

PERRY WALLACE

THE
LONG ROAD
HOME





*From the distance of 34 years,
burt and confusion and ambivalence
give way to a rare reconciliation.*

By FRYE GAILLARD, BA'68

He stood at the center of the hardwood floor and did his best to take it all in. There had been other times, other moments when the cheering had swept through the building, but he had never imagined it could feel like this. On a February day in 2004, playing once again to an overflow crowd, Perry Wallace had come back home to the Vanderbilt gym, the place where he'd made his own piece of history.

Starting in the summer of 1966, this young man from the north side of Nashville entered the student body at Vanderbilt. He was a basketball star at Pearl High School, the valedictorian of his all-black class, and there were a hundred colleges scattered across the country who wanted him to come play basketball for them. But he had chosen instead to stay close to home, becoming the first black player in the Southeastern Conference, and there were people who said from the very beginning that he carried himself like a young Jackie Robinson. There was a dignity about him, an air of self-possession and restraint, and a gentle courage that you could see in his eyes. But out on the court, he also showed a certain ferocity—his game played mostly above the rim, blocking shots, snatching rebounds with a snap of his hands. And even in the dingy little gyms of Mississippi, where the crowds would threaten and greet him with a slur, there were the occasional gasps of astonishment and awe at the things they had never seen anybody do.

In many ways it was an experience as rich as he could have imagined. But there was a bitterness about it that was slow to recede, and it wasn't just the ugly racism of the road—the choreographed hatred in Deep South arenas where the cheerleaders jeered and epithets flew from every corner of the room. Back at Vanderbilt also, there were nights when he would lie by himself in the dorm and wonder at the icy silence of his classmates. Not all of them, of course. There were people who were kind, and people he admired for their honest confrontation with the issue of race. And yet too often, there were students who looked right past him in the halls, as if somehow he were not even there.

He found it a lonely way to spend his years, and when graduation came in 1970 he told one reporter who was working in Nashville: "I have been there by myself. There were many people who knew my name, but they were not interested in knowing me. It was not so much that I was treated badly. It was just that I wasn't treated at all."

The official relationship cooled after that. People began to talk about "Perry's blast," his public critique of the subtle racism he encountered at his school. Vanderbilt's vice chancellor Rob Roy Purdy spoke for many others when he told the same reporter: "Perry has become quite bitter, you know. He seems to remember the trauma and not the good side of it. He has made a lot of people unhappy."

For a time at least, the hurt ran deep, as Vanderbilt and Wallace went their own separate ways, neither one talking very much about the other. But now here he was in 2004, standing once again at center court. He was a gray-haired man of 56, a husband and father, a law professor at American University, and he thought the emotions might sweep him away as he glanced at his jersey, now hanging from the rafters: No. 25 in black and gold, just the third time in University history that an athlete's jersey had been retired.

Wallace was honored, he told one reporter, and he also was happy for Vanderbilt—proud of the decision the University had made to lay claim to its own little corner of history. There was a symmetry now. A story once overflowing with pain had finally come full circle—fulfilling, more than 30 years later, the delicate promise it had held from the start.

It began in the final days of segregation. Perry Wallace was the youngest of six children, coming of age in an all-black world. His father, Perry Sr., had moved the family to Nashville in the 1930s, joining the massive urban migration in search of greater economic opportunity. They had all been farmers until that time, and Perry Sr. applied the hardheaded ethic he had learned in the fields to the task of earning a living for his family. In the early years he got a job laying brick, and after a while he was doing well enough to start his own company.

