

# The Syracuse Walking Dream

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Basketball star, football phenom, fighter pilot: The unsung story of D.C. native Wilmeth Sidat-Singh, who embarrassed the University of Maryland, mastered every sport he tried, and, contrary to press reports, was not a Hindu.

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In October 1937, Syracuse University's undefeated football team traveled to Baltimore to face the Maryland Terrapins. The visitors' rising star heading into the game was Wilmeth Sidat-Singh, a junior halfback playing his first season of organized football.

Over the next few years, on all sorts of playing fields, Sidat-Singh would build a case for himself as one of the greatest all-around athletes ever to call D.C. home, then he'd die a hero's death. Evidence of his greatness can still be found in old newspaper clippings and in the memories of the few folks alive who got to see him perform. Yet nothing about Sidat-Singh's short and brilliant athletic career is more memorable than what he endured in that game with Maryland.

And he didn't even get to play in it.

Sidat-Singh had come to Syracuse on a basketball scholarship, earned while leading DeWitt Clinton High School to the New York prep finals two years in a row. A Syracuse assistant football coach saw him tossing the pigskin in an intramural game and coaxed the kid into coming out for a second sport.

He'd learned to pass a football on the sandlots of Harlem, where his dad had a medical practice.

"We played football or basketball every day, and Wil was good at everything," recalls John Isaacs, now 92, a longtime buddy of Sidat-Singh's. Isaacs' Textile High beat DeWitt Clinton to win New

York's 1935 prep hoops title. "He always tried to get me to play him in tennis, but there was no way. Baseball, even swimming, anything."

But for all his physical gifts, in his first couple years at Syracuse, Sidat-Singh was regarded more as an athletic oddity than a star. Freshmen were athletically ineligible, but when he began getting playing time on the basketball team the next season, reporters started writing about the new Hindu athlete on campus.

On March 14, 1937, the Washington Post wrote its first story about Sidat-Singh, a very small piece titled "Hindu Basketeer Has Never Been to India," which described him as "presumably the only Hindu basketball player in the United States" and quoted the 19-year-old confirming he'd "never been to India."



Sidat-Singh was Syracuse's best ballhandler and scorer during his three years of varsity hoops, yet even so, his basketball career at the school was closer to very good than great. And college basketball, all these years before "March Madness," wasn't as big a deal. Had he just stuck to hoops and intramural football, the "Hindu" stories might have been all that was ever written about him.

But his newsworthiness picked up considerably when he tried out and made the football team, at a time when college football was probably the most popular sport in the country after big league baseball. And he got very good at the gridiron game very fast.

Syracuse played a single-wing offense, in which the halfback position required a running back's speed and a quarterback's arm. A week before the Syracuse-Maryland game, Sidat-Singh showed



the school, like other members of the Southern Conference, wouldn't even let its sports teams play against Negroes.

"Sophisticated Maryland University's tradition stands to be knocked into a crooked hat Saturday," read the lede of the Tribune's front page story. "For behind the scenes stands a Negro. [Sidat-Singh has been] exploited by local dailies as a Hindu, obviously for the purpose of explaining the presence of the dark skinned footballer in the visiting backfield."

"And now—oh, horrors—[Maryland] must match wit and brawn, shoulder to shoulder, with a colored person," added the story on the sports page. "What ironical tricks are played on the poor unsuspecting Nordics!"

There were no bylines on the Tribune's Sidat-Singh stories. But Sidat-Singh's kin in D.C. knew who had outed him.

"We knew that came from Sam Lacy," says Adelaide Webb Henley, Sidat-Singh's aunt. "He was a Washingtonian, and a friend of my family. He knew Wilmeth wasn't a Sidat-Singh. He knew he was a Webb."

Lacy, then the sports editor of the Tribune, would go on to write about sports and race for the next 60 years, most famously for the Afro-American, and ranks among the most significant sports reporters ever.

