

WPJ “The Time Machine” Article #32

## Squeak’s out, Tabery’s in

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Leland “Squeak” Johnson was the subject of my “Time Machine” article number three, published in this newspaper on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Possibly the best back in WHS history. Undoubtedly the most successful. Graduating in 1935 he “walked on” at the University of Minnesota hoping to make the football team coached by the legendary Bernie Bierman. The previous fall the Gophers had gone undefeated and claimed the Big Ten and National championship titles. Squeak made the team as a freshman, was a reserve back as a sophomore, and a starter his last two years, when not injured. During his four-year tenure the Gophers were 27-5 with three Big Ten titles and another National championship.



However, as the headline proclaims, Squeak is out and Tabery is in. Don Tabery, that is. He did not play college football. He was clearly good enough to do so. I will address this later.



In Squeak’s junior and senior seasons, the mighty Indians were 12-2-1. The 1935-36 seasons, without Johnson and before Tabery, yielded nine wins against three losses and a tie. During Tabery’s tenure Wadena was 10-3. The 1930’s was a great decade for WHS football and basketball. That takes good athletes and good coaching. Wadena had both.

In his 1939 senior yearbook, below the 1938 football team picture, it states, “Tabery furnished the driving power and scoring technique for the backfield.” That fact was evident in one WPJ article covering the final two games of the season, and Don Tabery’s football career. On Friday night the Orangemen defeated Long Prairie 36-7 and, because of Thanksgiving, on Tuesday night they slipped past Detroit Lakes 12-0. This is how Tabery’s performance was described, playing in two football games in just five days, “If there were individual stars for Wadena credit must go to Tabery for his hard-hitting, body-crushing blows for substantial gains in each contest.” In the Long Prairie game Don Tabery scored four touchdowns and in the DL contest he scored the only two touchdowns of the game.

A fitting ending to a successful football career. Two things come to mind. Why would he not play college football? Would he have been recruited and said no? I wondered if the Gophers would try to get him. Squeak put Wadena running backs on their radar I would think. Or maybe he just did not want to go to college or could not afford to go. I don't know. If any family members have any information on this, please send me an email at [jebbwillis1955@gmail.com](mailto:jebbwillis1955@gmail.com).

I did recently discover some information that might shed some light on this matter. After he graduated from WHS in 1939 he worked in Brainerd and Hibbing. In 1941 he was in AZ building Camp Chafee. In 1942 he was building a military highway in Newfoundland and then on to Manitoba to build a military airport. From 1943-46 he served in the Navy. From 1947-50 he worked in Santa Catalina, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, and Greenland! On September 2, 1950, Don married Marcy Kern at St. Hubert's Catholic Church in Bluegrass. They lived in California for a short time and then returned to Wadena. In 1953 Don Tabery joined forces with Simon and Don Kern in their new construction business, Kern & Tabery Construction. Today President Brad Kern and Vice-President Ryan Tabery continue the traditions this family-owned business started over 70 years ago.

That might explain why Don Tabery did not go to college. Perhaps he had a vision of what he wanted to accomplish and the best path to follow. Don passed away in 2012 at the age of 91. He was laid to rest in Calvary Cemetery.