

## **Claude Norris, Vince Borleske and Whitman's Gridiron Battles with the UW**

By Jim Moore '66

Claude Norris is not presently recognized in Whitman College sports history. He should be. A standout athlete, he was among the first African Americans to attend the College. Although a student for only two years in the early 1920s, he was crucial to the College's ability to compete, under the excellent coaching of Vince Borleske, with the biggest universities in the Pacific Northwest during the early part of the twentieth century. Why he was recruited to attend Whitman by Borleske is an interesting story deeply rooted in the competitive relationship between tiny Whitman College and the much larger University of Washington. First, let's consider the early relationship between the two schools and how it brought to Whitman what may have been its first African American student.

Whitman and the UW have been linked competitively from the beginning when Whitman, in 1882, induced the UW's president, A.J. Anderson, to assume the presidency of newly-minted Whitman College. By the early twentieth century, the competition had moved to the football field.

Even though Whitman's student body was, at best, about one-tenth the size of the UW's, the two institutions faced each other on the gridiron periodically for an astonishing forty-five years. The relationship was set in motion when Whitman took interest in the new sport in the 1890s and invited the UW team to Walla Walla to teach athletes the game's finer points. The rivalry took off when they began competing in 1899. Whitman defeated the UW twice and tied them three times between 1900 and 1907. The two schools continued playing in the original Northwest Conference (NWC) from 1910 through 1919 or so when the UW decided to play football in the Pacific Coast Conference with the large California schools. Even after the UW no longer played football in the NWC, Whitman and the UW often competed early in the season. The last football game these schools played against each other was in 1944. One thing was certain through the years: the UW did not want to lose again to the little Walla Walla school.

If you go to a football game at the UW today, you will probably find in the program a reference to the largest score in UW history. It was a 120-0 victory over Whitman in 1919, early in the career of Whitman's fabled coach, Vince Borleske.

Borleske had been a star athlete at Whitman. After graduating, he moved to Seattle to coach and teach at Broadway High School while attending law school. Following Borleske's law school graduation, Whitman President Stephen Penrose recruited him in 1915 to return to Whitman "for a couple of years" to raise Whitman's struggling athletic programs to the class of other, much larger, Pacific Northwest institutions. These included the UW, Washington State College, the University of Idaho, the University of Oregon, and Oregon Agricultural College. Borleske's job, from Penrose's perspective, was to make Whitman's athletic teams competitive on the field and in the classroom. Penrose knew that Borleske valued both; and Borleske, for his part, loved the college and the job.

Borleske's first few years coaching and battling the big public schools on the gridiron were difficult, but Whitman slowly gained strength. That growth was interrupted when World War I took many Whitman athletes into the military. The war ended in November 1918 in the midst of a flu pandemic. No football was played in 1918. A year later college football resumed, but Whitman's experienced players were still in military service; the team consisted of new recruits, mostly freshmen. The UW's ranks, on the other hand, were filled with seasoned players. In the schools' annual game, the Sun Dodgers (UW's nickname at the time) both outweighed and outplayed the Whitties. The result was the horribly one-sided loss mentioned above, 120-0. Thereafter, Borleske used this loss as a motivator to improve his teams' skills and capabilities; and improve them he did.

In 1920, Washington discovered that Whitman was no longer the pushover it was the year before. Whitman led at halftime, 14-12, but ultimately lost the game, 31-14.

In 1921, in one of the greatest games in Whitman history, the Missionaries almost played the Sun Dodgers to a standstill, as described by the 1922 *Wailatpu*:

The old 'Whitman fight' time after time held off the Sundodger eleven when the Missionaries were backed down in the shadow of their own goal posts. The ball would go over on downs and Whitman would punt out, only

to have Washington steadily work the oval back into Whitman territory. It was a great exhibition of fighting made necessary by the fact that the Whitman offense could not 'get going'.

Whitman deserved a nothing to nothing tie score since the [lone] Washington touchdown was a fluke. After a fumbled pass from center Blackman was forced to punt from his own goal line. The ball was partially blocked and shot out toward the sideline. . . . [The] Washington quarterback scooped it up . . . and dove over the Whitman goal line . . . [for the only score of the game].

That 7-0 score was as close as Whitman would ever get to once again defeating the UW in football. Nevertheless, the competition between the schools continued in the major team sports into the 1940s. On several occasions the Missionaries defeated the UW in baseball, tennis, and basketball.

Of particular interest is what the *Waiilatpu* writer had to say about a special Whitman player in the 1921 football game:

Norris, the husky colored fullback, was a tower of strength on defense, despite the fact that he had had only two nights practice before making the trip.

The reference is to Claude Norris, a freshman at Whitman in fall 1921. Mr. Norris grew up in Seattle and attended Broadway High School before matriculating at Whitman. His family had moved to Seattle to escape racism they experienced in the East. According to a [Pacific Northwest Quarterly](#) article entitled "Lesson Twenty-one: African Americans in the Modern Northwest,"

[p]eople of color have generally moved to the American West for the same reason that other groups came—in search of opportunities that, they believed, would be greater in the region than elsewhere [in the US].

The African-American population increased in Seattle from around 400 in 1900 to 2900 in 1920. Racial segregation still predominated. Although, unlike Oregon in the 1920s, Washington did not ban most African-Americans from living in the

State, they had difficulty finding well-paying work and fair treatment. The PN Quarterly article notes that

[u]nion regulations, employment discrimination, and other factors kept the great majority of African Americans [in Washington] at the bottom of the economic ladder in menial and service occupations throughout the first four decades of the century.

