people," Fishman replied, leaning in. "We ordered milk shakes." He swept the dishes from the counter onto the floor as the team exited.

"Fishman would do those things," says Hill, who after a long career in business now is a fundraiser for the Maryland athletic department. "But if anyone was going to pay for them, it was me. I probably think about all this more now than I did at the time. I was just trying to play football."

That summer he had waded through the Reflecting Pool during Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington. He often socialized at nearby Howard, home then to civil rights activists Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown. One day the two approached Hill, urging him to join the movement. "I told them that the best way I could help was by playing football, not by staging a sit-in," Hill says. "Rap said, 'Are you scared?' And I snapped right back at him. Stokley stepped between us and said, 'I think Darryl's right.'"

At home, even Maryland fans remained cool to Hill -- or did until unbeaten Air Force came through College Park to play the winless Terps five games into his first season. On the game's final play, with the score tied and Maryland at midfield, Hill hauled in a pass on a crossing pattern, then dodged several tackles before carrying a defensive back over the goal line with one last lunge. "I hadn't been booed at our games, but there was a little edge you could feel," says Hill. "Perceptions changed after that."

But not universally. Earlier this year Hill sat for an ABC Sports camera crew that had brought along a copy of the school yearbook from his debut varsity season. Paging through it, Hill noticed for the first time: Though he had led the Terps in receiving and kickoff returns, the pages on the football team included no mention of him. Nor was he in the team picture. Someone on the yearbook staff had simply used the photo from the previous year.

Where Darryl Hill could at least count on the support of most of his teammates, it took Jerry LeVias, the first black scholarship player in the Southwest Conference, much of his career at Southern Methodist to win even that. One player spit in his face during a practice in 1965, his freshman season. Students scrambled to avoid having to sit next to him in class, and student trainers refused to tape his ankles.

The parents of his first roommate threatened to withdraw their son from school; his second moved out after concluding that his social life was being adversely affected by LeVias's race. From then on LeVias lived alone. He quickly learned to linger on the practice field so he wouldn't have to watch the shower stalls empty as soon as he entered them. As a sophomore LeVias became an instant, off-the-charts star, and he was the Mustang most likely to be acclaimed by the media after a victory. "And then," he says, "I was the skunk in the middle of the room."

He would spend Saturday nights riding along with a school janitor named Leon who moonlighted as a cab driver. The pimps and night owls Leon drove around Dallas became LeVias's chaperones, determined that he not get into mischief that might compromise his future. In the wee hours of Sunday mornings Leon would drop LeVias off at his aunt's house in southwestern

Dallas, where her attentions would fortify him for another week.

LeVias had had no idea what awaited him when he arrived from segregated Beaumont, Texas, with a copy of the New Testament in his pocket. SMU coach Hayden Fry had signed him largely because of the verdict of Jerry's devout grandmother, who, after meeting Fry, told her grandson, "There's something godly about that man." Says LeVias, "We never did talk about breaking barriers. It says something about fate and faith -- that's how I went to SMU."

At one point in LeVias's recruitment his father, Charlie, asked where Southern Methodist was. Told it was in Dallas, he said, "They shot the president there. What they gonna do to my boy?"

Essentially anything they wanted to. At 5'8" and 160 pounds, deployed on the flanks and on returns, LeVias was easy to target. LeVias met often with Fry to unburden himself of the abuse he took, always late at night because his coach didn't want other players to think LeVias was being coddled. Over and over Fry incanted a West Texasism: "If you don't want 'em to get your goat, don't let 'em know where it's hid." LeVias had developed an understanding of Fry's own predicament one day when, waiting outside the coach's office, he overheard a booster say, "If you let that nigger play, I'll never give another dime."

Meanwhile, when the Mustangs went on the road, fans at Texas held up ropes tied into nooses, and the Texas A&M corps of cadets let black cats onto the field. As SMU, long a conference doormat, kept winning through the fall of 1966, the hate mail grew nastier. After LeVias emerged beaten up from a victory over Baylor that pushed the Mustangs' record to 7-2, Fry finally laid out for the press what his star had been going through and issued a plea that it stop. Other conference coaches indignantly denied any problem.

Several weeks later, before the season finale at TCU, someone phoned the SMU administration and vowed to shoot "that dirty nigger LeVias." Except no one told the intended target, who thought the team's police escort and late entrance that afternoon were part of the red-carpet treatment accorded any team closing in on a conference title. Only just before kickoff did Fry tell his star what was happening. LeVias spent the game crouched down in the middle of huddles. And every Mustangs play began with a quick count. "I ran quicker to the bench than I did for a touchdown," LeVias says of his 68-yard pass play in that 21-0 victory, which sent SMU to its first Cotton Bowl since Doak Walker's days.

