

SPORTS

A minor league hockey team takes the ice in Wytheville

The town of 8,241 is now host to a team in the Federal Prospects Hockey League.

 by **Robert Anderson**
October 30, 2023



Wythe County residents Dustin and Suzie Booth are season ticket holders for the Blue Ridge Bobcats' inaugural season. Photo by Robert Anderson.

The soil in Wythe County must be something special.

The folks there planted an idea and grew a hockey team.

The Blue Ridge Bobcats of the Federal Prospects Hockey League sprouted up from seed and were in ... well, maybe not full bloom on Oct. 20, with their first official game in franchise history a 5-3 loss to the visiting Mississippi Sea Wolves.

But the inaugural game took place inside Wythe County's Apex Center, a 90,000-square foot facility on 95 grassy acres overlooking Exit 77 of Interstate 81.

And that is a big victory.

In early summer it still had a dirt floor. Now a hockey rink covers the surface, and the ice won't be going anywhere until the local team's 56-game season ends in April.

Professional sports have returned to the county for the first time since 1989, when the Chicago Cubs pulled their Appalachian League Rookie baseball franchise out of Withers Field in downtown Wytheville.

Let that sink in.

There is a professional sports team in Wytheville.

Matt Hankins, Wythe County's assistant administrator, was among the curious who stood rinkside on a squeaky-clean concrete floor waiting for the Bobcats to take the ice for the first time.

"It's hard to believe that where we are standing, in May this was dirt," he said.

<https://cardinalnews.org/2023/10/30/a-minor-league-hockey-team-takes-the-ice-in-wytheville/>



The Apex Center sits high atop a hill overlooking Interstate 81 in Wythe County. Photo by Robert Anderson.



The Apex Center. Photo by Robert Anderson.

Building a hockey franchise from the ground up is nothing new for Bobcats owner Barry Soskin.

The 66-year-old Illinois native has owned a number of teams in a variety of leagues and currently has a majority stake in at least four other FPHL teams — the Port Huron (Michigan) Prowlers, the Carolina Thunderbirds of Winston-Salem, the Baton Rouge Zydeco and the Bobcats’ opponent Friday, the Biloxi-based Sea Wolves.

Soskin also is the president of Apex Drive Holdings LLC, which operates separately from the hockey team and hopes to attract other forms of entertainment such as concerts to the Apex Center. He has a 10-year renewable, escalating lease from Wythe County, which has made a considerable investment in the upgrades to the facility.

The improvements included an intricate cooling system below the rink that was still being installed in late summer.

Would the facility be ready in time for the ballyhooed debut?

Soskin heard the skepticism, and it was louder than a whisper.

“So many people were saying the ice would never be done and we would be needing delays and delays and I go, ‘No, I talk to these guys, they got their act together,’” Soskin said.

An hour before the opener, Soskin resembled an expectant father, circling the interior of the arena, checking everything from locker rooms to popcorn machines.

He soon discovered a problem.



Fans line up outside the Apex Center for the first game. Photo by Robert Anderson.

The two lines of spectators on either side of the arena were growing. That is normally good news, but gaining entrance to the building was taking too long. Soskin was not happy.

“Should there be a line that long?” he said. “I get it, but if I was in that line, I’m not waiting in that line.”

Soskin estimated that the team sold between 140 and 190 season tickets for 28 home games, short of his goal of between 250 and 350.

“Ticket-wise I really have to blame me, us, whatever. We did not get the final seating chart until Monday,” he said, imagining a conversation with a potential ticket buyer.

“I’d like to sell you a season ticket.”

“Great, where do I sit?”

“How the hell do I know?”

“Well, let me see a seating chart.”

“No! We didn’t have anything approved yet.”

The game began 15 minutes later than the scheduled 7:30 p.m. puck drop. Spectators were still filing into the arena. Soskin reported an opening-night attendance of 1,271.

The owner did not try to deflect any blame.

“The stuff, honestly I’m not really happy about, is our end,” he said. “I think we can do a better job. I take the heat. I think we can get better by the next [homestand]. Simple things, but when you don’t do them it makes the fan experience different, and I want the fan experience to be awesome.”

* * *



Fans showed up in a variety of hockey jerseys. Photo by Robert Anderson.

Dustin and Suzie Booth bought full season tickets when they heard about minor-league hockey coming to Southwest Virginia.

Three years ago, the couple moved to Wythe County from Denver, where hockey was their favorite sport.

