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Syracuse University Magazine (USPS 009-049, ISSN 1065-884X) Volume 22, Number 1, is an official bulletin of Syracuse University and is published four times yearly: spring, summer, fall, and winter by Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244. It is distributed free of charge to alumni, friends, faculty, and staff. Periodical postage paid at Syracuse, NY, and additional mailing offices.

WEB SITE: sumagazine.syr.edu.

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LETTERS TO EDITOR, OTHER MAGAZINE BUSINESS: *Syracuse University Magazine*, 820 Comstock Avenue, Room 308, Syracuse NY 13244-5040. Telephone: 315-443-2233; Fax: 315-443-5425. E-mail: jacox@syr.edu. E-mail letters must include a mailing address. Letters are subject to editing for style, clarity, and space limitations.

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POSTMASTER: Send address corrections to 820 Comstock Avenue, Room 009, Syracuse NY 13244-5040.

Opening Remarks

Heroes Among Us

In “Pioneering Paths” (page 40), you’ll learn about some extraordinary alumni who graced the Hill long ago. Many of you may have read a thriller by John D. MacDonald '38, one of the best-selling novelists of all time. Others may know about Dr. Sarah Loguen Fraser (G 1876), a Syracuse native who was the daughter of abolitionists and one of the first African American women to become a physician in this country. The stories of these alumni are compelling. Several endured the hardships, prejudices, and injustices of their times. Cornelia Maria Clapp, for instance, was not welcome in the world of science and research, simply because she was a woman. Yet she steadfastly pursued her dream, earned a doctorate at SU in 1889, and became a leading expert on marine zoology.

Perhaps the one alumnus who intrigues me most is Wilmeth Sidat-Singh '39. If you're an Orange sports fan, you may be familiar with the legend of Sidat-Singh, a gifted student-athlete who starred in basketball and football at SU in the late '30s.

At a time when the color line was as prevalent in sports as it was in other facets of American life, Sidat-Singh, an African American, was not deterred by the racism and segregation of the day. He maintained his dignity and remained determined. And his actions, on the field and in life, spoke volumes about his character. As a single-wing halfback, forerunner to today's quarterback position, he was compared to the likes of Hall-of-Famers Sammy Baugh and Sid Luckman. But he never had the opportunity to play in the NFL because African Americans were banned from the league until 1946. Instead, he put his talents to use on the basketball court and starred for two seasons with the Harlem Renaissance, an all-African American team that barnstormed the



country and was considered one of the best pro squads of the era.

When the country entered World War II, Sidat-Singh was selected to be a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, the famed black fighter pilots who paved the way for desegregation of the U.S. military. In 1943, at age 25, he was piloting a P-40 during a training mission over Lake Huron when the engine failed. Entangled in the ropes of his parachute, he drowned. His body was found six weeks later and he was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

In February, the University retired basketball jersey number 19 in honor of Sidat-Singh during halftime of the SU men's basketball game against Providence College in the Carrier Dome. It was a tribute that was long overdue for this unsung American hero.

Like other alumni featured in “Pioneering Paths,” Sidat-Singh was an exceptional person whose story still resonates today as a lesson in character. Although he died more than a half century ago, he continues to teach us what perseverance and courage are all about.

JAY COX
Editor