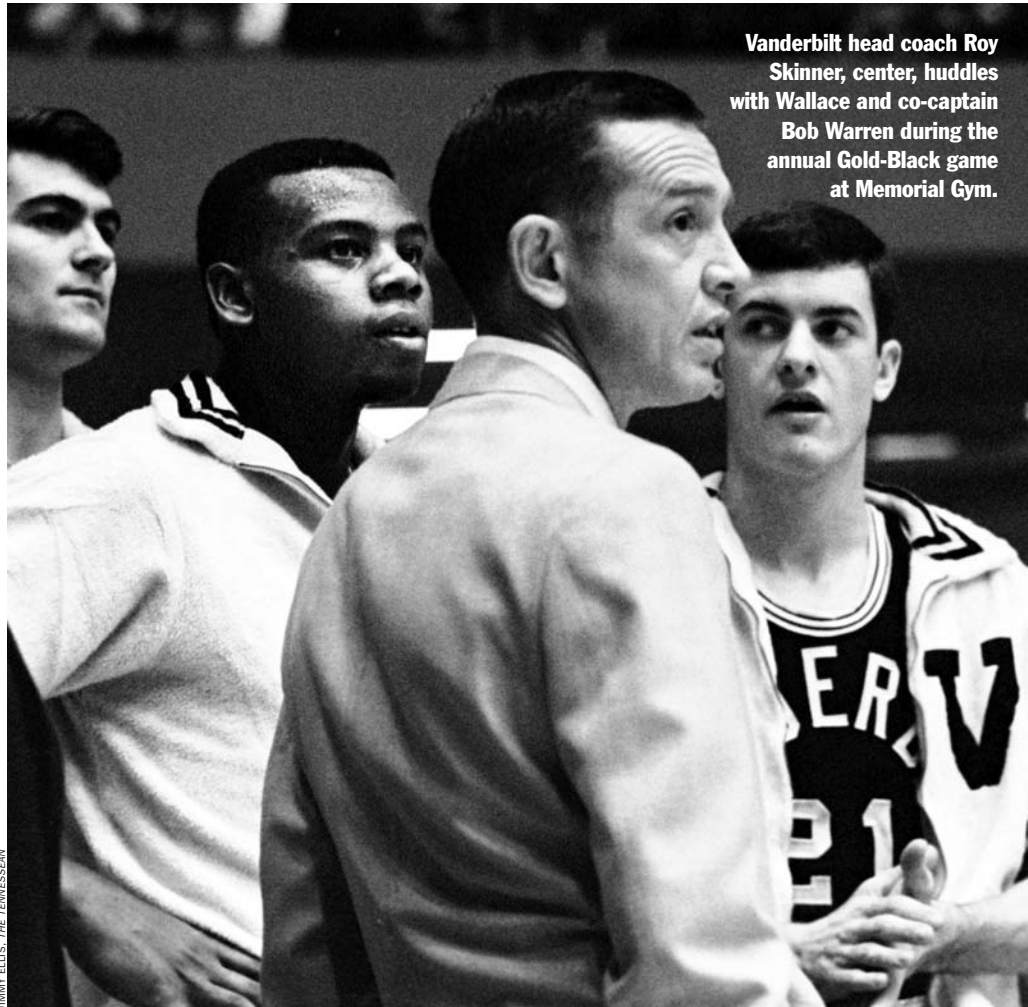
Sometime late in the 1950s, the family moved again to a sturdy new home, nestled near the boundary of a white neighborhood. For Perry Jr., the effect was like living in a no-man's land, especially in the winter of 1960, when the sit-ins began in the heart of downtown. White toughs roamed the streets every day, inflamed by the students from the black universities— young men and women who

dressed as if they were on their way to church. The demonstrators carried themselves with resolve, silent in the face of the insults and violence, as they took their seats in the segregated restaurants.

At the age of 12, Wallace was fascinated by the drama. Sometimes on a dare, he and his friends would venture downtown, lured by the danger, but drawn also by a new and intoxicating kind of hope.

"People were talking," he remembers, "about the possibility of change. We were scared, but curious, especially as kids. We wanted to help, wanted to get involved, but there was also a lot of conflict and hostility—white guys throwing rocks, calling you names, pointing guns at you. You would think to yourself, 'This doesn't make any sense.'"

