

# December 3, 1955 Basketball Breakthrough

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 27, 2023)

John Spratling, chair of the Scarboro 85 Monument Committee, identified the significance of the upcoming 68<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Black athletes being allowed to play basketball in what was previously a segregated public school system in Tennessee and the Southeast. John rightly states that this action paved the way for many more Blacks to have opportunities to excel at sports. I believe he is correct and think you will agree as well.

Rose Weaver, who along with Martin McBride initiated an effort to recognize the Scarboro 85 Black individuals who were the first in the Southeast to desegregate public schools on September 6, 1955, when the Oak Ridge High School and Robertsville Junior High School was desegregated. Rose and Martin, along with the committee they organized, did this in 2020, to honor the Scarboro 85 on the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what is becoming recognized as a monumental occasion.

It was an honor to have served on the State Board of Education's Social Studies Standards Review Committee this year. We included the Scarboro 85 in the standards and expect approval by the state board on second reading in February, 2024. This will place the Scarboro 85 story in the standards to be taught in all Tennessee public schools.

Since the initiative led by Rose Weaver and Martin McBride, several individuals and groups have helped to recognize the significance of the efforts of those 85 brave young students who are advanced in age now. Local newspapers and television stations have helped as has the City of Oak Ridge and Anderson County, as well as others. The Oak Ridge High School's Mark Buckner has engaged the students there to assist in the design of the Scarboro 85 monuments being envisioned to be placed on the location of the original pavilion for the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell.

Rose Weaver, with assistance from John Spratling and Martin McBride, has written the story of the breakthrough in sports which John Spratling identified. Please enjoy the amazing story of individuals who endured things most of us have never had to encounter and still led the way for change, radical change, that today we can now take for granted as normal and expected. It was NOT so in 1955!

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December 3, 1955 is a day that fundamentally changed sports in Tennessee and the nation. That date marks the first time Black student athletes entered an All-White public school (or university) sports event in the Southeastern United States.

On that day, two young Scarboro 85 students entered an Oak Ridge High School basketball game for the first time, in a game against Powell Valley High School.

It was a major turning point in American Civil Rights history.

It's difficult to appreciate the extent of emotional pain these young pioneers experienced. The teams they played were All-White ... and racial segregation (outside public education) was rigidly-enforced and perfectly legal.

At the outset, some opposing schools refused to play Oak Ridge with a mixed-racial team.

A contemporary New York Times article noted that a crowd of 500 watched as young Fred Guinn and Lawrence Graham (now Dr. Ahmed Akinwale Alhamisi) played in the game where Powell Valley edged Oak Ridge 53-51. Many felt that more points could have been made if Guinn and Alhamisi had played longer, as they were obviously the better players.

These two young pioneers led the way for future professional superstars, like --- A'ja Wilson (SC), Candice Parker (TN), Michael Jordan (NC), and Shaquille O'Neal (LSU). Back in 1955, they would not

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have been allowed on the court of their respective alma maters due to skin color. They would not have even been allowed in the universities.

Thanks to the courage and leadership of these Scarboro 85 students, Oak Ridge High School was able to field a mixed-racial team:

- Five years before Ruby Bridges,
- Two Years before Little Rock 9,
- One year before Clinton 12,
- Three months before Dr. Martin Luther King and Ms. Rosa Parks national prominence in the Montgomery bus boycott, and
- Six years before the first three Black undergraduates entered the University of Tennessee (and fifteen years before the first Black UT Basketball player!)

In her wonderful book, *Tender Warriors*, Dorothy Sterling interviewed the future Dr. Alhamisi. In the book, he recalled:

"The phone would ring the day of the big game and coach would let me know the time when the bus would leave for the game and within seconds he would call back and say the opposing team would not play Oak Ridge High if that 'N-Word' plays."

"Some teams don't mind my playing, some teams object, but not the fellas on the team. Mostly it's the fans or the board of education that decides against us," said Alhamisi.