Sporting replica team jerseys given to season-ticket holders, the Booths are "all-in" as Bobcats fans.

"We've committed," Dustin Booth said. "We're very excited to have any kind of sport here, but hockey's even better. We've been anticipating this since it was announced, hoping that it wasn't going to disappear before it got started."

While Denver has a pro franchise in all four major sports, Suzie Booth prefers watching players at the lower levels.

"We specifically love minor-league sports," she said. "Everybody's out supporting the big guys. In Denver, when we first lived there, there was a minor-league hockey team called the Denver Cutthroats. We had the most fun at those games. It's not as uptight as a [major-league] game."

The Booths were tailgating with friends in the parking lot before the season opener.

Without hockey, what would they be doing on a normal Friday night?

"We don't have any kids," Dustin Booth said. "We met a lot of our friends in town at Seven Sisters Brewery so we'd probably be there."

Suzie Booth said she and her husband had only been inside the Apex Center once prior to Friday.

"We bought a hot tub," she said.

"I never thought it would be a hockey arena," Dustin Booth said.



The Necaise family — from left, Dean, Anna, Rodney and Jessica — flew from Mississippi to see their Seawolves play in Wytheville. Photo by Robert Anderson.

Rodney Necaise made a trip to Wythe County in the spring to take a look at viability of the Apex Center for hockey.

He must have been convinced at some point, because Necaise bought airline tickets for himself; his wife, Anna; and their two children, Jessica and Dean, to fly from southern Mississippi to Southwest Virginia for the two-game series between the Sea Wolves and Bobcats.

“It’s amazing what they were able to do,” Necaise said. “I didn’t think they were going to make it. From what I’ve seen, it’s a good arena. There’s still some work. But just getting hockey in and getting the money flowing is going to help with that, I’m sure.”

The Biloxi franchise plays in a 9,150-seat arena. The club formerly was in the East Coast Hockey League, where it won the Kelly Cup in 1999. The team folded amid the COVID-19 pandemic but returned last season as an FPHL entry.

Necaise has some pull with the Mississippi team. He is the co-owner of a Biloxi business, Omni Technologies, which has its advertising logo on the Sea Wolves’ uniforms.

Standing outside the visitors’ locker room before the game in the shadow of the team buses, he was impressed by the local show of support.

“I’ll give props to the Bobcats,” he said. “I’ve been watching some of the fans walking around in their jerseys, hats, all that stuff. They’re decked out, ready to go.”

Randy Irvin had never seen a hockey game before the Bobcats clashed with the Sea Wolves.

The former Rural Retreat football player was enjoying the physical nature of the event.

"I came tonight knowing zero. I like it a lot, I really do," Irvin said. "The speed is amazing."

Irvin left the arena with positive vibes.

"As a fan, what I'm most happy about is they're actually doing something with this place," he said. "Looking around, I think it's going to do well."

* * *



Fans sit rinkside for the opener. Photo by Robert Anderson.

Sherri Oakes had her eye on one particular Bobcat on the ice.

Her son, Cody Oakes, sported No. 19 on his black and blue jersey.

She and Cody moved from Colorado, where he played hockey at Cherry Hill High School, to Winston-Salem when he joined the SPHL franchise in North Carolina in 2018. She made the short drive up Interstate 77 to Wythe County for the season opener.

"It's awesome, I'm so excited," she said. "I'm sorry. I can get loud sometimes."

Mom celebrated when son scored a goal with 4 minutes, 28 seconds to play that cut what had been a 4-0 Mississippi lead to 4-3.

"It was good to get the monkey off the back," said Cody Oakes, 26, who is playing for his fifth minor-league franchise in six years and is still at the Single-A level.

Oakes said he is paid \$225 per week. He and 20 other players live in a Wytheville retirement home that has been converted into a hockey dormitory. Players look for ways to supplement their salary with part-time work around games, practice and long bus rides.

"During the summer you'll have to work a little bit, but if you're real frugal with money you can make it work," he said. "We're doing it more because we still love the game. We love the atmosphere. We're rolling with it. They've accepted us with open arms here.

"It's nice, because it actually feels like a home to me. I'm enjoying it a lot."

* * *



Bobcats Coach Wojtech "Zemmy" Zemlicka looks on from the bench. Photo by Robert Anderson.

One man inside the Apex Center did not enjoy the game for most of the evening.