No racial trailblazer was as jaw-slackeningly good. LeVias touched the ball only 66 times all season, catching just 18 passes, yet in seven of SMU's eight victories he either scored or set up the Mustangs' winning points. The press gave Fry heat for not using him more, although LeVias never held it against his coach. "He was protecting me," LeVias says today. "And the good Lord takes care. How can someone touch the ball 66 times in an 11-game season and do what I did?"

Neither he nor SMU would soar so high again, but the abuse persisted. The following season a Baylor linebacker sent his fist over LeVias's face mask, causing three fractures in the arch around the socket of his right eye. "You pay the price, you get the prize -- but here I wasn't really seeing the prize," says LeVias, who vowed to transfer after each of his first three seasons, only to be talked into staying by his sister Charlena. "You can't really understand it unless it's directed at you day after day, year after year."

Like Darryl Hill, LeVias had a knack for making opponents pay -- as he puts it, "Turn the other cheek, then show them both cheeks" as you cross the goal line. During LeVias's senior season, with the Mustangs tied in the fourth quarter at TCU, a Horned Frogs linebacker tackling him said, "Go home, nigger!" and spit in his face. LeVias stalked off the field, flung his helmet against a wall and declared, "I quit!" He sat at the end of the bench and broke down in tears. Fry pleaded with him while the SMU defense held, and soon the Frogs were lining up to punt. As Fry scrambled to find a return man, LeVias bolted past him and onto the field, turning to say, "Coach, I'm gonna run this one back all the way."

"It was kind of like the Babe Ruth story," says Fry, who had picked up LeVias's headgear. "I handed him his helmet and said, 'Jerry, you might be needing this.'"

Breaking down the film, Mustangs coaches would count 11 eluded tacklers, several of whom had two shots at him, and a couple of reverses of field during LeVias's 89-yard return for the decisive touchdown. "A lot of stuff had happened, and that was the first time I outwardly showed any real emotion," LeVias says. "But sometimes you just get your fill."

Several years ago, fed up with his thrashings about in the middle of the night, LeVias's girlfriend of the past 26 years, Janice McKinney, finally challenged him to tell her why he was so angry. LeVias began to talk through his past openly for the first time in years. Now he finds peace in a Latin phrase he runs across in his line of work, with a court-reporting firm in Houston: *res ipsa loquitur*. Let the thing speak for itself.

When his phone began to ring in late 2003, after his induction into the College Football Hall of Fame, LeVias became even more comfortable sharing details of what he had gone through. He also learned to handle congratulations with a grace he didn't know he had, even when the source astonished him. At a Hall of Fame reception in New York City, the teammate who had spit at him during freshman year came up to apologize. And the TCU linebacker who had spit at him, while not apologizing, much less acknowledging what he had done, called to congratulate him and say that he had raised his children to respect all people.

During the course of that conversation LeVias had the sense of being felt out by a man nervous that he might be fingered. But to this day LeVias has never publicly identified that Horned Frog. In one respect it's enough to have fielded the phone call. As LeVias puts it, "He knows that I know."

Like Darryl Hill, Calvin Patterson had been a schoolboy pioneer, the first black athlete of distinction at Dade County's Palmetto High following its integration in 1964. He had been raised in a tidy brick home by a great-aunt and -uncle, schoolteachers in Miami's middle-class black community of Richmond Heights. And in contrast to LeVias's experience at SMU, a teammate at Florida State actually volunteered to room with Patterson. But those apparent advantages may have only ratcheted up expectations, and in Patterson's case, expectations played a fateful role.

The letters began coming right after he signed with the Seminoles. "They were the meanest," recalls Javan Ferguson, a friend who grew up playing with Patterson in the cemetery across from Calvin's house, dodging gravestones as if they were tacklers. "With the n word, with expletives, signed by supporters of FSU. We're 17-year-old kids who had no idea that kind of hatred existed.

We would laugh, thinking these people must be crazy."

Ernest Cook, a black fullback from Daytona Beach, had also committed to the Seminoles and received the same hate mail. Cook took it seriously enough to reconsider and sign with Minnesota. Patterson had options at safer compass points -- Notre Dame, Southern Cal and Syracuse all pursued him -- but, Ferguson says, "when Calvin told me about Ernie Cook, we laughed. 'Ah, he bailed out.' It wasn't like a caution light went on."

