

= Willis Ward =

Willis Franklin Ward (December 28 , 1912 ? December 30 , 1983) was a track and field athlete and American football player who was inducted into the University of Michigan Athletic Hall of Honor in 1981 .

Ward was the Michigan High School Athlete of the Year , after setting a national prep record in the high jump . At the University of Michigan , he was a collegiate champion in the high jump , the long jump , the 100 @-@ yard dash , and the 440 @-@ yard dash , and finished second in the voting for the Associated Press Big Ten Athlete of the Year award in 1933 . In track and field he was a three @-@ time All @-@ American and eight @-@ time Big Ten champion .

In football , Ward was only the second African @-@ American to win a varsity letter for the Michigan Wolverines football team , lettering in 1932 , 1933 , and 1934 . In 1934 , a controversy developed when Georgia Tech refused to play if Ward took the field , and university officials opted to keep Ward out of the game . Teammate Gerald R. Ford reportedly threatened to quit the team in response to the university ? s decision . After being excluded from the Georgia Tech game , Ward went on to score all 12 of Michigan 's points that year outside of the Georgia Tech game , without another Wolverine even having an extra point or a field goal .

Ward later became a lawyer in Detroit and a member of the Michigan Public Service Commission from 1966 to 1973 , serving as chairman from 1969 to 1973 . He also served as a probate court judge in Wayne County , Michigan .

= = Early years = =

Ward was born in Alabama in 1913 . His father , Henry R. Ward , was an Alabama native who moved to Detroit and worked there in a Ford Motor Company factory . His mother , Bessie , was a Georgia native .

Ward attended Detroit 's Northwestern High School where he excelled in both track and football . As a high school junior , he was named Michigan High School Athlete of the Year , after setting a national prep record in the high jump at 6 ? 4 @.@ 5 . He was city champion in the low hurdles (with a time of 13 @.@ 0) and the high hurdles (with a time of 15 @.@ 8) . Ward also won the 220 hurdles at Ann Arbor (with a time of 25 @.@ 9) and Class A (with a time of 26 @.@ 1) .

= = University of Michigan = =

= = = Freshman track star = = =

Ward attended the University of Michigan from 1931 to 1935 , where he became one of the most successful track athletes in the school ? s history . As a freshman in 1932 , Ward 's specialty was the high jump . Ward won the NCAA high jump championship in June 1932 with a jump of 6 ? 7 1 / 3 . He jumped as high as 6 @-@ 7 @-@ 1 / 2 in his freshman year . Ward 's best jump in 1932 was two inches above the mark that won the gold medal at the 1932 Summer Olympics (Canada 's Duncan McNaughton won the gold with a jump of 6 feet , 5 ½ inches) , but Ward did not qualify for the team .

Ward ? s accomplishments were not limited to the high jump . An Associated Press article in 1932 noted : ? His specialty is the high jump for which he has a mark of 6 feet 7 ½ inches . He can run the high hurdles and the low hurdles . He has broad jumped 22 feet without training in that event . He put the 16 @-@ pound shot over 43 feet without prior experience , and it believed he might be developed into a world champion weight man . He unquestionably could be trained to do the springs . He is only 19 . Ward has an ideal build for a track man , six feet , one inch tall , 185 pounds of well @-@ distributed weight , good legs , natural co @-@ ordination . He is quiet and unassuming , and popular with coaches and fellow members of the squad . ?

When Ward decided to try out for the football team as a sophomore , Michigan track fans worried

that Ward would be injured . The Associated Press reported : ? University of Michigan track fans do a lot of worrying these days because a Negro boy from Detroit insists on playing football . Willis Ward , they believe , will be the greatest track man ever to compete for the Maize and Blue ? if he doesn ' t get hurt . ? Ward is a good football player and loves the game Well wishers even have told him about the advantages of competing only in track and staying away from the gridiron , but he is determined to play on the eleven , and he is good enough to make the grade . ? Michigan ' s track coach , Chuck Hoyt , noted that ? Ward is his own boss and football is his recreation . ?

