

## **THE TOM HARRIS ALUMNI ASSOCIATION**

### **Founded 2005**

#### **The Early Years**

Thomas “Tricky Tom” Harris, the legendary coach of men’s and women’s sport teams at Virginia Union University (VUU) was born April 10, 1908 in Hope, Arkansas.

At the age of 14 he entered Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. It was a trade and high school at that time. Coach Harris gained the Negro All-American status at 16 because Tuskegee played a full college slate at that time. He qualified for the Olympic Trials as quarter-miler in 1931.

Coach Harris finished college at Wilberforce College (now Central of Ohio) located in Yellow Springs, Ohio. After graduation he served as an assistant track and football coach at Wilberforce College from 1938-42.

Later, Coach Harris spent four years in the army (1942-46) during WWII where he achieved the rank of captain. “I was Athletic Officer for Normandy Base and organized the first league there. Then I was assistant athletic officer in Paris. I coordinated athletic activities between England, France, Italy and Germany. Later, I organized goodwill tours to England, Switzerland and Denmark... After the war, I brought the European Golden Gloves Team to Chicago to fight the Americans (two finalists).”

After the war (1946) coach Harris coached at Tennessee State. “I took some Europe’s players, and we had three straight football conference championships, four straight boxing championships, two straight tennis championships and three Olympic participants – one Gold Medalist.”

#### **The Union Years**

Coach Thomas “Tricky Tom” Harris arrived on the campus of Virginia Union University in 1950 after his successful coaching tenure at Tennessee State. According to the Editorial page of The Richmond Times Dispatch, Tuesday, March 2, 1982 – (Coach) “Harris was virtually a one-man athletic department at VUU. At that time he coached football, basketball, baseball, tennis and track. Later he also coached golf.” During his spare time, he served as Athletic Director.

“Everybody,” Coach Harris once said, “told me I’d be crazy to take it (Union job). But I have enjoyed it more than anything in my life.” “Had he listened, he would have likely been at Howard University or Kentucky State all these years,” according to Harold Pearson of the Richmond Times Dispatch.

By several different accounts, VUU’s athletics were at rock bottom when Coach Harris started and for the next 32 years he worked for little glory or financial reward.

## **Coach Harris' Coaching Records at Virginia Union University**

***Basketball*** – Coach Harris' record (1950-74) was 273 victories and 230 defeats. During the time when CIAA teams had to qualify for tournament participation, he led them to the tournament 13 times. He was selected four times CIAA Coach of the Year, between 1951-55 he won four CIAA titles.

Coach Harris was also awarded "The Afro-American News Paper Award" given to the most outstanding coach by a vote of the 1951 Tournament coaches.

He was succeeded by Robert "Bob" Moore, who had served as assistant coach under Coach Harris, and he was also captain of both basketball and football teams while a student athlete at VUU.

***Football***- Coach Harris' (1950-73) record was 98 victories, 83 defeats and 5 ties. In his first season Coach Harris did the improbably – his football Panthers defeated their arch rival Virginia State College for the first time in 17 years.

On his retirement from football he explained, "It was my move. This way I will be able to do more for football. I had to start by myself with every body against me. I didn't want any young man to go through the hell that I did."

"I just couldn't do it all any more. I am tired – not of coaching, but of all the other things you have to do with this job here – recruit, tape, scout, etc." "When I started as football coach here, I had to cut the grass, mark the field by myself before I could even start."

Coach Harris was asked by Harold Pearson (Richmond Times Dispatch, January, 1971) about the future of VUU athletics, "I can project it only in the light of what the administration decides it wants... If it wants to have a good program, I can give it to them. If they don't want to spend some money, it can't be done. It won't take as much money as some of the other schools because we have a different philosophy. We don't feel you need a thousand boys. Just give us 33 scholarships. We can't operate with 17 any longer. I hope they will give Coach Bailey double my allotment."

***Girl's Basketball*** - Coach Harris retired from major men's sports in 1974 and as athletic director in 1979. However, that retirement was short lived. The women's basketball team needed a coach and who better to fill that position than Coach Harris.

