

# In Conversation With... Garney Henley

By Chris Durka



My conversation recently was with Hamilton Tiger Cat legend # 26, Garney Henley. Garney played his entire 16

year professional football career for the Tiger Cats. He initially came to Hamilton in 1960 as a defensive back but it didn't take long before he ended up also playing on the offence and special teams. Garney played in 7 Grey Cup games where he was part of 4 Grey Cup Championship Ti Cat teams, in 1963/65/67 and '72. He was both a CFL Eastern All Star and a CFL All Star in 1963/64/65/66/67/68/69/70/71 and '72. He also won the CFL Most Outstanding Player Award in 1972 and the Jeff Russell Memorial Trophy in 1963 and 1972.

This may be difficult to believe, especially to the avid CFL and Ti Cat fan, but Garney Henley didn't begin to play the sport of football until he attended Huron Collage in South Dakota. After high school Garney enrolled at South Dakota State but a few months later he transferred to Huron College where his main sports were Basketball and track. It was his basketball achievements in high school that attracted a lot of attention in and around the State. When he attended Huron College it was the football coach there that noticed his athletic abilities and approached him to try out for the football team. It wasn't until after some personal soul searching, family consultation and the consistent encouragement of the football coach that Garney finally decided to give football a try.

Garney's college grid iron accomplishments, which included his NAIA All American selection in 1959, caught the attention of Vince Lombardi and the Green Bay Packers so they selected him in the 1960 NFL draft. He was also drafted by the New York Titans of the newly formed AFL but he decided to try out with the Packers. Garney dressed and played in all the exhibition games, primarily on the offence as a receiver and although he did quite well, he was a victim of the numbers game and was the last cut. It was soon after when he found out from Lombardi that a coach named Jim Trimble of a Canadian professional football team was interested in him, so his rights were traded to the Hamilton Tiger Cats.

Garney and his wife packed up their car and drove to Hamilton. When they arrived and saw the view of the city from the mountain, they couldn't get over the number of so many houses they saw and wondered how they would ever find the football stadium. Garney said that

with the directions from a gas station attendant they eventually made it to Civic Stadium. His first meeting with head coach Trimble was somewhat candid and concerning because when Trimble looked at the rather thin, studious looking Henley he thought that he was a lost high school kid. When Garney introduced himself, Trimble didn't seem to be impressed and instructed assistant coach Ralph Sazio to take Henley out to run some pass patterns and then let him go. Fortunately Sazio, who had a keen eye for football talent, saw something in Henley and told the head coach that they should keep him and the rest is history.

When Garney dressed for his first game he said that he was simply given jersey #26 to wear, he didn't have a choice in the matter, so there was no special personal reason for having that number. For the next 16 years however, #26 became one of the most famous numbers in Tiger Cat and CFL history. During the road trips, Garney said that he had two great roommates in Don Sutherin and for the longest time Bob Krouse. He also mentioned that he had the good fortune to have played with some of the greatest players of that time such as, Angelo Mosca, Bernie Faloney, Joe Zuger, Bob Krouse, Hal Paterson, John Barrow, Zeno Karcz, Pete Neumann and the list goes on he said.

Garney mentioned the head coaches that he played for, Jim Trimble, Ralph Sazio, Joe Restic and finally Jerry Williams. He said that he preferred playing for Ralph Sazio the most and went on to say that Sazio was a strict, hard line but fair coach whose approach was very similar to that of Vince Lombardi's in Green Bay.

Garney said that there were a number of memorable moments during his career, such as being selected as the Canadian Football League's most outstanding player in 1972, and participating in 7 Grey Cup games, especially three in particular. The first being the 1962 Grey Cup fog bowl, although the Cats eventually lost that game, it was an unforgettable game for him personally where he scored on a 74 yard TD run, recovered a fumble, had another 18 yard rushing TD and an interception in that game. It was also unforgettable because of the thick fog that set in at CNE Stadium in the third quarter. It made the visibility so bad that eventually only the lower half of the players could be seen thus causing the last 10 minutes of the game to be postponed until the next day. The second memory was the 1963 Grey Cup game in Vancouver against a very strong Lions team stands out because the Cats won that

game and he played both ways, never coming off the field. The third memory was winning the 1972 Grey Cup game in Hamilton on a last second field goal. I asked Garney, who held the placement for the rookie kicker, what did he say to Sunter just before that last second field goal and he told me that he simply said, "I'll get it there, you just look at the ball and kick it".

Garney's last season was at the end of the 1975 football season. He remained in Canada and became an administrator and a coach at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, Brock University in St. Catharines and Guelph University. At Guelph he turned around a very poor basketball program into a very successful one and in 1973-74 Guelph won the Canadian (CIAU) national Basketball championship. In 1989 to 1993 Garney was an assistant coach with the Tiger Cats and in 1995 to 1996 was the Director of Football Operations with the Ottawa Rough Riders. After 36 years in Canada, Garney moved back to his home State of South Dakota in 1996.

Garney Henley was inducted into the South Dakota Track Hall of Fame in 1972, the South Dakota Basketball Hall of Fame in 1975, the Huron College Hall of Fame in 1978, the South Dakota Hall of Fame in 1979 and the South Dakota College Hall of Fame in 2004. In 1979 he was inducted into the Canadian Football Hall of Fame and in 1985 into the Guelph Athletics Hall of Fame. Garney was voted the 6<sup>th</sup> Greatest Player ever to play in the Canadian Football League in a 2006 TSN poll. He was inducted into the Hamilton Sports Hall of Fame in 2011 and into the Ontario Sports Hall of Fame in 2015.

In ending, Garney mentioned the Tiger Cats fans. He said that Hamilton football fans were and still are tough, supportive fans that know their football. He said that after leaving Green Bay he couldn't have gone to a better place than Hamilton.

It was both a privilege and an honour for me to have had the opportunity to have had a conversation with one of the greatest players to have played in the Canadian Football League and especially for the Hamilton Tiger Cats.

**CHRIS DURKA 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.