Adelaide Webb Henley, now 96 and living in D.C.'s Rock Creek Gardens neighborhood, had spent much of her childhood with Sidat-Singh. She was the youngest of eight children; Elias Webb, her brother and Sidat-Singh's father, was the oldest. So Adelaide was only six years older than her nephew. Elias Webb, also a graduate of Howard University Medical School, left town in the early 1920s to start up a pharmacy in Tampa, Fla. He and Pauline left Wilmeth, their only child, with Adelaide's mother in the Webb house at 313 T St. NW. Adelaide and her siblings helped raise Wilmeth.

Wilmeth went to first grade at the Lucretia Mott School at 4th and W Streets NW. When school let out for the summer, his parents called for him, so Henley and an older sister got on a train and took Wilmeth to Tampa, where they stayed through the hot season.

During their time together, Henley recalls, Wilmeth was “a very happy child, a very nice child.”

Henley also remembers the unhappiness that the *Tribune's* 1937 Sidat-Singh scoop—accurate as it was—caused her family. She didn't go to the Maryland-Syracuse game. But her husband, Benjamin Henley, and sister, Helen Webb, were among the Sidat-Singh relatives who drove up to Baltimore in a rainstorm, for what would have been the closest he came to a hometown appearance during his college football career.

Sidat-Singh didn't get in the game, however. Not for a single down.



Maryland won 13-0.

“Growing up, my father always told me about that game,” says Lyn Henley, Sidat-Singh's cousin and Benjamin and Adelaide Henley's son, now 62 years old and living in Silver Spring. “He watched Sidat-Singh the whole game, just seeing him sitting on the bench with a wet towel draped over his head and his head down.”

No injury or discipline from the coach kept Sidat-Singh from playing, of course. It was Lacy's scoop—and racist realities that most Americans want to forget about.

“The schools had an agreement,” says James Coates, an Annapolis native and sports historian who in the early 1980s, while in graduate school at the University of Maryland-College Park, extensively investigated the 1937 Maryland-Syracuse game. “It wasn't a color line that they had

drawn into the contracts; it was an anti-American Negro line. If you were black and from the Dominican Republic, or black and from Cuba, or a Native American, or Hindu, you were allowed to play against Maryland. If you were an American Negro, you couldn't play."

Coates says his research absolved Sidat-Singh of any blame for the cultural mislabeling. "Schools were asking about race even then," Coates says. "And I looked through all the Syracuse admission records to see if Sidat-Singh ever tried to pass himself as a Hindu. He did not. He never told anybody he wasn't black. Syracuse came up with that on their own, they put that word out."

Wire stories about the game, like those in the Post and the New York Times, which back then gave beat coverage to Maryland and Syracuse athletics, respectively, left out any mention of Sidat-Singh's absence, or any mention of the player at all. The big upset is attributed to the Terrapins' handling the bad weather better than the visitors.

The black papers in D.C., however, erupted. The Tribune ran stories about Sidat-Singh's race-based exclusion for several weeks.

Not all Tribune readers were happy with the paper. Letters to the editor came in arguing that there would have been plenty of time after the Maryland game to gloat that the New York Hindu was really a D.C. Negro. A greater good might have been accomplished, many letter-writers argued, if the Tribune had held the story until the Syracuse halfback had broken Maryland's racial prohibition.

But in a front-page editorial in its next issue, dated Oct. 30, 1937, the Tribune blasted the schools and its critics.

"Without the Negro youth, his team lost the game, and the two schools, by bowing to race hatred, lost the respect of the real sport loving public the world over," read the editorial, again unsigned but probably written by Lacy. "We believe the issue was bigger than Wilmeth or the two schools involved. We do not want to 'fool' the white folks into believing that we are of some foreign stock in order to be given our just due, whether it be sports, business, the arts, or the right to earn a living."

(To add some perspective about the state of our nation at that time: The Tribune's Sidat-Singh editorial ran beneath a banner headline for another story the paper was covering: "High Court Upholds Scottsboro Sentence.")

No newspaper—not the Tribune, nor the New York Times, nor the Washington Post—ever quoted Sidat-Singh about his race-based benching. Had they tried to interview him, they wouldn't have gotten much, says Isaacs.

