

Simpson's legacy strikes at heart of race in America



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It's complicated. Still.

O.J. Simpson is dead. Maybe – *maybe* – his body and soul will rest in peace. His tattered legacy certainly won't.

Simpson, who succumbed to prostate cancer on Wednesday night in Las Vegas at 76, goes down in history as the ultimate American tragedy in so many ways.

From football legend and Hollywood star ... to accused double-murderer and the Hall of Shame.

What a complex journey.

Simpson was acquitted by a Los Angeles jury for the brutal slayings in 1994 of ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend, Ron Goldman. Yet the presumptions – buttressed by the liability judged in a subsequent civil trial – are going with him to the grave.

If you were among the 95 million people watching in real-time on national TV as a Ford Bronco transporting Simpson, driven by his friend and former teammate Al Cowlings, rolled down the LA freeway in a low-speed police chase in June 1994, it was a series of images you'll never forget. And no, it was hardly a move consistent with innocence.

This, while people chanted from freeway bridges, "Go, O.J., Go!"

Remember Simpson as polarizing, whether he intended to be or not. It's fair. The so-called "Trial of the Century" and its aftermath struck at the heart of racial inequities in America and a criminal justice system that historically has victimized people of color. That's part of his legacy, too.

Three years after the acquittal of four white police officers captured on video brutally beating a Black man, Rodney King, which ignited the L.A. riots in 1992, an all-Black jury found Simpson not guilty.

When the verdict was announced, the basic reaction from many white Americans was visible disgust. Simpson's blood was part of the evidence. He didn't have an alibi. He had a history of domestic violence incidents during his



O. J. Simpson sits in Superior Court in Los Angeles in December 1994 during an open court session. POOL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

marriage.

Even so, when the verdict came, there was no shortage of images of cheering Black Americans.

It was deeper than the testimony and cross-examination of a racist, white Los Angeles police detective, whose background included using racial slurs and planting evidence, which undoubtedly weighed on the jury. It was deeper than defense attorney Johnnie Cochran's classic plea, "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit," as Simpson couldn't squeeze his hand into a glove found at the murder scene.

The reaction from Black people had more to do with the entrenched pattern of social injustice in America over so many years that railroaded – and sometimes lynched – Black men who faced bogus charges.

Simpson, it seemed, was a beneficiary of some sort of criminal-justice payback.

That, too, is part of his legacy. And how ironic is that.

This was the same Simpson who never involved himself with civil rights issues as he became a household name during the late 1960s, unlike other high-profile athletes of that era. Instead, during his heyday, Simpson told people, "I'm not Black, I'm O.J."

That stance, during previous chapters of his life, didn't pose a threat to his legacy. Back then, Simpson was widely revered as a hero.

One of the all-time great running backs, he led Southern California to a national championship and was awarded the Heisman Trophy in 1968. Drafted into the NFL by the Buffalo Bills with the No. 1 overall pick in 1969, "The Juice" powered "The Electric Company" and in 1973 became the league's first 2,000-yard rusher. Kids like me adored him, as he raced through defenses in his Spottbilt cleats, en route to his 1985 induction

into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Off the field, he won with crossover appeal. Simpson was the first Black athlete to explode as a commercial star, running through airports as a Hertz spokesman. It continued after football; he landed roles in more than 20 movies and had TV gigs as an analyst for ABC's "Monday Night Football" and on NBC.

Simpson seemingly had the world in the palm of his hands. But that was back then.

Did he do it?

That question has formed the essence of Simpson's legacy for nearly 30 years. And many will tell you that it's not even a legitimate question. As news of his death spread, it sparked, as you'd expect, a fresh round of re-litigation. And passion. Only this time, with the added layer of social media.

Simpson's complicated legacy, though, is a reminder of cracks in American society on so many levels.