Many times he thought about getting away. He knew already that he might have special gifts as an athlete, and while he suffered periodically from attacks of asthma, he also knew



Vanderbilt head coach Roy Skinner, center, huddles with Wallace and co-captain Bob Warren during the annual Gold-Black game at Memorial Gym.

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from the example of his parents that obstacles existed in the world that could be overcome. He thought about how it might be to go north. It was what you did, after all, if you were ambitious and black and wanted to go to college. You could go to an all-black school in the South, or you could go to an integrated school in the North.

He was drawn especially to the latter possibility, and with that in mind he worked hard at his game, and even harder at his studies, looking to his future at one of those integrated schools where the faculty was strong and the standards were demanding. By his senior year, Wallace had emerged as valedictorian and a high school all-American on a championship team that had gone undefeated. He knew his parents were proud of what he'd done, and not just because of the accolades or acclaim or the scholarship offers that poured in by the dozens. They seemed to be proudest of all about his *effort*—his energy and drive and dedication to a goal.

Perry Wallace Sr. was that kind of man. He was always a stoic, work-toughened father

who understood clearly that the world didn't surrender its rewards without a fight. But Wallace's mother also exerted a major influence on his life. She, too, was a worker, a gentle woman with an eighth-grade education who had a job cleaning office buildings downtown. She often brought home old magazines, discarded from the waiting rooms where she worked—*Time*, *Life*, it didn't really matter. It expressed her love for learning, and she worked hard to impart the same values to her son.

"I remember taking those magazines as a boy, and looking at all those people on the pages," says Wallace. "These were people living better, and I wanted a part of what they had. Because of that dream, I said to myself at a very early age that I was going to be a student-athlete, probably at a big university up north."

That was always the expectation and the hope, almost a given in his high-school years, encouraged by his family and the teachers at his school. But then he met the person who turned things around. Roy Skinner was the

basketball coach at Vanderbilt, a plain-spoken man born and raised in the South who was having great success in the 1960s. His teams most often were nationally ranked, and his players in general were a credit to the school—student-athletes who knew they were expected to show up for class.

Skinner thought Wallace might fit in well, and told him so at a meeting at his home. Wallace, by then, was a senior and a star, deluged already with scholarship offers, and Skinner knew he had some catching up to do. But he had an advantage the other coaches didn't have. He was a smallish man with a manner that was quiet, unassuming and direct, and to the Wallace family, he seemed to be Southern all the way to the bone. Curiously enough, that put them at ease. They might well have assumed before the conversation started that a Southern white man in the 1960s was more likely than not to be a segregationist. But Skinner gave off none of that aura. Instead, he seemed to be "just folks," a phrase that both of Wallace's parents would use, and theirs was not a superficial assessment.

"My parents knew people, and they knew life," remembers Wallace years later. "And they had a feeling about Coach Skinner. When he came over that day and sat down in our house, he had a certain manner about him, a certain honesty and decency, a rhythm and a style that seemed easygoing. My parents, of course, were looking at him hard. They were asking themselves, 'Who is this man who wants to take our son into dangerous territory?' And they liked what they saw."

Wallace, meanwhile, during that same conversation, was struck by something quite simple and direct. The coach called his parents "Mr. and Mrs. Wallace," and it was not a common practice at the time for a white man to use courtesy titles in such a situation. For Skinner, however, they seemed to come easily, and for Perry and his family, the whole experience tapped in subtly—and then with great force—to the hopes and dreams of the civil rights era.

It had been a preoccupation for years, this powerful movement in pursuit of simple justice that was pulling more and more at the heart of the country. They had watched it on television in the '50s—the riots in Little Rock and the startling heroism of nine black chil-

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dren at Central High School—and they had seen it firsthand in the Nashville sit-ins. Now in the mind of young Perry Wallace, the hopes and opportunities created by the movement suddenly seemed to be more personal and real.

“I had a sense of possibility,” he says. “I had a sense that I could play some role.”

