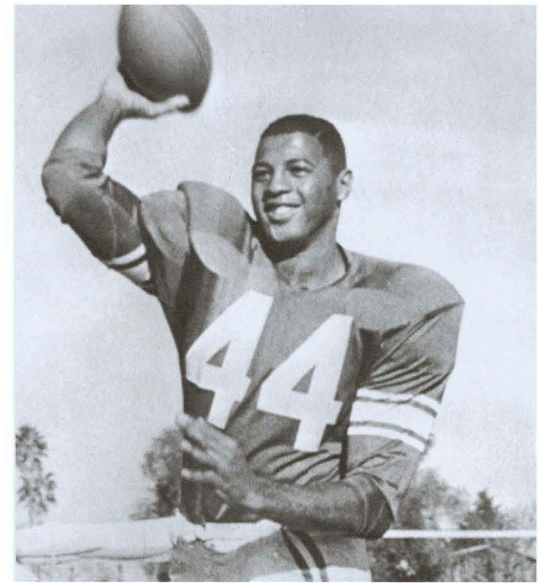


THE LEGEND OF
Ernie Davis

BY SCOTT PITONIAK



The heroic story of the orange gridiron great hits the silver screen

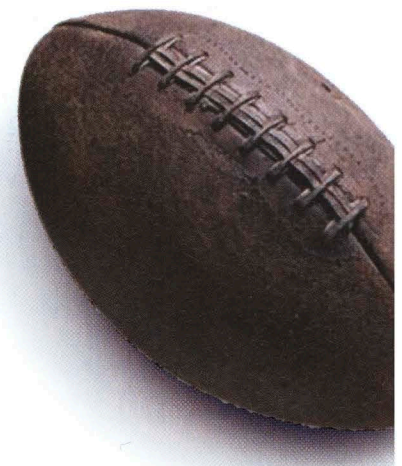
JOHN BROWN '62 FRETTED OFTEN in recent years that his late Syracuse University classmate, football teammate, and friend Ernie Davis '62 was becoming a forgotten hero. "I worried that Ernie eventually was going to end up like yesterday's newspaper," Brown says. "You know, read once, then tossed away." And that is why Brown is so excited about Universal Pictures' release this autumn of a poignant biopic about the short-but-profound life of Davis, who in 1961 became the first African American to win the prestigious Heisman Trophy, presented annually to the nation's top college football player.

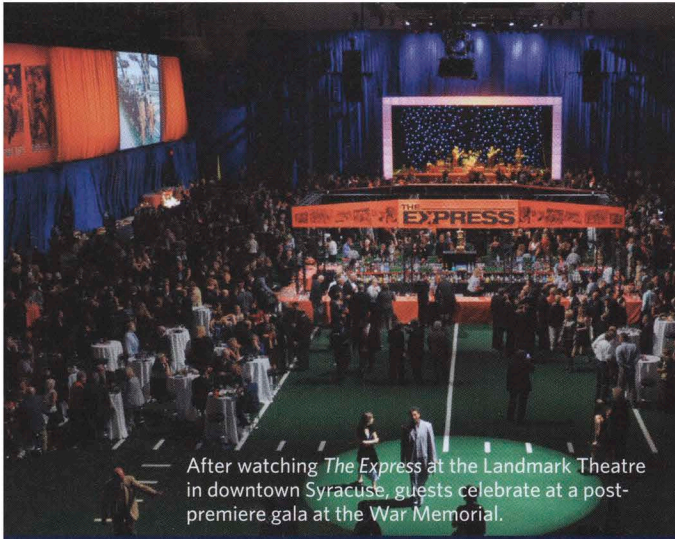
The Express, starring former Amherst College wide receiver Rob Brown as Davis and acclaimed actor Dennis Quaid as Orange football coach Ben Schwartzwalder, is based on *Ernie Davis: The Elmira Express*, a biography by Robert G. Gallagher '71. The film chronicles not only Davis's extraordinary football exploits while surpassing many of Jim Brown's Syracuse records, but also the quiet courage he displayed while battling racism and the leukemia that ultimately took his life on May 18, 1963, at age 23. "It does my heart good," says John Brown, a retired regional bank executive in Pittsburgh, "to know that people throughout America will be awak-

ened to what a truly marvelous person Ernie was. It's a story that has parallels to Jackie Robinson's quest to break the color barrier in Major League Baseball. Ernie's winning of the Heisman was a watershed event, and paved the way for so many African American football players who followed. It's a story that should be told—and needs to be told."

