

CHARLES FOLLIS

By Milt Roberts

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He was called the "Black Cyclone from Wooster." He was born in the little community of Cloverdale, near Roanoke, in 19th century Virginia. His name was Charles W. Follis. What sets this handsome black man apart from all others is that he was America's first black professional football player. The Shelby (Ohio) *Daily Globe* of September 16, 1904, announced that Charles Follis had signed a professional football contract. The headline read, "Charles Follis has signed for the season."

There was no better anywhere ... his sensational play for Shelby in 1904 more than justified the wisdom that their far-sighted manager, Frank C. Schiffer showed when he secured Follis' signature on a football contract.

Who was Charles W. Follis? Mrs. Florence Follis, of Wooster, Ohio, Charles' sister-in-law, was able to provide the answer. Charles was born on February 3, 1879. He was one of seven children. He had four sisters: Cora, Lela, Alice, and Lucile, and two younger brothers, Curtis and Joseph. All three boys played football for Wooster High School. Curtis died at age 19, as a result of complications stemming from a football injury. In 1913, Florence married Joseph, the youngest of the three brothers. She related, "I don't recollect much about Charles and Curtis, only what Joe told me. They were brought to Wooster by their daddy when they were quite young. Joe was born here, and the brothers and sisters all grew up here in Wooster. Charles was the biggest of the three boys, about 200 pounds and six feet tall."

In 1899, as a junior in high school, Charles helped organize the school's first varsity football team. His schoolmates elected him captain. With Follis doing most of the ball carrying, Wooster was unbeaten and unscored on that first year. Even as a young high school runner, Follis showed devastating power. In 1899, when Wooster beat Alliance, 27-0, the Wooster *Republican* reported, "The ball was kicked off and Follis brought it back halfway across the field, plunging through the Alliance boys as if they were so much paper."

After graduation, he entered Wooster University in the spring term of 1901. He did not play football for the University that fall, but for the Wooster A.A., a local amateur team. This team met the Shelby A.A., champions of northern Ohio, in a two game series which brought Follis to the attention of the Shelby team management.

In the first game, a narrow 5-0 loss for Wooster, the Wooster *Republican* reported that "Follis did some splendid tackling and his all-around playing was a feature." Shelby took another look at him in the second game. Those two looks were enough for Frank C. Schiffer, Shelby manager; he wanted Follis playing with his team, not against them.

The Shelby *Daily Globe* of September 8, 1902, reads, "Manager F.C. Schiffer stated this morning that he had secured Follis the colored player of Wooster. He played with Wooster last season and knows the game thoroughly. He will be a valuable addition to

the team, and will arrive in Shelby next Sunday." So, it was 1902 when Frank Schiffer first brought this marvelous black athlete to Shelby, a town that to this day remains without a black family. He was offered a job at Howard Seltzer and Sons Hardware Store, with working hours arranged so that he could both practice and play football.

And play he did! The 58-0 rout of Fremont was highlighted by a 60-yard run by Follis "with the entire Fremont team at his heels." His defensive work was also cited. Time and again in the football seasons of 1902 and 1903, Follis' superb play increased his popularity with the Shelby following.

One of Follis' admiring teammates on the Shelby eleven those two seasons was Branch Rickey, of later Brooklyn Dodger fame. Rickey often played for pay with Shelby while was attending nearby Ohio Wesleyan University, his alma mater. He knew Follis well. In fact, as player-coach of Wesleyan's second team, on October 17, 1903, Rickey felt the "Black Cyclone's" full power when he ran their ends dizzy for 20, 25, 35 and 70 yard gains, the last being a touchdown. After that game Rickey praised Follis, calling him "a wonder."

But all was not praise for Shelby's wonder. He was sometimes the object of rough tactics from opposing players and ridicule from fans in towns and cities visited by the Shelby team. In a 40-0 defeat of Marion, the paper of October 12, 1903, reported "Marion's quarterback started dirty work on Follis, but was called by Bushey." In other words, Bushey, a teammate, had to intercede and act as "policeman." It was reported in a 22-5 victory over the rugged Columbus Panhandles in 1903, that Follis had torn ligaments in his shoulder.

As for fan abuse, Shelby and Toledo were playing one afternoon in 1905 in Toledo, and according to a newspaper account, "Follis, the Shelby halfback, is a Negro and the crowd got after him early, advising the local players to put him out of the game. Toledo captain Jack Tattersall addressed the crowd by saying, 'Don't call Follis a nigger. He is a gentleman and a clean player, and please don't call him that!' He was applauded for his sentiment and the colored player was not molested during the rest of the game."

Verbal abuse didn't always occur away from home, however. One confrontation for the popular black athlete was with a Shelby tavern owner. It is recalled by the town's old-timers even today. The Shelby players crowded into the tavern one afternoon for post-practice refreshments. Follis, at a teammate's invitation, had come along for the first time. When the tavern owner saw him, he announced that white football players could stay but black ones would have to go. Follis didn't force the issue; he withdrew from the group and took his refreshment alone.

