At last, Robeson to enter College grid Hall of Fame

SOUTH BEND, Ind. (AP) – Paul Robeson was the greatest football player of his time, a renowned entertainer and a scholar. But he is best known for being what he really was not – a communist.

For nearly 50 years the former Rutgers player and first black to win consecutive All-American honors (1917-18) was shunned because of his political beliefs and efforts to win equal rights for blacks.

Now, 77 years after his final season, Robeson is taking his place in the College Football Hall of Fame. He and 12 others today are to be the first class of inductees enshrined in the new hall in South Bend.

"My father always believed, he didn't worry about whether the appropriate or the full recognition would come during his lifetime," said Paul Robeson Jr., who will accept the honor Friday for his father, who died in 1976.

"He knew what he had done, why he had done it and he knew eventually he would be (recognized)," he said. "That's all he ever expected and he was right."

Robeson fought for equal rights for blacks beginning in his Rutgers days and developed a reputation as a leftist. When he refused to denounce communism or the Soviet Union, he was labeled a communist.

In the era of McCarthyism and the Cold War, few wanted to be seen as a Robeson supporter. While other greats took their place in the Hall of Fame, Robeson was passed by. He wasn't even on the first ballot in 1951.

"This was the McCarthyism era, and American society had a phobia about radicals," said Ritter Collett, sports editor emeritus of the Dayton (Ohio) *Daily News* and a current member of the Honors Court, the National Football Foundation's 12-member selection committee.

"We have come, in successive years, to view that in a different light, especially as it relates to black radicals," Collett said. "It was only the radical element in American society that was trying to do anything in a legal sense for blacks at that time."

Robeson was neither surprised nor angry at his exclusion, his son said.

Robeson also graduated Phi Beta Kappa and was the valedictorian of the class of 1919. The son of a former slave, he worked his way through Columbia Law School by playing in the American Professional Football League.

Robeson gave up a law career to be a singer and actor, and he entertained all over the world. He played Othello on Broadway and his signature song was, "Ol' Man River."

The other inductees are: Jim Brown, Syracuse; Chris Burford, Stanford; Tommy Casanova, Louisiana State; Jake Gibbs; Mississippi; Rich Glover, Nebraska; Jim Grabowski, Illinois; Jim Martin, Notre Dame; Dennis Onkotz, Penn State; Rick Redman, Washington; Billy Sims, Oklahoma; Mike Singletary, Baylor; and former Arizona State coach Frank Kush.

Those of you to whom I'll send this are too young to remember the Robeson of the period covered in this story. I did not see this story in today's Wash. Post. This clipping is from our local ~~inquirer~~ morning paper, today's, 8/25/95. Robeson was a pre-McCarthy victim. As many others also were. While it is largely true, as Collett says, that it was only blacks who then tried to do something for blacks, it is not entirely true. While~~x~~ it is also true that many people were afraid in those days, all were not. When Robeson went to Washington to address a peace meeting in about 1940 and to sing to it (~~many~~ many songs in foreign languages) the hall was overfilled. I met him at old National Airport, which was where the Pentagon now is, drove him around and to the home of friends of his who were on the Howard faculty. We had a chance to talk some. We also talked as we walked from the hall to where I'd parked the car, several blocks away. Beautiful as his singing voice was, from my recollection his speaking voice also was. He was a very big man, not fat, large, with a large frame. All he carried to and from the meeting was a small square box in which he had what he used for his throat or voice. It was not much more than three inches square. Old Man River was the title of an operetta song, not of the operetta itself. Lil and I do not now recall the operetta title. There was a fourth and more radical if not for the era revolutionary albeit entirely American fourth verse he told me he sang when he could but was not used in the commercial presentation. He was famous for that song but I think it was not really a signature. There were many other roles for which he was famous. One was the title role in "The Emperor Jones." We have an original pen-and-ink sketch of him as Othello that we will give to Hood, possibly mostly for the black student union, and an original pressing of him singing Ballad for Americans.

We may have some other original pressings of his records at 78 rpm. For all the violence of football, he was a very gentle man and his voice normally was, too. He was to have sung Ballad For Americans at the pre-Pearl Harbor Republican convention in Philadelphia, where as I recall Wendell Willkie was nominated to run against FDR, but the right-wing campaign against him was strong. They scratched him but not the song. When he sang at Poughkeepsie, New York, that gathering was assaulted with the apparent intent of killing him. My recollection is not clear but I believe that is what led him to leave this country. I believe that the home in which he spent his last days in West Philadelphia has been bought to be converted into a memorial to him and for community uses. At the time I drove him around in Washington, world-famous as he then was and so often honored, All-American hero that he was, he would not have been allowed to dine in any downtown restaurant in Washington or in any white restaurant. He dined that night with his Howard friends at the home to which I drove him and where I picked him up.