So he decided to cast his lot with Vanderbilt, and to take his place as a racial pioneer. It gave him at least some measure of comfort to know from the start that he was not alone. Coach Skinner, as it happened, had also recruited another black player that year, an outspoken young man by the name of Godfrey Dillard.

Wallace was happy about that piece of news. He figured he would need all the company he could find.

He enrolled in the summer of 1966, taking some introductory courses, and the problems came at him almost from the start. He began attending services at a church near the campus, the only African-American to do so, and after a while a couple of the elders called him aside. They seemed a little uncomfortable about it, and they worked hard to be pleasant as they delivered the news. But the bottom line, they said, was that some of the older members of the church were threatening to write it out of their wills if the racial purity of the congregation were breached. The elders said it probably would be best if Wallace found another place to worship.

“I didn’t hang my head,” he remembers. “I wasn’t really hurt. The old instincts of segregation kicked in. I simply understood that this was one of those places in the South where colored people weren’t welcome.”

The larger melodramas took shape on the road, when the freshman basketball season began. Those were the days when first-year recruits were not yet eligible to play for the varsity. Ole Miss canceled the freshman game that year rather than host black players on its campus, and the story at Kentucky was even stranger. As Wallace remembers it, early in the game or maybe even during warm-ups, he decided to dunk—a stylish habit he had developed in high school. As soon as he did it, he happened to glance at the Kentucky sideline and saw the scowl on the face of Coach Adolph Rupp. Later he learned that his little

The season before, Kentucky had lost the national championship to Texas Western, an unlikely collection of thunder-dunking black players. Now here was Wallace, threatening to bring the same style of play to the SEC. Kentucky’s coach persuaded the National Collegiate Athletic Association to ban the dunk—a move that robbed Perry Wallace of his offense. Wallace took it in stride. He simply worked a little harder on his jump shot.

dunk had triggered a case of *deja vu*. The season before, Kentucky had lost the national championship game to Texas Western, an unlikely collection of thunder-dunking black players led by a guard named David Lattin. Rupp was appalled, and now here was Wallace, threatening to bring the same style of play to a conference as traditional as the SEC.

In defense of the “purity” of the game as he had known it, Rupp set out to change the rules. He persuaded the National Collegiate Athletic Association to ban the dunk for the next several years—a move that robbed Perry Wallace of his offense.