= = = First African @-@ American football player in 40 years = = =

In addition to the concerns of track fans , Ward 's decision to try out for the football team raised issues of race . Though George Jewett had broken the race barrier as Michigan 's first African @-@ American football player in 1890 , Michigan had not played another African @-@ American in the 40 years after Jewett . During Fielding Yost 's tenure as coach several African @-@ American students joined the football team , but records indicate that none of them ever saw game action and only one earned even a " reserve letter " . Some reports attribute the de facto segregation of the football team to racism on the part of Yost , who was the son of a Confederate soldier .

While in high school , Ward had decided to attend Dartmouth College . With Kipke 's assurance that he would be given full opportunity to play football , Ward enrolled at Michigan . Kipke had played with African @-@ American athletes in high school and was eager to have Ward on his team . According to John Behee , the author of a book on the history of African @-@ American athletes at Michigan , Kipke ? threatened to fight , physically fight , those alumni and fellow coaches who opposed his playing Ward . ? Behee wrote that " on several occasions Kipke took off his coat and was prepared to fight with those who bitterly opposed having a Negro play for Michigan . "

Ward got the opportunity to prove himself in spring football practice in May 1932 . According to one account , Kipke ordered his veterans to pound Ward " without mercy " during practice . " If , at the end of the week " , said Kipke , " he doesn 't turn in his uniform , then I know I 've got a great player . " The United Press reported on the results of spring practice : ? Three young freshmen at the University of Michigan ? Jerry Ford , of Grand Rapids ; Russell Oliver , of Pontiac , and Willis Ward , Detroit Negro ? displayed such brilliance during spring football practice that they are expected to become important cogs next fall in the Wolverine varsity eleven . ? Another report in July 1932 described Ward , the ? giant negro , ? as being ? the outstanding athlete becoming eligible for play . ?

Ward made the team in 1932 and started four games at end . Ivy Williamson , captain of the 1932 football team , greeted Ward at the field house and told him , " If you have any problems with anybody , let me know because we 're prepared to take care of them . " Reporting on his decision to play football and risk injury , the Associated Press noted : ? Ward would rather win an ? M ? on the gridiron than be an Olympic champion . ?

The 1932 Michigan Wolverines football team went 8 ? 0 , outscored its opponents 123 ? 13 , and won the national championship .

= = = 1933 track season = = =

During the 1933 track season , Ward was so dominant that he was dubbed Michigan 's ? one @-@ man track team ? and became a national sensation . He led Michigan to Big Ten championships in both indoor and outdoor track . Going into the Big Ten track meet in May 1933 , Ward was expected to dominate . Coach Hoyt described Ward as ? a good ? un , ? and praised him for his unassuming character and tolerance of the spotlight of publicity . One report noted : ? He is altogether likeable , for he always speaks without raising his voice and never protests a decision . ? Ward is a star now , but he is just finishing his first year of competition . Unless injuries hamper him it is likely he will be as great an attraction or possibly even greater than the two Negro track stars who preceded him here , DeHart Hubbard and Eddie Tolan . ?

Michigan won the Big Ten meet with 60 ½ points , with Ward individually accounting for 18 points .

One writer noted that the Wolverines would have finished in second place ? without the huge , versatile negro . ? At the meet , Ward won the 100 @-@ yard dash and the high jump and placed second in the 120 yard high hurdles and the broad jump . His performance at the Big Ten meet was described as ? the greatest individual performance since Carl Johnson scored 20 points for Michigan in 1918 . ?

Even TIME magazine took note of Ward ? s dominating performance . Time noted : ? The other entrants in the Intercollegiates last week had reason to consider with awe another athlete who ? until he helped Michigan win the Western Conference title last week , with 60 ½ points to Indiana 's 47 ½ had not often been heard of outside the Midwest , except as a member of Michigan 's football team . He was Willis Ward , 196 @-@ lb . Negro sophomore . At the Big Ten meet in Evanston last week . Willis Ward won the 100 @-@ yd. dash in 9 @.@ 6 sec . He won the high jump , placed second in the broad jump . In the 120 @-@ yd. high hurdles , he forced Ohio State 's Jack Keller to world 's record time of 14 @.@ 1 sec . , finished a close second . The 18 points he won were what enabled Michigan to beat Indiana . They made his the most efficient individual performance in a Big Ten meet since Carl Johnson scored 20 points for Michigan in 1918 . Quiet , unassuming , an above @-@ average student of literature , Ward was the first Negro ever elected to Sphinx , Michigan 's junior honor society . ?

