

The life of Palo Alto resident Henry Ford, a black ex-NFL player who broke the country's standards in career, sports, and personal life – and changed Menlo-Atherton football forever.

# Grav Area

by MARIA FLETCHER, YUE SHI, NATHAN SETO, and RYAN STRATHEARN



Photo by Yue Shi

**O**n the shady street of Waverley, one house pops out from under the trees. Each of its walls are painted a different bright shade. Metal sculptures peek out from behind bushes. A big oak tree reigns over the walkway to its quaint turquoise door. Inside and out, the house is beautiful and alive with character, and like the couple that live inside, there is more to it than the eyes can see.

Rochelle and Henry Ford have lived in their vibrant house for 40 years, raised two sons, and now enjoy watching their grandson Ethan play football at Bishop O'Dowd High School located in Oakland, California. Ethan has the sport in his genes: his grandpa played football 60 years before him – it was one of the ways he was able to break away from his difficult childhood and become the man

he is today.

Henry Ford was born in 1931 in Homestead, Pennsylvania, a black community in which the majority of the population lived off welfare. With his mother and three sisters, he lived for many years in a two-room house with 15 other residents. There was no running water and the one toilet of the building was in the rat-infested cellar. The closest father-figure Ford had was his junior high basketball coach, having only met his father once for 15 minutes throughout his life.

He spent most of his childhood in Pittsburgh where he played baseball, basketball, and football. In high school, Ford focused on the latter and began to pick up great skill. He was an All-American football player, and the first black team captain for the school. His academic dedication made him an outstanding student as well; however, Ford explained that athletic ability was African American

students' only identity in the eyes of colleges. Although he had the grades and intelligence to attain an academic scholarship, this was generally not an option for blacks going to predominantly white universities.

When Ford graduated, University of Pittsburgh offered him a four-year athletic scholarship for football. "I wanted to prove to [my black teammates] that I could go to a white school and play," Ford reflects. Ford chose to take their offer and majored in business. His decision made him the first colored man to major in business in the nation. However, breaking this barrier did not immediately prove fruitful because the country, particularly the South, wasn't ready to give African-Americans jobs traditionally given to whites.

Ford played all four years for University of Pittsburgh without missing a game. Although he was a skilled quarterback,

Ford played on the defensive line either as a safety or a cornerback. "They didn't have black quarterbacks back then," Ford said. He expected to play as the starting quarterback, but the coach never let it happen. In the six or seven games he played as a backup to the injured QB's, he made history by being the first black person to ever play the position at a major university.

Ford not only defied the country's athletic standards for minorities, but also made his own path in his personal relationships. Among the other racial barriers he faced, Ford, like other blacks was expected to stay away from any interaction with white girls.

One of the years Ford played on his high school football team, the school sent them to training camp in nearby Ligonier, Pennsylvania – a white, upper class, mainly conservative Republican town that was popular for football train-

ing. Ford was traveling with his team when he first saw Rochelle Shamey out of the bus window, standing in the Diamond - where the town's youth gathered to socialize. He called for the bus driver to stop so he could talk to her, but the bus driver refused and the team drove on to camp.

Ford recalled running back to the spot after being dropped off at camp, and finding Rochelle still there.

"That was the best luck I ever had,"

Ford said. As he approached, however, he had to apologize.

"'Oops, I'm sorry.' She said, 'What are you sorry for?' I said, 'I thought you were colored.'"

At the time, interracial marriages were

illegal and would be for another 25 years. Relationships between blacks and whites were shunned by society, especially those between a black man and a white woman. Despite the country's stigma, that day Rochelle and Henry began

what would be a 60-year friendship; the two stayed in contact throughout their college years and eventually were married after Henry's football career ended.

Ford's skill increased through college and caught the attention of the NFL. He was drafted in the ninth round as the 109th pick by the Cleveland Browns in 1955. Ford's rookie year, the Browns won the NFL Championship (the Super Bowl had not been

**"There were no [business] jobs for blacks back in those days."**

invented), beating the Los Angeles Rams 38-14.

He played one year for the Browns before being traded to the Pittsburgh Steelers. In the two games he played during the season at Cleveland, he had great performances in several positions including safety, quarterback, halfback, and special teams return. Ford was more qualified for the quarterback position than the two white men who the coaches typically played, but again he was denied his deserved role based on skin color, not skill.