Bobcats coach Wojtech "Zemmy" Zemlicka wore a dark suit that matched his dark mood after the loss.

"I wasn't very much impressed," Zemlicka said. "We haven't done anything we were talking about. The compete level wasn't there. It wasn't the way we wanted to present ourselves.

"Every day you have to get better in your job. Winning is fun but winning takes hard work and doing all the little things, and at the end of the day, being a physical team. We have a mix of Europeans and North Americans, and we just played afraid for about 45 out of 60 minutes. That's why the outcome is the way that it is."

The team had a two-week training camp where the roster was cut from 45 to 23 players. The squad would later be trimmed to 19.

Oakes said the team will respond positively to Zemlicka, a native of Poland who is a former player and assistant coach with the Roanoke Rail Yard Dawgs, who also opened their 2023-24 season Oct. 20. The Bobcats lost 4-3 in overtime the next night in their second game against Mississippi.

"He has us on a tight leash. Honestly, he's been nothing but amazing so far," Oakes said. "If he wanted to put on the skates and come out full gear, he'd probably still be the best on our team."

Zemlicka's counterpart, Sea Wolves coach Joe "The Show" Pace, did suit up. Pace and several assistants are player coaches. Pace scored Mississippi's third goal of the game in the second period.

0:00

The Bobcats take the ice. Video by Robert Anderson.

Mississippi's Philip Wong will forever have the honor of scoring the first goal in the Apex Center.

Brice French, a 23-year-old rookie from Fairbanks, Alaska, scored the first goal for the Bobcats with 14:34 left in the game, followed by Massachusetts native Kyle Stevens and Oakes.

A few skirmishes on the ice developed into fights, but they were tame by hockey standards as the officials were quick to restore order.

The 11-team FPHL is one big traveling fraternity.

"It gets wild out there at times, but for the most part we're friends," Oakes said. "We all know each other."

* * *



The Bobcats roster has an international flair. Photo by Robert Anderson.

The Bobcats dropped a 4-3 decision to Mississippi the next night before embarking on a 511-mile trip to the Detroit suburbs to face the Motor City Rockers.

It was a history-making bus ride as the Bobcats earned their first victory in franchise history on Oct. 27 with a 5-4 overtime victory. Two third-period goals by Vladisov Vlasov sent the game to overtime, where the Bobcats prevailed 2-0 in a shootout on goals by Jakub Volf and Josh Newberg.

The Bobcats dropped a 4-3 decision to Motor City on Saturday.

The Wythe County team is in the FPHL's Empire Division, named for good reason because three of the teams are located in New York — the Binghamton Black Bears, the Elmira River Sharks and the Watertown Wolves. The other Empire team is the Danbury (Connecticut) Hat Tricks.

The six teams in the Continental Division are the Sea Wolves, the Thunderbirds, the Rockers, the Zydeco, the Port Huron (Michigan) Prowlers and the Columbus (Georgia) River Dragons. The Bobcats will make the 835-mile trip to Baton Rouge for a two-game series Dec. 8-9. Biloxi is a 748-mile ride.

Most of the trips are two-game series. Almost all the games are played on Fridays and Saturdays with a handful of Wednesday and Sunday games.

The Bobcats return home Nov. 3 against Carolina.

Soskin has some short-term and long-term improvements in mind.

Current seating in the facility includes fixed chair-back seats mounted on large risers on both sides of the arena along with several small sections of aluminum bleachers behind one end of the rink.

By next year, Soskin said he wants to install chair-back seats that go from the back of the concrete concourse down to the hockey boards with a total capacity between 3,700 and 4,000.

“Let’s build some more stands,” he said. “A work in progress.”

Soskin said the financial support from local advertisers has been “better than I thought for the first year.”

The owner might be sweating some of the small stuff, but he said the big picture in Wytheville looks promising.

“I have a team in Baton Rouge. I have a team in Biloxi,” Soskin said. “The budgets are well over a million bucks. My budget is not that high here. In Biloxi where I have to take in half a million in corporate and we have to have 3 [thousand], 3,500 [attendance], here I don’t have to do anywhere those numbers to maintain from a hockey standpoint.

“Remember, I also own the building. I also have an event business where we need to put on concerts, shows, tractor pulls ... whatever to make this building successful. Nobody used this building. My job is to make a lot of people use this building.”

Soskin unequivocally pledged that hockey will return to Wytheville in 2024 and beyond.