"I asked Wil about it a few times, and we talked about what happened at Maryland," says Isaacs, who had already begun what would become a long pro basketball career with the famed New York Renaissance, or Rens, while his pal was at Syracuse. "But he wouldn't get upset. He just said there was nothing he could do. That's the way things were."

If the Tribune's scoop gave Sidat-Singh his first celebrity among black sports fans, the benching incident foisted something approaching martyrdom on him.

By his senior football season, Sidat Singh was too good, and too famous, to be benched. He was in the lineup when Syracuse hosted a rematch with Maryland in 1938.

Syracuse won 53-0.

News of Sidat-Singh's athletic redemption got the same blowout treatment in the black press accorded his public humiliation in Baltimore a year earlier.

The Crisis, the NAACP's widely circulated house organ, gave the cover of its Oct. 9, 1938, edition to an action photo of Sidat-Singh on the football field, above the headline "He got revenge on Maryland, 53-0."

The clearest sign of Sidat-Singh's newfound clout came weeks after the Maryland rout, when Wallace Wade, head coach of Duke, also of the Southern Conference, announced that his school would void the racial exclusion provisions in its game contract with Syracuse.

"The Duke-Syracuse contract, signed several months ago, contains a clause forbidding use of Sidat-Singh against the Blue Devils," said the Washington Post's story on the announcement. But, it added, Wade "had given Syracuse University permission" to play the "crack Negro back."

Even Grantland Rice, the mythmaking syndicated sportswriter—he'd given the world the slogan "The Four Horsemen of Notre Dame" a decade earlier—turned his typewriter loose on Sidat-Singh. Rice fell for the Syracuse halfback after watching him lead three quick scoring drives in the final minutes of the Orangemen's 19-17 upset of previously undefeated Cornell, in a game the New York Times said "will long be remembered on Piety Hill."

From a Rice column on the contest that ran in the Washington Star on Oct. 18, 1938, as quoted in author Alan Levy's book, *Tackling Jim Crow: Racial Segregation in Professional Football*: "A new forward pass hero slipped in front of the great white spotlight of fame at Syracuse today. The phenomenon of the rifle shot event went even beyond Sid Luckman and Sammy Baugh."

At that time, Baugh was starring in the pros as quarterback of the reigning NFL champion Washington Redskins. But Luckman, already a legend, was still in college. And in November, Sidat-Singh turned in what the New York Times called the day's most "eye-catching" performance as Syracuse defeated Luckman's Columbia squad, 13-12.

After the season, Sidat-Singh and Luckman were named to various all-star teams and over the next year played alongside each other in exhibition games featuring college gridgers vs. NFL teams.

In a September 1939 game played in front of 25,000 fans in Boston against Baugh's Redskins, Sidat-Singh threw a touchdown pass and had a 49-yard run.

By then, the Chicago Bears had drafted Luckman.

But while exhibitions against black players were tolerated, the NFL would sign no blacks for another 10 years. The Redskins didn't field a black player for 23 years.

Sidat-Singh wasn't drafted.

He wasn't a Hindu anymore.

Over speakerphone from New York, Hal Jackson tells me he hasn't been asked about Sidat-Singh in a long time. At 92-and-a-half, he adds, his memory, like his hearing, fails him a lot.

But Jackson remembers Sidat-Singh.

And the chance to talk about him again has Jackson giddy.

"Oh, he was fantastic!" says Jackson. "Sidat-Singh! Such a star!"

Then he breaks into poetry.

"Did you see that thing? That's Sidat-Singh! The Syracuse Walking Dream!" Jackson practically shrieks. "Oh, he was amazing!"

(The original source of those lines is hard to pin down, but in various books and newspaper stories over the past seven decades, the words have been attributed to Grantland Rice, from a poem written after the 1938 Syracuse-Cornell game.)



Adelaide Webb Henley, Sidat-Singh's aunt, keeps a scrapbook she compiled after Wilmeth disappeared. (Darrow Montgomery.)

