

Robinson gave young blacks the will, the means to succeed

by Marc_H._Morial

To some extent, Eddie Robinson, the former Grambling University football coach who died last month, had his own Urban League operating out of the small majority black-student college. In addition to teaching his students how to excel in athletics, he taught them how to succeed in life - how to break down institutional barriers to realize their potential.

Through several presidential administrations and wars, as well as the civil rights movement, he had given young blacks with limited prospects the chance for a better life while making college football history at the same time.

"Eddie Robinson, the son of a cotton sharecropper, had more impact on football than any man in the game's history since Knute Rockne - more than George Halas, Bear Bryant, or anyone," wrote veteran sports writer Allen Barra recently in the Village Voice.

At age 22, Robinson joined Grambling in 1941 as a football and basketball coach. He also taught physical education and served as the football team's bus driver, uniform launderer, field keeper and publicist. In his 57-year career, the beloved coach put the tiny college in northern Louisiana on the map by sending 220 of his football players to the National Football League, including Doug Williams, the first and only black quarterback to win the Super Bowl. Indianapolis Colts' Tony Dungy and the Chicago Bears' Lovie Smith, the first black coaches to reach the big game, cite Robinson as an inspiration and trailblazer.

When he retired from coaching in 1997, Robinson left college football as its most successful coach, a record that stood until four years ago. But what is even more impressive is that he helped over 80 percent of his players obtain college degrees and raised scholarship money for thousands more.

NFL commissioner Roger Goodell observed to the Associated Press in April that the Robinson "always focused on coaching his players to be better men as well as better football players."

Robinson was blessed with the talent to produce greatness on a shoestring budget, giving hope to all Americans that anything is possible with hard work and a belief in oneself.

Some of Robinson's ability to leverage money for Grambling's program stemmed from his friendship with former Purdue University assistant football coach and New York Yankees' owner George Steinbrenner. As Barra points out, Robinson actually played a role in getting the Yankee owner to underwrite the Whitney M. Young Jr. Urban League Classic game that has raised more than \$21 million in scholarships for more than 4,000 students after tight finances prevented the New York Urban League from doing so. The Yankees' owner

continued his support even after the game moved to Giants Stadium in 1987, according to Barra.

To put his football powerhouse on the national radar screen, Robinson took his team on the road in 1968. The tour, which coincided with the release of a documentary titled "Grambling College: 100 Yards to Glory" produced by the late Howard Cosell, helped catapult Grambling football into the spotlight as the first team from a majority black school to appear on all three major television networks. The team's growing fame prompted countless young black football players to follow in their steps and be coached by Robinson.

Last month, in honor of Robinson's life, the National Consortium for Academics and Sports created a new award to be presented to players, coaches and others in the world of sport who exemplify the courage needed to stand up for justice.

How fitting that the first Eddie Robinson Leadership Award last month went to Rutgers women's basketball coach C. Vivian Stringer and her group of outstanding female scholar-athletes who made it all the way to the NCAA women's basketball finals and exhibited great courage and class in the wake of ridicule by radio shock jock Don Imus, who lost his job as a result of the uproar over his insensitive remarks about them.

Robinson, himself, received countless awards over his lifetime, including being inducted into the College Football's Hall of Fame, and honorary degrees, including one from Yale.

Faced with battles all his life - whether against the institutional racism or dealing with a meager football budget at Grambling State, Robinson eventually came up against the one battle he couldn't win - against Alzheimer's Disease, which claimed his life on April 3 at age 88.

In an Associated Press interview, Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco described Robinson as a "great Louisianan and true American hero" as well as "one of the greatest civil rights pioneers in our history."

"Coach Robinson elevated a small-town program to national prominence and tore down barriers to achieve an equal playing field for athletes of all races," she said.

Robinson was a warrior, pioneer, a mentor and most of all - a great man.

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