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Porter at RFK Stadium
where Howard will play its
home games this year.



Profile of a Coach

By Paul R. Hathaway

PHOTOGRAPH BY JIM WELLS



There was no reason to think that this winter would be different from the others. It had happened so many times in the past that they had grown used to it at Grambling: Doug Porter would pack his scarred overnight bag, take off for some obscure place, express his gratitude for being seriously considered for the job he was being offered, and then turn it down. In the manner that bespeaks one who knows where home is and what there is about it that makes it home, he had always come back to Grambling.

He had been wooed by dozens of universities looking for a head football coach. Florida A&M, Texas Southern, and Southern University had all approached him. A professional football team had even discussed a front office position with him. But he had brushed them all off.

For eight years, Porter had served as right-hand man to the legendary Eddie Robinson, coach of the Grambling Tigers. He had come to Grambling from the microscopic, backwoods Mississippi Valley College in Itta Bena and become a kind of institution in himself. He had become a part of the Tiger legend that so awed and mesmerized some teams that they seemed defeated even before the opening kickoff. In the eight seasons, he had served as chief player and offensive coordinator for the Tigers, Grambling had compiled a record of 68 wins, 18 losses and one tie.

Doug Porter was so much a part of the Grambling Mystique, that it was impossible for Tiger followers to believe he would give up a good thing.

But this winter was different. He had run out of goal lines to cross at Grambling. He was not looking for a new challenge. But in the back of his mind he knew he needed one.

When Porter accepted the job as full-time head football coach at Howard University, Grambling was stunned.

"People here just didn't believe it when they heard it," said Collie Nicholson, sports information director at Grambling. "It was like someone had died. No one could follow this football team and not know Doug Porter's contributions."

Coach Robinson, though benumbed by his loss, was magnanimous:

"Doug had been with us so long, I stopped counting the years . . . You get good men and you think it's something that will last forever. You hate to keep a man like this in the background. He has the qualities to make an outstanding coach. What I like about him most is that he wants to give the parents back a better man."

Though Grambling had admittedly never showed an inclination to create a race of librarians, it liked to talk about scholarship. Out of the muscled grunts of its Saturday afternoons, it had contributed two football players to the NCAA Academic Football Hall of Fame. That was no mean feat, the Grambling public relations people insisted.

Coach Robinson was himself a success story. It is said that in 1941 when Grambling President, Dr. Ralph Waldo Emerson Jones hired Robinson, he was working at the Kalmbach-Burckett feed mill in Baton Rouge. In 32 years of coaching at Grambling, Robinson had compiled a record of 225 wins, 80 losses and 11 ties. Only Coach Paul "Bear" Bryant of the University of Alabama has scored more wins among active coaches.

"I made my decision . . . I felt it offered a tremendous opportunity . . ."

For Coach Porter, frequently prodded by people over why he left the snug cocoon of the Grambling football machine to come to Howard, it was a natural step forward.

"I made my decision because I felt it offered a tremendous opportunity for establishing a top-level club," he said. "This is one of the few schools where the potential is still there to compete in a highly competitive sports sense. There hasn't been a Black school that's risen in athletic prominence in the last 10 years. We have potential here . . ."

6 We have the thrust in the University itself.”

To those who knew Doug Porter, it was surprising that he made the big step. There is a home-grown quality about him that suggests that somehow he is native to the land he occupies or that, by chance, he comes from wherever you happen to be from. These characteristics had played an important role in his ability to blend in with the artlessness of the Grambling scene where football success had always been considered a kind of community adventure into the misty regions of the less innocent.

Then, too, there was a certain loyalty about him that said that even if some day Grambling had stopped winning, he would have somehow remained on in his battle station, rattling out hoarse shouts of encouragement, calling out orders to willing but depleted troops who had long since grown tired of asking their bodies to do the impossible and win.

To leave behind Grambling was to leave behind a whole world, then. Grambling was the great American success story with shoulder pads. It had been the subject of a 60-minute documentary over the American Broadcasting Company television network, and of hundreds of magazine and newspaper stories. Its weekly games were presented on national television in more than 100 television stations. More than 100 Grambling graduates had moved into professional football and achieved All-Pro stardom. Among them were Tank Younger, the Los Angeles Rams; Buck Buchanan, the Kansas City Chiefs; and Willie Davis of the Green Bay Packers. Last year, 19 Grambling graduates were listed on the rosters of the National Football League.