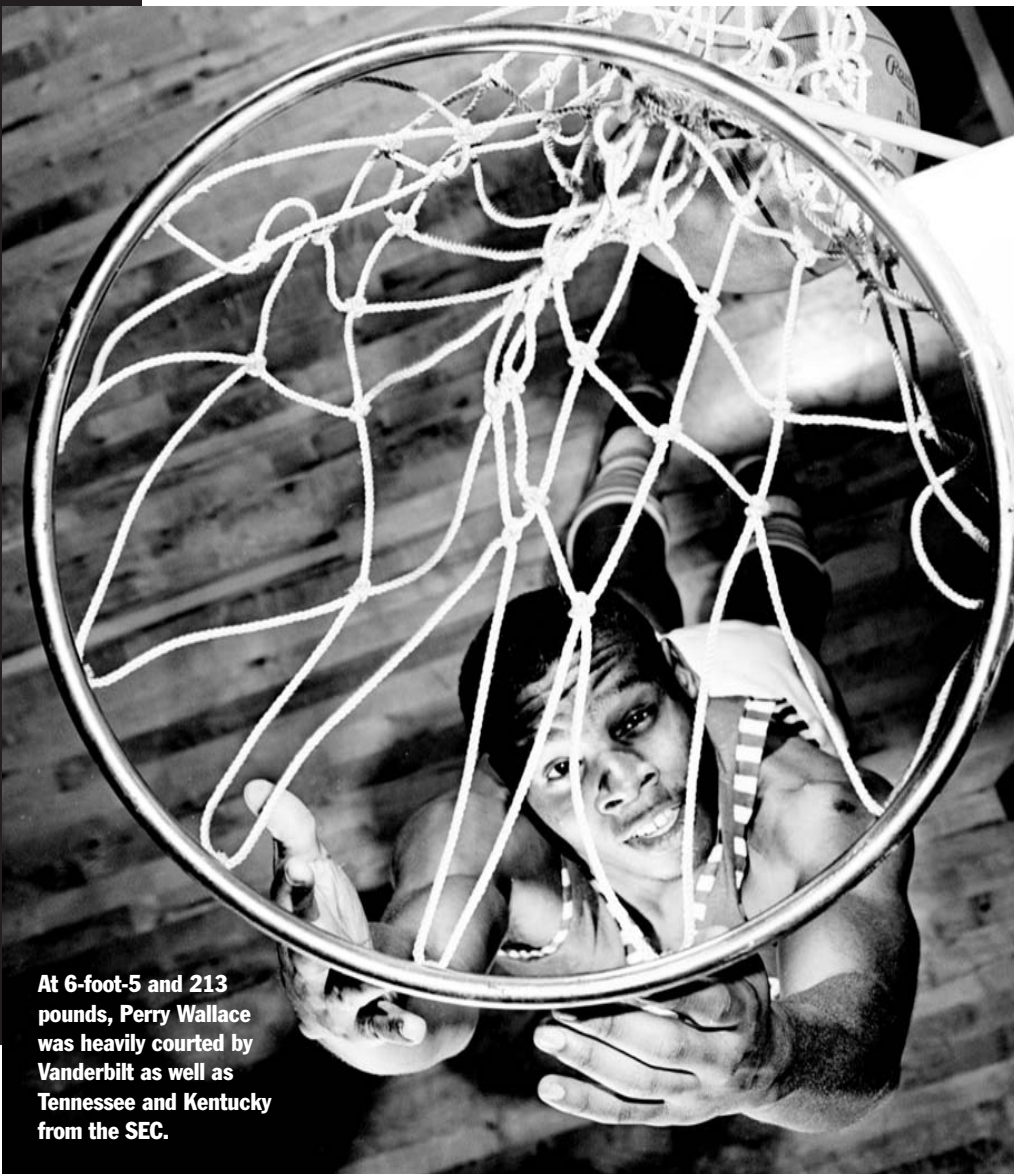
Wallace, however, took it in stride. He simply worked a little harder on his jump shot. But other events during that freshman season were not as easy to put out of his mind. The most disturbing of these was the game they played at Mississippi State. The arena itself was a sweltering place with the look and feel of an airplane hangar, the dressing rooms

tiny with concrete floors, the bleachers like something from a high-school gym. They were filled this night with a howling group of fans, shouting curses and slurs, and Wallace thought it seemed like a preview of hell.

He remembers years later how his hands, improbably, were as cold as ice, despite the stifling heat in the place, and he remembers also that when both teams left the floor for the half, he and Godfrey Dillard sat together on a bench, clasping tightly to each other’s hands.

“We were trying to be in denial,” he says. “We didn’t want it to be this bad. But it was such an outrageous display of racism, like the blaring of trombones. The crowd was starting to shatter our denial.”

They made it through the game, playing well enough in the second half, and Perry took some comfort from the fact that they won. But back at Vanderbilt, a fundamental question started playing with his mind. Like many of the other black students at the school,



At 6-foot-5 and 213 pounds, Perry Wallace was heavily courted by Vanderbilt as well as Tennessee and Kentucky from the SEC.

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he began to ask more skeptically what he could really expect from America. He had been raised with the expectation and the hope — the quite remarkable leap of faith, given the realities of racial segregation — that a person of talent and commitment and drive could somehow manage to make his own way. The country in the end would yield its rewards.

