

BENCHWARMER SUPREME

By Jim Campbell

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A passage from the best-selling book on the Supreme Court, *The Brethren*, best explains Byron White.

"To (fellow Supreme Court Justice and Yale Law School classmate of White, Potter) Stewart, and his classmates," the authors wrote, "White was both Clark Kent and Superman."

How did Byron White get from tiny Wellington, CO (population 347) -- not too far from Ft. Collins, where he was born on June 9, 1917 -- to a highly respected position on the Supreme Court?

The quick and easy answer might appear to be football, but a deeper look shows that White could have just as easily attained the respect and status he enjoys had he never whizzed across America's gridirons.

Growing up just east of the Rockies, young Byron had positive role models in his parents and older brother Clayton, known as "Sam." Sam, who became a doctor, went off to the big state university at Boulder, the University of Colorado. Pure athletic scholarships were not the universal practice in those days, but the state university offered academic scholarships to the valedictorians of all the state's high schools. White aimed at getting one.

While not playing varsity football as a freshman -- in 1934 an athlete was only eligible for three varsity seasons -- White did achieve greatness off the playing field, ranking at or near the top of his class. He would do that his entire career at Colorado. His sophomore season, 1935, a knee injury limited him to only two games, but White's junior season, 1936, was a different story.

A local writer Leonard Cahn nicknamed him "Whizzer," though White disliked it. Soon other writers on a national basis took up Cahn's alliterative monicker, as did the fans of the silver and gold (the school colors in White's day), who took up the cry of "Go it, Whizzer."

In 1936, White took a kickoff 102 yards for a touchdown against Denver. Then, against Utah, with his Frontiersmen (Colorado would not be known as the Buffaloes until later) trailing 7-0 late in the third quarter, White took over. He kicked a field goal to get CU on the scoreboard, then broke touchdown runs of 95 and 57 yards and for good measure kicked both extra points. Final score: White 17, Utah 7.

Football Illustrated Annual predicted, "If triple-threat Byron White duplicates his daring deeds, Colorado has a chance to hit the top."

White's senior season got off to a flying start as Cinderella Colorado upended Missouri, 14-6. After six more wins, they went into the season finale, the traditional Thanksgiving game with the University of Denver, undefeated. Denver was the equal of Colorado on the gridiron, but led by White, CU crushed DU, 34-7.

By virtue of the undefeated season, Colorado received an invitation to the Cotton Bowl for New Year's Day 1938.

Colorado was matched with Rice, and White did all he could to make it a game. He led the Frontiersmen on a long, first-quarter drive, culminating with a nine-yard scoring pass. Then White intercepted an Owl's pass and zipped 47 yards to paydirt. White converted both PATS, staking his team to a 14-0 lead. Rice, using its vastly superior manpower, eventually won, 28-14, but White proved the attention given him was merited.

He was a consensus All-America, runnerup in the Heisman Trophy voting, and led the nation in scoring, rushing yards and total offense. He scored 122 points -- 18 touchdowns, a field goal, and 23 extra points. His nation-leading 1,121 yards rushing was done at 6.2 yards per attempt. White also returned 47 punts

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for a lofty 12.5-yard average and returned four kickoffs at a 39.8 yard average. In short, there wasn't much that Byron White didn't do.

His school rushing record, set in an eight-game season, stood until 1971 when Charlie Davis broke it, barely, in a 10-game season.

But White was far from one-dimensional. While a junior he was tapped for the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa honors society. In his senior year, he was ranked first in his class, valedictorian, and student body president. He followed brother Sam in winning a Rhodes scholarship as well.

White was questioned about his interest in pro football. He showed little. He was going to England to study at Oxford.

Art Rooney, owner of the then Pittsburgh Pirates (they would be known as the Steelers the next season), drafted him anyway, making him "an offer he can't refuse."

That non-refusable offer turned out to be \$15,800 for the season, astronomical. Sam found out that Byron could report to Oxford as late as January 1939, and still be a Rhodes scholar, so White recontacted Rooney. He was Rookie of the Year, an All-Pro and the league's leading rusher with 567 yards.

There were rumors, unfounded, that White's teammates wouldn't block for him because of his high salary.

Armand Niccolai, an All-Pro tackle on the team, said "We liked and respected him. We admired how motivated he was; how he wanted to succeed outside of football. If anything, I blocked harder for him, because you knew he was giving it all he had."

When White got to England, he met young Jack Kennedy. Their paths would cross again.

With war clouds gathering on the continent, White suspended his studies at Oxford and enrolled at Yale Law School. He played the 1940 and '41 seasons with the Detroit Lions, who purchased his contract from Rooney.

In 1940, White again led all NFL ground-gainers, with 510 yards. His last season was 1941, after which a combination of law school and the impending military draft made pro football an impracticality.

After two years at Yale, White enlisted in the naval intelligence branch. He served in the South Pacific.

There he renewed his friendship with Ensign John F. Kennedy. When Kennedy's PT-109 was sunk, White wrote the official report.

After the war, Lieutenant Commander White -- with two bronze stars -- returned to Yale Law and graduated with high honors in 1946. He clerked for Supreme Court Chief Justice Fred M. Vinson for a year, then settled into practice in Denver.

His reputation as an able attorney growing, in 1959 he backed old friend and service buddy Jack Kennedy in his quest for the presidency. White was asked by Bobby Kennedy to head the National Citizens Committee for Kennedy-Johnson. He did, and was subsequently appointed deputy attorney general. On April 16, 1962, White was named as Kennedy's first appointment to the Supreme Court.

Over the years, White's vote became a swing vote. His vote depended on the issue.

Though only a three-year veteran of the NFL, White was paid a fine tribute by the NFL Players Association when they named the organization's highest service award after him, stating, "Byron White -- scholar, athlete, patriot, humanitarian, and public servant -- is the personification of the ideal to which professional football players aspire."