It was against this backdrop that Coach Porter came to Howard last winter to be interviewed by Howard officials. It is perhaps characteristic of him that as he was being interviewed, he turned the questioning around. At times, it was difficult to determine, say insiders, who was interviewing whom. What kind of program could he expect? What kind of

support could he expect? What would Howard do about financial aid, recruitment, tutoring, academic standards? He tossed the questions out with the ease and assurance of a coach playing catch with his warmup quarterback behind the bench. Obviously, he was a man who had not only worked at the problems of college football but lived with them. Indeed, the questions seemed so engrained in him that he did not seem to ask questions so much as he embodied them. He was there, it seemed, to prick consciences, to remind those in charge that they were entrusted with improving people's lives, and not just their on-the-field statistics.

“They both knew how to relate to kids.”

Douglas Taylor Porter did not come by football by chance. He was one of two children born to Waudell P. Porter and Sophia Taylor Porter in Fayetteville, Tennessee. It is a safe bet that if he was not born with a football in his hands there was one lying close by somewhere. His late father who was head football coach at St. Augustine's High School in South Memphis in his son's high school years, coached for 50 years before retiring in 1970. Football was akin to a religious experience at the Porter home. The supplicants were the teams Waudell Porter developed; and he presided over them, a harsh, punishing, but kindly priest administering to his flock. In Doug Porter's high school days, St. Augustine's (now called Bretton) was a small Black Catholic school with approximately 250 students. Still, out of this small student body Waudell Porter was able to fashion the feared Thunderbolts, a perennial city and state champion.

Waudell Porter is remembered around South Memphis for not only coaching the football team, but chaperoning the high school dances on Saturday nights to raise money for the school's program. He

operated the dances the way he did his football team, with an avuncular joy mixed with a sternness and withering glare that could immediately transform rowdies into altar boys. Mess up and you were out of the dance, off the team, out in the street.

To listen to one who has known both the elder and the younger Porter is to hear one talk of the same man. There is a feeling of timelessness about it, as though Waudell Porter had by invocation willed, forced even, his spirit for life in his boy—and that the younger Porter's teams were nothing more than souped up Thunderbolts.

Fred Freeman, defensive coordinator for the Howard football team for the past two years, played under Coach Doug Porter at Mississippi Valley and served as an assistant coach for his father at Bretton.

“They both knew how to relate to kids,” says Freeman. “They were people you could talk to. They were the kind of *men* you could always come back to with a problem.”

Freeman recalls too that the elder Porter never held back on money for equipment.

“Even though Bretton was a relatively poor school,” said Freeman, “We looked like a wealthy team on the field. We always had the best uniforms that money could buy.”

His reputation for developing good football players with a sound grasp of the fundamentals was so widely recognized that college coaches regularly scouted Thunderbolt games.

“He was a really good, dropback passer.”

In the mid-1940's Doug Porter starred as the quarterback for his father's high school team before entering Xavier University in New Orleans where he started for four years.

Julian Spence, who worked closely with Porter as defensive backfield coach

at Grambling for eight years, recalls seeing Porter play for Xavier.

"He was a really good, drop-back passer," recalls Spence, who played for the old Chicago Cardinals, the San Francisco 49'ers and the Houston Oilers. "I really believe that if he hadn't been Black, he would have made the pros. In those days, though, they (the professional football teams) were not touching Black quarterbacks."

After college, Porter worked for his father at St. Augustine's High as an assistant coach before returning to Xavier to serve as assistant coach from 1956 to 1960 under Coach Alfred C. Priestley.

At Mississippi Valley State, Coach Porter, taking on his first head coaching job, miraculously produced a winner out of a congenital loser in five years. Before Porter came to Itta Bena, Mississippi Valley had a reputation for losing two ways: It could just plain lose. Or it could be humiliated. Usually, it was the latter. In 1959, a mediocre Grambling team beat Mississippi Valley 93-0. The excuse usually given in the pre-Porter days was that the Delta Devils, as they were called, could never "generate an offense." That was basically true since it was so busy generating the other team's.