Yet the Tallahassee to which Patterson came in the fall of 1968 was scarcely removed from the Old South. A sheriff patrolling the campus brandished a cane he threatened to use on students, and only four years earlier, after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the city had chosen to close its public swimming pools rather than desegregate them. In the meantime it seemed sometimes as if every black person in the state had a stake in what Patterson would do. To five younger siblings who still lived in Miami's Liberty City, where Patterson had been born, Calvin was a hero twice over, first at Palmetto High and now in Tallahassee. Black students would turn out simply to watch him practice.

At Palmetto he had been a running back of such power that coaches would show off for recruiters a blocking sled he had dented. Nonetheless, he carried only six times as a Seminoles freshman, and coaches began nudging him toward the defense. By the following spring he had begun to show up late for practices or miss them entirely. In the 1969 spring game, as a knot of black students chanted his name, he never got off the bench. It was stiflingly hot that day, but through the final quarter Patterson didn't remove his helmet because he didn't want anyone to see him crying.

Black students at Florida State were expected to carve out a social life across town at Florida A&M, but there Patterson met with a you-should-be-playing-for-us freeze-out. Blacks on his own campus shunned him for dating white women -- and several black female students beat up one white girlfriend in a dorm hallway. Meanwhile Patterson was punting on schoolwork. Coaches would walk him to class, and 10 minutes later he'd walk himself out. Says T.K. Wetherell, who was then academic adviser to the football team and today serves as Florida State's president, "He had the IQ. It was the 'I do' part you couldn't understand. But for two years he basically didn't play. He had to make it up academically and socially, yet he needed football so the others would come along."

Patterson did have several close friends, a few of them white, including quarterback Tommy Warren, who had asked to room with him, and history professor David Ammerman, who in 1972 would tape a series of conversations with him. In one of those interviews Patterson complained of being "a black representative." He added, "And I can't get used to sitting on the bench. That's when I turned into a renegade."

With no academic standing to return in the fall of 1970, he spent two years hanging out in Tallahassee. In the spring of 1972 he took a room in Ammerman's home, telling friends he had enrolled at Tallahassee Junior College with the hope of becoming eligible to play again at Florida State in the fall.

One morning late that summer Patterson called an old friend in Miami to tell her that he had been

shot in a holdup at a convenience store. He'd be O.K., he said, but wouldn't be able to play football anymore. Over the next few hours he paid a cable-TV bill. He ate a can of tuna. And he placed the nose of a .38 revolver against his midriff.

The bullet had already passed through his abdomen and punctured his aorta when Patterson somehow phoned the police. The first officer on the scene arrived to find The Carpenters' *Rainy Days and Mondays* cranked up to earsplitting volume. A Florida State football schedule, just arrived in the mail, lay crumpled on the floor. "Please hold my hand," Patterson asked the officer. He bled to death before the ambulance could reach the hospital.

The police report, which called his death "an apparent suicide," couldn't begin to account for the welter of forces that had brought him to that moment. Patterson clearly wanted nothing worse than a lifetime spot on injured reserve. It was another high August afternoon. Football practice was to begin the next day.

All summer long, when Patterson disappeared in the mornings, friends assumed he was going to class. In fact he had never enrolled. As Warren says, "It must have been absolute torment to come up with some sort of endgame in order to save face."

All the while Patterson seemed to be searching for a place beyond college, which he bitterly came to regard as having no more than a gladiatorial interest in him. During the final summer of his life he spent hours with Ammerman discussing Voltaire's *Candide* for a phantom term paper in a class he wasn't taking. "We'll never know the answers," says Warren. "Maybe it was part of his tragic personality, not wanting to play. Because if you play you have to perform." Don't play, and you can never be accused of failing.

Only a few players showed up for the funeral, and not a single coach or administrator. "Nobody knew what to say to the family," says Warren, who went on to become a civil rights lawyer, winning huge discrimination settlements from such companies as Shoney's and Publix.

In 1992, at a Seminoles home game, Warren became angry when he saw commemorative plastic cups erroneously featuring J.T. Thomas as Florida State's first black football player. Over the following decade he lobbied the school to acknowledge Patterson's rightful place. A year ago Warren and his wife, Kathy Villacorta, both graduates of Florida State's School of Law, donated \$100,000 to endow a scholarship there in Patterson's name, expressly for students committed to civil rights work. At the same time, the university honored Patterson with a ceremony and a brick in the Legacy Walk outside Campbell Stadium. "It doesn't change anything," Wetherell says. "But at least we can now say, We remember."

