In the race of his life, Michigan senior Val Johnson made history as a black student.
He was a black student at a largely white university. A young man in a town where many boarding houses and shops turned away African-Americans. A quiet athlete, accustomed to racing the clock, challenging a football star cheered by thousands as the most decorated player in campus history.

This had never happened at the University of Michigan.

On paper, Val Johnson didn’t stand a chance. But things weren’t that black and white for the students of 1948.

Two men wanted to be president of the LSA Class of 1949: Pete Elliott and Val Johnson.

Peter R. Elliott was the prototypical big man on campus. On the football team, he alternated between quarterback and defensive halfback on a squad that went undefeated for two seasons and won back-to-back national championships. During a 1948 trip to the Rose Bowl, he golfed with Bing Crosby. He would leave Michigan with 12 varsity letters – in football, basketball and golf – in an accomplishment never to be repeated.

Handsome, fair-haired and clean cut, Elliott played football alongside his older brother Chalmers, who was known as “Bump” and, like Pete, an All-American.

Orval Wardel Johnson also was an athlete, but he excelled in track and track did not generate big crowds or huge headlines. He ran the 100-yard dash in 10 seconds and the 220 in 21.6; a U-M media guide described him as “the speedy Detroit colored boy,” a graduate of Northwestern High School. He was a slender 155 pounds, and his 5-foot, 11-inch frame often was immaculately dressed. A four-year letterman, he also was active in the Student Legislature, the Sphinx junior honor society and his East Quad dorm council.

If he stood out, it was because Johnson was exceedingly nice, dubbed “the gentlemanly runner” by coaches and reporters. “If I could make Val mad for a few races,” his coach, Ken Doherty, remarked, “he could become world champion.”

For now, Johnson would settle for class president. That is, if he could get past the biggest name on campus – and perceptions.
In photo after yearbook photo, Val Johnson is the lone black face in student groups: Student Legislature, the “M” Club of varsity lettermen, Senior Board, a gathering of class presidents from Education, Pharmacy, Nursing and other schools.

African-American students were all but invisible at Michigan in the 1940s, despite blacks having attended since the end of the Civil War. When Johnson entered his senior year in the fall of 1948, the campus was booming with more than 20,000 students, a record level driven by more than 10,000 veterans who survived World War II and now crowded U-M classrooms. It is estimated that fewer than 100 students were black – half of 1 percent of the campus. While the University would ask students about their gender, religious affiliation, parents’ occupations and any fraternity or sorority ties, it did not ask about race.

At the start of the decade, graduate student William H. Boone published a master’s thesis about life for black students like him on a nearly all-white campus. His findings were bleak. Black students said they found it harder to pay for school because they were limited to menial part-time jobs, while white students were paid better for better jobs such as store clerks and library assistants. They hesitated to speak up in class for fear of standing out (“I believe I am ‘on the spot’ and too conspicuous, for everyone turns around and stares when I say anything,” one reported). They rarely joined social activities sponsored by the University. And the anxiety of being black in a white world left students feeling stigmatized and mentally wrought by “the undesirable realities of life.”

The situation was not much better as the decade drew to a close. Roger W. Wilkins, a black student from Grand Rapids who enrolled in the fall of 1949, found that he and the few classmates who looked like him “were peripheral to campus life.”

“I would soon learn that though we could eat in the cafeteria, we could not get our hair cut at the Michigan Union, that 90 percent of the private rooms for rent to students were unavailable to us, that we could not eat (or when we became 21, drink) at the legendary Michigan watering hole, The Pretzel Bell,” he wrote years later, “and that the girl friends whom we had yet to meet could not try on clothes as the white girls could at the State Street shops.”

Wilkins spent seven years at Michigan, earning bachelor’s and law degrees in classes taught entirely by white men. “I was never assigned a book, an essay, a play, a short story, or a poem that was written by a black writer or that suggested that any black person had ever done or thought anything worthwhile in the entire history of the world,” he said.

This was Val Johnson’s world.
“Michigan’s Man of Distinction.” That was the moniker assigned to Johnson by his campaign managers, Bill Graves, a zoology major, and Betty Blumberg, a senior studying Spanish, made it their job to get out the word when campaigning began in late November of 1948.

The job of class president involved rallying the seniors, building school spirit, coordinating events and activities, and finding ways to give back to the University with a class gift and reunions after graduation. It did not carry political power – that was left to the Student Legislature, to which Johnson had been elected earlier that spring.

Johnson supporters – white and black – wandered the dorms handing out buttons and lollipops that urged “Val Johnson for Senior President.” At the same time, phones rang throughout the residence halls. Male students who answered heard the voice of Norris Domangue, a senior who flew aboard bombers during the war; women listened to Kay Woodruff, a junior who served in the Student Legislature with Johnson. Over and over, some 1,200 times, campaign workers played taped messages of Domangue and Woodruff reciting a poem that encouraged a vote for Johnson. Johnson himself visited the dorms, mingling with students and asking for their support.

When election day arrived, the campus woke to biting winds and a rare front-page editorial in the Michigan Daily, whose senior editors urged students to head to the polls. “It is true that you have an almost impossible job in trying to select the best candidates on this sprawling campus. Unless you have personal contact with a candidate, you are almost forced to take the word of a friend in selecting qualified people to fill the jobs.”

There was other big news in that day’s paper. Led by All-American Pete Elliott, the undefeated Michigan football team had finished No. 1 in the season’s final Associated Press poll. More than half a million fans had turned out that fall to watch Elliott and his teammates crush their opponents by scores like 35-0, 54-0 and 40-0.

