

Chuck Ealey: down memory lane . . .



Later named CFL rookie of the year, quarterback Chuck Ealey led the Hamilton Tiger-Cats to a Grey Cup win in 1972.
(Staff Photo by Fred Loek)

By TOM SAWYER

As it turned out, he'd be named the CFL's rookie of the year in 1972 for his work as quarterback with the Hamilton Tiger-Cats.

But in the beginning, Mississaugan Chuck Ealey wasn't all that sure he even wanted to play pro football and, to tell the truth, "really wasn't too excited" about coming to Hamilton from his Ohio home, he recalled in a recent interview.

What swayed him, finally, was a shot at playing quarterback with the Ti-Cats, something he says he never would have had in the NFL.

So, although there was more money to be made south of the border, Ealey joined Hamilton in '72 and, somehow, the combination worked.

Successful in his first try as a starting quarterback, he went on to win the next game, and the one after that, and soon, the team was on a roll, winning a total of 10 regular-season games in a row and, finally, the Grey Cup.

But between '72 and '73, the Tiger-Cats lost about half its squad, some players retiring, others cut, and everything fell apart.

And in the midst of it all was Ealey, increasingly unhappy with the terms of his contract.

He knew he had to live with it, but all the same, there was the record of that first season — the 10 regular-season games, the rookie of the year award —

what are they doing now?

and, really, he hoped for more than the \$15,000 Hamilton was willing to pay.

"I really almost left the game for another job outside football," he says. "But I still loved the game quite a bit and didn't want to make that kind of transition."

Things finally came to a head with a league decision around this time to extend the season from 14 to 16 games.

The players pushed for money; they were paid on a per-game basis, they said, so more games meant more money, but only Ealey had that condition down in black and white.

Eventually, the Ti-Cats settled with him — only him — out of court.

But somehow it was never the same after that.

So when, finally, he was traded to Winnipeg in mid-'74, he felt sure it was a personality thing.

Halfway through the next season he was gone again, this time to Toronto.

Ealey was by this time a "born-again" Christian, very active in the born-again Athletes in Action group.

Privately, it was a good time. Professionally, though — that was another thing.

"It was very frustrating to see teams with so much talent get so screwed up," Ealey says of the Argos.

"Nobody felt secure there, so it was always a defensive game, (the players) just trying to survive in their own position."

As a result, Ealey spent a lot of time helping the coach, just trying to pull the team together, and his own game suffered for it.

All the same, he was playing well, better than you might think from the statistics.

But when he was seriously injured during a 1978 game with Calgary, he started thinking that might be the end, and having thought so, it was.

"Once you start thinking that," a friend had told him, "you might as well go ahead and get out."

The next four or five months were spent scouting the job market, the search eventually paying off in a management job with John Deere.

But football?

"I really am not interested," he says emphatically, then adds: "It's sort of funny — once it's over, it's over."

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