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### Nashville and Its Role in Desegregating The SouthEastern Conference

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# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

## NASHVILLE AND ITS ROLE IN DESEGREGATING THE SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE

As this year is the 40th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (PL88-352), it is only fitting that some attention be given to the sports arena, specifically the desegregation of the Southeastern Conference (SEC) and the role that Nashville played in bringing down the conference's "Jim Crow" walls and racially diversifying its teams. In May 1966, Perry E. Wallace, Jr., who played center on Pearl Senior High School's championship varsity basketball team, signed with Vanderbilt University and became the first African-American "Commodore" to participate in the school's varsity sports and in SEC basketball. Just as young college students at the beginning of the sixth decade of the 20th century led Nashville in becoming the first major city in the South to desegregate its lunch counters during the sit-in movement, an academically talented, physically agile, and well-disciplined student athlete from North Nashville continued the civil rights struggle in the sports arena and led the desegregation of the SEC.

Known for his slam-dunks and referred to as "king of the boards," Wallace was graduated from Pearl on June 7 as class valedictorian. During his high school basketball career, he averaged 19 rebounds and 12 points per game. A high school All-American, Wallace was recruited by more than 80 colleges and universities across the country. His graduation from high school occurred in the midst of the modern Civil Rights Movement and racial cordons across the spectrum were down or coming down every day. Yet, the SEC continued to conduct business as usual and remained racially segregated.

Wallace and his Pearl High teammates broke the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association's (TSSAA) color barrier when they became the first African-American high school team to win the TSSAA's Boys' State Basketball Tournament (1966). Pearl High School's legendary Coach Cornelius Ridley suited a team of well disciplined, cerebral, and poised athletic student warriors.

A self-confident and disciplined Perry Wallace assumed a leadership role both on and off the basketball court. In the spring of 1966, both the Nashville *Tennessean* and *Nashville Banner* covered the flurry of recruiting surrounding Wallace and watched with great anticipation to see with which institution of higher education he would cast his lot. According to Roy Neel, who covered his signing as a sports reporter for the *Banner*, the high school All-American was "the best player in the region." Said Neel, "It was a daily drama." The excitement reached its apex when Wallace signed with Vanderbilt University, an SEC member school. He entered Vanderbilt University that fall as an engineering major and joined Vanderbilt's freshman basketball team. The same year, Roy Skinner, the Commodores basketball coach, also signed Godfrey Dillard from Detroit, Michigan, another African-American freshman basketball player.

During their first year, the African-American players encountered segregation's "flood of hatred" during games at Mississippi State, the University of Tennessee, and Auburn University. In spite of vitriolic racism, the players successfully completed their first year. However, Dillard left the team because of numerous injuries, leaving Wallace as the only African-American player on the Commodores squad. On December 2, 1967, he became the first African-American varsity student athlete to compete in the SEC.

According to Brad Golder's article "Breaking Barriers: The Story of Perry Wallace, the SEC's First Black Athlete," in the Vanderbilt *Hustler* (February 26, 2002), Wallace was handicapped before his first season on the varsity team began. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), with "strong support from Kentucky Head Coach Adolph Rupp and Oklahoma Head Coach Henry Iba, outlawed the slam-dunk in college basketball." The "dunk shot" was Wallace's high school trademark. Like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (Lew Alcindor) of UCLA and other black collegiate basketball players, he executed it with precision. In 1966, Rupp's

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Kentucky Wildcats were upset in the National Championship by five black starters at Texas Western. "The NCAA crapped on Perry," Skinner said. "They took away his game." Notwithstanding, Wallace persevered and developed into one of the SEC's best post players.

Desegregating the SEC was not an easy task for the first African American who competed in its conference. He experienced intense ire from segregationists. Their blatant display of racism was at its worst in Alabama, Mississippi, and his home state of Tennessee. Cheerleaders led a volley of invective racist cheers against him. Although members of opposing teams made him the target of physical abuse on the court, referees refused to acknowledge their actions as intentional fouls. Fans threatened to beat, castrate, and lynch the trailblazing student athlete. When the Commodores played at Oxford, Mississippi, the catcalls, threats, and racially disparaging expletives were so vociferous, they were discernible over the radio airwaves. At Tennessee's Stokely Athletic Center, a group of opposing fans near the baseline threatened lynching, shouting "We gonna string you up, boy!" Wallace was harangued, taunted, and threatened throughout his SEC career.

Struggling to stay inbounds between whites who wanted him to fail and African Americans who expected him to be a "superstar," Wallace became the quintessential "organization man." He never retaliated against players who maliciously fouled him. He realized that any perceived misconduct on his part would impede the progress of SEC desegregation. Wallace remained silently focused and let his performance on the basketball court speak for him. He met the test with dignity, decorum, and determination. The academically astute and well-disciplined student athlete set new criteria for SEC athletics. The first African-American

"Commodore" and the first to complete four years in the SEC, Wallace ended his tenure as captain of the Vanderbilt varsity team. As a testament to his athletic prowess, notable bravery, and despite the racial bigotry he encountered, Wallace continued to reign as "king of the boards." According to Golder, Wallace still ranks "second on Vanderbilt's all-time rebounding list with 894 career rebounds." He stated, this is "a number that is even more amazing considering that he only played three varsity seasons."

A pioneer in the desegregation of SEC sports, Perry E. Wallace, Jr. earned a bachelor's degree in engineering in 1970. After his graduation, the universities of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Kentucky opened the 1970 SEC season with desegregated varsity teams. With the assistance of Vanderbilt University, its coach, basketball team, and a well-disciplined student athlete from Pearl Senior High School, who became the first African American to compete in the Southeastern Conference, Nashville led the way in bringing down the conference's walls of racial segregation. Because of Vanderbilt's actions, the universities that belonged to the SEC diversified the players who suited-up for their courts or playing fields. After 1970, the SEC no longer conducted business as usual or adhered to a restrictive color barrier. In December 2003, after 71 years of existence, the SEC secured its first African-American head football coach when Mississippi State University hired Sylvester Croon, thus bringing down another conference color barricade. Forty years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, its member teams are desegregated as well as its coaching staffs.

--Linda T. Wynn

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