

# **“The Time Machine”**

Art 35

## **John Campbell An Inspiration in Football and in Life**

John W. Campbell was born in 1938 and raised in Wadena MN. His father was the town dentist. With two brothers and two sisters John's mom was busy being a homemaker. John graduated from WHS in 1956. He passed away on October 21, 2024, just two weeks after he celebrated his 86<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Family, faith and football were the gifts he cherished most. And he infused into those three gifts a dry and witty sense of humor. He was blessed.

This “Time Machine” article will be focusing on Campbell's football journey. If you have not seen his obituary you must do so. It is one of the most interesting I have ever read. It covers his football, his relationship with Jesus Christ, and his family. You will definitely laugh and you may even shed a tear or two. I did both. Much of the football story below was taken from his obituary.

As a senior at WHS John played football and basketball. He stood 6'3" and weighed in at 150 lbs., dripping wet. He was not a gifted athlete and admitted that his brothers, Don and Dave, were much better than him.

Upon graduating in 1956, he enlisted in the Navy. There he began his assignment as a Dental Assistant, possibly in an effort to follow in his dad's footsteps, but also as an efficient way to charm Navy nurses while he cleaned their teeth. When later asked what he did to protect our nation's freedom during his time in the Navy, he would proudly state “I fought tooth decay.”

When John was not on duty he was spending a lot of time in the weight room, which resulted in him putting 75 lbs. of muscle on that 150 lb. frame. He soon found himself playing on the naval base football team at a very high level, competing against many D1 college players. He eventually was scouted by several college football powerhouses and received football scholarship offers from schools like Georgia Tech, Michigan, and several others. Upon his honorable discharge from the Navy, John made the bold move to walk on at the University of Minnesota in the fall of 1959 “where absolutely no one knew who he was.” He started out on the 5th string offensive tight end and defensive end positions. As this was unacceptable to John, he started several fights with starting players which intrigued head coach Murray Warmath who wisely decided to try John out in a game to see if he could channel some of that energy to do some good against another team.

In short order, John became a two-way starter (unheard of in D1 college football) and within the next year, the Gophers won the 1960 National Championship. Over the next two seasons, the Gophers were at the top of college football rankings and played in two Rose Bowls where John distinguished himself. After his senior year, John was voted to the Big 10 all-conference team and was named an honorable mention All-American.

Upon graduation, John entered the NFL draft where the newly franchised Minnesota Vikings signed him. He was notably the first Gopher ever drafted and signed by the Vikings.

After two years with the Vikings playing on special teams and eventually getting snaps as a strong side linebacker, John was traded to the Baltimore Colts who needed a linebacker of his caliber.

Shortly after that, the Pittsburgh Steelers called and another trade was made to bring him over. He played for the Steelers from 1965-69 and was named to the Sporting News All-Pro team in 1966. He was also voted the Steelers player rep and became friends with team owner Art Rooney Sr. John was also instrumental in the redesign of the Steelers uniform which is still in use today.

During the 1969 season, the new coach, Chuck Knoll, decided a youth movement was in order and John was cut from the Steelers, only to be picked up again by the Colts. There he finished his final season in 1970 when his

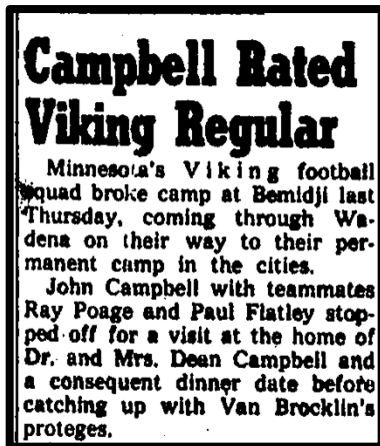
football career came to an end due to an injury. Notably, the Colts went on to win the Super Bowl that year. John watched the game from the comfort of his family room.

Thus, his great run in the world of football had come to an end. But there was so much more to who he was. As stated, John's obituary covers the important stuff. His Family and his Faith.



**John Campbell**, future Gopher All-Big Ten selection, All-American honorable mention, and NFL (Steelers) All-Pro Team, recovered 3 fumbles against Park Rapids, in the fall of 1955.

Viking training camp in Bemidji



University of Minnesota Gopher



University of Minnesota Gopher



I met John Campbell for the first time in the fall of 2019 when he came to town for the 2<sup>nd</sup> annual WDC Hall of Fame induction. We were not able to chat for long but it was my honor to be in a picture with arguably the most successful WHS athlete of all time.