

IN MEMORIAM

JAMES STEEDMAN WOMACK II '67
1945-2021

James Womack II '67 became Carolina's first Black male cheerleader on a dare. In high school, he'd been valedictorian of his class and the drum major. His roommate freshman year in 1963, the year before the Civil Rights Act passed, said UNC would never choose an African American for its cheer squad, because all the cheerleaders came from fraternities or sororities.

"I like a challenge," Womack told the audience of "Stories from the Sidelines," a Black Alumni Reunion panel discussion in 2019.

Womack, gifted with a winning smile and an outgoing personality, went to the tryouts in Kenan Stadium and sat down with the other hopefuls. Everyone else in that section got up and moved away, he said, emotion constricting his words.

He performed his routine, then left to take a final exam. Only later did he learn that when the judges saw that his totaled score made the cut, they wanted to reassess their ratings of him. Student body president Michael Lawler '63 wouldn't let them.

Womack made the team and became the first Black cheerleader at a Division I school. During his first game, some fans threw oranges at him. No one on the squad spoke to him for the entire year.

"People who were not cheerleaders afforded me more respect and honor than the cheerleaders," he said.

Men's basketball coach Dean Smith was among

those who recognized the value Womack brought to UNC athletics. Smith invited Womack to join him on a trip to recruit a talented high schooler, Charlie Scott '70, who would become Carolina's first Black scholarship athlete. After the visit, Scott chose UNC, and Womack was tapped to recruit Black athletes for other Carolina teams.

As part of the vanguard of integrating UNC, Womack paved the way for Black cheerleaders who followed. At Carolina games, the band frequently played Dixie, and fans were expected to stand. He said he took the pragmatic approach that if he was standing when the band began the tune, he'd stay standing. But if he was sitting, he wouldn't rise.

When the teams traveled to schools such as Clemson and to the Gator Bowl in Florida in 1963, Womack couldn't stay in the same hotel as the rest of the squad. He said he remembered the Ku Klux Klan coming to campus in 1966 and threatening to hang Black students.

Womack persevered. After graduation he moved to Texas and made a career in the insurance industry as an insurance adjuster analyst who helped settle million-dollar claims.

It was five years after he graduated before other Black cheerleaders joined the squad. In 1972, Mary Rudd '75, the first Black female cheerleader, and David Belton '75 made the team. Their path was much smoother, thanks to Womack.

"As painful as it was, I did enjoy it," Womack told the Black Alumni Reunion audience about his years



as a cheerleader. "I felt the love for Carolina and cheerleading, but I feel the pain at the same time."

Womack died on Dec. 4, 2021. He was 76.

—Nancy E. Oates