

Coach Carl Snavelly

by Paul Fenchak, 1995

Editor's Note: Madera native Paul Fenchak lives in Lutherville MD and is retired from the Baltimore County School District. A graduate of Madera High School, Clarion University and Penn State, he served as a school principal in Clearfield County and is a life member of the Association of Professional Baseball Players of America. We thank Mr. Fenchak for allowing us to reprint this story -- adapted from an article he wrote for THE PROGRESS and other material he supplied to the Conference Archives.

Carl G. Snavelly (1894-1975), a highly successful college football coach from the 1920's through the 1950's, merits special attention among Central Pennsylvania Conference Methodists because of his strong stance in using a black member of his Cornell University team in a game against the U.S. Naval Academy played in Baltimore's Municipal Stadium on October 18, 1941.

Five year before Branch Rickey employed Jackie Robinson for the baseball Brooklyn Dodgers, Snavelly did what was fair and equitable when other coaches of northern colleges were giving in to the southern desires of not permitting the use of black players.

Snavelly learned of Methodist conviction from his father, Rev. Charles Cameron Snavelly (1860-1943). Admitted on trial to the Central Pennsylvania Conference in 1900, Rev. Snavelly served Altoona Epworth, Williamsburg charge, State College St. Paul's, Danville Trinity, Ramey charge, Clearfield West Side and York Ridge Avenue before retiring in 1928.

Coach Snavelly was raised in Methodist parsonages until Lebanon Valley College football coach Ollie Butterwick traveled to Danville to recruit his renowned "educated toe." Carl said afterwards he had had at the time no intention of going in for higher education, but Ollie was a great salesman. He put his arm around Carl's shoulder and said, "You are going to college." He came the next day, and the rest is history.

A Lebanon Valley students lettering in both football and baseball, Carl returned home to spend the summers of 1913-16 with his family in Ramey. While there, Snavelly played baseball and starred for four summers with two players who became outstanding professionals -- viz., pitcher Marty Baylin (Louisville, American Association) and third baseman Jack Kost (Rochester, International League). It was in Ramey that he met Bernyce Clara Richardson, whom he married shortly after his graduation from Lebanon Valley College. He also worked during those summers in the local coal mines -- and perhaps it was such strenuous and dangerous labor that

added to the strong character formation of Carl Snavelly and built upon the guidance in moral development provided by his father.

Moral fortitude was required in 1941 when Coach Snavelly insisted that Sam Pierce, a black member of Cornell's team, would be used against Navy in Baltimore, a city which then had segregated sports competitions. Never characterized by flamboyance, Snavelly succinctly remarked to the Baltimore press corps before the game, "Pierce is a member of the Cornell team, and if we need him out there tomorrow we'll use him. He's been in all of our games to date, and he'll get his chance if it comes."

It is a tribute to Carl Snavelly that he did not yield on this issue while other coaches, some with national reputations, were taking the easy route and bowing to the prejudice and traditions of the South. And the practice was not limited to football. That previous spring, Navy had refused to allow Lucien Alexis, a Harvard lacrosse player who was black, to participate in a varsity game at Annapolis.

Nor did the Naval Academy stand alone in this practice. A notable similar incident took place in 1937 when the University of Maryland threatened to cancel its football game with Syracuse if that school attempted to use its highly talented black star Wilmeth Sidat-Singh. Mr. Sidat-Singh had to remain in a Baltimore hotel and listen on the radio while his team lost to Maryland 13-0. He gained a measure of revenge the following year, however, when Maryland traveled to Syracuse and he became a veritable one-man offense -- running, passing, and scoring three touchdowns in a 53-0 rout of the visiting Southerners.

And the practice even extended to Methodist schools. That previous fall, Western Maryland College asked visiting Boston University not to use its black player Charley Thomas. BU reluctantly abided by a "gentleman's agreement," and Mr. Thomas formed a depressing tableau sitting idly on the sidelines while his teammates played.

Only an eighteen-year-old sophomore and not yet a first-string substitute, Pierce actually played only a few minutes. He entered the action in the third period, made a tackle and was replaced two plays later. During the final quarter, he was a potential receiver for a play in which the Cornell quarterback was sacked. But the courageous action of Coach Snavelly allowed Samuel Riley Pierce Jr to become the first black both to play against the Naval Academy and to participate in Baltimore's then-segregated sports environment.

Pierce's appearance drew zero reaction on the pages of the Baltimore *Sun*, except that his name was included as a reserve in the aggregate compilation. But for the Baltimore *Afro-American*, it was a major story. A page-one headline trumpeted the news in bold type: "Cornell Star in Navy Game" -- with a smaller headline that read "Academy's Jim Crow Policy Gets Setback." In addition, a picture of Mr. Pierce appeared on the front page, and two more on the inside sports section.

Despite the determination of Coach Snavely to treat athletes without regard to color, he had no control over off-the-field inequalities. While the rest of Cornell's squad stayed at the Gilman School, Mr. Pierce had to room at the Druid Hill YMCA.

There is a sequel to this story that helps to secure its place in history. Coach Snavely's Cornell football player was the same Sam Pierce who roughly 40 years later was selected by President Ronald Reagan to serve as Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The accomplishments of this Phi Beta Kappa graduate and lawyer with the Army's Criminal Investigation Division also include serving as a partner in a New York law firm, an associate counsel to a House of Representatives antitrust committee, a General Sessions judge in New York County, and a member of the board of governors of the American Stock Exchange.

Thanks to the courage and fair play of Carl Snavely, Sam Pierce received his dues that October day. "An honest man's the noblest work of God" is how the British poet Alexander Pope would have summarized the tenacity of Coach Snavely in breaking the color barrier in Baltimore.

Finally, Carl Snavely's October 1941 accomplishment in Baltimore is only one small part of his distinguished coaching career: Bucknell 1927-33, North Carolina 1934-35, Cornell 1936-44, North Carolina 1945-52, and Washington (MO) 1953-58. His 1931 Bucknell team was the only undefeated team in the east, and his 180 career victories place him in the NCAA's top 20. In 1965, he was one of eight persons elected to the National Football Hall of Fame.

He was also an innovator. The Official Book of the National Football Foundation reports that Snavely was "the first college coach to make an intensive study of football motion pictures. The meticulous Cornell coach set up a projection room in his den and devoted hours to scanning those action films. King Carl, as he was called, knew that the camera would reveal flaws in a team's play that the human eye couldn't detect." It goes on to say he was "a great single wing coach" who "turned the quick kick into an offensive weapon and won many games and scored many points by quick kicking on second and third downs."

It's a genuine person who applies the discipline and principles of faith seven days a week. While the name Carl Snavely may not appear beside that of John Wesley or Francis Asbury, this preacher's son from the Central Pennsylvania Conference willingly faced threats and hardships not unrelated to those of his Methodist forebears.