Jackson, a D.C. native, launched a broadcasting career in the late 1930s and was breaking down racial barriers in radio from the start. He'd

eventually become a major broadcasting entrepreneur, owning several radio stations in New York. But he started out in D.C. with a music show that he aired during time he bought from previously all-white WINX. By 1940, he had become the nation's first black sportscaster. His main gigs were Howard University football and Homestead Grays baseball from Griffith Stadium.

In 1940, Jackson founded a pro basketball team here, thinking it might boost his sports broadcasting career. The team started out as the Washington Bruins but soon changed its name to the Lichtman Bears, after chief sponsor Abe Lichtman, who owned a chain of theaters that catered to black audiences, including the Howard and Lincoln.

The Bears were as black as the Terrapins were white.

Sidat-Singh was Jackson's first superstar. He'd moved back to the District after graduating from Syracuse with a zoology degree in 1939.

"Wilmeth had a girlfriend who lived in LeDroit Park [named Marjorie Webb, no relation]," says Adelaide Webb Henley, "and I think he came back here for her."

She also says Sidat-Singh's plan was to follow his biological and adoptive fathers into medicine. But he was still too much in love with sports to get into serious studying. He commuted to New York to play with his childhood friend John Isaacs on the New York Renaissance in 1940.

In the days before the NBA, the Rens were as good as anybody. Sometimes, they were better than anybody: In 1939, Isaac's all-Negro five won the World Professional Basketball Tournament in Chicago, which at the time was the premier competition open to pro teams regardless of racial makeup.

But by the time Sidat-Singh joined the Rens, the team was having financial troubles. And Jackson's team pursued him. On March 22, 1941, the Washington Post ran a small story about the Bears that mentioned the acquisition of Sidat-Singh. The update on the Bears, the paper said, came from "business manager Sam Lacy."

Yes, the same guy who'd turned Sidat-Singh's college career into a social movement was now trying to hire him for pro ball.

But whereas Lacy's revelations about Sidat-Singh's race back in 1937 had been on the money, the acquisition tidbit was a bit premature. The Rens refused to let Sidat-Singh play for the D.C. team right away, saying he was still under contract in New York.

Local newspaper stories from that time indicate that Sidat-Singh played for every sports outfit he could while waiting for his pro basketball career to take off here. In 1941, he became a quarterback for the U Street Lions, an all-black semipro football team that two years later, and without Sidat-Singh, would play for the semi-mythical Negro Football World Championship. He played fast-pitch softball, at the time a game taken very seriously around town, for the Treasury Department team, identified in newspaper clippings as the “Colored City Champions.” He even once made the quarterfinals of the D.C. public courts tennis tournament.

But Sidat-Singh was free and clear to sign with the Bears by the 1941-1942 season. And Isaacs and several other top players from the New York Rens’ 1939 championship team—black basketball heroes named Pops Gates, Dolly King, and Tarzan Cooper—joined him here.

Overnight, Jackson’s outfit became unbeatable.

“I only came down there to the Bears because of Wil,” says Isaacs, his last surviving teammate, who can still crack himself up by doing an imitation of Sidat-Singh’s “lippy” speaking voice. “Everybody who knew him loved him. And he got us all down there, one by one. And we just beat on people, no mercy at all.”

Sidat-Singh, one of the few Bears who actually lived in D.C., was the team’s go-to guy in the season opener, scoring 18 points in a win over the Brooklyn Dodgers—the barnstorming cagers, not the baseball squad—and he remained the focus of the offense all year.

With each win, the Bears got a bigger turnout to their home venue, Turner’s Arena at 14th and W Streets NW. That’s the same building that would later help launch the careers of Patsy Cline and Vince McMahon.

“We packed that place every Sunday,” says Jackson.

The Post identified Sidat-Singh that season as the leader of Jackson’s “imposing collection of sepia stars.”

World events took a lot of luster off the Bears' accomplishments. The beginning of the basketball season came just a week after the bombing on Pearl Harbor. The former Rens on the Bears roster all worked at a Grumman plant on Long Island, where military airplanes were manufactured.

