Matthews remembered for success on field, overcoming discrimination

By Karl Lindholm, Special to the National College Baseball Hall of Fame

June 29, 1901: The score was tied 5-5 in the bottom of the ninth of the decisive third game of the Harvard-Yale series, before 10,000 fans at the Polo Grounds.

Harvard’s William Clarence Matthews, a freshman, led off with a line drive single to right field, beat the throw to second on a grounder by the next batter, went to third on a sacrifice bunt, and then, “Harvard’s fleetest man” dashed home on a short fly ball with the game-winning run, and delirium engulfed the Harvard fans. The headline the next day in The New York Times read:

“Matthews, Right-Fielder for Crimson Team, Brought in Winning Run in Ninth Inning”

William Clarence Matthews was a terrific college baseball player at the turn of the last century, 1901-1905. In fact, he was rumored in the summer of 1905 to be crossing the color line in the major leagues to play for the Boston Nationals after four years at Harvard.

Compact and lithe at 5’8”, 150 pounds, Matthews played in the middle of the diamond after his first year and batted in the middle of the order. He was the best player on arguably the best college team in the country at a time when America was baseball-mad and outstanding collegians walked off their campuses onto major league nines. Harvard was 75-18 in his four years there.

Making the Harvard varsity squad was an accomplishment in itself: In Matthews’ first year, 136 candidates tried out for the team. He was remarkably versatile and expert at all phases of the game. He led Harvard in batting from 1903-05 with averages of .344, .343 and .336 respectively; he stole 41 bases in his three years as a starter and hit 10 homers.

Matthews, called “Matt” or “Matty” by his teammates and the press, had a flair for the dramatic, often performing his best in the Crimson’s most crucial games. In the first Yale game at Harvard in his sophomore year, for example, he came up in the first inning, and “fairly (met) a fast ball square on the nose.” As The Boston Globe reported:

“Matthews was almost to third before the ball was even picked up. Randall had already crossed the plate, and then came Matthews, running like a deer, crossing the home plate yards ahead of the ball.

“As Matthews was running, the racket on the Harvard stands grew louder and louder, and when he crossed the plate, the band was belching forth in exuberant discord.”

There were many other on-field highlights too. In a crucial game against rival Princeton his senior year, he again crushed a long home run in the first inning, this time with two men on base (“with 8,000 supporters yelling like mad”), providing all the offense the Crimson would need that day in a big 6-1 win.

Matthews was hardly a one-dimensional player. An agile defender, he anchored the infield at short, and often was commended in the Boston press (nine daily newspapers) for his “clean,” “fast” or “brilliant” play in the field. On the base paths, he was clever as well as fast, a constant threat to steal or take the extra base.

Matthews’ greatest baseball achievement at Harvard may not have been on the field at all. Each spring, then as now, the team traveled south to play games in warmer April weather. For three years, Harvard acquiesced to Southern sensibilities and left Matthews home, as Georgetown, Annapolis, Virginia and other opponents would not tolerate being on the field with a black man.

In 1905, however, Harvard abruptly called off its scheduled games in the South and hastily organized three games in the Philadelphia area. It was an extraordinary gesture in support of their black teammate that became a part of Harvard baseball lore. The Boston Globe identified Matthews in his obituary in 1928 as “the shortstop for whom the varsity team abandoned its Southern trip in 1905.”

Despite his small stature, Matthews also played football at Harvard, making the varsity team in his first and fourth years. In his senior year, he starred in the climactic Yale game, a 12-0 loss, before 35,000 fans. An undersized end, he was widely praised for his “fierce” play, and was called in the press Harvard’s “Dark Demon.”

That same spring, 1905, the popular muckraking journal McClure’s published an exposé of the corruption in college sports, fo-
cusing among other ills on the "ramp athlete," one who was not a real student but merely enrolled to enhance a sports team. The article exempted by name one athlete in particular, William Clarence Matthews, whom it called "an example and a moral."

Matthews was an exemplar in other ways too. He was so highly respected by his classmates that he was elected to the prestigious Class Day Committee, responsible for graduation activities, the first black student so honored at Harvard. This recognition gained him national attention.

The McClure's piece was just one of a series of articles in his senior year celebrating Matthews. The Boston Globe offered a long profile of Matthews, picturing him in his study at Harvard and affirming that "those who know him admire him not alone for his qualities as an athlete, as a student, or even for his dogged persistence in overcoming all obstacles in the way of earning his living and education, but as a man of character, and a man who, first having made his own opportunity, has grasped it."

