



Jim Wagstaff

This article was written by Budd Bailey

Play football, see the world.

That slogan could have been written by Jim Wagstaff. He might have had an idea what might be ahead when he first decided that football would be his life's work. Still, Jim had quite a ride.

James Burke Wagstaff was born in American Falls, Idaho on June 12, 1936. His hometown is right along the Snake River and the American Falls Reservoir. The closest good-sized city is probably Pocatello, about 25 minutes to the east. Of course, that's by driving along Interstate 86, which was a long way from construction when Wagstaff came into the world. As of 2010, the population of American Falls was under 5,000.



Jim attended American Falls High School. As you might expect, he's the only player from that school that has reached the NFL. But one other player came really close. Charles "Tiny" Grant played for the Beavers before heading to the University of Utah. The 6-foot-4, 260-pound center was a center for the Utes from 1951 to 1953, and he was a 16th-round draft choice of the Eagles in 1954. Alas, he never played in an NFL game.

Wagstaff may have been a good football player, but he probably was better at track. After all, he set a state record in the pole vault. Jim graduated from high school and moved on



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to college at Idaho State in Pocatello. “I walked on that first year, made the varsity, and lettered four years. I was captain in 1957,” he told author Jeffrey J. Miller. The team played its home games in the Spud Bowl, and the Bengals played in the Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference against such teams as Colorado Mines and Adams State. The highlight came in 1957, when Idaho State had a perfect 9-0 record. Wagstaff was an All-Conference pick at defensive back. The Bengals dominated the competition that year, outscoring opponents by a margin of 280-85. ISU also won the conference title in 1955. Babe Caccia was the coach of the Bengals in that era, and he stayed 14 years with a record of 79-38-2. No one has won more football games at Idaho State.

The Rocky Mountain Conference wasn’t exactly the Big Ten when it came to producing talent back then, and scouting wasn’t too sophisticated back in the 1950s. Still, Wagstaff caught the attention of someone in the pro ranks. He had some speed, since he also ran track at Idaho State. Jim finished his time there with eight varsity letters. He was drafted in the 21st round by the Lions, who were coming off an NFL championship in 1957. Jim lasted until the last cut, but he had a high school coaching job waiting for him back in Idaho – and he needed to know about his future immediately. “I went in and told them that I had two children and one on the way,” Wagstaff told Miller. “They said, ‘It’s between you or another guy.’ I said, ‘Well, I’m not going to gamble.’” The Lions did tell Jim that he would be welcome to attend training camp in 1959.

Wagstaff spent the year in Idaho and returned to the Lions’ camp in 1959. He was still on the roster near the end of training camp when he injured his knee and was let go. Jim recovered and signed with the Chicago Cardinals later in the season. He played in two games as a defensive back, so he had the chance to play with Hall of Fame Dick “Night Train” Lane. It certainly is possible that Wagstaff played in the final game in the team’s Chicago history, a 35-20 loss to Pittsburgh. The Cardinals moved to St. Louis for the 1960 season.

Wagstaff didn’t go with them. He had the chance to sign with the brand-new Buffalo Bills of the American Football League, which started play in 1960. “Buster Ramsey (the team’s head coach) was the defensive coordinator at Detroit those two years that I messed around there,” Wagstaff told Miller. “I really thought a lot of Buster, and I figured they had a lot of defensive backs at the Cardinals, so I decided to go there.”

As you’d expect, bodies came and went from that first Bills’ training camp, which was staged on the polo fields of the Seymour Knox estate. Wagstaff, listed at 6-foot-1 and 190 pounds, came out of the competition as a starter at defensive back. Hundreds of players have suited up for the Bills over the years, but Wagstaff is one of the only 22 to have the distinction as starting in Game One. It came against the New York Titans in the Polo Grounds on September 11, 1960. Buffalo lost, 27-3.



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The Bills never did get much going in that first season and finished 5-8-1 in 1960. It's fair to call Wagstaff one of the few bright spots of the year. He finished the season with six interceptions, returning one 39 yards for a touchdown against the Patriots on December 4. The total was second on the team to linebacker Archie Matsos. Cornerback Richie McCabe joined Matson as AFL All-Stars. "That was a strange first year," Matsos told author Randy Schultz. "The Bills had the best defense in the AFL. But they also had the worst offense. I guess the defense that year set the tone for future Bills teams."

The 1961 season was similar for Wagstaff and the Bills. Buffalo finished with a 6-8 record, a bit better than the year before. Wagstaff had three interceptions as he started 12 of 14 games. His partner at safety, Billy Atkins, was an AFL All-Star with 10 picks. The lack of progress wasn't encouraging to Bills' owner Ralph Wilson, who fired Ramsey after the season.

The new coach was Lou Saban, and he didn't have long to check out Wagstaff's talent in person. Jim suffered a severe injury in training camp. "We were throwing the ball and stuff, and I went after (Elbert Dubenion, a receiver)," Wagstaff told Miller. "He got his knees right in the center of my sternum and broke a bunch of ribs." Jim was dropped from the roster even before the team's 1962 media guide was printed that season. The final numbers: 30 pro games, nine interceptions, one touchdown. Ainsworthsports.com ranks him as the third-best player to ever come out of Idaho State, and No. 18 on the list of the best football players from Idaho.

