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Before Myron Rolle, There Was Byron WhiteBy [CONNOR ENNIS](#)

Associated Press Byron White, left, served as deputy attorney general under President John F. Kennedy, who later nominated him to the United States Supreme Court.

Myron Rolle's [stay in Oxford as a Rhodes scholar](#) has prompted many references to Bill Bradley. However, given the fact that Bradley was a basketball player and Rolle starred at Florida State in football, perhaps a more apt comparison would be Byron White. How accomplished was White's life? Here is what Linda Greenhouse wrote in [White's obituary](#) when he died in 2002:

A sports hero, Rhodes scholar, successful lawyer, triumphant political organizer and director of Robert F. Kennedy's Justice Department — Byron R. White had been all of these before his friend John F. Kennedy named him to the Supreme Court in 1962.

To learn a little bit more about White, we turned to Prof. Dennis J. Hutchinson of the University of Chicago Law School, a former law clerk for White and also the author of his biography, "[The Man Who Once Was Whizzer White.](#)"

Q. In the context of his time, just how good a football player was Byron White?

The New York Times White was a college football star at Colorado before becoming a Rhodes scholar.

A. He was a superb power runner and the point to keep in mind about his accomplishments is that he did set the record as a college player for most all-purpose yards in a season, a record that lasted for about 50 years until it was broken in 1988 by Barry Sanders. All-purpose yards is rushing yards, receiving yards, kick return yards and interception return yards. And he averaged almost 250 yards a game in all-purpose yards. To say he was a triple threat wasn't enough; he was a quintuple threat because, in addition to running, passing and catching he also played defense and kicked. But he was a person of enormous strength as a power runner. The only reason he wasn't more well known during his day was the newspapers' East Coast obsession with college football at the time.

Q. Professional sports in White's time (the late 30s and early 40s) were much, much different than they are now on many different levels, not the least of which is the amount of money that a player can make. That being said, was it a difficult decision for White to halt his career for a year and go over to Oxford as a Rhodes scholar?

A. The initial decision was, Do I sign with Pittsburgh or do I take the Rhodes? And he dithered and dithered and it became quite a cause celebre in his home town. Everyone wanted to give him advice and there was moral freight on both sides of the argument. Was he in it just for the money? And if he was he would be condemned. But he was offered a lot of money for those days to play and if he turned

it down he was essentially turning away money that would have helped both of parents, who were stuck in the throes of the Depression, and his brother, who wanted to go to medical school. But he was able to get a deferment of a year from Oxford. So he played for Pittsburgh in 1938, and matriculated in the fall of 1939. Then the war broke out and he went back to Yale Law School, before leaving to play for the Detroit Lions and then going back to finish law school.

Q. How did his time as a Rhodes scholar affect White? Did it change him or influence him in far-reaching ways?

A. Well he met John Kennedy there, when Kennedy's father was the ambassador to the Court of St. James and they traveled in Europe together. So that was significant. But it affected him in multiple ways. The most durable effect that it had was in both widening and enriching his scope of friendships and acquaintances. He met people who were from fancier backgrounds so to speak, socially and financially. He was influenced to attend Yale Law School. And the friends that he met at Oxford and Yale later became colleagues in the Department of Justice.

In terms of his studies, he was taking some law courses, which at that time especially at his stage, was heavily historical and emphasizing Roman law, so was of next to no use to him professionally.

Q. White's nickname, which he apparently disliked, was Whizzer. What was the origin of the name, and why did White dislike it so much?

A. They are probably 50 sportswriters in Colorado who claimed they christened him with that nickname, and I narrowed it down to two possibilities, but I think they were both wrong. I found through my research that it was probably the student editors at the university newspaper. They were trying to get attention for their region for the all-American team and they figured you needed a fancy nickname to get the attention of the East Coast press.

They thought of the Duke of Wellington, because he was from Wellington, Colo., but that sounded effete. Lord Byron sounded more effete, so Whizzer it was. One of the editors told me that Byron White was just too dull of a name. If he had been Willie White or a name like that he wouldn't have needed one, but Byron required a nickname.

And the reason he disliked it was he thought it had an immediate association with the act of urination.

Q. The title of your book comes from a story in which a woman approaches White and asks "Aren't you Whizzer White?" He replies, "I was." What does this story say about White? Was he determined to leave his athletic career, and persona, behind when he became a lawyer?

A. He didn't want to be remembered for what he viewed to be a past life. He detested the sort of attention he got from what we now think of as paparazzi, especially from the press in New York which broke into his room while he was there for the National Invitational Tournament in basketball, and made up quotations from him. Completely made them up. He just wanted to put that behind him.

And as deputy attorney general or a member of the Supreme Court, there was the feeling that you don't

conflate the playing field with grave responsibilities. He was concerned that he not inadvertently demean the office.

Q. As a bit of a follow up, was White proud of his football accomplishments? Did he ever discuss them? Was he a fan himself?

A. I think he missed the physical challenge, which he still subjected himself to in his 60s when I clerked for him. He still played 2-on-2 basketball and he still loved to drive the baseline against his young law clerks.

And he missed the fellowship. This is someone who could get misty-eyed when he saw one of his old football teammates. He was ferociously loyal to them, and it was a camaraderie that he absolutely treasured. In his home over a beer one of those guys could call him Whizzer and he wouldn't bat an eye. But if some pipsqueak law clerk called him that they they would get the hard stare.

He was a huge fan. He loved watching superb athletes in competition. Dr. J was one in particular, when I was around. He was loyal to Colorado, or course, and he very loyal to the Steelers and the Rooney family. He loved Art Rooney.

He didn't like to talk about his past exploits. The year I clerked for him the only time he talked about his playing career was when there was an article in the newspaper about it. And that was about the famous Utah game in the fall of 1937 when he made a spectacular 97-yard touchdown run.

Q. White's life was a remarkable one. Considering how all-encompassing collegiate sports have become for athletes, as well as how wealthy the best players can get from playing professionally, can you imagine someone living a life like that happening now?

A. It's very difficult because he played in the days before athletic scholarships, when everyone was basically a walk on. A long practice at most was two and a half or three hours and there wasn't a study session afterward or film study. There wasn't the training, all of that. That's what makes sports so all-encompassing now. It takes a truly extraordinary person to attain that level of athletic and academic achievement. But then there's a Myron Rolle and there's a Bill Bradley, so occasionally they come along.

Today, someone who has that level of athletic proficiency and that level of academic potential, might say, O.K., I'll go to Princeton or Stanford, not the SEC or schools like that. That's what makes Myron Rolle so remarkable to me.

Q. Byron White's story is remarkable, too.

A. He wanted to submerge it and I didn't want him to get away with submerging it, especially because he could be so difficult in dealing with the press. He took the same approach to biography that William Faulkner did: He wrote the books and he died; nothing more to say. Byron White felt, I wrote the opinions and I died. There's nothing more to say. O.K., but ...

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