Matthews' route to Harvard was hardly conventional. He was born in the Deep South, in Selma, Ala., the iconic locus of so much important civil rights activity nearly a century later. He trained under Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Industrial and Normal Institute from 1894-97, showing sufficient promise that he came north at age 20 to attend Phillips Andover Academy, and then Harvard, with the intent at the time of returning south "to teach."

Matthews attended Tuskegee in just the second decade of that remarkable institution. He was important figure in the establishment of viable athletic programs there, helping to organize a fledgling football team and serving as captain of the baseball team. There, too, he learned the tailor's trade, was in charge of the mailing department of the school, and graduated as salutatorian of his class.

At Andover from 1897-1901, Matthews was one of five black students in the school and the only one in his class, yet was fully involved in school life. He starred in baseball, football and track and was elected captain of the baseball team, an extraordinary honor. Though Andover students generally attended Yale, Matthews chose Harvard as it was clearly the most congenial environment for an African-American student at the time.

In the summer of 1905, Matthews played his one season of professional baseball in Vermont for Burlington in the Northern League, an "outlaw" league, outside organized baseball's reach. Nonetheless, it was a fast league: In its six-year existence, it numbered more than 100 players with major league experience. Matthews was almost certainly the only black man in 1905 earning a paycheck playing alongside whites in the country.

On July 15, 1905, while Matthews was playing in Vermont, the Boston Traveller reported that it was "probable" that Matthews would be joining the Boston National League nine "very soon." Matthews himself said at the time: "What a shame it is that black men are barred forever from participating in the national game .... Many negroes are brilliant players and should not be shut out because their skin is black."

The next day, the Traveller posted reactions to the rumor. Predictably, Southern newspapers found the idea loathsome. The Atlanta Journal calling Matthews the "human chocolate drop," and reminding readers that the rest of the country was different from Harvard, where "a dark brown epidermis isn't any drawback."

Whatever the facts, Matthews of course did not succeed in integrating the game. The unwritten law, the "color line" drawn in the 1880s, proved fixed in place.

Back in Boston, after his summer in the Northern League, Matthews, now 28, got on with his life. He attended Boston University Law School and passed the bar in 1907, married Penelope Belle "Nellie" Lloyd (a schoolmate at Tuskegee), taught physical education in various Boston high schools and joined the law practice of an influential Harvard alumnus.

He was not altogether through with baseball, however. In the summers between 1906-1910, as he struggled to make ends meet, Matthews played weekends on teams in various semi-pro leagues in the Boston area and southern Maine, always with "the distinction of being the only colored player in the league."

In 1912, he was appointed by President William Howard Taft, with the helpful support of Booker T. Washington, as a special assistant to the U.S. District Attorney in Boston. After World War I, he served from 1920-22 as Marcus Garvey's counselor general in the Universal Negro Improvement Association.

Even while he was with Garvey, he remained involved with Republican Party politics, ultimately serving as the leader of the "colored section" of the Republican Party in support of Calvin Coolidge in the 1924 presidential election. After the election, the Coolidge Administration appointed him to a position in the U.S. Attorney General's Office. As an assistant U.S. attorney general, he was posted in Washington, D.C., Lincoln, Neb., and San Francisco, Calif.

William Clarence Matthews died unexpectedly on April 9, 1928, at the age of 51 on a visit to Washington from his post in San Francisco. The cause of death was a "perforated gastric ulcer." In its obituary, The Boston Globe described Matthews as "one of the most prominent Negro members of the bar in America."

The Pittsburgh Courier, the national black weekly, carried an account of the funeral, reporting that more than 1,500 were in attendance and "scores of telegrams" were received, including one from President Coolidge and another from U.S. Attorney General John Sargent.

In all of the celebrations of his life recounted in the press, his athletic exploits were noted prominently. He was forever, in the oft-repeated phrase, "Harvard's famous colored shortstop."

Author's note: In the course of his public life, Matthews was often referred to as a "graduate" of Harvard. The sad fact is that he never received a Harvard degree, though he had ample credits and even spent his senior year studying in the law school.

Matthews had entered Harvard in 1897 with a "condition" in math. The requirement that he pass a math course at Harvard utterly defeated him. His Harvard transcript shows no fewer than seven notations (courses and exams taken, appeals for a waiver) regarding this proviso, all unsuccessful or denied.

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