

Leland "Squeak" Johnson

by Jebb Willis – volunteer

Wadena County Historical Society

Before we board *The Time Machine*, I want to tie up a few loose ends as they relate to our last voyage to meet WHS alum, T. Edison Smith ('36). You may recall in his retirement, from the ages of 68 to 94 he golfed his age 3,359 times. An achievement confirmed by *Golf Digest* and a world record. In addition to that he had an illustrious career at Moorhead State Teachers College as a student/athlete, professor, administrator, and coach. He excelled in football, baseball, track & field, and obviously golf. He was inducted into the Moorhead State University Hall of Fame in 1979. However, I mentioned nothing of his athletic achievements at WHS. There are several reasons why I mentioned nothing. In no particular order, here are a few of those reasons:

- The WCHS has no WHS yearbooks from his school years.
- I have not yet researched WHS track and field.
- There were no high school baseball or golf teams. They were summer sports.
- WHS had no conference affiliation, therefore no football all-conference awards.
- No cumulative statistics were published in the WPJ. That was typical of that era.

I could continue, but Squeak is waiting. The bottom line is that when one looks at T. Edison Smith's book of work it is apparent that he was one of Wadena's great student/athletes.

We are about to go back in time to learn about another Wadena alum who was also a great student/athlete. Leland "Squeak" Johnson ('35), who just happened to be a teammate of T. Edison Smith's ('36). During the five football seasons of 1931-35 WHS's record was 27-6-2 with four games cancelled due to weather. The rosters for those five seasons had Squeak and/or T. Edison on every one of them. And Squeak's brothers, Cassell and Russell, were both excellent running backs on the 1931 and 1932 teams.

In my research I was able to document the exceptional ability Squeak had as a running back. To sum it up, speed and power. Here are three examples.

In **September of 1933**, against Fergus Falls, Squeak ripped off a 58-yard TD run in a 12-0 victory over the Otters. Here is what the WPJ had to say.

Leland Johnson made Wadena's other touchdown in the third quarter when he displayed the field running qualities that earned fame for his brothers in high school football circles in the past two years. Taking the ball from center Squeak skirted the left end, twisting, dodging and plowing through the whole Fergus team, line and backfield for 58 yards and Wadena's final touchdown. The try for point failed.

WPJ September 21, 1933

Detroit began a series of line plunges down the field only to lose the ball again on Wadena's one yard line and so the battle waged until the second quarter when Johnson broke through Detroit's left tackle for a masterful sixty yard race to a touchdown. Detroit

WPJ November 2, 1933 In a big game vs Detroit Lakes (known as "Detroit" until a 1927 name change) Squeak was able to secure a 6-6 tie with his 60 yard burst for a touchdown.

In the **November 8, 1934, Wadena Pioneer Journal** it describes Squeak's biggest moment of his WHS career in his last "big" high school game. Here it is.

"Squeak Johnson, in the second quarter, hit a hole opened for him in the line, spun through and shook off three tacklers and raced down the field 77 yards for the only touchdown of the game. It was a thrilling run. Two Alexandria tacklers were but a stride behind him up to the twenty-yard line and there Squeak put on an unexpected spurt to draw away from his pursuers and cross the Alexandria goal line standing up." Final score: Wadena 7, Alexandria 0.

The next chapter of Squeak's life as a student/athlete would be at the University of Minnesota. During his senior year of 1934-35, the Minnesota Gophers won not only the 1934 Big 10 Championship, but their undefeated season was also worthy of being crowned the National Champions of College Football. Squeak was going to "walk on" (a non-scholarship player) in hopes of making the Gopher team coached by the legendary Bernie Bierman.

Squeak made the freshman team in 1935. And he was a reserve running back during the 1936 campaign. By the 1937 and 1938 seasons he was a starting running back, when not injured.

WADENA, MINNESOTA, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 1937

"SQUEAK" JOHNSON STARS IN FIRST GOPHER VICTORY

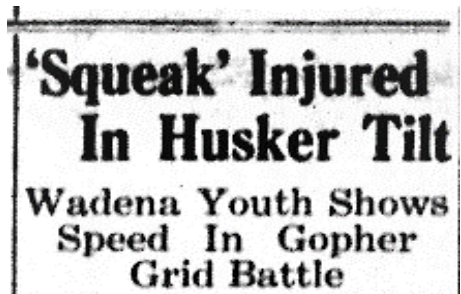


Leland "Squeak" Johnson, Wadena boy, proved to the satisfaction of Coach Bernie Bierman and Twin City sports writers Saturday that he is one of the most promising halfbacks at Minnesota this year, when in less than two minutes of play in the game against North Dakota State, he drove left tackle for 24 yards and then swept the left end for the remaining two yards and a touchdown.

Oddly enough, the North Dakota player who brought Squeak down on the two-yard line, preventing him from scoring on his drive over tackle, was Wes Phillips, brother of C. V. (Chuck) Phillips of Wadena; Squeak was also lauded for his passing and punting.

The following Twin City sports writers gave praise to Leland in their stories following the Gophers' decisive victory of 69 to 7 over North Dakota. Here's what

Squeak Johnson had an injury plagued career with the Gophers, however when he was healthy, he was a key player on the team as a hard-nosed running back. He played on one National Championship team and three Big 10 Championship teams. The team record during his four years as a Gopher was 27-5.



Leland "Squeak" Johnson was obviously a tremendous athlete, but he was much more than that. Below are some of the other great things I discovered about him.

Squeak graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1940. He entered the U.S. Navy as an aviation cadet, earning his wings in 1941. He was appointed chief flight instructor at the naval air station in Pensacola, FL and in 1943 assumed duties as Squadron Commander on the USS Independence as well as several other carriers in the Pacific. He was awarded 3 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 2 air medals and numerous citations. After release from active duty in 1945 he was instrumental in organizing the "Weekend Warriors" program at the Naval Air Station at World Chamberlain field and was commanding officer of several squadrons there. He retired with the rank of Captain, USNR, in 1977.

His business career culminated at Brown Steel Tank, where he served for 26 years, the last 11 as president.

He was laid to rest June 23, 2006, in Wadena.

Until next time!