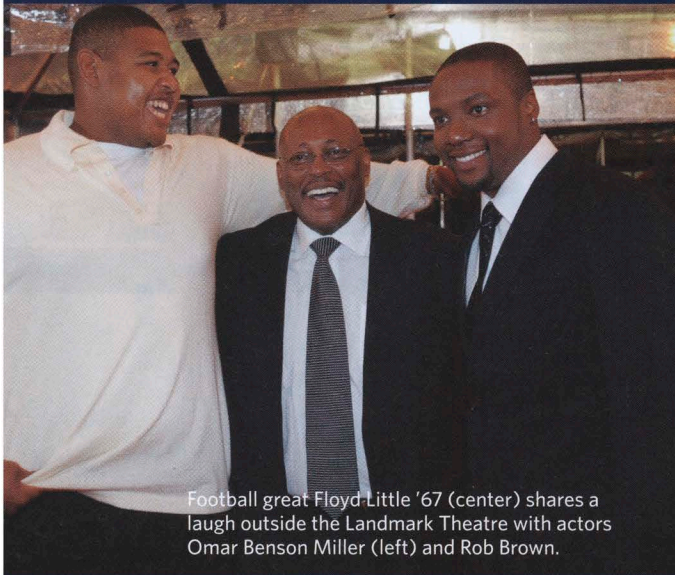
Express director Gary Fleder seconds that emotion. He, too, sees similarities between Davis and Robinson, the Brooklyn Dodgers second baseman who broke baseball's color barrier in 1947. "Like Jackie, I think Ernie showed how greatness can transcend race and color," Fleder says. "And helping people

Heisman Trophy winner Ernie Davis amazed the football world with his talent and charmed the country with his humble style and grace. He still holds Syracuse University records for highest average running yards per carry for a game (15.7), a season (7.83), and a career (6.63).

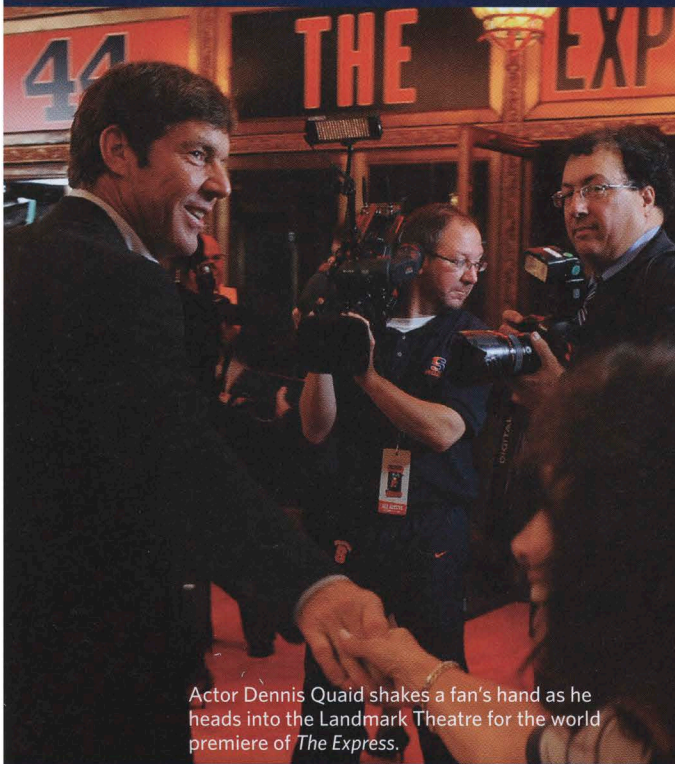




After watching *The Express* at the Landmark Theatre in downtown Syracuse, guests celebrate at a post-premiere gala at the War Memorial.



Football great Floyd Little '67 (center) shares a laugh outside the Landmark Theatre with actors Omar Benson Miller (left) and Rob Brown.



Actor Dennis Quaid shakes a fan's hand as he heads into the Landmark Theatre for the world premiere of *The Express*.

CAPTURING *Hollywood's Attention*

WHEN ATHLETIC DIRECTOR DARYL GROSS ARRIVED AT Syracuse University in 2004, he immersed himself in the school's athletic history. The more Gross learned about Ernie Davis '62, the more impressed he became. On several occasions, members of the Varsity Club, an athletic fund-raising group, told Gross about failed attempts to make a movie about Davis's life and encouraged him to see what he could do. "They kept telling me, 'You need to get this movie made,'" Gross recalls. "They didn't have to push me very hard because after hearing and reading about Ernie, I felt the same passion about him that they did."

As an assistant athletic director at the University of Southern California, Gross befriended Gary Foster, a Hollywood producer whose credits include *Sleepless in Seattle* and *Tin Cup*. He called Foster, who advised him to contact Universal's John Davis, who already had rights to a script. "We convinced John to send a crew to Syracuse to interview people who knew Ernie, and they were so blown away by those interviews that the project became a go," Gross says of that February 2006 meeting. "I expected this process would take 10 years rather than three, but that's how excited they became once they learned more about what an incredible person Ernie was."

Roger Springfield, the athletic department's director of media properties, production, and licensing, worked closely with *Express* director Gary Fleder to ensure accuracy and authenticity. The result is a movie that brings to life a forgotten American hero and gives positive national exposure to SU. "I walked out of that movie with tears in my eyes," Gross says. "It was so emotional. You felt sad for what Ernie had to endure, but you also felt inspired by his spirit."

Universal Pictures and SU collaborated on a gala premiere at the Landmark Theatre in Syracuse on September 12. The "orange-carpet" affair featured lead actors Rob Brown and Dennis Quaid as well as SU football legends Jim Brown '57 and Floyd Little '67, and members of the 1959 national championship team. The fund-raising event benefited the University's Ernie Davis Fund, which aids student-athletes, and the 'Cuse Cares Community Service Program.