When he died on February 27, 1982, he was 16 minutes away from his second consecutive CIAA Women's Championship. Assistant Coach Lou Hearn completed the game and victory. The Pantheretts were 18-4 and scheduled to play Mount St. Mary's in Emmitsberg in the first round of the Division II National Tournament. The next year Coach Lou Hearn took the same team to the Division II Nationals where the Pantheretts won the Division II Women's National Championship.

## **The Death and Legacy of Coach Thomas “Tricky Tom” Harris**

***His Death*** – Coach Harris departed this life on February 27, 1982 at the age of 74 (after serving VUU for 31 years) during the Women’s Basketball CIAA Championship game at the Norfolk Scope in Norfolk, VA. A memorial service was held in his honor on March 2, 1982 in Barco-Stevens Hall, VUU. Dr. Allix B. James, President-Emeritus of VUU presided. He was eulogized by President David T. Shannon, VUU president at that time.

***His Legacy*** – During an interview before his death with John Templeton of the Richmond Afro-American Newspaper (March 6, 1982) he said, “I want to leave serving Union.” He was true to his word.

***Coach Willard Bailey***, at the time of his death noted, “He was the greatest innovator I’ve ever known. He could stretch a dollar as far as it could be stretched and there were games I’ve seen him defeated because of insufficient numbers and the lack of depth...”

During one of his last interviews with Harold Pearson of the Richmond Times Dispatch, Harris smiled, “I am the only person at the University who hasn’t had a vacation in the last 29 years. I should be dead whether you know it or not. I’ve got no business being a living person.”

“When I entered Union in 1959, I cried,” said ***Harlow Fullwood***. “I could have gone like Minnesota. I talked to Coach Harris and he said there is more to this place than buildings.” A week later Fullwood had had enough. He threw his helmet off in practice and started to walk off the field when Coach Harris stopped him, saying, “Son, where you come from the only thing you can do is wash dishes or scrub floors. You’re big, strong, fast and intelligent, but you’re missing one thing – you don’t have a strong commitment to work. If you stay, I will work with you personally before practice and after. The decision you make today will affect you for the rest of your life.” Fullwood stayed for four years, long enough to become an All-American, All-CIAA and be drafted by both the American and National Football Leagues. “Just about everything I have I attribute to that decision he helped me make that day,” said Fullwood.

When Fullwood saw Coach Harris stricken with a heart attack he said, “I just left. I couldn’t handle it. The man was a genius. He could get more out of men and women than anybody I know.”

Fullwood, who went on to become a decorated police agent in Baltimore, president of the Baltimore chapter of alumni and a VUU trustee, said he owes just about all of his success in life to a decision Coach Harris forced on him back in 1959. Fullwood remembered, “He (Harris) never complained about salary. He just tried to make a contribution. He put loyalty to his players, his family and his university before himself.”

***Bob Moore*** is another who owes his success to “Tricky Tom”. “When I wrote him in 1958 asking to play football, I only weighed 165 pounds soaking wet, but he took me in. He taught me that you didn’t have to have all the great facilities and all that. He never had an inferiority complex playing the Morgans or the A&Ts.”

Moore tells how Harris' inventive mind earned him the nickname of "Tricky Tom". "He always had a gimmick – a play just out of the thin air." They never knew what "Tricky" was going to do. In his junior year Moore was convinced to go out for basketball by Coach Harris. That's when he really saw Coach Harris' greatness. "I used to watch him hold football practice until 6:00 p.m., then go home to eat and come back at 6:30 p.m. to run basketball practice. He never complained and he never missed a practice."

"We used to ride in two station wagons and stop by the side of the road to pick up some bologna and orange juice. I know driving those wagons from Carolina to Pennsylvania must have gotten to him. 'That's what Union prepares you for,' Coach Harris used to say. 'If you can survive here, you can survive anywhere.'"