At the Drake Relay Carnival in April 1933 , he finished second in the 100 @-@ yard dash , narrowly losing to Ralph Metcalfe . The 1934 Michigan yearbook , called the Michiganensian , noted : " Michigan climaxed a successful season by winning the Annual Butler Relays and taking the title from Indiana . Willis Ward won the meet almost single @-@ handed when he scored thirteen of the team ? s 18 ¾ points . In winning the 60 yard dash , the Flashy negro star equaled the recognized world mark of 6 @.@ 2 seconds . " At the Big Ten indoor track championship , the Michiganensian noted that Ward , ? Michigan ? s all around athlete , was easily the outstanding star of the meet . ? Ward won the 60 @-@ yard dash , the 70 @-@ yard high hurdles and the high jump .

= = = 1933 football season = = =

In 1933 , Ward started all eight games for Michigan at right end and was a key player in Michigan ? s second consecutive undefeated football season and national championship . Time magazine credited the work of Ward and halfback Herman Everhardus : " Michigan came perilously close to slipping from the top of the Big Ten , where it has been for three years . That it did not slip was largely due to a crack halfback named Herman Everhardus and to Willis Ward , a rangy Negro end . It was Ward who , after hard @-@ fighting Illinois had marched to a touchdown in the first period , shot through and blocked the place kick which would have given Illinois a seventh point . " After the season was over , Coach Kipke also credited the play of Everhardus and his ends for the undefeated season : " Our ends , Ward and Petoskey , were near perfection . " Michigan 's left end , Ted Petoskey was named a first @-@ team All @-@ American in 1933 , and Ward earned honorable mention All @-@ American honors at right end .

= = = Runner up for 1933 Big Ten athlete of the year = = =

In December 1933 , Ward finished second in close balloting for the Associated Press Big Ten Athlete of the Year award . The AP reported that Duane Purvis of Purdue beat Ward " by the slender margin of two votes . " In the AP ? s polling of conference coaches and sports writers , 55 votes were cast , with Purvis receiving 17 votes to 15 for Ward , described by the AP as " Michigan 's ' one @-@ man track team . ' " The AP pointed to Ward ? s dual contributions in football and track : ? Ward , in addition to his feats in track , was one of the bright stars of Michigan 's championship football team this fall . Fast and rangy , he was classed as one of the finest wingmen in football . In track , he has run the century in 9 @.@ 6 , high jumped 6 feet 7 ½ inches , leaped 24 feet in the broad jump and won his share of glory in the high hurdles . ?

= = = 1934 track season = = =

In 1934 , Ward won the Big Ten long jump championship with a distance of 23 ? 2 ¼ .

= = = 1934 football season = = =

The 1934 football season proved to be one of the low points in the school 's history , both because of the team 's 1 ? 7 record , and the ugly racial incident that kept Ward out of the game against Georgia Tech . Though excluded from the Georgia Tech game , Willis started every other game ? five games at right end , and two games at halfback . Incredibly , Michigan scored only 21 points in the entire 1934 season , and Ward scored 12 of those points . In fact , Michigan scored nine points against Georgia Tech and Ward 's 12 points were the only points scored by the Wolverines in the seven games in which Ward played . Michigan was shut out in the first two games , before beating Georgia Tech in the season 's third game . The following week , Michigan lost to Illinois , 7 ? 6 , as Ward scored Michigan 's only touchdown from the line of scrimmage of the entire 1934 season . (The season 's only other touchdown came on a punt return against Georgia Tech .) Ward 's touchdown came on a trick play , as fullback Johnny Regeczki passed the ball to end Mike Savage who lateraled to Ward . According to the Chicago Tribune , the lateral " enabled the fleet Negro to outfoot the Illinois secondary . " After being shut out in three games after the Illinois match , Michigan closed the season with a 13 ? 6 loss to Northwestern . Michigan 's only points against Northwestern came on two field goals by Ward . Thus , all 12 of Michigan 's 1934 points outside the Georgia Tech game were scored by Ward , without another Wolverine even having an extra point or a field goal .