"We only came to D.C. on weekends, since most of our games were on Sundays," says Isaacs. "We got \$50 a game, which was nothing to sneeze at then, so it was worth it making the trip."

Sidat-Singh, living with his mother at 610 R St. NW, felt he also needed to chip in to the war effort. In early January 1942, just a month after the Japanese attack, he signed on with the D.C. police, which had already lost hundreds of members to the armed forces. He was assigned to the 13th Precinct, headquartered at 9th and U Streets NW.

Walking the beat didn't hurt his ability to run the floor. The Bears averaged 55 points per game for the season, which was a lot of points at the time; Sidat-Singh averaged 20 points per game, which was unheard of. In February in Baltimore, where a few years earlier he'd suffered his greatest humiliation, Sidat-Singh scored 28 points against the Baltimore Mets, and that performance was recognized as the highest single-game scoring total in pro basketball history.

He got his points while the Bears, who weren't affiliated with any league, faced the best teams in the country—including two games against the Detroit Eagles, the reigning champions of the 1941 World Professional Basketball Tournament. (The Eagles had future college coach and basketball dad Press Maravich in the lineup when routed by Sidat-Singh and the Bears.)

The Bears beat them all. On March 29, 1942, they closed out a perfect 22-0 season with a win over the Wilmington Blue Bombers, champs of the American Basketball League, regarded as the first major professional basketball league.

Over the summer, Sidat-Singh decided he needed to do more for his country.

"All the other guys on the team didn't need to go in the military, because they worked at Grumman," says Jackson. "Sidat-Singh wanted to go."

In August 1942, he signed up for duty with the U.S. Army, but not just to be another soldier. He set out to fly the planes his Bears teammates were building. The Washington Post reported Sidat-

Singh had left the police department and was sent for pilot training "somewhere in the south." Actually, he had been assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group. That was a brand-new, racially segregated unit reserved for the best and brightest black recruits.

The 332nd would later become better known as the Tuskegee Airmen.

Sidat-Singh had played his last game.

Sidat-Singh got out of flying school in March 1943, and with other members of the first graduating class of the 332nd, he was transferred to Selfridge Field in Michigan in the first week of May. On his way north from Tuskegee, Sidat-Singh came home to see his family and friends.

Adelaide Webb Henley remembers her nephew and childhood running partner stopping by her house in his military uniform. Jackson visited Lt. Sidat-Singh at his mother's home, and the Afro-American ran a photo of the handsome and fit pilot showing off his leather bomber jackets to the Bears' boss in its May 8, 1943, edition.

The Afro-American's next issue was dominated by news that Sidat-Singh was missing after a training flight crash into Lake Huron. Perhaps because of the degradations Sidat-Singh had suffered in Baltimore in 1937 at the hands of the white power structure, his disappearance was not accepted without cynicism by the black press. The *Pittsburgh Courier* posted a "bulletin" on its front page announcing the paper was sending its own investigator to Selfridge Field.

Fellow Tuskegee Airmen who saw the smoking plane go down in the water as Sidat-Singh tried to jump clear, however, told the papers that it was just a tragic accident.

Isaacs says that when he first heard the reports, on Mother's Day 65 years ago, that Sidat-Singh was missing in the water, he believed his buddy would come out of it OK. "If you saw him swim, saw the way he was built so powerfully, you'd understand," Isaacs says.

Sidat-Singh's body, however, was recovered from the lake seven weeks later, several miles from the base. A diver found him still wearing his parachute, which was stuck to the outside of his sunken plane. The chute must have gotten caught on the aircraft when he jumped. He was 25 years old.

The body was sent to Washington as tributes from black luminaries poured in.

Heavyweight champ Joe Louis, the first black athlete ever embraced by white America, visited Pauline Sidat-Singh at her home as she mourned her son.

"Joe called me when he heard about Sidat-Singh and asked what he could do," recalls Jackson, who still has a photograph of himself and the Brown Bomber with Mrs. Sidat-Singh at the family's R Street address. "Everybody wanted to do something. The local press in Washington wasn't very attentive, but the *Afro* was really a national paper then, and this was huge. So sad."

