

1986 Grey Cup Champions Meet Again

By Brian Snelgrove

It was a reunion three decades in the making.

The year was 1986 and the Hamilton Tiger-Cats were decided underdogs in the Grey Cup against the heavily-favoured Edmonton Eskimos. Most pundits predicted a one-sided affair – and they were right – Hamilton won 39-15 in one of the biggest upsets in Grey Cup history.

Thirty years later nearly 40 members of that 1986 championship team gathered in Hamilton to share memories and swap stories from that historic contest. The players, coaches and staff were honoured at the Tiger-Cats home game on August 20 against the Saskatchewan Roughriders.

“It was outstanding,” says Jason Riley (OL, 1984-93) one of the event organizers. A lot of time and planning went into putting this together. On the Friday night we had a fantastic party at Dave Sauve’s with over 100 people, including the team, support staff, coaches and spouses. There were guys from all over North America. On Saturday there was a tailgate party before the game at the Polish Hall over at Balsam and Barton. There had to be 300 people, with fans taking pictures and getting autographs and everybody had a great time. What a wonderful way to spend the day. Then we went to the brand new clubhouse at the stadium. It was phenomenal. A lot of guys hadn’t seen it. Guys were blown away by it. It’s been a great partnership with the team. They put a lot of resources into it, as did the Alumni. We were all introduced at halftime



of the game and went back the next day for a brunch they gave us in the executive suite at the new stadium. It was very rewarding and then we all went our separate ways.

“There was so much character on that team,” Riley adds. “The whole O-line from the Grey Cup was there. There was an amazing sense of camaraderie. Al Bruno was a master at bringing the team together. He galvanized the team and everybody liked each other. I hadn’t seen Howard Fields or Ron Ingram in 30 years.

“We loved being underdogs,” says Riley of the ‘86 game. “We knew we were going to win that game come hell or high water. If you watch the intros we were all business, we came out like animals, completely focused. We were very proud of the whole team effort. It was a total team effort right until the end. We were going to die on that field to win. Edmonton was at the wrong end of a perfect storm.”

Riley currently resides in Hamilton and is the offensive line coach for the McMaster Marauders.

“The reunion was a sort of validation over time of what you were a part of,” says Paul Bennett who was a defensive back for the Tiger-Cats from 1984-87 and now lives in Winnipeg. “When you’ve reached the pinnacle of what you have strived for your entire career it becomes more emotional and deeper and more appreciated. When you work hard and that’s your profession and then you look up at the guys that made it happen. It was just a really nice sense of accomplishment.

“We were huge underdogs,” Bennett says in recalling the game. “We were determined not to let that happen that we would lose three in a row. It was such a complete team effort. There was that underlying fear of losing three in a row. Edmonton had a great season and we were .500. It’s like a horse race, when you get too far behind you can’t catch up. We caught





them early. We were prepared and we were motivated and really came together. It wasn't a fluke. We were really ready. I remember at half time even though we were up 29-0 thinking never ever let up even for a moment."

Bennett is a member of the Canadian Football Hall of Fame and is the founder of Our Manitoba Heroes, a gala event celebrating "ordinary people doing extraordinary things". The former Ti-Cat is also considering a return to coaching high school football.

"It was great to get everybody back," says slotback Rocky DiPietro, a Hall of Famer and Ti-Cat star for 14 seasons (1978-91). "It was a great welcome by the fans and great treatment from the team. We've got a nice new alumni room. It was nice to see a lot of the regular guys as well as a lot of guys from out of town. We shared a lot of memories at Dave Sauve's house the night before, remembering things you've forgotten over time. Certain things jog your memory.

"I think it was our defense that dominated the game," DiPietro says about the '86 contest. "They came to play. We were huge underdogs. Some of us still had bad memories of our loss to Winnipeg two years earlier. Probably about ten minutes into the second half we were pretty

sure we were going to win. One thing that stands out I guess was standing on the podium with the Grey Cup with Harold Ballard and King Clancy. Ballard was at almost every practice and he treated us very well. He took care of us and I was glad for him."

DiPietro currently lives in Foothill and recently retired as a high school teacher.

"Its 30 years but this group has always been together," says former Assistant GM Mike McCarthy. "We had reunions after five, ten, 20, 25 years but this one was special. The Tiger-Cats really got behind it and a lot of effort went in to organizing it. Jason Riley did a fantastic job coordinating the whole reunion.

"We were huge underdogs going into that game," says McCarthy. "We came back in the two-game total point Eastern Final against Toronto after losing the first game badly. King Clancy passed away during training camp and we were wearing our black helmets with the shamrock on them for King. We destroyed the Eskimos. I think the defense still holds a lot of Grey Cup records. There were a lot of big plays. The guys were so relaxed and believed they could do it. The players all believed in Al Bruno. I remember walking with Harold Ballard all the way around B.C. Place after the

captains got the Cup. He took everybody in the organization out to the game."

McCarthy lives in Stoney Creek and is the General Manager of the Ohio franchise in the new developmental spring league, Major League Football.

Attending the weekends' events were: Al Friday, Ben Zambiasi, Bernie Ruoff, Bob Krouse, Dale Sanderson, Dan Huclack, David Levy, David Sauve, Frank Kovacs, Frank Robinson, Greg Irvine, Howard Fields, Jason Riley, Jeff Howe, Jim Rockford, Joe Zuger, John Eakins, John Malinosky, John Salavantis, Ken Zachary, Lee Knight, Leo Ezerins, Leon Lyszkiewicz, Less Browne, Marv Allemang, Michael McCarthy, Michael Robinson, Mike Derks, Mike Walker, Miles Gorrell, Mitchell Price, Pat Brady, Paul Bennett, Paul Clatney, Paul Osbaldiston, Ralph Scholz, Ray Jones, Rocky DiPietro, Rod Skillman, Romeo Komer-sky, Ron Ingram, Steve Jackson, Terry Lehne, Wayne Lee, Walter Bender.

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