= = = 1934 Georgia Tech game = = =

Despite his many accomplishments , the event for which Ward is most remembered is the game he did not play . In 1934 , Michigan had scheduled Georgia Tech as the third game of the season . After learning that Michigan had an African @-@ American player , Georgia Tech football coach and athletic director W. A. " Bill " Alexander refused to allow his team to take the field if Ward played . As early as the fall of 1933 , Alexander wrote to Yost asking what was going to be done about Ward , asserting that his team would not take the field if Ward played .

As the game approached , word spread that Georgia Tech was insisting that Ward not play , and that the administration might capitulate to the demand . Ward 's right to play became a major controversy on the campus . Mass meetings and demonstrations were held . Some students and faculty demanded that either Ward must play or the game should be canceled . Petitions were circulated , and formal protests were lodged with the university by the Ann Arbor Ministerial Association , the NAACP , the National Student League and many other groups . The student newspaper , the Michigan Daily opined : ? If the athletic department forgot it had Ward on its football team when it scheduled a game with Georgia Tech , it was astonishingly forgetful ; ... if it was conscious of Ward 's being on the team but scheduled the game anyway , it was extraordinarily stupid . "

Time magazine ran a story about the uproar on Michigan 's campus : ? Fifteen hundred Michigan students and faculty members signed a petition asking that the team 's star end , Negro Willis Ward , be allowed to play against Georgia Tech . ? According to Time , 200 ? campus radicals ? threatened to prevent the game from being played by standing in the middle of the field . Rumors of a sit @-@ down protest on the 50 @-@ yard line during the game spread across campus in the week before the game . One alumnus recalled that , the night before the game , " bonfires lit all over the campus echoed with screams of student anger , and ' Kill Georgia Tech ' was heard throughout Ann Arbor . " In an attempt to thwart any attempt to disrupt the game , Yost hired a Pinkerton agent to infiltrate " The United Front Committee on Ward " , a conglomerate of student organizations that supported Ward 's right to play .

Athletic authorities argued that Ward should not play because it would be discourteous to Georgia Tech , and he might be injured . There was fear that if Ward played , he would be injured by

malicious blows after the play had ended . Playwright Arthur Miller , then a writer for Michigan ' s student newspaper , learned first @-@ hand about the strong resistance among the Georgia Tech team to playing on the same field with an African @-@ American athlete . In his biography of Miller , Enoch Brater noted that Miller had friends from Arkansas who knew one of the Georgia Tech players . Brater described Miller ' s involvement this way : " Rummel [Miller ' s friend from Arkansas] took Miller with them to meet with members of the team , to protest but also to appeal to the athletes ' sense of fair play . " Miller was right in the middle of this " , Rummel recalls . Not only did the visiting team rebuff " the Yankee " Miller " in salty language " , but they told him they would actually kill Ward if he set one foot on the Michigan gridiron . " The Georgia Tech team was wild . " Miller was furious . He " went immediately to the office of the Michigan Daily and wrote an article about it , but it was not published . " . . . Rummel said that Miller " could not believe that the Georgia Tech team would have tried to destroy Willis Ward " but , I am sure they would have . " ?

In the end , Ward was not allowed to play . As his teammates faced Georgia Tech , there are conflicting reports as to Ward ' s whereabouts . According to Time , Ward " sat calmly in a radio booth , watched his teammates defeat the Southerners , 9 @-@ to @-@ 2 . " According to Behee , Ward was not even allowed to watch the game from the press box , or even from the bench of his own stadium . Instead , he spent the afternoon in a fraternity house . A third account states that Kipke " quietly sent Willis Ward off to scout another Michigan game in Wisconsin . " The day after the Georgia Tech game was played , an editorial ran in The Michigan Daily stating " that everyone who touched (the Ward affair) did so only to lose in respect and esteem . "

