

All America Bill Lewis

By Bob Royce

When Casper Whitney chose his annual All-America team in 1892 his only bias was towards football's "Big Three" -- Harvard, Princeton and Yale, the teams that then dominated the game. Race, color or creed made no difference to him; he just chose the best players for each position, and that was that. As a result, his choice for the game's best center that year, William H. Lewis, earned the distinction of being the first black football player to earn national recognition -- with no fanfare whatsoever.

Bill Lewis was born in rural Virginia in 1868, the son of former slaves. His father, foreseeing only a life of poverty and turmoil during what historians call "Southern Reconstruction", moved his family north to Massachusetts, the ultimate destination of hundreds who earlier had escaped via "the underground railroad". There, Bill grew up virtually free from racial prejudice and excelled both in the classroom and on the playing field. At the

age of 20 he entered Amherst College, where he undertook a pre-law curriculum and expanded his reputation as a student-athlete.

Amherst was no football powerhouse. Far from it. "The Lord Jeffs" took annual drubbings not only from the members of the Big Three but also from most of the smaller schools on their schedules. They accepted their role as doormats for larger colleges as a toughening process that gave them valuable experience. So Lewis learned his football the hard way. He briefly played halfback, the position for which he might have been best suited, but switched to center when the team had no one else qualified to fill the spot. Anchoring the Amherst line, Bill Lewis rapidly developed the respect of all opponents. In 1891, his senior year, he served as captain, and Amherst ended the season with a 6-4-3 record, the best in the school's history up to that time.

The following year Bill entered Harvard Law School and almost immediately was signed up for football. At 23, he stood 5 feet, 11 inches tall and weighed 173 pounds; a big man for those days, but not big for a

football center, a position where bulk and brawn had always been considered special assets. In fact, it was the lack of bulk that enabled Lewis to excel, expanding the role of center from a mere bulwark to an effective part of the team's attacking unit. In rating the top anchormen at season's end, Whitney ranked his 1891 choice, Adams of Pennsylvania, the most reliable snap-back. He chose Lewis over Adams, however, because of his quickness,



By Rob Royce

Bill Lewis

versatility and ability to handle Yale's Phil Stillman, a rising lineman in his own light.

Whitney chose Lewis again in 1893, this time naming him captain of the All-America team. In Harper's Weekly Whitney wrote: "There can be no two opinions as to the choice of centre (sic). Lewis has proved himself to be not only the best centre of this year, but the best all-round centre that has ever put on a football jacket." No less a pundit than Walter Camp agreed somewhat more than a decade later when he named Lewis to his All-Time All-America for "The Independent" magazine. Camp cited Bill's quickness down-field as revolutionizing center play, changing the requirements of the position "to one of mobility rather than fixed stability."

A successful career and a Harvard law degree were no guarantees for anyone's future, much less that of Bill Lewis, a young black man out on his own for the first time. While struggling to establish his own law practice, he supplemented his income by writing a book ("How To Play Football"), serving as line coach at Harvard and entering politics. Combining legal and political acumen, Lewis climbed from local to state politics and was elected to the Massachusetts State Legislature where he served with distinction. Teddy Roosevelt recognized his ability and appointed him U.S. Attorney for Boston. From 1907 to 1911, Lewis served as the U.S. Attorney for all of New England. Howard Taft appointed him Assistant Attorney General, a spot he held for two years before returning to private practice.

We think of William H. Lewis as a successful football star. Before his death at the age of 81, he thought of himself as a successful attorney.