"For him, athletics was a teaching mechanism, more than the three Rs, but the big L – teaching people how to leave," said *David Shannon, then VUU President*. "He became a living legend because of the people he taught in the 50s. Their children are now here. He taught me track and he was teaching my daughter track."

*Willie Spence*, who called him "Pops", played quarterback for Coach Harris' football teams in the mid 1960s at VUU. Yet Spence remembers Coach more as a father than a coach. "He would sacrifice a game if he thought it would teach a lesson. He was more interested in your future as opposed to what was happening right then."

"I'll never forget Tom Harris. He'd take a puff on that cigar of his, say a few words then he'd take another puff. I had the greatest respect for that man. I think that if he could have written a script for his own death, he'd have written it just like it happened. He went out doing what he loved best...influencing young people."

*Lou Hearn* was the assistant coach of the girls' basketball team at the time of Coach Harris' death. He said, "Coach was like a grandfather to the girls and really to me too. One thing he taught was that you had to rise to the occasion and the girls showed they had learned his lessons." The girls had just won a come from behind victory, 61-60, for their second consecutive CIAA Championship.

"His nickname was Tricky Tom, yet he was probably the most honest, straightest dealing man I ever knew," said *Clarence "Big House" Gaines*. "He loved his work too. Everyday was short for Tome. At lunch Saturday, Tom was as jolly and full of life as I'd ever seen him. We talked about a little of everything, and I remember he reminded me about the famous red shoes. A long time ago I bought red shoes for my team, and Tom thought that was really funny. He came over before the game and said 'Boy (he called everyone boy) you think those are your championship shoes? Well, I'm gonna beat 'em right off you.' Then he proceeded to do just that. Tom was still talking about that to the day he died."

"I probably had less success against him than any other coach. Yet winning wasn't that important to Tom. It was the association with the kids and everyone else involved he cherished most. Yeah, he may have had slow words, but he had a fast brain."

One of Coach Harris' last acts as athletic director was hiring *Dave Robbins* as Union's first white basketball coach in the summer of 1978. It was a move that left him open to criticism, even though Union won the NCAA Division II Championship the next year.

"He caught a lot of flak for hiring me," said Robbins. "I'm sure he grew up during the height of racial prejudice, but he was wise enough not to judge a man by his color. For four years he was like a father to me, always so helpful. He could decipher a game in a minute and tell what your pluses were. And he was a great judge of talent. Union will go on without Coach, but I don't see how it can be nearly as good."

Throughout his life, Harris had several nicknames. He was known at Union as "Tricky Tom". At Tuskegee he was "Indian Tom" and "Speed". He was "Mighty Ace" at Wilberforce and "Magician" at Tennessee State. Harris said he never asked about how the nicknames started because "it might have been something bad".

The Arkansas native was known on campus as "Tricky Tom", but was a quiet, reserved individual who shunned the limelight. He refused to be in photos with his players, saying they deserved the attention – not him.

"He wanted to give us all the glory", said junior forward Barvenia Wooten who was on the team at the time of his death. "He told us he had gotten all he needed. He left us a lot of inspiring memories. I looked up to him like a father. We all had so much respect for him."

In a tribute in 1972, *Chancellor John Malcus Ellison* stated, "Coach Thomas Harris is admired by those who know him for his simplicity, his honesty and his "down-to-earth" philosophy which he shares in his demeanor and has expressed in the "Harris Style" of conversation. His genius is so illusive that he is often described as 'Tricky Tom'. He prizes defeat as well as victory; for defeat in games or in contests to him is preparation for victory."

Reported in 1973 by *Randy Hallman* of the Richmond Times Dispatch, Coach Harris said, "The beautiful thing about this job has been watching my boys grow up while they're here, then go out and become a useful part of the world. I believe I've coached more professional people than most coaches. I've coached lawyers, doctors, teachers and a few hustlers."

*Compiled by Joe Louis Simmons, ED.D. '60 – With major sources coming from The Richmond Afro-American, The Richmond Times Dispatch and The Richmond News Leader.*

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