In a more-recent interview, Fred Guinn recalled that sixty years ago, names of "N-Word" go home, darkies cannot play basketball, and other profane language, which challenged their character and worth, were used during games.

In a 1990 interview, Guinn said "I remember even to this day, a white woman in a red polka-dot dress who was allowed to shout the "N-Word" at me throughout an entire game and other white students who threw spitballs on the court anytime me and Lawrence played. When I had an opportunity to play any ball, the shot went in. It did not break my concentration."

The late Fred Guinn of Oak Ridge is a member of the class of 1956. "It was a terrible thing," he said. "The coach tried to get teams to play us, but they'd say, 'Don't bring the (black) players.'"

"Even at home games, the coach had to get permission from the other teams before (the two black Oak Ridge players) could play," recalled another Scarboro 85 student, Oak Ridge resident Larry Gipson.

Dr. Alhamisi (then Lawrence Graham) was an all-around athlete in High School. His brother, Ronnie Graham, who played for the Oak Ridge Bombers between 1966 – 1970, recalled that Alhamisi ran into the same situation in High School baseball that he encountered in basketball.

Alhamisi was the catcher for the Oak Ridge Wildcats but not afforded the opportunity to use his athletic ability. "It was his hope --- similar to basketball --- that he would play more to test his ability and how he measured up to other athletes," said Ronnie Graham.

A third game-changing Scarboro 85 basketball player was Robert Berry, a Scarboro 85 student who played on the freshmen team at Oak Ridge High School.

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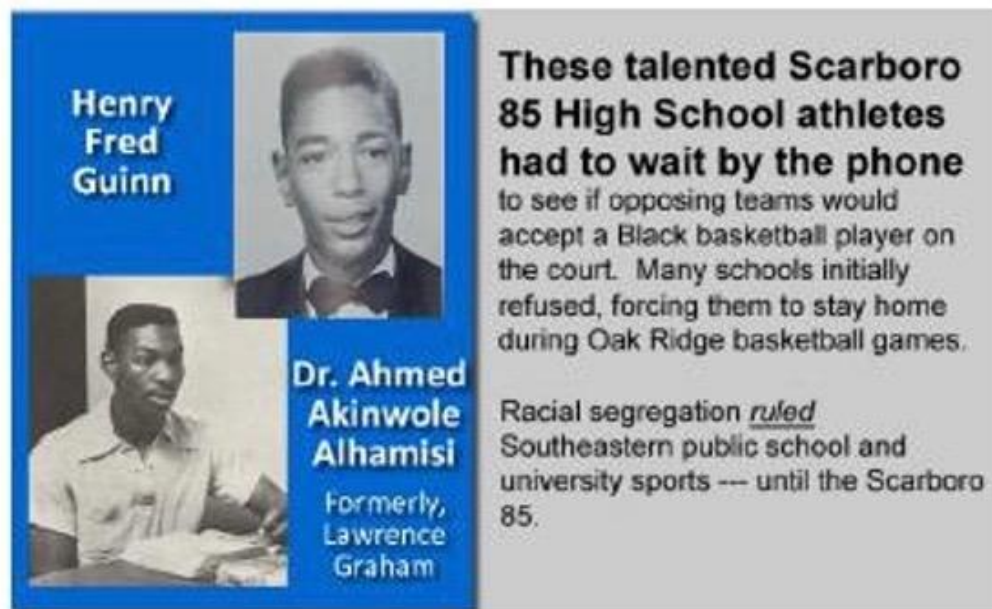
Remember that back then, buses, movie theaters, lunch counters, city and state public facilities, were all segregated. So today, let us think of these three rare individuals. They were courageous leaders, who did not let the shackles of discrimination and difference limit their talent or ingenuity. They believed in the talents they possessed.

Lawrence Graham (now Dr. Ahmed Akinwale Alhamisi) is a renowned educator and author graduating from the University of Michigan-An Arbor where he is retired. The late Fred Guinn retired from Oak Ridge Methodist Medical Center and the Y-12 Plant.