Now, however, he and the others were starting to doubt it. Less than a year into this noble experiment, he was starting to wonder if his assumption of fairness was nothing but a cruel, self-inflicted illusion. Not that there weren't a few reasons for hope. Among other things, Wallace and his friends were impressed by the serious discussion of race quietly taking shape in certain quarters of the campus. It was driven in part by the Impact

Symposium, a student-run group bringing in speakers such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Black Power advocate Stokely Carmichael.

Most impressive to Wallace, the students who were running the program were white, and nearly all of them came from the South. They seemed to understand that the region had to change, that segregation was an anchor pulling them down, and that Vanderbilt was not immune to the problem. But even these students were somehow remote, somehow out of touch with that undertow of loneliness that was pulling at the black students.

In the end, of course, the white students were different, no matter how decent they intended to be. And others were still tied to the bigotry of the past. More than once walking into their dorms, black students heard

cries of “nigger on the hall,” and for Wallace himself, another experience stayed with him even more. He was invited one evening to have dinner with some friends, and they decided to go to the women’s quadrangle. About halfway through the cafeteria line, he suddenly was aware that the coeds were staring — dozens of them with a look that was equal parts fear and disdain. At least that was the way it felt, and his mind flashed back to the story of Emmett Till, the black teenager lynched and mutilated in Mississippi in 1955 for the simple crime of speaking to a white woman.

Wallace’s parents had warned him about such things, and his mother especially had told him many times, “Stay away from white girls.” Now at the women’s cafeteria at Vanderbilt, he felt a powerful urge to get away.

“It occurred to me,” he said years later, “maybe I could just get up and run.”

Instead, he rode it out, and it was not the final time as the months went by that he encountered residues of old blindness or, at the very least, a feeling of being walled away from his peers. All of it was intensified over time by the feelings of hatred he encountered on the road. During his sophomore year in 1968, there was a trip to Ole Miss that seemed to say it all. Godfrey Dillard, his black teammate, was gone by then. He had injured his knee and left the team, and though many of the white players tried to be supportive, in many ways Wallace was out there alone.

Against Ole Miss he injured his eye. He was fighting for a rebound when one of his opponents hit him in the face, something that even today Wallace wonders might have been deliberate. But his eye was bloodied, and the fans in the bleachers responded with delight. They taunted and jeered as he walked off the court, daring him to return, and as the trainers worked on his eye at halftime, he had to fight through a feeling of dread.

By the time the medical personnel had finished, his teammates were already back on the court. Perry knew what was waiting on the other side of the wall, and he paused for a minute at the locker-room door, gathering his resolve. It was then that he noticed a remarkable thing. There was a small group of fans, all of them white, who had made the trip from Vanderbilt to Ole Miss. They stood

and cheered as he stepped through the door, and though their voices were quickly overwhelmed by the boos, Wallace was nevertheless grateful they were there.

Even so, there was a distance somehow that couldn't be bridged. He may have had his supporters in the crowd — people, in fact, who were there at some risk. But in the final analysis, the strength he needed had to come from within.

"There were some good and decent people," Wallace says, "but I also realized at that moment how much I had to carry this thing by myself."

By nearly any measure, he carried it well. That night at Ole Miss, he played the second half like a man possessed, snatching a dozen or more rebounds, and by his senior year he led the team in scoring, averaging more than 17 points a game. In addition to that, as he approached his graduation in 1970, he was deeply admired on the Vanderbilt campus — chosen, in fact, in an annual vote among students as the most respected leader at the school. He graduated with a degree in engineering, a demanding regimen by anyone's standards, and however difficult the whole thing may have been, many people were impressed by his triumph.

"Whenever we would talk," remembers Vereen Bell, a professor of English who knew Wallace well, "I would think about how I was when I was in college, and then I would look at Perry. He was so much wiser, so much more reflective. It was the difference between a teenager and a grown man."

Given the widespread nature of that perception, when Wallace spoke out near the time of graduation, giving the University mixed reviews, even a few of his hard-earned admirers reacted with a mixture of astonishment and shock. What was he talking about anyway? Didn't he hear the cheering in the stands? Didn't he appreciate the accolades and awards? Didn't he value his Vanderbilt degree?