“We’ll be back,” he said. “There’s nothing that’s going to happen, good, bad or indifferent that’s going to change what we’re doing for the next five or six years.

“I’m not an idiot. If I’m throwing money into a money pit, five, six years later and I still don’t see any light at the end of the tunnel, why should I keep spending my kids’ inheritance?”

And Cody Oakes?

How long will he make 800-mile bus rides to keep pounding the boards, taking and dishing out forechecks for paychecks of \$225 per week?

“At least until the wheels fall off,” he said.

0:00

The Blue Ridge Bobcats against the Mississippi Sea Wolves. Video by Robert Anderson.

The Blue Ridge Bobcats’ schedule

For more information and ticket sales, visit www.blueridgebobcats.com.

OCTOBER

20: Mississippi 5, Bobcats 3

21: Mississippi 4, Bobcats 3, OT

27: Bobcats 5, Motor City 4, OT

28: Motor City 4, Bobcats 3

NOVEMBER

3: vs. Carolina

4: at Carolina

10: vs. Mississippi

11: vs. Mississippi

17: at Carolina

18: vs. Carolina

24: at Baton Rouge

25: at Baton Rouge

DECEMBER

1: vs. Columbus

2: vs. Columbus

8: at Baton Rouge

9: at Baton Rouge

15: at Baton Rouge

16: at Columbus

22: vs. Carolina

JANUARY

5: at Columbus

6: at Columbus

7: at Mississippi

11: at Carolina

12: vs. Motor City

13: vs. Motor City

19: vs. Columbus

20: vs. Columbus

26: at Motor City

27: at Motor City

28: at Motor City

FEBRUARY

2: vs. Baton Rouge

3: vs. Baton Rouge

4: vs. Baton Rouge

10: vs. Carolina

14: at Carolina

16: at Elmira

17: at Elmira

23: vs. Mississippi

24: vs. Baton Rouge

25: vs. Baton Rouge

MARCH

1: at Motor City

2: at Motor City

8: at Port Huron

9: at Port Huron

10: at Motor City

15: vs. Carolina

16: vs. Carolina

20: vs. Carolina

22: vs. Danbury

23: vs. Danbury

29: at Carolina

30: vs. Carolina

APRIL

5: at Columbus

6: at Columbus

12: vs. Watertown

13: vs. Watertown

0:00

The ice machine. Video by Robert Anderson.

SPORTS

In the Alleghany Highlands, two rival high schools begin the process of merging

This week Alleghany Highlands school system unveiled the logos and uniforms for the “new” Alleghany High School that Covington will merge into. The neighboring schools will join to become the Cougars at the start of the 2023-24 school year.



by **Robert Anderson**
February 3, 2023



The crowd at the final Alleghany-Covington football game last fall. Photo by Robert Anderson.

What’s this math they are teaching in the newly created Alleghany Highlands School District?

One plus one equals ... one?

That's the equation school officials hope adds up to a successful consolidation of two rival high schools in Western Virginia: Alleghany and Covington.

Beginning with the 2023-24 academic year, the neighboring schools' student bodies will merge as one.

High school students in grades nine through 12 will attend a "new" Alleghany High School in the existing building at its current location. The current Covington High building will serve as the division's middle school. A brand new central administration already has hit the ground running.

In October 2021, students in both communities had considerable input in choosing the name of the new high school, its mascot and the school colors.

The winning combination was the Alleghany Cougars. Along with that spirit of compromise, the new colors came from both sides of the aisle, the navy blue of Covington and the Columbia blue of Alleghany.

But what would that mixed palette look like?

The school system had the answer Monday as officials and students unveiled Alleghany High's new Cougar mascot, logos and even a spiffy new marching band uniform.

Solidarity and unity were the themes of the day,

"Cougars in the wild are known mostly as solitary animals, not known for working in groups," Alleghany Highlands School Board Vice Chairman Jonathan Arritt said during a brief ceremony at Jackson River Technical Center. "Our Cougar was born through a unifying spirit of purpose, focus and resolve that is present throughout the Alleghany Highlands.

"That purpose was to provide the best future possible for our children. That focus was to do the work that needed to be done, and the resolve was to see it through. It's important we all recognize the blending of traditions."



So far, the blender has filled six jobs coaching varsity athletic programs or directing extracurricular activities including head football coach Will Fields, who spent the last three seasons as the head coach at Allegheny.