The Scarboro 85 Monument and Historical Interpretive Site is planned to honor them and the other young Black students who paved the way so we today can embrace the message of racial healing and unity for the nation.

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Thank you Rose for this reminder of the achievements we all too often have overlooked. Thanks to John for realizing the significance of these three individuals and what they did to break through the segregation barrier in sports.



Two individuals who led the way to breaking the racial barrier in public school sports in the Southeast

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### SEGREGATION BAN ENDS

#### Oak Ridge School Uses Two Negroes in Basketball Game

OAK RIDGE, Tenn., Dec. 3 (AP)—Two Negroes went in as substitutes for Oak Ridge High School's basketball team tonight. The move marked the first break in segregation in a Tennessee school or college sporting event.

A crowd of 500 persons watched the game as Powell Valley finally edged Oak Ridge, 54-53.

Coach Ben Martin started an all-white team. However, he sent in Fred Guinn, Negro center, midway through the first half. Guinn scored a foul shot thirty seconds later to clip a point off Powell Valley's 7-5 lead.

Once, a few scattered boos were heard when the second Negro player, Lawrence Graham, had a foul called against him.

Oak Ridge was ordered by the Atomic Energy Commission to integrate its schools at the opening of this school term. The city, under the administration of the A. E. C., is the first Tennessee community to comply with the Supreme Court's antisegregation decision.

**The New York Times**

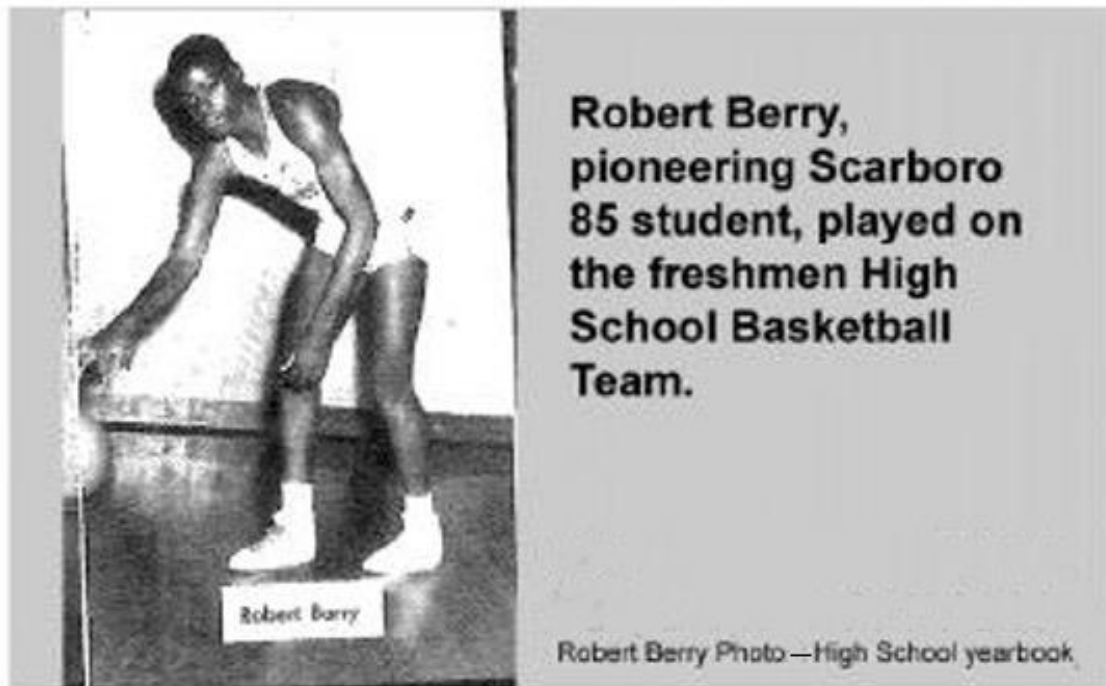
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New York Times article documenting the momentous event and recognizing the accomplishment that led to sports opportunities for many to follow

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The third person who helped break the racial barrier