At Mississippi Valley, Coach Porter who doubled as athletic director, is remembered as a tough, paternalistic, almost puritanical disciplinarian who looked with equal disfavor on players who were sloppy, on or off the field; or who failed to keep up with their studies; or who "mistreated women."

"He didn't like to see his players exploit women because of their position on the team," said Coach Freeman.

He demanded that his rules be followed to the letter. Short haircuts. No mustaches. And a strict curfew. Going to and from a game, every member of the team had to wear coat and tie. They looked like members of the school choir. But Porter insisted that the rule be strictly observed. There were those, who still stereotyped Mississippi football teams as wearers of
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blue jeans and tennis shoes, he would lecture—and Mississippi Valley was going to disabuse them of that notion.

As athletic director, Coach Porter had a responsibility for all equipment issued to students by the Athletic Department. Players were forbidden by him to wear Athletic Department equipment off the playing field. He kept watch over each item as though they were personal extensions of himself. At the core of this attitude was an unshakeable sense of loyalty to a school that constantly flirted with financial disaster.

It was not unusual to see Coach Porter stroll into a players' dormitory at 11 o'clock at night, drop a few casual words about the game next Saturday and then disappear into the Mississippi night, a warmup jacket or a pair of dirty sweat socks jammed beneath an armpit.

No one ever seemed to be offended by this action. It was more like a father sifting through his son's dirty clothes for Mother's laundry.

One night several members of the Mississippi Valley football team were comfortably seated in the front row at the college gymnasium watching a basketball game, their outstretched legs clearly revealing the "V" emblem (for Mississippi Valley) on their school-owned socks. Suddenly the youths spotted Porter coming through the doorway and began scurrying for the backrow where they managed to keep their feet hidden from Porter who could spot a Mississippi Valley sweat sock as quickly as he could a receiver downfield.

Coach Freeman, who was forced to retire in 1968 with a damaged knee after two promising years as a defensive tackle with the New York Giants credits Porter's coaching with preparing him for professional football.

"Playing pro ball wasn't that big a transition for me," he recalled. "Every-

thing the pros were doing we were doing at Mississippi Valley." 7

In 1964 and 1965, Coach Freeman's last two years, Mississippi Valley reached its athletic peak. But it still could not beat the bigger, deeper Grambling team, losing to the Tigers, 20-7 and 34-20.

Nevertheless, Coach Robinson knew a winner when he saw one.

"I was impressed with the way Doug's teams performed and I said to myself 'I want that man on my side from now on.'"

He hired Porter after the 1965 season.

At Grambling, Porter faced a challenge different from the one he had encountered at Mississippi. This time he was not being called upon to build a team so much as he was being challenged to fit into one. It was the kind of experience that could have made him wish that he were back at Itta Bena sniffing for sweat socks with "V's" on them.

Grambling was, after all, not his team. It was like trying to coach the wind. Here was a team coached by a man who was a legend, operating on the basis that it too was a legend. It was a team generated by its own conceit, aimed at glories that transcended goal lines and victory marches.

Somehow, though, Porter, the man who always seems native to that particular plot of land that he occupies, fit in. While he could not carve a winning team out of a team that was already winning, he could influence it. If he could not score touchdowns, he could at least jot out the strategy for one, even though it was on turf that he could not quite assume was even his. He was good at that, standing behind graying and splintered benches and threading a long, brown finger through red Louisiana clay past an imaginary enemy to an imaginary goal.

The players sensed that Porter, even on the sidelines, without the ball, without a uniform, standing there in his inevitable white meshed baseball cap, could smell the goal line.

"Yeah, Coach," they would say. "I dig."

In the face of newly launched programs by predominantly white institutions to re-

Coach Porter
talking to a first-year
football prospect.

8 cruit Black athletes, Porter's ability as a recruiter became a key factor in the continuing growth of the Grambling football program.

Don Perkins, a former Dallas Cowboys fullback, who served as color man for the nationally televised Grambling games, said of Grambling once: "You've got to wonder how an enterprise which capitalizes on racial polarization can remain so successful in an age of increasing integration."

