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Alexandria
COMMUNITY MEDIA

Charles Fremont West: A pioneer in sports and medicine



**CHARLES
FREMONT WEST**

The return of school and football provides an opportunity to highlight an Alexandrian who excelled at both. Before he practiced medicine in Alexandria for more than 50 years, Charles Fremont West played in the 1922 Rose Bowl as the first African American to play quarterback.

Born in a farming family near Washington, Pennsylvania, West's athletic ability developed a legendary status early on. His sister said he could outrun the family horse and wrestle the family bull to the ground.

He starred in three sports at

Washington & Jefferson College, near his family home in Pennsylvania. The highlight of his college football career was playing in a scoreless tie against the University of California in the 1922 Rose Bowl.

West, nicknamed "Pruner," had to face a lynch mob before the game, who threatened to kill him and called him a racial slur. However, they couldn't see which player he was, as he was light-skinned. In response to the mob, West said, "We did not bring him."

Spectators later realized that West was playing, and shouted racial slurs at him. The town pharmacy displayed a toy in its show window of a Sambo-like doll, depicting racist caricatures of Black people, with West's name tagged to it. After the game, West went to the store and asked owner Frank Connors for the figure. Impressed by the player's courage, Connors gave West the figure, which is still in the family collection.

Not only did West face racial hate during the game, but his team also only played 11 players during the entirety of the bowl game, despite traveling with 17 players. This meant that West and his teammates played every snap of both offense and defense. Current Rose Bowl rules make a tie virtually impossible today, so the 1922 version is almost certainly the only 0-0 tie in its history.

The Akron Pros offered West a roster spot in 1924, but he enrolled in medical school at Howard University instead. He served as the head coach of the university's football team for two stints, one in 1928 and another in 1934 and 1935.

After completing medical school, West practiced general medicine in Alexandria for more than 50 years. He and his wife La Verne had two children. During his time in Alexandria, West served as the team doctor for Parker-Gray High School. He practiced medi-

cine until 1979, shortly before his passing.

Since the 1970s, West's contributions have led to him being recognized as an African American pioneer in both medicine and sports. In 1978, Howard University Medical Alumni Association honored him for his years of practice. He was inducted into the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame in 1979. Howard University established a Charles Fremont West Memorial Athletic Fund after his death.

In 2011, Washington & Jefferson College had a ceremony in honor of West and installed a display of his accomplishments in the library. They honored him again in 2012 when the alumni magazine highlighted him as an unsung hero in African American sports. In 2018, the Rose Bowl inducted West into its Hall of Fame.

*Out of the Attic is
provided by the Office of
Historic Alexandria.*