For many years, in different corners of the Vanderbilt community, there were whispered accusations of ingratitude — and some people, in fact, didn't bother to whisper. But a few sprang to Wallace's defense, including his coach, Roy Skinner, the plain-spoken

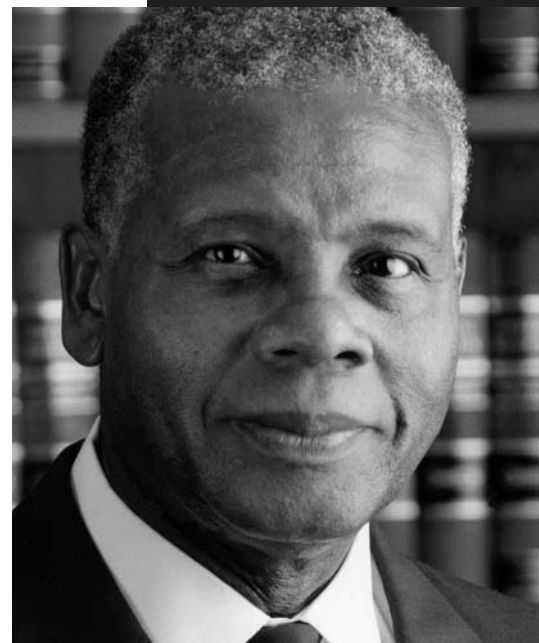
Southerner who lured him to the school, who told one reporter: "I think Perry was trying to help us."

Vereen Bell certainly thought that was true. On many evenings he would listen with a mounting sense of heartbreak as Wallace and some of the other black students would talk about the bewildering reality of the times. They had met among themselves in the spring of 1967, a casual conversation in one of the dorms, and their disillusionment began pouring out. All of them were tentative about it at first, not wanting to seem like whiners. They understood well enough that they had not been marooned in a nest of naked bigots. There were many white students, probably even a majority, who wanted very much to be decent and fair. But the footing sometimes was difficult to find, for many of the old habits of racial segregation were still institutionalized at the school.

All-white fraternities, for example, still dominated the campus social life, and even the idea of integration was new. The first black undergraduates had arrived on campus in 1964, and as the 1960s drew to a close, their numbers were small. But they shared in the mounting impatience nationwide that was sweeping through the African-American community — the intermingling of expectation and anger that followed inevitably from the procrastinations of America and at Vanderbilt, the intimate microcosm where they lived, and they were a bit hurt beneath all the rage to find people still resistant to the notion of equality.

"Looking back on it now," says Bell, "it was such a no-brainer. It's hard today to imagine a period of history when anybody could have been so blind — when anybody could have ostracized or looked down on Perry and these other young people. It was not that the ostracism was universal. But, unfortunately, it happened. It was something all of them had to deal with."

For Wallace, it took a decade to work it all out, to sort through the contradictions and the pain. He left Vanderbilt and made a brief run at pro basketball (playing on a minor-league team) before taking a job with the Urban League, and then entering law school at Columbia University. All the while, he was



CADE MARTIN

sifting through the memories of his Vanderbilt experience — the wounds and scars from the Deep South arenas, and the quieter racism he encountered on campus. He remembered the time in his junior year when a group of white men paid a visit to his room. They invited him to come and worship at their church, which, as it happened, was of the same denomination of the church that had asked him not to come back during his freshman year. Wallace felt tired just listening to their pitch, and told them bluntly it was too much to ask.

"I said, 'Thanks, but no thanks,'" he remembers, "'because I am tired and weary of this race thing. I am tired of the pioneering. I don't want to take on any more.'"

