

Big House Gaines tells the story of how Cleo Hill, a student at Winston-Salem State Teachers College, and Billy Packer, a student at Wake Forest College, organized unauthorized, and probably illegal, scrimmages between their two teams during the mid-1960s.

. . . It was in one of the first home games of the 1959-60 season, when Cleo was a junior, that an event occurred that would start me, Cleo, and the city of Winston-Salem down the path to a peaceful integration of the races.

The game was just about to start when I looked up and saw a white teenager glancing around Whitaker Gym on our campus. It was easy to see him. He was the only white kid in a crowd of 2,000 black folks. Puzzled, I looked at him closer and recognized him from photos that I had seen in the *Winston-Salem Journal's* sports section.

He was Billy Packer, a guard that Wake Forest College in Winston-Salem had recruited from a Northern high school. His father was the coach at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania.

I walked over to him, introduced myself, and said, "Son, why don't you sit down here with me, so you can ask me any questions you want?" I didn't ask him why he was there. I knew why. He was there to watch good basketball, and I needed no other explanation of what one lone white person was doing on the black side of town.

Billy sat down beside me and then asked me which of my players was Cleo Hill. News of Cleo's skills was beginning to reach a white audience, even if that audience was another college basketball player who lived and breathed the sport.

Just as I pointed to Cleo on the court, the game began. Cleo got the tip and immediately threw the ball up toward the basket—a very un-Cleo-like move. The ball never even came close to the basket. It was as big an air ball as any kid who had never played basketball could make.

Without saying a word, Billy glanced at me with maybe a touch of pity or skepticism in his eyes. I knew what he was thinking. *This is the great Cleo Hill I have been hearing so much about?* was written all over Billy's face.

But Cleo soon removed that look from Billy's face and replaced it with one of awe as he began to regularly sink 15-foot hook shots, twohanded set shots, and every other kind of shot there is in the book. Cleo was great on defense, too, even goaltending and getting away with it.

Billy didn't say much to me, but I knew exactly what he was thinking. He was thinking that the black kids in a tiny girls' college in the tiny CIAA played better basketball than the mighty North Carolina, North Carolina State, Duke, and Wake Forest in the mighty Atlantic Coast Conference.

Billy later told me that he thought the ACC probably had more overall talent spread over the entire league, and that Len Chappell, Wake's center, was better than our center. On both those counts, I would probably agree. The CIAA's smallest schools struggled to field consistently good teams, and Chappell was an excellent player.

But Billy went on to say that he had never seen anyone like Cleo for leaping ability. Most importantly, he said the overall athleticism and speed of our team was something that he was not accustomed to seeing on white basketball courts. Without quite saying it, Billy was saying that my little Winston-Salem Teachers College team could hold their own with—if not beat—some of the big-time university teams.

The next day, Wake Forest's coach, Horace "Bones" McKinney, casually asked Billy how he had spent the previous evening.

"Watching Winston-Salem Teachers College play basketball," was Billy's reply.

Bones just nodded. He was trained to be a Baptist minister and had secretly worked behind the scenes to smooth the way for Sam Jones of North Carolina College to be drafted by the NBA in 1957. I know

Bones didn't harbor any ill will toward blacks and probably didn't have any ill feelings toward anyone. Well, maybe he did have ill feelings toward the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which had

beaten Wake for the ACC championship in a 1957 game decided

by a controversial call.

A few days later, I stopped at my office in the gym on my way to church on a Sunday morning. I heard basketballs being dribbled and shot. I would never call a practice on a Sunday morning. In fact, I urged my players to take Sunday off and go to church to get right with God.

I opened the door to the court and looked inside. There were my black players taking on the white Demon Deacons from Wake Forest in a pickup scrimmage. There were no coaches and no fans—just a white team playing basketball against a black team. Perhaps most importantly, there were no referees and no students in street clothes acting in that role. The kids were depending on each other to call and admit to fouls.

I watched for a few seconds, then closed the door before anyone noticed me. I went on to church.

What I had witnessed was probably illegal. In most Southern towns, it was literally against the law for black athletes to play white athletes. In 1947, when Jackie Robinson had tried to play professional baseball in some Southern cities, the local governments had closed those facilities rather than allow him to play. Now, here were 20 or so black and white college students in my gym playing basketball.

Billy, without asking Coach McKinney's permission, and Cleo, without asking my permission, had arranged for the two teams to play each other whenever travel and class schedules permitted. Billy would later tell me that he had told his teammates about the phenomenal play he had seen in our game, and how the conversation had drifted around to wondering how the Wake team would perform against our players.

One thing led to another, and soon the entire white Wake team from the ritzy west side of town was regularly driving over to the poor east side of town to scrimmage. Sometimes, my black players would cram themselves into a couple of cars and make the trip over to Wake.

Dozens of these unauthorized scrimmages occurred in the early to the mid-1960s, thanks to Billy Packer, who started them as

a player and then continued them when he graduated and returned a few years later as a Wake Forest assistant coach.

What Billy and his teammates and Cleo and his teammates did was unofficially integrate Winston-Salem. According to Billy and Cleo, there was never any conflict between the two races on the basketball court. There were no racial taunts, no macho displays, no fistfights, no violence of any kind. Coach McKinney and I wouldn't know. We were never invited to attend any of those scrimmages. I don't think a single one of them was ever supervised or even witnessed for the full game by a coach on either team. This was the players' idea, and I think both coaches instinctively knew that it should stay their idea.

In one sense, those scrimmages were amazing. In 1959, in a South where racial segregation was the social and legal norm, there were 20 or so black and white young men slamming into each other on a court in an intense basketball game. Despite all this physical contact, there was no violence. . . .