The other appointments beginning in 2023-24 are:

Boys and girls cross country: Jeremy Bartley, who coached Allegheny's boys to the 2020 Class 2 championship and the girls to the 2022 title, the only VHSL titles in school history.

Golf: Brian Ellwood, who was the coach at Allegheny in 2020.

Volleyball: Charles "Thumper" Leitch, a former girls basketball head coach at Allegheny.

Cheerleading: Kim Jefferson, who has been the coach/sponsor at Covington since 2006.

Band director: Adam Eggleston, who is in his first year at Allegheny.

Choir director: Amanda Sprouse, who has been at Allegheny since 2006.

Head coaches for winter and spring sports and activities will be hired after their respective seasons. The school division will accept applications from inside and outside the system.

The “new” Allegheny High already is looking for a new athletic director. The division made big headlines last spring when it hired former Virginia Tech assistant football coach Bryan Stinespring as its first AD.

However, Stinespring accepted a job in January as an assistant coach on new VMI football coach Danny Rocco’s staff. Fields will serve as interim AD until Allegheny hires Stinespring’s replacement.

As the two schools merge their varsity athletic programs into a single team, legitimate angst exists for athletes:

Will I still have my starting position or my place on the team?

What will it be like to play for a new coach?

How will I get along with a teammate who was in a different uniform a year ago?

Fields is aware of those worries, but the interim athletic director sees other positive aspects of the consolidation.

“I’ve heard concerns about shrinking opportunities as two schools become one,” Fields said. “Certainly, that’s a factor, but I think there are going to be more opportunities than people believe. We’re already reaping the benefits.

“Individual sports like wrestling and swimming are difficult to practice with small teams. Our teams are already practicing together and are able to compete against each other in practice. It’s crucial to get those repetitions in practice.”

Fields said he already has been conducting offseason weightlifting sessions with prospective Allegheny football players who are finishing the school year at Covington on the Cougars’ campus.

“I went over to meet with their kids,” he said. “The first thing I told them was, ‘If you had to choose, you probably wouldn’t have chosen me. But I chose you, and I’m happy about coaching you.’

“I’m just trying to make inroads. We’re going to treat them all the same. We’re glad to have them. It’s not like we couldn’t use more players.”



Covington struggled to find enough football players to field a team in 2021 on the heels of the 2020 season abbreviated by COVID-19. Last year when the Cougars played at Allegheny in the second week of the football season, Covington had fewer than 25 in uniform.

“Both schools have had difficulty fielding [teams] particularly on the sub-varsity level,” Fields said. “This will change all of that. [Covington has not] had some JV teams off and on. They’ve had JV football in [only] one of the last four years. Sometimes they don’t have JV baseball and softball. We’re going to have more robust JV programs and more robust middle school programs. The benefits are going to be able to trickle up to the varsity.”

“With two student bodies coming together, we’re going to have more interest. Our band and choral groups will be able to have more complete sections to add to their sound. There will be more actors for our dramatic productions.”

The consolidated Allegheny school will remain a member of the Three Rivers District, which also will include Carroll County, Floyd County, Glenvar, James River, Patrick County and Radford.

Declining population

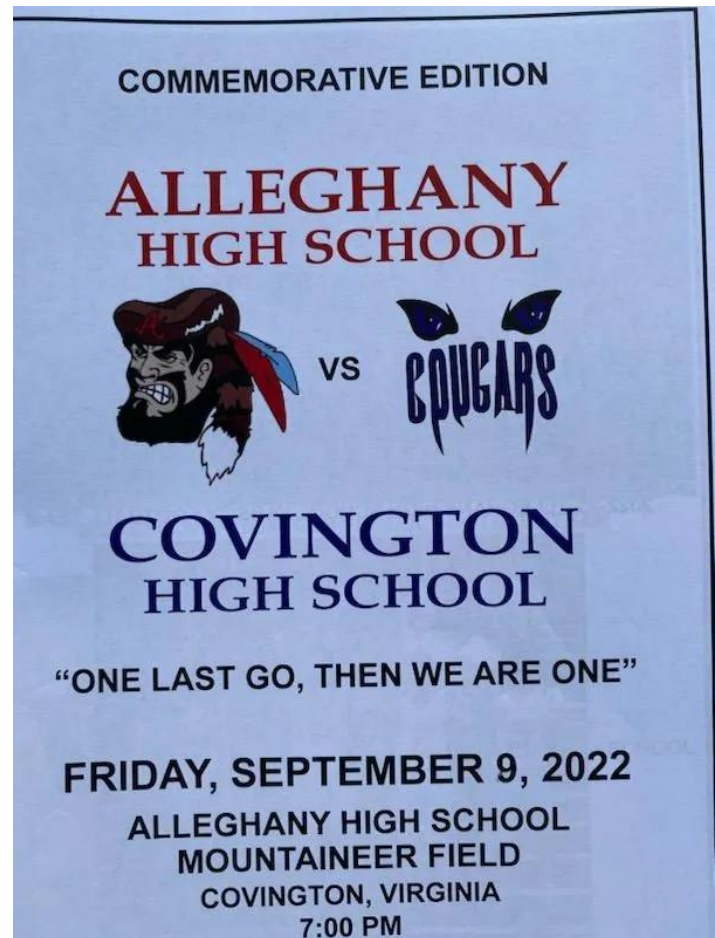
The Alleghany-Covington school merger was driven partly by declining population in both localities.