Despite the overt discrimination faced by Seattle's African-American residents in the early twentieth century, Claude Norris thrived as a four-sport athlete and student at Broadway High School. Borleske, having coached and taught at Broadway, certainly had faculty friends there who might have called his attention to Norris. Just how Borleske enticed Norris to attend Whitman is unknown, but Borleske's reputation—enhanced by his coaching stint at Broadway—certainly had to be a factor. From Borleske's standpoint, the chance to bring one of the best high school football players in the Northwest to Whitman to give the Missionaries a reasonable chance against the UW was the primary motivation for recruiting Norris; whether Borleske also was interested in breaking the color line as a social statement we will probably never know.

When Whitman announced the decision in 1977 to drop football, Vince O'Keefe, sports editor of *The Seattle Times*, in an article discussing football's history at Whitman, quoted Claude Norris on the subject of his experience playing for Whitman. Norris said that Borleske had recruited many players from Seattle. About himself, he said:

"I played every position but center. We had a bunch of big mooses up front. I was 218 pounds and most of the linemen were bigger."

About the 1921 Washington game he said:

"We met Washington in their new stadium . . . I played all but two minutes of the game at fullback and linebacker. When I left the field the Seattle crowd gave me a standing ovation."

After the 7-0 loss to the Sun Dodgers, the Missionary team of 1921 did not lose another game that season and gave their coach his first conference football

championship. Quite rightfully, Norris was highlighted in the yearbook as one of Whitman's stars and, according to an article in the *Seattle University Spectator* (October 29, 1953), Norris received "All-American mention" at that first season's conclusion.

Norris also starred on the 1922 team, which finished third out of seven teams in the conference. A major event was a week-long-plus trip to Reno to play the University of Nevada and on to Salt Lake City to play the University of Utah. Interestingly, Norris did not go on the trip, for reasons unknown. Given the active racism of the time, it's possible that his not being permitted to lodge in the same hotels or eat at the same restaurants as his teammates factored into the decision.

Two other African-American football players seem to have been recruited by Borleske in 1921: Ira Simons and (Owen) Smauling. Smauling and Simons appear in a team picture, identified only by last names, on page 1 of the *Whitman Pioneer* of October 7, 1921, published shortly before the 1921 game with the UW; however, no evidence exists of either playing in the game. Whitman records show that Simons graduated from Yakima High School and registered to attend classes at Whitman, but there is no record of his completing the semester. As for (Owen) Smauling, the College has no record of his registration at all; this possible first name is based upon census and other public records uncovered by Steve Hammond '79.

The Whitman yearbooks covering 1921-1923 do not suggest that Norris, Smauling, or Simons joined any of the men's living groups. Moreover, it seems clear that Norris's success at Whitman did not result in other African Americans attending Whitman in that decade.

Whitman's records do indicate that Norris left Whitman after his sophomore year to take a job. Starting in 1926 he began his career as a Seattle policeman, a job that lasted for almost 30 years. That was followed by nine years as a highly-respected captain in the King County Sheriff's Office. Norris also spent many years as a physical trainer for Seattle University sports teams and is in the SU sports Hall of Fame. In 1958, the Puget Sound Sportswriters and Sportscasters Association presented Norris with the Sullivan Award for his contributions to Northwest athletics.

Claude Norris certainly was among the first African-Americans to attend Whitman, and he contributed significantly to bringing the first football championship to the College. Mr. Norris's role on that great Missionary team deserves to be celebrated.

The discovery of Claude Norris playing for Whitman in 1921-1922 raises broader questions: Who were other minority students attending and playing on teams for NW colleges and universities at the time? Why has it taken so many decades for even one of these students to be recognized? An article by Jordan James entitled "First Black Player in the History of Major College Football Programs" (<https://247sports.com>, Feb. 13, 2019) indicates that, with regard to "major" college-level football programs, the first African American players in the U.S. attended schools in the East and Midwest. James identifies the first to play in the Far West as Hamilton Greene, a law student at the UW who played the 1923 season, ending with the UW going to the Rose Bowl on January 1, 1924. James lists no African American playing football in Northwest or Pacific Coast institutions before 1923. Claude Norris's participation at Whitman predated Greene by two years, although, interestingly, the 1921 Broadway High School yearbook identifies a Hamilton "Ham" Greene as a high school teammate of Claude Norris.

It appears that even Norris was not the first African American to play football for a team in the Pacific Northwest Conference. The University of Montana joined the PNC (along with Whitman, UW, UO, OAC, WSC, and UI) in 1916; James Dorsey, the first African American to graduate from that institution, played football for Montana from 1919 to 1922 (<https://missoulian.com>). Thus, Claude Norris was probably the second African American to play college football for a NWC team in the Far West.

Very few details have emerged about Claude Norris, Ira Simons, Owen Smaulding or other minority students at Whitman in the early twentieth century: how they were treated by the College, its faculty and the other students; where they lived as students; whether they joined or lived in any of the living groups on campus; why they left Whitman prematurely; what impact Whitman had on them and vice-versa; what impact Norris, in particular, had on the College and its staff or students. If anyone has information regarding these three men or other early minority student-athletes, please share what you know with me ([JMoore914@comcast.net](mailto:JMoore914@comcast.net)) or Dana Bronson in the Whitman Archives

([bronsodm@whitman.edu](mailto:bronsodm@whitman.edu)). The Whitman historical record needs further clarification.

In any event, Norris was a pioneer. And despite the tremendous difficulties brought about by the rampant racism he had to contend with, he was well liked and respected for his work at Broadway High School, at Whitman, in Seattle and King County law enforcement, and as a trainer for many of the fine Seattle University athletic teams of the 1950s and 1960s. Whitman should be grateful for its two-year association with Claude Norris.

JRM, with welcomed research assistance from Dana Bronson and Steve Hammond