



James A. Dorsey

AND THE SUPPORT OF BLACK SPORT IN PITTSBURGH

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There has been much written about sport and the African American but very few discussions of local sport and those that helped lay a foundation for the sporting culture in the African American community. In Pittsburgh's Hill District, one person who was instrumental in establishing a recreational and athletic culture, especially by directing various recreation centers for more than 50 years, was James Arthur Dorsey.

James Arthur Dorsey was born in 1890 in what was then Allegheny City (now Pittsburgh's North Side.) He was the son of Allen and Mary C. Sparksman Dorsey. Allen Dorsey, a graduate in pharmacy, worked at George Splane's Drug Store at 5th and Smithfield streets and as a shipping clerk for the Hotel Duquesne in Downtown Pittsburgh for years. The Dorseys had seven children: five boys sandwiched between two girls. The eldest girl, Ethel, was born a year before James, who was then followed in birth by Chris, Witherow, Sparksman, Michael, and Effie. The five Dorsey brothers became known for their athletic prowess.

Jim Dorsey showed an interest in sports while watching students play basketball in the basement gym of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary on North Avenue. In 1906, at the age of 16 and while working as a janitor on the Phipps Estate, he came up with the idea of



Monticello Athletic Association
basketball team, 1911.

Front row, L-R: Bud Brown, Cum Posey,
Sellers Hall, Charles Richmond.

Middle row: James Dorsey, See Posey,
Walter Clark.

In back: Joseph Mahoney, Evan Baker.

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starting an African American basketball team in the estate gymnasium. He would gather his friends for pick-up games and practices on Sundays. The players were Cum Posey, Sellers Hall, George Bell, and Dorsey's brothers, Chris, William and Sparksman. Jim recounted in a 1962 interview, "I had the janitorial job in the gymnasium and bathhouse on the Northside. On Sundays I would sneak a group of our own boys into the gymnasium and indulge in all the possible pastimes, especially basketball."

In 1910, Jim got a job at Washington Park and moved the games there. He started out as a janitor and rose to assistant superintendent of the park by 1919. Between 1910 and 1917, Jim played football for the Collins Tigers and Delaney Rifles, plus basketball for the Monticello Athletic Club, Delaney-Monticello's, and the Loendi Club.

The Collins Tigers and Delaney Rifles often played football games against historically black colleges and universities such as Wilberforce University in Ohio, Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and Storer College in Harper's Ferry, W.V., as well as the local Holy Ghost College (now Duquesne University). The annual Thanksgiving Day game against one of these schools drew thousands of football fans to Pittsburgh's Exposition Park each year. The 1910-1913 Collins Tigers team featured Cum Posey at quarterback, Jim Dorsey at fullback, and Chris Dorsey at center. The Collins Tigers started out as a "gang of roughnecks" in 1904 with misfit clothing including baseball uniforms, tennis shoes, heavy undershirts, and caps. By the time Dorsey, Posey, and coach Hunter Johnson joined the team in 1910, the Collins Tigers had become a well-organized force in local football.

The Dorsey men – James, Chris, William (Witherow), Sparksman (Sparks), and Michael – were all excellent athletes. Chris played locally as well as in Chicago for the Lincoln Athletic Club where his teammates were Fritz Pollard, Duke Slater, and Ink Williams. The 1913 Collins Tigers featured three of the Dorseys: Jim, Chris and Witherow.

In 1914, Jim Dorsey joined the Delaney Rifles football team as a star fullback. The Rifles were formed in 1908 by Attorney Frank Steward who was also a captain in the all-black ceremonial militia. The militia was named for Martin Delaney, doctor, soldier, diplomat, scholar, and a man popularly known as the father of Black Nationalism. The team featured Dorsey, his brother Chris, and Sellers Hall. The Rifles continued to play the Thanksgiving Day games against Wilberforce, Lincoln, and Storer.

In 1910, Jim was a starting center on the Monticello Athletic Club basketball team. The team was formed by Dorsey and was captained and coached by Cum Posey, Jr. This team defeated Howard University in 1911 to capture the unofficial "Colored Basketball" championship.

The Monticello team merged with the Delaney Rifles basketball team in 1916 and then later formed the Loendi Big Five that dominated Colored basketball in the early 1920s.

At the time that Dorsey was active as an all-around athlete, he was also a student at the University of Pittsburgh working toward a degree in Physical Education. He then took a position as coach and assistant physical director at the Virginia Theological Seminary and College at Lynchburg, Va., in the fall of 1917. Dorsey quickly became a class officer and participated in at least two musical recitals, singing solos in the fall 1917 and winter 1918 recitals. Dorsey felt he could contribute to the athletic program at the seminary, simply because of his experience in playing against black college teams that dated back to his days with the Collins Tigers. But R.C. Woods, president of VTS, who could not offer Dorsey the head coach position or a salary, gave him a full scholarship to assist with coaching and training and to continue his education. He returned to Pittsburgh in 1918 and

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worked at Carnegie Steel, Homestead Works plant. In March 1918, Dorsey married Zerbie Turfley, daughter of Pittsburgh's oldest African American physician, G.G. Turfley, and herself a Pitt graduate and amateur basketball player. Zerbie Turfley played on the Della Robbia Girls basketball team that was organized at Washington Park in 1913. By 1922, Jim Dorsey's career as a player was over, and he concentrated on his career as a recreation director.

