

# The Clerk's Black History Series



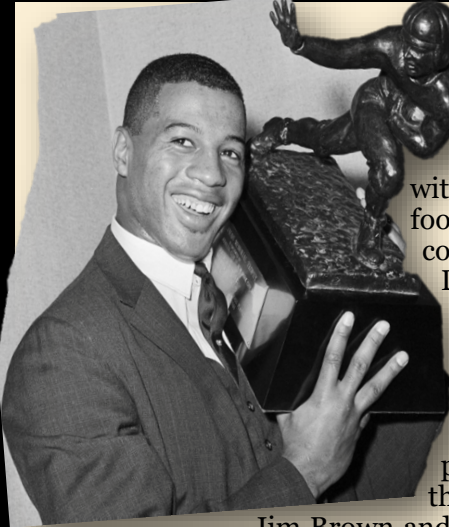
**Debra DeBerry**  
Clerk of Superior Court  
DeKalb County



## Ernie Davis

(December 14, 1939 – May 18, 1963)

### First African-American Heisman Trophy Winner



**Ernie Davis** was born on December 14, 1939, in New Salem, PA. His father died shortly after he was born and his mother struggled to raise him alone. At 14-months old, Ernie was sent to live with his maternal grandparents in Uniontown, PA. He faced multiple struggles in his early years but credits those hard times with instilling in him discipline and determination. At the age of 12, Ernie went to live with his mother and step-father in Elmira, New York and played baseball, basketball and football at Elmira Free Academy. Davis led the high school's basketball team to 52 consecutive victories, and some felt his natural gifts were best suited for the hardwood. Davis however, loved football and was heavily recruited by some of college football's top programs. But it was NFL great and Syracuse Alum, Jim Brown, who convinced Davis that Syracuse University, Brown's alma mater, would be a welcoming place for a young black athlete.

Ernie Davis entered Syracuse University in 1958, and although freshmen weren't allowed to play in varsity games, he dominated practices with his power and speed. At the start of his Sophomore year, Ernie took the field, donning the legendary jersey number 44, after his idol,

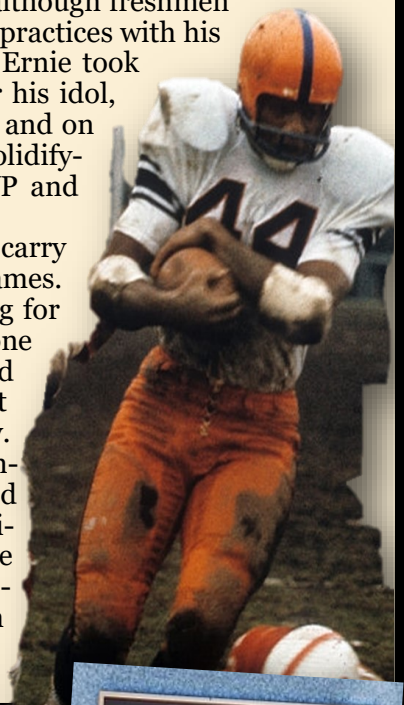
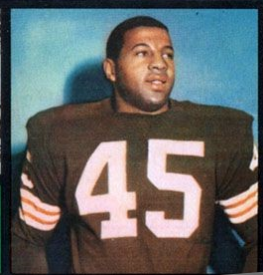
Jim Brown and compiled 686 yards on 98 carries and 10 touchdowns and on New Year's Day in 1960, Davis scored two touchdowns against the University of Texas, solidifying a 23-14 win for the National Championship. That year Ernie was named the MVP and earned the nickname, "The Elmira Express."

His Junior year earned him All-American honors when he set a record of 7.8 yards per carry and was the third leading rusher in the country having rushed 100 yards in six of nine games. But it was Ernie's Senior year that changed the history of the Heisman Trophy. Rushing for 823 yards on 150 carries, scoring 15 touchdowns, with 12 rushing, two receiving and one interception returned for a score, Ernie Davis dominated college football. On Dec. 6, 1961, he became the first African-American to win the prestigious Heisman Trophy.

The honor garnered a meeting with President John F. Kennedy. After graduating from Syracuse, Ernie was drafted first overall by the Washington Redskins but was immediately traded to the Cleveland Browns. His selection as the first pick in round one of the draft, was also an African-American first. But shortly after the trade, Ernie began having serious nosebleeds and swollen glands. His teeth would bleed and he began to tire easily. Something was wrong.



ERNE DAVIS  
CLEVE. BROWNS  
BACK

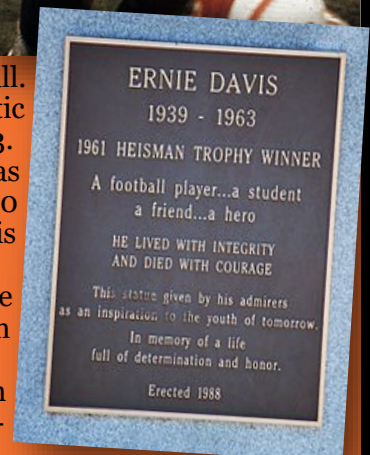


President Kennedy & Heisman  
Trophy winner Ernie Davis 12/6/1961

Davis was elected to the National Football Foundation in 1979 and the College Hall of Fame in 2008. In October of 2009, Syracuse University renamed their football field, "Ernie Davis Legends Field."

Ernie Davis never played one game of professional Football. And after a sixteen-month battle with acute monocytic leukemia, Ernie Davis died on May 18, 1963, at the age of 23. Both houses of Congress eulogized Davis and a wake was held in his hometown of Elmira with more than 10,000 mourners. A letter from President Kennedy was read at his funeral.

His commemorative statue now stands in front of the school named in his honor, Ernie Davis Academy, in Elmira New York. In 2005, Syracuse retired jersey No. 44.



ERNE DAVIS

1939 - 1963

1961 HEISMAN TROPHY WINNER

A football player...a student  
a friend...a hero

HE LIVED WITH INTEGRITY  
AND DIED WITH COURAGE

This statue given by his admirers  
as an inspiration to the youth of tomorrow.

In memory of a life  
full of determination and honor.

Erected 1988