

In Conversation With... Bill Graham

By Chris Durka

A few days ago I had the pleasure of talking to #83 Bill Graham a former great Tiger Cat who played for Hamilton in 1953 and 1957 to 1960. Bill earned a roster spot with the 1953 Ti-Cats at the tender age of 17, right out of high school. He was invited to a number of Ti-Cat try-out camps competing with numerous other young football hopefuls. His success at these preliminary camps led to the Tiger Cats spring training camp followed by the exhibition season and eventual signing of a professional football contract with his hometown team, the Hamilton Tiger Cats. It was like a fairy-tale as he put it. He said that he only attended the tryout camps for the physical workouts so that he could get into better and stronger shape. He never in his wildest dreams thought that he would actually make the team. This should not have been too surprising because he inherited his athletic genes from his dad who played for the Hamilton Tigers football club in 1924.

I asked him what it was like at such a young age to be part of a team with the likes of Bernie Custis, Jake Gauduar, Pete Neumann, Vince Mazza, just to mention a few, and he simply said that it was a like a dream. Bill said that all the players helped him and took care of him particularly Bernie Custis who helped him to learn more about the aspects of the pro game.

After his rookie year in '53 he left the Ti-Cats for the O.R.F.U. and played for the Kitchener- Waterloo Dutchmen with team-mates such as Bobby Kuntz and Cookie Gilchrist. In 1956 he set an O.R.F.U. scoring record of 157 points and then returned to the to the Tiger Cats in 1957. Bill played in 4 Grey Cup games with the Cats winning 2, the first in his rookie year 1953 and also in 1957.

Bill was an outstanding athlete, not only did he play pro football but also played Junior A hockey for the Guelph Biltmores and for the 1959 Canadian Gold Medal World Hockey Champions Belleville McFarlands who represented Canada in that World Championship Tournament.

Bill returned to play for the very talented 1957 Tiger Cats team. He said that although that team was laden with so many great players such as Bernie Faloney, Cookie Gilchrist, Gerry McDougall, John Barrow, Tony

Curcillo, Eddie Macon etc. they played as a team not as separate individuals and this was the reason that they were so successful. They were dedicated to the game with the determination to win.

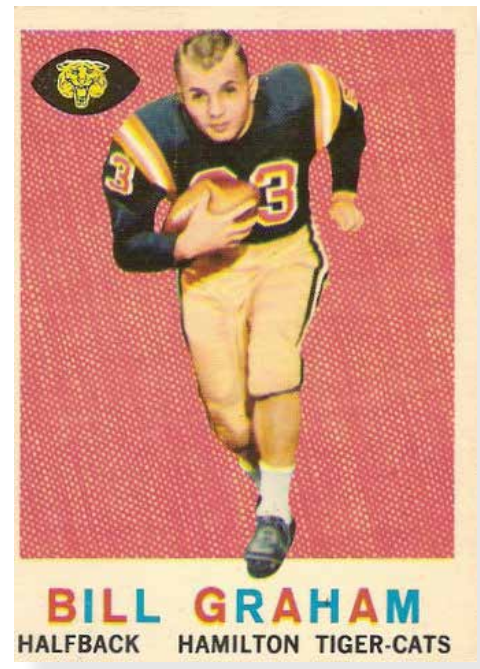
Bill played under two head coaches in Hamilton, Carl Voyles and Jim Trimble. He said that they were both very much alike, very tough, no nonsense individuals with the desire to win.

I asked Bill what were some of his most memorable moments that he could share and he said that being part of and winning the Grey Cup in 1953 and '57. I asked him what went through his mind during the 1957 Grey Cup game when Ray Bawel was tripped by a spectator along the sidelines after intercepting the ball and Bill said that he was simply stunned. The rest of his Ti-Cat team mates were also stunned because this had never happened before ever.

A more personal memorable moment for Bill was a play in that same '57 Grey Cup game when he made a touchdown preventing an open field tackle on the great Winnipeg running back Leo Lewis. He was the last line of defence when Lewis broke through on a kick off when he tackled him. The picture of that tackle is proudly displayed on the wall of his basement family room along with his '59 World Hockey Gold Medal. Another memorable moment was during the 1957 eastern final against Ottawa when Bill said that late in the game he tackled the Ottawa ball carrier forcing him to fumble. The fumble was recovered by the Ti Cats and with that turnover the Cats were able to score the game winning touchdown and subsequently the trip to the '57 Grey Cup. During Jim Trimble's press conferences he referred to Bill Graham at 165 lbs the toughest pound for pound player in the CFL.

During Bill's time with the Ti-Cats he said that Bernie Faloney, Bernie Custis, Gerry McDougall were all good friends of his but Ron Howell was his closest friend. Ron and Bill were also hockey team mates and roommates with the Kitchener Bitmores and Ron was his best man at his wedding in 1959.

I asked him who was one of the toughest players that he had played against and Herb Grey the great two way player for the



Winnipeg Blue Bombers came to mind.

Like all previous former great players Bill didn't forget mentioning the Hamilton football fans. He said that the Hamilton fans are great, there is no doubt about it and he went on to say that "they have a fever for football".

Bill retired from both football and hockey after the 1960 CFL season due to business opportunities which he also succeeded in. Even today he is still remains very active in a number of his very worthwhile interests including sitting as the Chairman of the Sources of Knowledge Program. Bill mentioned that he is thankful for the opportunities, experiences and accomplishments in his life, but most of all thankful to his family for all the love and support they have provided.

CHRIS DURKA

Chris is a long-time Tiger-Cat fan, season ticket holder, historian and collector of Tiger-Cat memorabilia and autographs. Over the years, Chris has had the honour to speak with many Tiger-Cat players whom he now recalls in conversation.