Coach Porter's name became anathema to bigger schools trying to recruit Black football players. He pursued young Black—and white—high school football stars with a muted intensity. (He signed two whites.) He knew how to relate to the youths he sought. He talked their language. He talked to them in a way that made them feel that somehow they were being beckoned to some high mission.

He did not recruit with a hard sell. There was not even a sales pitch. He just came and made his presentation to the youth and his parents, like a country preacher pleading for funds for a church that he already knows will see better times.

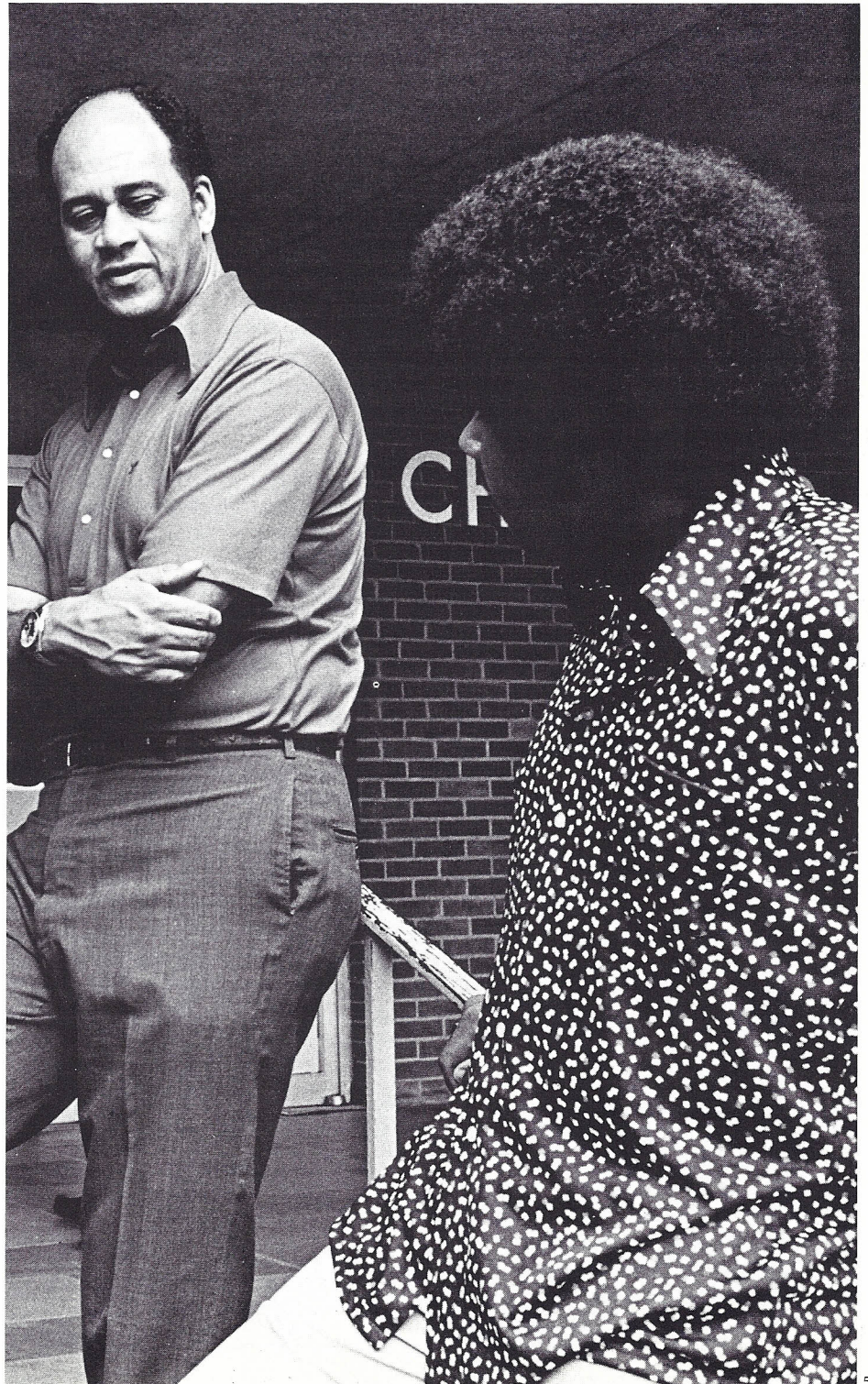
"Anyone can say 'no' over the telephone."