= = = Gerald Ford ' s role in the Georgia Tech controversy = = =

The school ' s refusal to play Ward in the Georgia Tech game later became part of the public legacy of President Gerald R. Ford . Ward recalled that he met " my man Jerry " during freshman orientation in 1932 , and the two became friends and roommates when the football team traveled for road games . When Ford learned that the school had capitulated to Georgia Tech , some accounts indicate that he " quit the team " or threatened to quit in order " to make a statement and take a stand because Willis Ward was his friend . " Ford wrote about the Georgia Tech incident in his autobiography , recalling that he felt the decision to keep Willis out of the game was " morally wrong . " " I went to Willis himself . He urged me to play . " Look , " he said , " the team ' s having a bad year . We ' ve lost two games already and we probably won ' t win any more . You ' ve got to play Saturday . You owe it to the team . " I decided he was right . That Saturday afternoon , we hit like never before and beat Georgia Tech 9 " 2 . " Years later , Ford wrote that the Ward incident had influenced his thinking about race . Ford noted : " His sacrifice led me to question how educational administrators could capitulate to raw prejudice . " Ford used the story to voice his support for U @-@ M ' s affirmative action admissions policy saying , " Do we really want to risk turning back the clock to an era when the Willis Wards were isolated and penalized for the color of their skin , their economic standing or national ancestry " ?

In 1976 , Ward , then a probate court judge in Wayne County , said that Ford never mentioned the incident to him , but that Ford ' s brother later told him about it . " Jerry was very concerned , " Ward recalled . " His brother told me , " Jerry was so upset he wrote father asking him if he should quit the team . He was that angry . " ? At Ford ' s funeral , President George W. Bush also spoke about the Willis Ward incident . Bush said : " Long before he was known in Washington , Gerald Ford showed his character and his leadership . As a star football player for the University of Michigan , he came face to face with racial prejudice when Georgia Tech came to Ann Arbor for a football game . One of Michigan ' s best players was an African American student named Willis Ward . Georgia Tech said they would not take the field if a black man were allowed to play . Gerald Ford was furious at Georgia Tech for making the demand , and for the University of Michigan for caving in . He agreed to play only after Willis Ward personally asked him to . The stand Gerald Ford took that day was never forgotten by his friend . "

= = = Impact on Ward = = =

Ward proved to be one of the most successful athletes in the history of the University of Michigan . He earned six varsity letters in football and track . In track , he won Big Ten titles in the 100 @-@ yard dash in 1933 ; in the high jump in 1933 and 1935 ; in the 400 meter dash in 1933 ; and in the long jump in 1934 . On several occasions , Ward even beat Jesse Owens in the 100 @-@ yard dash . Because of his all @-@ around skills , Ward was considered a likely contender for the U.S. decathlon team in the 1936 Olympics .

However , the Georgia Tech incident left Ward angry and disillusioned . He recalled that it sapped his competitive spirit . Ward considered quitting football , even writing a letter to Coach Kipke about his intentions of leaving the team . He recalled later that the refusal to let him play against Georgia Tech destroyed his will . " It was the fact that I couldn 't play in the Georgia Tech game . That all of a sudden , the practice that you just did because it was the thing to do that was good ? a tremendous amount of burnt up energy ? all of a sudden becomes drudgery . " His one sports highlight in 1935 was beating Jesse Owens at Yost Fieldhouse in the 60 @-@ yard dash and 65 high hurdles . Ward 's times were neck @-@ and @-@ neck with Owens ' up until the NCAA track and field championship . He took part in the Olympic trials in 1936 , but having lost his competitive drive , Ward , in his own words , did not train to his peak and failed to make the U.S. team . " They were urging me to go out in ' 36 , " Ward recalled . " But that Georgia Tech game killed me . I frankly felt they would not let black athletes compete . Having gone through the Tech experience , it seemed an easy thing for them to say ' Well , we just won 't run ' em if Hitler insists . ' " Interviewed about the incident in 1976 , Ward said : ? It was like any bad experience ? you can ? t forget it , but you don ? t talk about it . It hurts . ?

= = Later years = =

Willis Ward went on to earn a law degree from Detroit College of Law in 1939 and had a distinguished career as a lawyer and judge . In 1964 , Ward , described as ? a Detroit Negro attorney , ? spoke out against Barry Goldwater and in favor of Michigan Governor George Romney as a possible Presidential candidate . In 1966 , Romney appointed Willis to the Michigan Public Service Commission , the state agency responsible for regulating Michigan 's public utilities ; Willis became chairman of the PSC in 1969 , serving in that capacity until 1973 . Ward later was elected a probate judge in Wayne County , Michigan .

Ward was inducted into the University of Michigan Athletic Hall of Honor in 1981 , as part of the fourth group inducted .