And for a while at least, that was how it was. Then in 1971, during his job interview with the Urban League, he met a man by the name of Ron Brown — the same Ron Brown who would later serve in President Clinton's cabinet before being killed in a European plane crash. There was something strong and reassuring about him, and in that initial interview, Wallace let go with a torrent of emotion, a jumbled recollection of his Vanderbilt days, filled with confusion, ambivalence and hurt.

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thought he had blown it. “I wouldn’t have hired me,” he said years later, “a person that un-together.” But Brown saw something more than the temporary anguish. Perhaps what he saw was a reflection of himself, of his own experience from a few years earlier when he was a pioneering black student at a small school in the North. In any case, the two of them talked many times after that and, slowly but surely, Wallace felt something change.

First during the conversations with Brown, and later during hours of reflection on his own, his exhaustion gradually began to recede, and the memories somehow began to fall into place. He thought often about the other black students — what a brave and intelligent group they were — and there were also white students he had to admire, for they seemed to be embarked on the same kind of journey. They were living on the crest of a monumental change, and they seemed to believe in it as deeply as he did.

There were also the pillars of the institution itself. His coach, Roy Skinner, had lived up to his billing — a demanding presence on the basketball court, but patient and steady — and there were professors like his friend Dr. Bell who went out of their way to make him feel at home. He was also impressed with Chancellor Alexander Heard, a man

who exuded great dignity and strength, as he led the University down the path to integration. When Wallace thought about all those things together, a richness about his Vanderbilt days emerged and left him inevitably with a feeling of pride.

By the time he had started a family of his own and had taken his place on the faculty of American University, he was proud of what he had accomplished in college, and proud of Vanderbilt for giving him the chance. “I just needed time to heal,” he says. “I just needed the time to be myself.”

But whatever peace he discovered on his own, the final moment of reconciliation did not come until 2004, when the University decided to retire his jersey. It was not an idea handed down from the top. Indeed, some on the Vanderbilt faculty thought the old grievances might still be alive, at least on the Vanderbilt side of the divide. Vereen Bell remembers proposing several times that the University name its recreation center after Wallace. He says the suggestion was met with rebuff, often with a grimace or a rolling of the eyes.

But then three students — Zach Thomas, Justin Wood and Sara Ruby — decided for a political science project to do a documentary about Wallace. Their professor, Richard

Pride, had come to Vanderbilt about the time Wallace was emerging as a star, and he encouraged the students to dive into the story.

“The diversity issue had been percolating on campus,” says Pride, “and the students could see that back in the ’60s, Vanderbilt had done something extraordinary.”

When the film was completed, Pride gave it an A, but encouraged the students not to leave it at that. Zach Thomas, a leader in the Student Government Association, proposed a resolution calling for the retirement of Perry Wallace’s jersey, and Vanderbilt Chancellor Gordon Gee was receptive.

And so it was that on Feb. 21, 2004, Wallace stood once again at center court, and cheering filled the room as it had so often in the days when he played. But there was no ambivalence about it this time — as far as anyone knew, no racist whispers out there in the crowd — and Wallace himself was deeply moved by the moment. Already, he had spoken to the student body and then to the members of the basketball team.

He says the current coach, Kevin Stallings, had urged him simply to speak from his heart. “He wanted me to talk about race as well as basketball,” says Wallace. “He wanted it to be a learning experience for his team.”

He spoke for 50 minutes, and though there was no recording of what he said, a few weeks later Wallace offered this account:

“I told them that I was older than they were, and I have gray hair, but we are part of a family with a magnificent heritage. We are students and athletes with one feeding the other. You can get all perfectionist about it if you want to, but perfection can become the enemy of understanding. The simple truth is, Vanderbilt took a chance and let all the horses run, and when you look at that history against the current backdrop of athletic problems — the way some coaches and players are acting — this university can say with great pride, ‘We got that right more than 30 years ago.’”

Kevin Stallings called the speech “inspirational,” and it seemed clear enough that his players agreed. On television that afternoon, they beat LSU 74–54. Perry Wallace watched it all with a smile. ▽