It was not uncommon for him to seat himself at the youth's dining room table, take out a pad of paper and a ball-point pen and begin to trace for the youth the Grambling offense setup. And, yes, ma'am. Yes, sir! he would personally look after their boy, and see that he got his studies, too.

In his office at Howard's Men's Gymnasium, Douglas Porter talked about the importance of personal contact in a recruitment program.

"Anyone can say 'no' over the telephone," he said. "But it's a lot harder for him to say it if you're sitting in his living room."

Most of the youths he has recruited, said Porter, are interested in more than



"Basically, they want to know if you're interested in them as a person," he said. "And I let them know that."

What does he look for in a player?

"I look for a football player the same way private industry would look for a junior executive," said Porter. "In most cases, you will find that most kids who are successful on the field are also successful in the classroom. Lack of effort in school always spills over into lack of effort on the field—I call it continuity of athlete."

With Porter always, there is an effort to evaluate the total person, the athlete, the student, the man.

At a coaches staff meeting this summer, he evaluated a backfield prospect.

"I'm impressed with this boy," he began. "He wants to do something with his life. He's a mature boy."

Of another, he began:

"There were about a hundred Black kids in his school, which was mostly white. He's never had much of a chance. He's never had anyone to push him. He has to be pushed."

Of another, he said:

"This one's been around. Came up here to see the campus and just disappeared for a few hours. We had to send someone out to find him . . ." His voice trails off. He stares at the floor in front of him and frowns. Obviously, this last one may not be junior executive material.

On Coach Porter's cluttered office desk stands a pile of books with a maze of elastic bands tied around them. The books are faded, almost tired looking. They are all bedrock textbooks, it seems: *The Psychology of Coaching*; *How to Organize and Conduct Football Practice*; *Pre-game Football—Preparation and Strategy*; and *The Book on the T-Formation*.

In a corner of the office stands a box of film canisters containing several Howard football games, which he has been studying for several weeks.

A stocky youth who plans to enter Howard in the fall enters the office and <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol1/iss4/2>

expresses an interest in coming out for the team.

"I played halfback and linebacker in high school," said the youth, nervously shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"What do *you* like to play?" asks Porter. "Linebacker."

"That's where we'll try you first." replies Porter.

"You been running?" asks Porter.

The youth nods.

"Good. Try to keep up your speed."

Coach Porter jots down the youth's address, zip code, telephone number, and thanks him for coming by. He promises to get in touch with him soon and sends him on his way. Minutes later, he is talking long distance on the telephone with another youth. This one has apparently applied but not been accepted yet.

"Hello, Lawrence (Pause). This is Coach Porter." He says it with the assurance of a man who knows he has the power to enrich the life of the person on the other end just by uttering his name.

"No . . . (Pause . . .) I haven't heard anything yet. But it should be soon . . . Yes . . . Well, you just be patient, and we'll be back to you as soon as we hear something . . ."

It will go on like this all afternoon. Telephone calls, visits, inquiries. But Doug Porter doesn't seem to mind. He sees a good team evolving from all this. But it will take time and hard work, he says. In a few years, he wants to be playing teams of the caliber of the University of Delaware, Villanova University and the U. S. Naval Academy.

"We'll work hard on execution and reducing our mistakes," he says. "I want us to go into every game with the idea that we won't beat ourselves. Everyone who plays us should know that on any given Saturday they can get their brains beat out."

Will he make Howard another Grambling?

"There was only one Grambling. And there can never be another." He says it with the conviction of a man who knows

that he cannot afford to look back, even at 9 mystiques. "I want to make a Howard."

And one recalls Coach Robinson once being asked if he would look for another Doug Porter.

"I would never hire anyone to replace Doug Porter," he said, "It just wouldn't be fair to the next man." □