

Making History Under Tremendous Pressure: The Warren McVea Story

by Scott Sosebee

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(OCT 10 2022) Today, most of us take it for granted when we turn on the television to watch a college football game, or go in person to view one at a stadium, that there is a good chance that the majority of athletes on the field will be African American. Almost half of all college football players are African American, and at the FBS level—the highest rung of college football—almost two-thirds are Black. Yet, despite such percentages, it was not that long ago that almost all the players were White, and in Texas and the South, until the mid-1960s, African Americans were forbidden from matriculating in and playing for any colleges or universities. Integration would come, generally, in the mid-1960s (Abner Haynes was the first Black athlete to integrate a college team when he enrolled at North Texas State in 1956, but it was in a lower division at the time), and the first African American to play for a Division I level school (the highest classification at that time) was Warren McVea of San Antonio when he was recruited to the University of Houston in 1965.

McVea was born in San Antonio in July 1946, and he Warren athletic prowess from a young age. San Antonio was one of the first cities in Texas to integrate its schools, so McVea was able to attend Brackenridge High School in 1961. His three year career for Eagles was one filled with all-district and, during his senior year, all-state honors. A reporter for the San Antonio Express News, in an article, called his “Wondrous Warren,” a nickname that stuck. During his career as a running back, flanker, and punt/kick returner, he gained over 4,000 multi-purpose yards and scored 596 points. He played more as a running back than anything else his senior year and averaged an amazing 10.3 yards a carry while rushing for 1,332.

Today, if a football player like Warren McVea had accumulated such statistics every school in Texas—in the entire nation—would be knocking on his door. A lot of schools did recruit McVea, seventy-three in fact, but only one from his home state. While he got scholarship offers from 1960s football powerhouses University of Southern California, the University of Michigan, and Michigan State among those seventy-three schools, the University of Texas, or Texas A&M were not among those. The only “big-time” Texas school that offered him a scholarship was the University of Houston, and it took an unusual set of circumstances for that to happen.

The University of Houston always seemed a little like the kid on the outside looking in at other kids on the inside and wanting to belong. When the Southwest Conference looked to expand in 1960 they chose Texas Tech to be a member and not UH, and they made it clear that they probably were not going to consider the Cougars anytime soon. Still, UH was determined to play with the “big boys” and to help get them there they hired a young Michigan State assistant by the name of Bill Yeoman to be their head coach in 1962. Yeoman was not a native Texan—he was from Indiana—and he had played for and served in the Army.

Yeoman, probably because he was not ingrained in the South’s ideas of segregation, came to the conclusion that one way he could compete with the bigger schools was by making inroads in and recruiting African American athletes. He first hired legendary former Lufkin Dunbar High School coach Elmer Redd. Despite being one of the most successful Black coaches in Texas football history, Redd had been cast aside when the federal government had forced Lufkin ISD to integrate its schools and Yeoman recognized that Redd could be a key to helping him get into African American athletes houses to recruit them. Redd did just that with Warren McVea and in July 1964 they convinced the San Antonian to come play for and be the first African American athlete at the University of Houston.

Freshmen were ineligible to play on varsity squads in those days, so McVea did not make his UH debut until the 1965 season. Still, no one had forgotten about “Wondrous Warren.” A Sports Illustrated article on the opening of the college season stated that “McVea is under tremendous pressure this season. Not only is he expected to lead his school to national football prominence, which he may, but he bears the burden of being the first Negro to receive a football scholarship to a major previously all-white college in Texas. His success at Houston could determine the speed with which Southwest Conference teams integrate.” The pressure was certainly there, but if it bothered Warren McVea it did not show. He performed spectacularly as one of the first multi-purpose players in college history. He rushed for almost 2,000 yards as a running back and had about the same number of yards catching the football. He still holds the University of Houston record for longest receiving touchdown in school history, a 99-yard completion against Washington State in

September 1966. He was named All-American twice, after both his junior and senior years. As for pressing the Southwest Conference to integrate? He did play a role, as the year after Yeoman signed McVea, SMU signed Jerry LeVias to be the first African American player in the SWC.

McVea's professional career was not quite as solid as his college one. The AFL expansion team Cincinnati Bengals selected him in the fourth round in 1968. The team employed him mostly as a receiver, where he caught 21 passes and two touchdowns, but Coach Paul Brown did not think he fit into the Bengals scheme so he traded him to the Kansas City Chiefs. Chief coach Hank Stramm did find a way to use McVea, lining him up mostly in the backfield so he could deploy him as both a runner and receiver. He became a star on Kansas City's 1969 team that went on to defeat Minnesota in the Super Bowl in January, 1970. His career, however, began a decline after that and he was out of the league by 1973. McVea then fell on tough times living in Houston after his playing career. Substance abuse problems afflicted him in the 1980s, and he went to prison for drug possession in 1993. He got out in 2000 and has now turned his life around and does some PR work for local Houston sports programs. The now 76-year-old McVea can look back on a life in which he did make a difference.

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