Considering that he was often a loner, sometimes by choice, sometimes not, it would have been an easy thing for Follis to have withdrawn from people, to have become anti-social. He did not. He was a member of a family steeped in pride and heritage, and though he experienced many trying moments, Charles Follis was never known to have resorted to belligerence in dealing with others.

It is highly probable that Branch Rickey's first hand observation of Follis' unruffled handling of prejudice, on the field and off, influenced his decision to introduce Jackie Robinson to major league baseball, just as he had watched Frank Schiffer introduce Charles Follis to professional football some 40 years earlier.

Follis celebrated his contract signing in 1904 with a remarkable opening performance, leading Shelby to a 29-0 win over Marion with an 83-yard touchdown romp. His steady play was largely responsible for Shelby's 8-1-1 season's record. Their only loss was to the Massillon Tigers, the professional champions of 1904. In 1905 the play of Shelby's fleet halfback only served to increase his widespread reputation. Then in 1906, Schiffer decided to change his reportedly half professional Shelby A.C. eleven into an openly professional team. Charles Follis, as always, figured heavily in Schiffer's plans. But the physical and mental strain the black athlete had endured started to take its toll. He missed the early part of the season, but upon his return handled his share of ball carrying in the late season games. Finally, on Thanksgiving Day, 1906, playing against the Franklin A.C. of Cleveland, he suffered still another injury. It was over ... America's first black professional football player limped off the football field for the last time.

Yet as exceptional as Follis' football talent was, even more startling were his baseball skills. He was truly major league material, Follis was the first black catcher to move from college baseball into black professional baseball. He left Wooster University, Ohio, in 1902 and by 1909 he was catching for John M. Bright's Cuban Giants.

It was evident from the very beginning of his baseball career that he was destined for stardom. In 1900 he was a brilliant young catcher for the Wooster A.A. town team. This team entered the Ohio Trolley League as the Wooster Giants and became the league champions. Charles Follis was the Giants' star catcher ... their leading slugger ... their most widely-known player.

In the seasons of 1901 and 1902, while playing for Wooster University, the black catcher became the talk of the Ohio college circuit. His closest competitor for top catching honors among the Ohio colleges was his future Shelby A.C. football teammate, Branch Rickey, then playing for Ohio Wesleyan University. And though Rickey quickly moved into organized professional baseball, Follis could not enter the major leagues with Rickey because of the color of his skin. Instead, he went his own way, into black professional baseball.

Follis was credited with many stolen bases, double plays, and even two triple plays in his career, but these skills had to rank second to his reputation as a power hitter. More than once sports writers referred to a Follis four bagger as "his usual home run." At least two of his homers were in the category of "moon shots" and are worth description. The first homer took place on August 22, 1901, at the fair grounds in Wooster, against the Sebring A.A. Catching for Wooster A.A., Charley went four-for-four and according to the *Republican*, "Follis came in for his usual whirl at the bat and knocked out two home runs, one of which went farther perhaps than any ball hit at the present diamond. Follis ... sent the ball so far and so swift that it looked like a pea as it whirled over across the race track." The second occurred May 16, 1906, in Ohio Trolley League competition while Follis was catching for the Wooster Giants. With much fanfare, rival city Elyria announced the signing of Herbert "Buttons" Briggs, ex-Chicago Cubs pitcher, for the season's opener against Wooster. Briggs had won 20 games for the National Leaguers only two seasons before. It was meant to scare off Wooster; it certainly didn't impress Charles Follis. Moved to lead-off batter, first inning, first ball pitched, Charley blasted a tremendous home run off the former major league star. He completed the day with four-for-six against the famous "Buttons."

From town ball to college ball, to Trolley League ball in Wooster, to black professional ball in Cleveland was but a short stride for Charles Follis. He had all the ability he needed to make the big jump.

But fate did not smile long on his professional baseball career. Both he and Johnny Bright, who formed the crack battery for the well-known Star-Light Champs of Cleveland and Bright's Cuban Giants, passed away tragically within one year of each other; Bright in 1909; Follis at age 31, from pneumonia, on April 5, 1910. With Follis' passing, Ohio newspapers published feature articles about his talent, reputation, and widespread popularity. "Follis was a natural hitter and he had an ease about him and a confident smile that always seemed to worry opposing pitchers," one report said. "As a football player and as a baseball player he gained the respect of his associates and opponents as well by his clean tactics and his gameness," said another.

The oldtimers in Wooster, Shelby, and Cleveland still talk about him today ... but historians forget him ... young sports fans probably never heard of him before. In Wooster Cemetery, a thin, weathered headstone, slightly tilted by the winds and snow of more than 65 years, marks his final resting place. Today it is viewed as a local historical site.

In May, 1975, when Wooster celebrated its naming as an All-American City with a gala civic parade, seated proudly on one of the attractive floats were relatives of the original Follis family ... smiling and remembering America's first but forgotten black professional football and baseball superstar, Charles W. Follis.