Cab Calloway, of "Hi De Ho" fame, launched a joint effort with the Afro-American to sell war bonds in Sidat-Singh's name. The Tuskegee Institute sent Pauline Sidat-Singh a life-size painting of her son, with the inscription "He was a man's man."

His funeral was held at Holy Redeemer Catholic Church on New York Avenue NW; interment was at Arlington Cemetery. A biracial phalanx of D.C. cops stood guard during the ceremony, and an airplane dropped a wreath at the gravesite.

Isaacs remembers getting an early morning call in New York from Sidat-Singh's mother when the body was found, and taking the next train to Washington. "I brought my oldest daughter, and we stayed with Hal Jackson on East Capitol Street," says Isaacs of his trip to Sidat-Singh's funeral. "Washington was a fun place then, and everybody knew Wil, as a basketball player or a cop. When he died, that was a shocker. Unfortunate things happen."

Adelaide Webb Henley says she doesn't recall much about the funeral. But her memories of her nephew get a boost whenever she opens the

scrapbook that she compiled just after his disappearance. It contains dozens of articles, many of them huge front-page stories that appeared in black newspapers, and shows the impact his life and death had on some segments of his hometown and his country.

"That's all I've got, really," she says.

Among the clippings is a column from Art Carter, a sportswriter with the Afro-American, written while Sidat-Singh was still missing. If he's not found alive, Carter wrote, "the war will have claimed its first major sports celebrity."

Carter then reminded readers about what had happened to Sidat-Singh in Baltimore five-and-a-half years earlier.

"As a Hindu, Maryland was willing to play against a Singh, but as an American-born colored youth, no! A thousand times no!" Carter railed. "I thought about this incident Monday when the missing report flashed over the wires and wondered what Maryland athletic authorities who barred Singh back in 1937 would think when they learned that this same guy crashed while preparing to try to save the democratic way that they denied him."

There's also an open letter written by Dr. Samuel Sidat-Singh that was printed in the Afro-American after his son's death.

"It is our hope that Wilmeth and thousands of others like him shall not die in vain, but that when this war is won with the peace, America will be a safe place for all people, black and white, all alike," he wrote. "That there shall emerge from these sacrifices an emancipation from racial bigotry and prejudice, from the inequalities of opportunities, both civic and economic, and that there shall be a just recognition of true merit, not leased upon the color of one's skin."

The scrapbook doesn't have any articles from major D.C. dailies, which all but ignored Sidat-Singh's disappearance and death.

The Washington Post ran three paragraphs about the funeral of Sidat-Singh, identified as a "Negro Army pilot," but put them at the bottom of a story about the death of a 67-year-old patent attorney and office manager from Epping Forest, Md., named Horace Chandlee, whose race is not mentioned.

Chandlee got four paragraphs.

In February 2005, Syracuse University retired Sidat-Singh's basketball jersey at halftime of a home game with Providence, making him just the fifth athlete in the school's history to receive

that honor (and the third Washingtonian, behind Spingarn alums Dave Bing and Sherman Douglas).

Sidat-Singh's stats as an Orangeman basketball player didn't warrant the tribute. But this was not your normal jersey hanging. This was penance for wrongs committed almost seven decades earlier. Isaacs and Lyn Henley and Adelaide Webb Henley were among those invited to attend the ceremony. School officials wanted them to hear apologies for concocting the story line of a Hindu basketball player, and for going ahead with that football game in Baltimore. And for other inhumanities that Sidat-Singh had never told his relatives about.

"They told us that even though he was a star athlete on scholarship, Wilmeth had to live off-campus, had to walk to school from what they called the 'ghetto' section of town," Lyn Henley says. "They said he didn't get the chance to enjoy the things that the other athletes at the school got to enjoy. We don't know how this idea got started, but it wasn't from the family. They called us. Somebody at Syracuse had researched what had happened and felt a great injustice had been done by Syracuse to Wilmeth. They felt this was a wrong that they had to make right."

Nobody from Maryland, he says, has ever gotten in touch with the family.