

Colleges • Perspective

Remembering the Orangeburg massacre, and the athlete-activists who took a stand

By **Kevin B. Blackstone** February 13

Robert Lee Davis found himself lying in blood next to his teammate Sam Hammond. At least one bullet had struck Davis in the back. Another went in Hammond's neck.

Davis recalled in [an oral history](#) that Hammond, a running back at South Carolina State, asked him, "Do you think I'm going to live?" Davis, a linebacker, said he answered, "Sam, you are going to be all right, buddy."

Hammond was the first of three young black men to die that night 50 years ago in Orangeburg, S.C. Davis was one of several football players at historically black South Carolina State to survive a hail of police fire with injuries.

What brought them together that Feb. 8, 1968, evening was not a team meeting or the training table. Instead, it was a call to confront a wrong, an affront, an act of overt racial discrimination in Orangeburg at a bowling alley that refused would-be black bowlers just like the state was denying black citizens their human rights.

As a result, Davis and Hammond became athlete-activists long before we created the suddenly ubiquitous, if not trite, alliterative phrase these days to describe football and basketball players, almost all of color, who have, by comparison, merely sported sloganeering T-shirts, or employed histrionics, to demonstrate against racial injustice.

It is a noble and laudable effort, of course. But what we've come to champion of athletes today pales juxtaposed to what so many did in the cauldron of the late '60s civil rights movement. Davis and Hammond, for example, dared to physically confront the very embodiment of the South's recalcitrant racists — scores of carbine rifle-toting, all-white state troopers — for which Hammond forfeited not just his career but his life.

They were among at least 30 victims of what became known as the Orangeburg massacre.

I was reminded of it three years ago as a presenter at the annual Media and Civil Rights symposium at the University of South Carolina. It included a mesmerizing panel featuring a demonstrator that night, civil rights icon and scholar Cleveland Sellers, and a reporter who became legendary for his fearless coverage of the massacre and other civil rights movement era violence, Jack Bass. With Jack Nelson, awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on the civil rights movement, Bass authored “The Orangeburg Massacre” in 1970.

And I took note that the panelists, particularly Oliver Francis, a one-time baseball player at Voorhees, another historically black South Carolina college, pointed out that black male athletes in particular stepped to the fore in Orangeburg’s deadly confrontation with white supremacy, and in others. Francis wound up convicted and sentenced to prison for 18 to 24 months as an organizer in an armed black student takeover in 1969 of the Voorhees administration building.

It all reminded that black athletes played not just pivotal roles in the civil rights movement, like the muscle North Carolina A&T football players provided for their classmates engaged in sit-ins to desegregate the Greensboro, N.C., Woolworth’s lunch counter. Or in Rock Hill, S.C., where 10 black Friendship College students were detained by police for trying to desegregate a town lunch counter in 1961 but became known as the Rock Hill Nine after one among them wasn’t booked so he could maintain his athletic scholarship. Chicago Bears running back Willie Galimore was the test black registrant at the Ponce de Leon Motor Lodge in St. Augustine, Fla., that became a flash point for desegregation fights in 1964.

And as was evidenced in Orangeburg, black athletes sometimes were even in the vanguard of protests. Samuel Freedman underscored as much in recounting the Orangeburg massacre in his 2014 book, “Breaking the Line: The Season in Black College Football That Transformed the Sport and Changed the Course of Civil Rights.”

Freedman wrote: “Shortly after the 1967 football season ended, many of the politically engaged members of the South Carolina State team joined in protests against a segregated bowling alley near the campus in Orangeburg.” On Feb. 6, 1968, Freedman reported, Davis and several of his teammates went on their own to the bowling alley and not only were denied admittance but were threatened with arrest by city police for disturbing the peace. Other students eventually joined the football players, objected to the police threats and wound up defending themselves from swinging billy clubs.

Two nights later, Freedman stated, “an all-white force of state troopers opened fire on the student demonstrators, killing three and wounding twenty-eight. Among the dead was one football player . . . Hammond. Several other players were injured by gunfire, one of them temporarily paralyzed.”

Davis was that temporarily paralyzed victim.

The student survivors of the massacre refused, however, to be deterred and allow the killings of Hammond, fellow student Henry Smith and high school football player Delano Middleton to be in vain. They organized a march from campus to the state capital 42 miles away to demand justice. Athletes decided to lead the march by running the distance.

“The four young men who approached me about the run were all track and field distance runners,” Willis Ham, a South Carolina State baseball player at the time, told the (Orangeburg, S.C.) Times and Democrat five years ago. “Three of the young men were

not of American descent, and they simply wanted to express their disgust for the way Americans ‘treat their own,’ with the one tool that they had to their credit [the ability to run].

“We wanted our fellow students to know how deeply we felt about their determination to go to Columbia [S.C.], and express to state officials how they really felt about the lack of support in the days leading to the massacre.”

“It gave us a chance to say that our spirits and drive for freedom from depression would never be destroyed,” Ham explained.

The white troopers who fired on the students were exonerated in a trial a year later. The lone conviction from the incident was of Sellers for incitement. He spent seven months in prison. He was pardoned in 1993.

But what Hammond, the football player, first fell for is forever remembered on South Carolina State’s campus. Its basketball arena that opened that fateful day, Feb. 8, 1968, was renamed the Smith-Hammond-Middleton Memorial Center.

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 **Comments**

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