

Scarboro 85 celebrates the first desegregation of high school or college sports in the Southeast

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of December 30, 2024)

On Friday, December 3, 2024, a breakfast gathering recognized the achievement in 1955 that marked a major transition for high school and college sports. The breakfast, held at Calhoun's Event Center, was well attended and was supported by several educators and a few previous ORHS students who served on a discussion panel moderated by David Clary, voice of the Wildcats.

Panelists were: Jill Prudden, former Lady Wildcats Coach; Aaron Green, current Head Boys Basketball Coach; Darryl Miller, former ORHS Boys Mr. Basketball; Tammy Dowdell, former Lady Wildcats (State Champion); Carman Dowdell Toy-Fouse, former Lady Wildcat; Cameron Sexton, former ORHS Basketball Player and current Speaker of the House for the State of Tennessee; Travis Free, current Head Baseball Coach; Ronald Graham, former ORHS Baseball Player (1962-1965); and Paige Taylor, current ORHS Lady Wildcats Coach.

The panelists each provided their personal insights and comments regarding the significance of the Scarboro 85 desegregation and impact on school sports. These educators and former students added significantly to the celebration.

At that event Trina Watson made the following remarks:

"Friends, we have some remarkable heroes from right here in Oak Ridge, TN that made something extraordinary happen in our nation. You and I are sitting here today unified because these heroes **made it happen**.

"Who are they?"

"The game changers of education and sports, known as the Scarboro 85, are civil rights heroes of this nation. The Scarboro 85 were the brave, young African American students from the all-black Scarboro neighborhood in Oak Ridge, TN, in Anderson County.

"What did they accomplish?"

"The Scarboro 85 students changed the course of history.

"The Scarboro 85 were the first students to desegregate Southeastern public schools. These young, courageous students quietly opened the modern civil rights era when they entered all-white public school classrooms at Oak Ridge high school and Robertsville Junior High School in Oak Ridge TN.

"Two Scarboro 85 students were also the first to desegregate sports in the Southeastern public schools and universities.

"The Southeast was key to the acceptance of the US Supreme court's decision in the case of Brown versus Board of Education. Back in 1954 following the historic Brown versus decision, schools in the north and west begin to quietly desegregate.

"However, Southeastern public schools remained as a unified defiant front: no school desegregation.

"The Tennessee State constitution of that time, like other Southern State constitutions, strictly forbade mixed classes.

"Then... The 85 heroic Tennessee students from the all-black Scarboro neighborhood in Oak Ridge changed everything. They quietly broke the deadlock by desegregating the

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public school system. This remarkable effort was the first major challenge to the Jim Crow racial culture in the Southeast.

“When did this happen?”

“Their landmark school desegregation occurred on September 6, 1955. This was:

- Five years before Ruby Bridges walked into the elementary school in New Orleans
- Two years before the Little Rock 9 in Arkansas
- One year before the Clinton 12
- Months before Dr. Martin Luther King and Ms. Rosa Parks rose to national prominence by leading the historic Montgomery boycott
- Six years before black undergraduate students entered the University of Tennessee
- Two weeks after the tragic murder of Emmett Till

“Their landmark desegregation in sports occurred on December 3, 1955. This was fifteen years before the first black University of Tennessee basketball player.

“Three courageous students, Harry Fred Guinn, Dr. Ahmed Alhamisi, and Robert Berry were the very first to participate in Southeastern public school and university sports.

“These talented high school athletes had to wait by the phone to see if opposing teams would accept a black basketball player on the court. Many schools initially refused, forcing them to stay home during the Oak Ridge basketball games. Racial segregation ruled Southeastern public schools and university sports until the courageous achievement of the Scarboro 85.

“How was this accomplished?”

“We recognize that only by God's grace and the help of the community Pastors, ministers, parents, teachers and the Scarboro school staff helped prepare them for their new journey. Their heroic efforts are fundamental to the entire civil rights movement and to American history.

“Their lives and actions were the bedrock foundation that changed the course of history. This country has been blessed in so many ways and we have benefited from their efforts of public-school desegregation as it opened doors to a whole new group of talented, creative human beings made in the image of God, with unique abilities, talents, and gifts to help our Country solve the very challenging problems we face today.

“We will forever be grateful for the remarkable achievements of the Scarboro 85.”

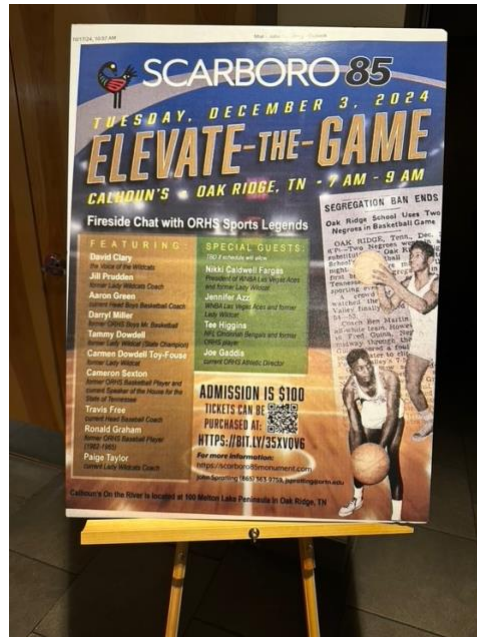
Thank you, Trina, for the words you said at that special occasion.

John Spratling, leader of the effort to establish a monument for the Scarboro 85, also spoke to the group gathered to celebrate the occasion. He reminded the audience of the importance of creating a monument to the achievements of these most courageous individuals who stood strong in the face of adversity to become the first of many to benefit from being allowed to play sports.

The featured panel of educators added their support to the effort to recognize and celebrate these trailblazers who helped to create the opportunity enjoyed by many students today. The civil rights movement was advanced by the Scarboro 85 pioneers and Oak Ridge is proud to be included in the history of that significant cultural change.

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The poster promoting the celebration (Courtesy of Ray Smith)



A newspaper article published in the New York Times on December 4, 1955, featuring the significance of the desegregation of school sports (Courtesy of Ray Smith)

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The panel and some of the audience at the breakfast to honor the first desegregation of sports in public schools in the Southeast (Courtesy of Ray Smith)



Funds are being raised for the monument that will be placed in A. K. Bissell Park to recognize and honor the Scarboro 85. It will be placed at the original location of the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell. (Courtesy of Ray Smith)

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John Spratling speaks to the audience reminding them of the effort to fund a monument to honor the Scarboro 85 (Courtesy of Ray Smith)