Wagstaff went back to Idaho, where he landed a coaching job at Pocatello High School (1963 to 1965) and Idaho Falls High School (1966 to 1968). He picked up a Master's degree in education along the way. In those years he taught government and physical education, and coached football, wrestling, and track.

That might have been the end of the story for some, but Jim made the jump to the college ranks when he was hired as the defensive coordinator, linebacker coach and secondary coach at Boise State in 1968. It was the start of a revised career path. The team finished 9-1 in 1969 and eventually moved up into the Big Sky Conference, where it was extremely successful. One of his players, Steve Vogel, went on to become a successful high school coach at Capital High School in Boise. He called Wagstaff a good role model in the profession. "My position coach, Jim Wagstaff, was both an outstanding person and very knowledgeable coach," Vogel said.

Then came the biggest break of Wagstaff's coaching career. Chuck Knox took over as the head coach of the Los Angeles Rams in 1973, replacing Tommy Prothro. Knox was looking for defensive assistants, and he called a friend – McCabe. Richie remembered



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Wagstaff from their playing days together in Buffalo, and told Knox to interview him. Wagstaff was picked as the team's defensive backs coach.

It was the start of a great run by the Rams. They won five straight division titles (with five different starting quarterbacks, no less) under Knox, Wagstaff and Company, winning 54 games along the way. The only problem was that the team couldn't reach the Super Bowl, losing three straight conference championship games. Wagstaff coached players like Charlie Stukes, Dave Elmendorf, Bill Simpson, Rod Perry, Monte Jackson, and Pat Thomas.

The Rams' inability to reach the season's last game wore on everyone. Knox left after the 1977 season, and signed a six-year, \$1.2 million contract to coach the Buffalo Bills. He took much of the coaching staff with him, including Wagstaff. The Bills were barely breathing at that point in their history, having won a total of five games in the preceding two seasons. Knox traded the biggest star on the roster, O.J. Simpson, as he started the rebuilding process.

The Bills took small steps at first. They went 5-11 in 1978. Wagstaff had such players as Mario Clark, Charlie Romes and Tony Greene as starters in the secondary. In 1979, Steve Freeman was added to the cast at strong safety, and the Bills had put together a good group of defensive backs in a 7-9 season. Still, no one was ready for what Buffalo did in 1980.

The Bills ran off five straight wins to open the season. Joe Ferguson had his best season at quarterback, throwing to elite wide receivers in Jerry Butler and Frank Lewis. The defense was stout in the middle with young players such as Fred Smerlas, Jim Haslett, and Shane Nelson. In the secondary, Jeff Nixon was a revelation at free safety with five interceptions in five games. Then he was injured and lost for the season, so the Bills talked ex-Ram Bill Simpson out of retirement to take his place. Simpson had four more interceptions. Buffalo won the division on the final play of the regular season, when a pass by Joe Montana of the 49ers fell incomplete to give the Bills an 18-13 win in the mud of Candlestick Park. Buffalo's Ferguson was injured for the ensuing playoff game against San Diego. The Bills fought bravely, but lost to the Chargers in the final minutes, 20-14.

Even though the Chargers had beaten the Bills, San Diego apparently noticed Wagstaff's work. The Bills led the AFC in fewest passing yards allowed in all three of Wags' seasons there. San Diego coach Don Coryell hired Wagstaff for the job of defensive backs coach.



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Upon his hiring, Wagstaff told the San Diego Union that the game was opening up. “One of the big keys in the future of football is going to be that fifth and sixth defensive back,” he said. “Any team these days is going to go with four and five wide receivers deep, so you've got to come up with a fifth and a sixth starting defensive back... I believe in certain situations you have to replace some of your linebackers with defensive backs... The way the rules are these days, you've got to have more than four starters to do that. ... The philosophy I've always had is, we like to give every team the same pre-snap look and then go into several different defenses - man, zone, and combinations of them. No predictability.”

Those Chargers sure could score, and they continued to do so in 1981 – finishing first in the league in points. But San Diego was 26th in the NFL in points allowed. The team still won the division but lost the AFC championship game in Cincinnati – remembered as one of the coldest NFL games ever played. It was a similar story in 1982, despite three new defensive starters. The Chargers went 6-3 in a strike-shortened season, and lost in the AFC divisional playoff.

The magic of the Chargers wore off after that. Wagstaff stayed through 1985. The team didn't have a winning record in any of those last three seasons, and missed the playoffs. That usually is a ticket for change when it comes to coaches, and Jim departed after the 1985 season. Jim Mora replaced him as secondary coach.

Wagstaff headed back to work in Idaho for a while, but apparently his wanderlust got the better of him after a while. “I went over and coached in Australia, trying to get programs going for football,” he told Miller. “I was over there for four or five years. In 1998, I was the head coach for the Australian football team that played in Italy.” In 1999, he was the coach for the Australian Cyclones World Cup team.

From there, Wagstaff turned up in, of all places, Alaska. He always liked to hunt, fish and ski, and Alaska was good for all of that. Jim spent two years coaching football at Kenai Central High School, which is located on a peninsula southwest of Anchorage. The school's sports nickname was the Cardinals.

Wagstaff died on September 28, 2010. He had three children with wife Nancy.



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