Ford was traded after the first season and played for the Steelers during the 1956-57 seasons.

In the fall of 1957, the Steelers returned to Ligonier to train like Ford's high school and college teams had years before. It was convenient for Henry and Rochelle (who at this point had been dating for several years), since it allowed them to see each other without risking suspicion when Henry's team came to town. That fall when the Steelers came to Ligonier the couple had been together for seven

years unbeknownst to their families and friends.

"Henry's high school, college, and pro team always came in the fall to practice before the season started, because you couldn't get into any trouble in this little town," Rochelle said. It was during one of these trips that Ford's secret relationship with Rochelle was discovered, and little did either of them know the incident would crush his professional football career.

"One night, he was in the hotel, talking to me on the phone. We were laughing and having a good time, and the Steelers management [that overheard the conversation] said he shouldn't know anybody in this town he was talking to like

that," Rochelle said. "so they tapped the phone and found out who he was talking to."

## Little did either of them know the incident would crush his professional football career.

After the Steelers management found out that Henry had been dating a white girl, they gave him a heartbreaking choice.

"You can choose white girls or football," and I chose white girls," Ford said.

The next day, Ford played in the Steelers' game without consequence. He didn't know that would be his last game as a professional football player. The day after the game, Ford got a call.

"I got cut by a news reporter, not a coach... only because he was a pretty good friend of mine and he called me on the phone to inform me," Ford said. The Steelers had dropped Ford from their roster.



Photo by Yue Shi



In 2015, Ford was given the Pittsburgh Pro Football Hall of Fame's President's Award for "displaying superior courage, integrity, and professionalism beyond the playing field" (left).

Photos by Maria Fletcher, Yue Shi

Ford had protested that "dating white girls was [his] private business," whereas playing football was a separate area of his life, and the two shouldn't affect each other; apparently the league had a different opinion. After three years of playing great football for both the Browns and the Steelers, they simply told him to pick up his cleats, officially ending his professional career. Ford was devastated.

He had struggled with employment throughout the years playing in the NFL, because at the time pro players' salaries didn't cover the cost of living.

"Us players back then had to work two jobs because the pay wasn't enough," he said. Even with a business degree from a reputable university, no one would hire Ford in positions for which he was qualified. He instead worked for the city as a garbage collector during his professional playing years.

"[I was] throwing a sack over my shoulder and going up the ladder... People would see me and say 'Hey Model T!'" (That was his nickname amongst his friends and teammates.)

"I would say 'Hey! How are you doing?' They'd say 'What are you doing up there?' I said, 'I'm staying in shape.' That was my excuse, for going up the ladder, working for the city of Pittsburgh during the summer, cause that's the only job I could get."

After being dropped from the professional league, Ford worked for several

different companies before getting an unexpected opportunity out of San Francisco.

In 1977, Coca-Cola offered Ford a business opportunity in the Bay Area and Henry and Rochelle moved from

## "People think, 'Nothing like that happens in Palo Alto' but it still does."

Pittsburgh to Palo Alto. That year, the couple's ambitious mission was to buy all the vending machines from Sonoma to Santa Cruz.

While the Fords did end up buying the vending machines, they ran into trouble as soon as they began working on them. As they were servicing the vending machines for the first time, the police showed up, assuming the couple was

stealing from it.

"Within three minutes the cops came... it took us the longest time to convince them that we did own the [vending machine] and they shouldn't take us to jail," Rochelle said.

With this, the racial discrimination Henry Ford had experienced his whole life followed him into California. Before they had even moved into the state, their realtor refused to show them houses in the Professorville district of Palo Alto and took them elsewhere around the Bay, from East Palo Alto to San Jose. When they were finally able to buy the house they wanted on Waverley, the couple was not received well. The first day in their new home, they got a knock on the door.

"How many people are going to live here?" A neighbor asked.

Frustrated with the ignorance of the question, Ford said there would be 13.

"I knew it!" the woman said.

Surprisingly, racial profiling has been a continuous struggle for all three generations of Ford's family. Henry and his sons have gotten stopped by police countless times for driving nice cars the officers thought were stolen. Rochelle told us that most recently, their grandson Ethan was followed home by police on his bike.