Voting stations were set up across campus, from the Diag and Engineering Arch to the steps of the Law School and lobby of the Michigan Union. Students were casting ballots for dozens of candidates eager to join the Student Legislature, J-Hop Committee, Board in Control of Student Publications, and class officer positions.

Voting would last two days, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Election organizers hoped to store ballots overnight in the city jail, but instead settled for the basement of President Alexander Ruthven’s house. After the first day of voting, the Daily carried a front-page photo of senior class candidates huddled around a table, presumably discussing their campaigns; Johnson was front and center, and Elliott was absent.

Thousands of students, the Daily reported, had turned out at the polls.
Despite the dearth of African-Americans on campus – or perhaps, because of it – Michigan students of the late 1940s were agitating for change. They wanted greater racial integration at a time when President Harry Truman ordered the end of segregation in the military and Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in major league baseball.

The number of student organizations ballooned, with newly created groups such as the Committee for Civil Rights, the Committee to End Discrimination, and the Democratic Socialist Club winning approval from campus administrators. Students formed the Inter-Racial Association, “to work for a purer democracy by combating prejudice and discrimination against race, religion or national origin in the United States and particularly in the Ann Arbor and University area.”

Called the IRA, the group was known for hosting popular films on campus and sandwiching in educational shorts about tolerance; when students would settle in for a showing of Alfred Hitchcock’s “The 39 Steps,” they first saw a documentary refuting the concept of racial superiority.

IRA members reached out to university officials nationwide to gauge racial issues on campuses and learn how they were being addressed. When the dean of students at the University of Illinois received the IRA’s query, he told U-M Dean of Students Joseph Bursley he had no intention of responding – a decision Bursley endorsed.

“I realize fully the tough row which many negros (sic) have to hoe and I am glad at any time to do what I can to help them,” Bursley wrote in 1946. “Personally I have no objection to sitting next to a negro at a movie or any public place, nor do I object to sitting at the table with him simply because he is negro. I have eaten more than once with colored people and would do so again.

“However, I have no sympathy with the radical trouble makers who are trying to stir up discord and bring about a clash between the whites and colored members of our community.”

Students felt otherwise. The IRA carried out “Operation Haircut,” a boycott of the dozens of Ann Arbor barbershops and beauty parlors that refused to serve black customers. A group of campus veterans lobbied student government to investigate why there were no black students on the varsity basketball and baseball teams. The Student Legislature called upon faculty to teach a course in the psychology of prejudice, another course in black history, and to make prejudice the theme of an English class. Whenever efforts failed, which was often, students took pride in at least having raised awareness of discrimination.

At the same time, graduate students at Michigan were conducting more research about African-Americans than at any predominantly white university in the country. Fifteen studies were under way by U-M master’s and doctoral students in 1948, compared with places like Yale University and the University of Chicago, with one study apiece, or Harvard University, which reported no such research.

And in the days leading up to the 1948 elections, the Daily made a point of constantly hammering Phi Kappa Psi fraternity for supporting its national organization’s policy of refusing black members. The national leaders had just revoked the charter of a Phi Psi chapter at Amherst College for admitting an African-American, and Michigan fraternity members called it the right decision; U-M’s Greek system had white and black fraternities, they argued, and the system worked just fine.

The Daily wasn’t buying it.

“This sounds like the beginning of the argument expressed by the white supremacists of the South,” the paper editorialized. “It rationalizes that because there are equal facilities for the different groups, no effort should be made to make them one united body.”
When it came time to tally the votes, in a room at the Union made hazy by cigarette smoke, there were a staggering number of ballots. More than 7,000 students – one-third of the campus – had cast a ballot, with roughly a thousand voting in the Johnson-Elliott race. There had never been such a turnout by students at Michigan.

It was a blowout.

After 10 hours of counting ballots, the outcome was overwhelming and undeniable. By a 2-to-1 margin, Val Johnson trounced Pete Elliott. Seniors had elected their first black class president, a first not only for Michigan but also for any predominantly white university in the country.

Johnson was running down a stairwell in the Michigan Union when someone told him the outcome. It was 3 o’clock in the morning, the day after polls closed. Behind him, a cheer went up from a Union hallway as other students heard the final results.

“I’m completely overwhelmed,” Johnson told a Daily reporter.


Days after the votes were tallied, Johnson reflected on his race, his victory, and what both meant for racial relations on campus. “I think it’s really a matter of getting acquainted with the different races. I’ve always believed association and acquaintance were the real solutions to the problem.”

He knew he was different, but not because of his skin color. “There’s an advantage to standing out as an individual, because if you’re liked, you’ll probably be remembered.”

“The gentlemanly runner” then composed a thank-you note to his classmates, “for the unceasing moral and physical support you accorded me in the recent Senior Presidential campaign.”
Val Johnson, Pete Elliott and the Class of 1949 graduated in early June, walking across a stage before thousands of family members and friends gathered at Ferry Field.

Elliott, who earned a degree in history, chose coaching as a career and led college teams at Nebraska, California, Illinois and Miami. He was elected to the College Football Hall of Fame and served as executive director of the Pro Football Hall of Fame for 17 years. He died in 2013 at age 86.

Johnson left to work for United Nations Radio in Paris. Fluent in French and Spanish and with a degree in Latin American studies, he also taught language and communication at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. He then returned to his hometown Detroit to teach high school Spanish. When he died in 1995, he was 69.

Six months after Johnson’s election, students at Rutgers University voted for William (Bucky) Hatchett, an African-American athlete in three sports, to be their senior class president. In 1950, UCLA students elected Sherrill Luke as the school’s first black class president. Ohio State students followed with Harland Randolph in 1953. That same year Michigan students elected, for the second time, an African-American to be LSA class president: Roger Wilkins.

—Kim Clarke


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