Recreation Administrator

During World War I, Dorsey joined the Army National War Work Council and was assigned to the Air Nitrates Corporation in Muscle Shoals, Ala., where he was a recreation director for African Americans. In September 1918, Dorsey was transferred to Camp Jackson, S.C., where he was physical secretary of YMCA headquarters until April 1919.

Upon his return from the Army, Dorsey became acting director at Washington Park and remained there until he moved to the new Crawford Bath House (Recreation Center) at Crawford and Wylie avenues in 1922. Objecting to a sign posted at Crawford designating the bath house for "Negroes Only," Dorsey resigned in protest of the policies of City Superintendent Margaret Gray. The issue was discussed in the *Pittsburgh Courier* and became a major controversy in



Camp Jackson, S.C., YMCA staff, 1918. James A. Dorsey, physical secretary, back row center.

the African American community. Pittsburgh Urban League Secretary John T. Clark sent a letter to Mrs. Gray admonishing her for removing Dorsey from Washington Park and promoting segregation.

This controversy was not new to Dorsey. During his tenure at Muscle Shoals, Dorsey tried to start a baseball league for African Americans. That effort was squashed because, he was told, "Negroes did not interest themselves about baseball...they had to get the work out," and so within a month, Dorsey tendered his resignation. He took the same action following the Crawford controversy.

In 1923, Dorsey became the first director of the new Centre Avenue YMCA. This appointment was the result of a long friendship and family connection with the YMCA. Dorsey's father-in-law, Dr. G.G. Turfley, was a treasurer of the branch's building fund campaign.



Jim Dorsey at his desk
at the Ammon Recreation
Center, c. 1940s.

Dorsey's work credentials with the Army YMCA in South Carolina during the war became assets that the new facility wanted. In addition, he was a financial contributor to the building fund. Dorsey stayed about two years at the YMCA.

In 1926, he returned to Crawford and supported the establishment of a baseball team composed of Charles "Teenie" Harris, Bill Harris, and other local youth. This team became the Pittsburgh Crawfords and grew to become one of the greatest baseball teams in history. Dorsey knew first-hand the benefits and passion of youth starting their own teams. Just 20 years earlier, he had done the same. Dorsey directed recreation and athletic activities at Crawford until 1940 when he directed the newly opened Ammon Recreation Center on Bedford Avenue. Along the way, Dorsey developed a unique perspective of using athletics not only to improve the personal health of people but to extend the benefits of full American citizenship at a time when African Americans had limited civil rights in Pittsburgh and elsewhere. Many of the youth that came to the various recreation centers were migrants and the majority of the migrants were from the Jim Crow South.

Dorsey's time as director of Ammon was crucial. From 1940 to 1950, he organized activities for the Hill District community. His early tenure was marked by the need to administer services during the United States' entry in World War II. Ammon had to be prepared to deal with war readiness and the return of disabled veterans in need of healthcare, welfare, and physical therapy. In a 1943 *Courier* article, Dorsey stated that "Nothing in Pittsburgh should be of greater importance than the welfare of its people, especially its children." He fulfilled the mission of Ammon with activities that went beyond sports and saw the relationship between the community and the center as a lifelong bond. Ammon offered drama classes, basketball, soccer, softball, tennis, swimming, football, games, tournaments, concerts, fairs, and many other activities.

In 1950, Dorsey returned to Washington Park; when it was scheduled to be demolished in 1954 for the construction of the Civic Arena, Dorsey helped organize a reunion. The event acknowledged the role of the playground in the lives of many from 1900 to its demise. On Saturday April, 24, 1954, a gathering was held and many came to tell their Washington Park stories. Among the storytellers was boxer Charley Zivic, baseball players Tony Bartirome and Bobby Del Grecco, and of course James Dorsey who 44 years earlier had opened the park to many African American athletes.

During the early 1900s, the Dorsey family would have been considered a "native" Pittsburgh family. Theirs was one that could trace its roots in Western Pennsylvania before the migration of African Americans from the South after the turn of the century. This distinction was sometimes marked by class, color, education, and social or religious affiliations. These distinctions were even made with some of the early sporting teams. The Monticello Club basketball team was primarily stocked with native, middle class, educated men. The exception to this was the football field where class and social distinction were neutralized. Dorsey understood this distinction and, while not embracing it, used this reality as a tool to help all who came into his programs. He understood the change in "attitude" that the migrants brought to Pittsburgh. But he understood more the complexities of urban industrial Pittsburgh and the changes it was going through. He did not want to see African Americans fall behind. In a 1962 interview Jim recalled,

Back there, the dream was to get into the mills or get a good job. Things got better after World War I started. They used to send down South for Negro labor.... Things became awful.... Loud and wrong Negroes came bounding into Pittsburgh ... and quickly the white population began restricting Negro privileges in the city by closing doors that always had been open to us.

Clearly Dorsey is reflecting from a native view of life in Pittsburgh as opposed to the Jim Crow segregated South. But his sentiment about a problem in the community was addressed in the programs he structured to deal with such issues.

James A. Dorsey retired from over 50 years as a recreation employee and administrator in 1960. His career spanned the birth of African American sport and he, in a small way, had a hand in the development of the early stages of the Loendi Club basketball team, the Homestead Grays, and the Pittsburgh Crawfords baseball teams. Dorsey was a major player in the formation of these teams that went on to spawn the love and passion of sport for future generations of Pittsburghers. His work as a recreation director furthered his affection for sport and citizenship. Jim Dorsey died in Pittsburgh in 1978. ☀