

The Express



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著者:Robert C. Gallagher

出版者:Ballantine Books

出版时间:2008-09-02

装帧:Paperback

isbn:9780345510860

“He could do it all, beat every opponent . . . except one.”

—plaque honoring Ernie Davis, in the lobby of Elmira Free Academy

Ernie Davis was an All-American on the gridiron, and a man of integrity off the field. A multi-sport high school star in Elmira, New York, Davis went on to Syracuse University, where as a sophomore he led his team to an undefeated season and a national championship in 1959, and earned his nickname, the Elmira Express. Two seasons later, Davis had broken the legendary Jim Brown’s rushing records, and became the first black athlete to be awarded the Heisman Trophy.

The number one pick in the 1962 NFL draft, Davis signed a contract with the Cleveland Browns and appeared to be headed for professional stardom. But Davis never ended up playing in the NFL: He was diagnosed with leukemia during the summer before his rookie season and succumbed to the disease less than a year later. In battling his illness, Davis showed great dignity and courage, inspired the nation, and moved President John F. Kennedy to eulogize him as “an outstanding man of great character.”

An enduring story of a true scholar-athlete, The Express is a touching, impeccably researched, deeply personal portrait of Ernie Davis, and a vivid look at sport in America at the dawn of the Civil Rights era.

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