Ernie Cook, the recruit who took that hate mail seriously, became an All-Big Ten fullback at Minnesota and is now a doctor in Daytona Beach. Calvin Patterson is buried in the graveyard he used to play in.

By the end of the '60s a San Jose State sociology professor, Harry Edwards, had staked out a place for the black athlete in the larger civil rights movement, which had taken a radical turn. Disciples of Edwards no longer contented themselves with

being accepted. They wanted to be affirmed: to be called black, not Negro; to be permitted to

wear Afros and facial hair; to see a face or two like theirs on the coaching staff.

This new order first breached the borders of the South in 1970, in the person of Eddie McAshan, a mortician's son who had been the first black quarterback at predominantly white Gainesville (Fla.) High before signing with Georgia Tech. In college he put up with the predictable parade of harassments: slashed tires, a suspicious fire in his dorm room, an effigy of himself hanging from a tree as the team bus rolled through Auburn's campus. But the first black quarterback at a major Southern university was simply too good to be wasted at cornerback. *Ebony* proudly quoted him saying, "I usually announce the play at the line of scrimmage by calling audibles."

In 1972, several days before what was to be his final game, against Georgia, McAshan asked for four extra tickets for his family. Turned down, he skipped practice in protest. Coach Bill Fulcher suspended him for both the Georgia game and the Liberty Bowl, which McAshan spent outside the stadium, sitting next to Jesse Jackson in a white stretch limousine. His five conflicted black teammates crossed an NAACP picket line, but while wearing black armbands to signal their solidarity.

Earlier that season a black fullback for Southern Cal, Sam (Bam) Cunningham, had scored three TDs in a 42-21 win over all-white Alabama in Birmingham. Myth holds that the loss turned Crimson Tide coach Paul (Bear) Bryant into an integrationist. In fact, in the stands that day sat Wilbur Jackson, a black freshman receiver who would join Bryant's varsity the following fall. It's far more likely that the bitter experience of 1966, when undefeated Alabama placed only fourth in the final polls, convinced Bryant that, without change, his teams would no longer contend on the national stage. Bryant probably scheduled USC knowing that a waxing by a team with black stars would be a useful piece of agitprop in his efforts to hasten his school and state along. Indeed, according to Allen Barra's biography of Bryant, *The Last Coach*, upon shaking the hand of USC coach John McKay after the game, Bryant said, "John, I can't thank you enough."

Today Wilbur Hackett is 56, an assembly-line supervisor at a Toyota plant in Georgetown, Ky., who spends fall weekends working as an SEC official. He played his four years in Lexington on a whipsaw. After George Wallace spoke on campus,

Hackett got into a fistfight with students who called him a nigger. No blacks enrolled at Kentucky in the year after Page's death, in part because Hackett and Hogg warned them off. "It was tough," Hackett says. "Houston and I packed our bags more than once."

Yet, before his junior and senior seasons, teammates elected Hackett defensive captain, in recognition of the effort he invested in every play. "I felt if I didn't do that, I wouldn't make it," he says. "And with Greg and Nat gone, I had to make it."

Hackett is speaking on a glorious fall day in downtown Louisville. "We could walk from here to where Nat works," he says of Northington, who works for the Louisville Housing Authority, "but he won't talk." Not, Hackett says, because his old friend is carrying around some incriminating secret about what happened during that fatal drill, but because he has never wanted to revisit his brief, agonizing transit of the SEC. "It was a freak accident," Hackett says, pointing out that during the same 1967 season a white Wildcat, Cecil New, suffered a spinal injury in practice and has been a paraplegic ever since. "Even to this day there's a cloud over UK football."

Now, on Saturdays, Hackett positions himself on Southern playing fields filled with more black players than white. "The players, they don't know who I am, and I don't want them to know," he says. "But I'm giving them the best that I've got because I've been where they've been."

In fact, it's more likely that Hackett gives them the best that he's got because he has been somewhere no one will ever have to go again. It's a place evoked by an athletic department questionnaire, filled out in Greg Page's long-since-cold hand, that rests in a filing cabinet in Memorial Coliseum on the Kentucky campus. Page answered it in May 1966, when he was still a high school senior down in the Cumberland Gap, and it might as well be a testament. It includes his response to the question, Why did you choose UK?

"I wanted to play football for UK and to help open the way for more Negro athletes to play ball here."

Issue date: November 7, 2005