"[Ethan] came home one night on his bike and he said, 'Oh Grandma, this is a safe place to live,'" Rochelle recalled.

Ethan was only 11 at the time.

"And I said, 'It is? What makes you say that?'"

"He said, 'Cause I was downtown on my bike and a policeman followed me all the way home.'"

"I thought, 'You'll know someday what that was all about,' [but] for now I said, 'I'm glad you were safe'. People think nothing like that happens in Palo Alto, but it still does."

After having a successful run with the Coca-Cola venture, Ford searched for a job

related to the passion he had been away from for 35 years: football. In 1990, Ford was offered a coaching job for the Menlo Atherton Bears. He gladly took the job, although no one imagined the influence he would have on the students and the school.

Before Ford arrived as the head coach, the Bears had many problems on and off the field. To start with, Menlo Atherton hadn't won a game in two and a half years, making it the longest losing streak of any California high school playing at the time. Things began to change within Ford's first season, and the team won three games. "All the students acted as if we won the championship," said Ford. Two years later the team did win the CCS championship and would continue to be in the championships the next four seasons after that. Their reputation as a football powerhouse continues to this day.

Prior to Ford's hiring, the student body was diverse and extremely segregated; racial tension was a school-wide issue. Ford specifically recalls his first day as the new coach, where a racial riot broke out and the school was forced to call an assembly. With nobody willing or ready to speak, the principal asked Ford to talk to the students. Ford opened up the

assembly with a Virginia Satir quote "In sameness we connect, in differences we grow." He continued to rally the students the rest of the assembly, marking the beginning of his seven-year-long project to establish a more uplifting and accepting community at MA.

Ford not only worked hard on the field to increase his players' skill, but he was involved in their academic and personal lives as well. According to Rochelle, he didn't hesitate

to drive players to and from school, pay for their necessities, and sit in on their classes to make sure they were keeping up. Ford's impact on his players' academic lives was enormous. The last football scholarship given to an MA student was seven years prior to Ford's hiring; over the seven years he was their coach, 34 players received collegiate scholarships.

With this job he rediscovered his passion for the sport. This time, he was making a difference in the opposite role.

Meeting and exceeding the expectations of his coaching position was Ford's way of giving back to the community, and redeeming himself in the sport that rejected him years ago.

"Of all the jobs I had, that was the one I held the longest and the one that brought me the least amount of money, which I ended up investing back into the foot-

ball program," Ford reflected. "It also brought me the most satisfaction of any job I ever had."

Today, Ford enjoys watching his grandson play. Ethan may not face the same profound racism as Ford did, but as proved by the recent National Anthem protests the country is still struggling to rise above racism and provide equal protection for all.

The protests by NFL athletes during the singing of the national anthem have become a major news item in the world of sports as well as civil rights, and Ford has his own opinions on the controversy.

"Those guys kneeling down, there's nothing wrong with that," Ford said. He sees the platform as an acceptable place for players to have their voices heard. He takes issue with Trump's call to fire the individuals who choose to protest, saying that Trump wouldn't jeopardize his businesses by firing people key to their success.

Ford recounts his life's story with a calm countenance, peacefully explaining the road he traveled despite the gravity of the things he had to overcome. One might expect bitterness looking back, however he does not seem to have ever carried grudges about his setbacks and roadblocks. Sitting in his living room, discussing his experiences, it was his wife Rochelle who said she can get angry over what happened to Ford but he never does.

Ford's life is more than a "rags to riches" story. He had to fight his way out of poverty to be a successful player and student; he started in perhaps the humblest way and now enjoys life with a happy family in a beautiful house. Despite having his NFL career immorally stripped from him, the love of the sport never left Ford. Perhaps it could explain the differences he was able to make with his own players four decades later.

Discrimination faced him at every step, but he returned people's judgments with passion and dedication. Despite poverty, prejudice, ignorance, and inequality, Ford pushed to follow a path of his own, and with the love of a woman who was willing to face these challenges with him, now lives a fulfilled life. Today, his countenance fully testifies to his character: resilient, dedicated, convicted.

You can read more about Henry Ford's story in "Gridiron Gauntlet: The Story of the Men who Integrated Pro Football".

## Menlo Atherton had been on a two and half year losing streak, the second longest in California. history

### "Those guys kneeling down, there's nothing wrong with that."