Before the renewal of the Syracuse-Penn State football rivalry in the Carrier Dome the following day, a permanent statue of Davis was unveiled on campus. "Ernie Davis isn't just a Syracuse University hero or a football hero; he's an American hero," Gross says. "And I'm absolutely thrilled that he's finally receiving the due he deserves."



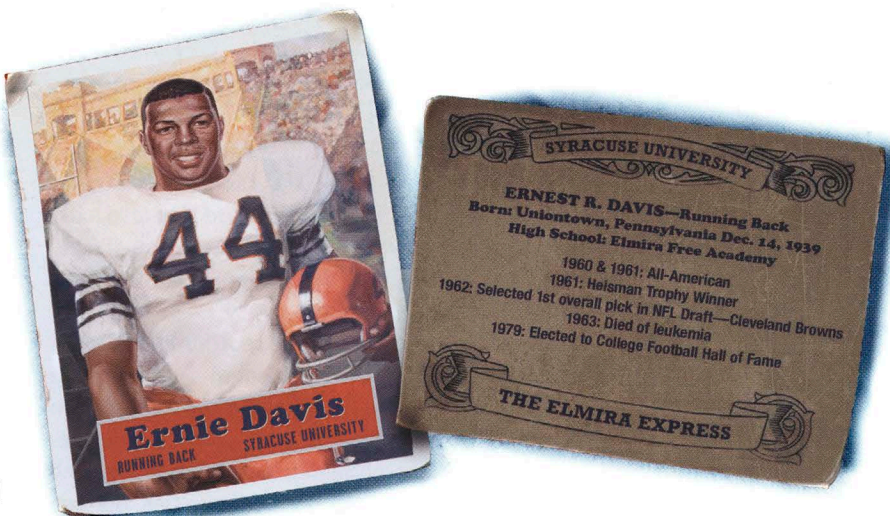
Ernie Davis meets President John F. Kennedy (photo top right) at the 1961 Heisman Trophy ceremony in New York City. "Imagine, a president wanting to shake hands with me," the Elmira Express later said.

cross those invisible lines is one of the big themes of this movie."

Fleder says the structure of *The Express* was influenced by *Seabiscuit*, the highly acclaimed 2003 movie. "That film was about this incredible horse defying remarkable odds against the backdrop of the Great Depression," Fleder says. "And that inspired me to tell Ernie's story against the backdrop of the civil rights movement of the late 1950s, early '60s. We hadn't yet reached the boiling point that we would reach after Martin Luther King's assassination in the late '60s. It was still mostly a time of blacks attempting to change things from within the system, and that's what Ernie attempted to do through his remarkable play on the field and his charismatic, color-blind personality away from it."

The film focuses heavily on the relationship between Davis and Schwartzwalder, the hard-nosed football coach from West Virginia who had numerous personality clashes with Jim Brown '57, the All-America running back who preceded Davis in the SU backfield and began the legacy of Syracuse jersey number 44. "You have to view things in the context of the times, and I think, at first, Ben's attitude might have been, 'Oh, no, don't tell me we've got to deal with another Jim Brown,'" Fleder says. "But Ernie quickly disarmed Ben, as he did everyone he met. I think Ernie affected Ben in a very profound way in terms of his views about a lot of things, including race." Both Schwartzwalder and Davis are portrayed as more talkative and, at times, more argumentative than they were in real life. Fleder believes the creative license was necessary to present an enormously complex subject in the confines of a two-hour film. "We created some tension so that we could provide context and tell a bigger truth about the times," he says.

Fleder, a stickler for authenticity, made the movie true to the period. "His attention to detail was amazing," says Roger Springfield of SU Athletics, an award-winning film director who served as the University's liaison to the production crew. "Every-



thing from the exact hue of orange on the football uniforms and cheerleaders' outfits to the re-creation of the plays Syracuse ran under Ben was dead-on. You watch that movie, and you are immediately transported back in time."

And that's just what John Brown hopes will happen. He wants people throughout America to learn what a fabulous football player Davis was. He wants them to know how Davis helped lead Syracuse to an 11-0 record and a national championship in 1959—a season that concluded with a hard-fought victory against an all-white University of Texas team in a Cotton Bowl game marred by racial epithets and cheap shots against SU's three black players—Davis, Brown, and Art Baker '61. He wants people to know how Davis appealed to people regardless of skin color, religion, or gender at a time when such transcendence was rare. And he wants them to know how Davis opened doors for other African Americans to win the Heisman, the most coveted individual award in all of college sports—an honor some historians believe Jim Brown was denied in 1956 because of the racial biases of some of the sportswriters and sportscasters who voted. "This is a lost piece of history that's going to be rediscovered by people outside of Syracuse," says John Brown, who is 69 years old. "I'm heartened by the fact that, in a year in which America has its first legitimate African American presidential candidate in Barack Obama, America also will be rediscovering its first African American Heisman Trophy winner. To me, that's very encouraging, a sign of growth by our society."

