

= Gene Derricotte =

Eugene " Gene " Derricotte (born June 14 , 1926) is a former American football player who played with the University of Michigan Wolverines from 1944 to 1948 . He was one of the University 's first African American athletes in the era when NCAA Division I college football was beginning to integrate . Derricotte established school records that still stand as a punt returner for the Michigan Wolverines football team . He also established several short @-@ lived school interceptions records . Derricotte also served as a Tuskegee Airman and later had a successful career in dentistry while continuing to serve in the military .

= = Early years and college = =

Derricotte was born in Fostoria , Ohio on June 14 , 1926 , and he grew up in Defiance , Ohio , where his father Clarence Cobb Derricotte ran a shoe repair business . In addition to Eugene , Bessie M. Anderson and Clarence Derricotte had two other sons , Bruce (b . June 22 , 1928) and Raymond . Gene married Jeanne E. Hagans and had a son Robert . Years later , Gene Derricotte would tell a reporter friend of his that he always wondered about his ancestry . He knew his name was French , but he was not able to find out much more about his roots . One thing he must have known was that despite living under segregation , other members of the Derricotte family had distinguished themselves as educated professionals . A black newspaper , the Philadelphia Tribune , did a tribute to the family in November 1944 , mentioning that Eugene 's father was a veteran of World War I where he fought in France before returning to Defiance to open his business , marry and raise a family . Eugene had an uncle (J. Flipper Derricotte) who was an attorney in Washington DC , and an aunt Juliette who had been a dean at Fisk College in Nashville TN before dying tragically after an automobile accident , when the nearby white hospital refused to admit her . (Jason , 1944)

While Eugene (or Gene , as he was often called) would become known for his athletic ability , he was also an excellent student , graduating from Defiance High School as the class valedictorian . (Jason , 1944) Because he was a star athlete , he was awarded a scholarship to attend the University of Michigan . He enrolled in 1944 , majoring in chemistry . While there , he became the first African @-@ American to play in the offensive backfield for the Michigan Wolverines football program . Derricotte was an immediate contributor as the team 's leading ground gainer in 1944 . Press reports in 1944 typically referred to his race , identifying him as " freshman negro halfback , " the " Negro speedster , " the " speedy negro freshman , " or the " lithe Negro star . "

In December 1944 , Derricotte was drafted into the United States Army . He was initially assigned as an artillery cannoneer with the 16th Separate Training Battalion in Fort Bragg , North Carolina . He later transferred to the Tuskegee Airmen pilot training program in Tuskegee , Alabama . Derricotte graduated from the program in May 1946 . With the war over , he was discharged , and he returned to the University of Michigan to continue his education .

When he returned from the war in 1946 and resumed his education , he continued to excel in academics as well as sports . He maintained a " B " average and majored in pharmacy . In football , he shared the starting duties at the left halfback position with Bob Chappuis , who went on to All @-@ Big Ten Conference honors in 1946 . After starting nine games at left halfback for Fritz Crisler in 1944 , Derricotte started five games to Chappuis ' four in 1946 . In the first game of the 1946 season , Derricotte threw a touchdown pass to Paul White and was described as the " sparkplug of the Michigan running game . " Derricotte broke his nose in a scrimmage after the first game and saw limited playing time , which gave Chappuis an opportunity to shine .

Derricotte , who wore # 41 while a Michigan Wolverine , had an unusual college football career because he began by starting many games , but gradually became more of a return specialist . In 1946 , Derricotte also set the school 's single @-@ season interceptions record . By 1947 , Chappuis had become an All @-@ American halfback and Derricotte 's only start was one game at quarterback . In 1947 , Derricotte averaged 24 @.@ 8 yards on punt returns , which still stands as a Michigan school record (min 1 @.@ 2 returns / game) . In fact , Derricotte still ranks fifth in NCAA

Division I @-@ A history in average yards per punt return . Oddly , the NCAA recognizes that he had 347 return yards on 14 returns that season (24 @.@ 8) . The University of Michigan claims he had 396 punt return yards that season (which would be 24 @.@ 8 with 16 returns) , but did not average at least 12 @.@ 3 with a minimum of 15 returns to rank in the top ten in school history . The Big Ten record book claims he did not have at least a 17 @.@ 4 return average with a minimum of 10 returns to place in the top ten in conference history . The 396 was a Michigan record from 1947 until 1990 when Tripp Welborne totaled 455 in 1990 . In 1948 , he again only had one start , but this time back at halfback under new coach , Bennie Oosterbaan . Both the 1947 Michigan Wolverines football team , Fritz Crisler 's last team , and the 1948 Michigan Wolverines football team were undefeated and finished the season ranked number 1 in the Associated Press polls . The 1947 team referred to as " Michigan 's Mad Magicians " is considered to be the greatest University of Michigan football team of all time .

During his Michigan career , Derricotte returned four punts for touchdowns , which set a school record that has since been tied (but not exceeded) by Steve Breaston and Derrick Alexander . He also returned three punts for touchdowns in one season , which was a Big Ten Conference record for more than 50 years until Ted Ginn , Jr. returned four punts for touchdowns in 2004 . The record had been tied by both Ira Matthews of the Wisconsin Badgers (1976) and Tim Dwight of the Iowa Hawkeyes (1997) .

In the Associated Press poll at the end of the 1947 season , the Notre Dame Fighting Irish were ranked ahead of the University of Michigan , though both teams were undefeated . Some noted that every Southern AP voter had voted for Notre Dame , which had yet to integrate , whereas three of Michigan 's star players (Derricotte , Bob Mann and Len Ford) were African @-@ American . The Southern schools refused even to schedule games against schools that played African @-@ American players .

Michigan beat USC , 49 ? 0 , in the 1948 Rose Bowl game . Derricotte scored a touchdown on a 45 @-@ yard reception from Henry Fonde in the game . Derricotte also completed a ten @-@ yard pass during the game .

Over the course of his Michigan career , he set the career interceptions record . Neither Derricotte 's career nor single @-@ season interceptions records lasted very long . The career interception record lasted one season and the single @-@ season record lasted three . He was also involved in only the third time Michigan had two 100 @-@ yard rushers in the same game .

= = Professional career = =

Derricotte was selected in the first round of the All @-@ America Football Conference draft in 1949 by the undefeated league defending champion , Cleveland Browns . Unfortunately , he was injured during training camp with the Browns at the end of July 1949 while standing along the sidelines playing catch with a teammate . Coach Paul Brown said Derricotte had a chronic knee injury that only rest could cure . Accordingly , Brown placed Derricotte on waivers , but said hoped he could return for another tryout in 1950 .

Derricotte was inducted into the University of Michigan Athletic Hall of Honor in 1987 . Derricotte also had a successful career in dentistry . In 1950 , Derricotte earned a degree in pharmacy , and in 1958 , he earned a further degree in dentistry . After receiving the second degree , Derricotte returned to the military , serving in Vietnam , as well as South Dakota , Massachusetts , Texas , Hawaii , Virginia , Illinois and at the United States Air Force Academy before his retirement in 1985 . Derricotte then relocated to San Antonio , Texas , where he started another career at the University of Texas Health Science Center . He married , and he and his wife Jeanne had a son , Rob . The family continued to reside in the San Antonio area . Derricotte retired from dentistry in 2000 .

In March 2007 , he was one of six surviving Tuskegee Airmen honored at a ceremony held in Washington , D.C. , where they were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in recognition of their service to the United States . They were also honored at another ceremony in mid @-@ June 2007 at Randolph Air Force Base in Universal City , Texas , near San Antonio .