Alleghany County's peak population came in 1940 when the population of Alleghany and Clifton Forge (then a city, now a town) was 29,149.

The 2020 census counted 15,223 people.

Covington's peak population came in 1960 with 11,062.

The 2020 census counted 5,737.



The program for the final Alleghany-Covington football game. Photo by Robert Anderson.

The big difference is that Alleghany and Covington's combined enrollment will move up from Class 2 as one of the smaller schools in Class 3. The Cougars have been placed in Region 3C. The other 3C members are Broadway, Brookville, Charlottesville, East Rockingham, Fluvanna County, Heritage-Lynchburg, Liberty Christian, Monticello, Rockbridge County, Rustburg, Staunton, Spotswood, Waynesboro, Wilson Memorial and Western Albemarle.

A sizeable crowd attended the final Alleghany-Covington football game in September, generating revenue that likely will not be replaced by any single home game in 2023.

Alleghany and nearby Greenbrier East High of West Virginia are beginning a "Border Rivalry" series in hopes of minimizing the impact to the gate receipts.

The Cougars' other nondistrict games will be against Waynesboro, Fort Defiance and Rockbridge County. The first football game for the consolidated school will be against Waynesboro on Aug. 25.

"[The football attendance] is not what it was because of declining population, but it's a hit," Fields said. "We hope to build up some of these rivalries to play teams that are close that will travel."



The Brackman Trophy, awarded to the winner of the annual Allegheny-Covington game. Photo by Robert Anderson.

Covington junior Rocklynn Phillips will walk new hallways as a senior next year at Allegheny. An unknown future awaits. Phillips, who plays football and is participating in swimming this year at Covington for the first time, is looking forward to testing his mettle.

“More competition, but we get both schools put together,” he said. “It’s always good to meet new people, give someone else a shot at that. I’m excited for it because it’s [about] who wants it the most. It’s all about winning. That’s what I want to do, is win.”

Allegheny freshman Kiera Lowman took care of that just fine in November when she won the VHSL Class 2 girls cross country championship and led the Mountaineers to the team title.

“I think there are going to be a lot of good things that come with academics and athletics,” she said. “I’m excited to have more teammates and classmates. I think there are a lot of positives.”

One plus one is one?

Allegheny Highlands superintendent Kim Holterman hopes so.

“We’re excited to reach this milestone,” she said. “That’s what this endeavor is really all about.”

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SPORTS

Martinsville star wound up on a Canadian postage stamp for his football records north of the border

In the 1970s, Sonny Wade won three Most Valuable Player awards in the Grey Cup, the championship game for the Canadian Football League.



by **Robert Anderson**
November 17, 2023



Sonny Wade holds his Emory & Henry College football helmet from the 1960s in the den at his home in Axton. Photo by Robert Anderson.

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As a high school football player, Sonny Wade was known for leading Martinsville High School to the 1964 Blue Ridge District title.

As a quarterback at Emory & Henry College, Wade was known for directing a high-powered offense in 1968 that generated a National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics record of 553.3 yards per game in total offense.

As a pro signal-caller in the Canadian Football League, he was known for steering the Montreal Alouettes to three championships while winning three Grey Cup MVP awards in a career so storied that he wound up featured on a Canada postage stamp.

Today?

He has settled into the bucolic life.

Forty-five years after putting on a football uniform for the final time, Jesse Harold Wade Jr. lives with his wife, Gayle, on a 265-acre spread in Henry County.

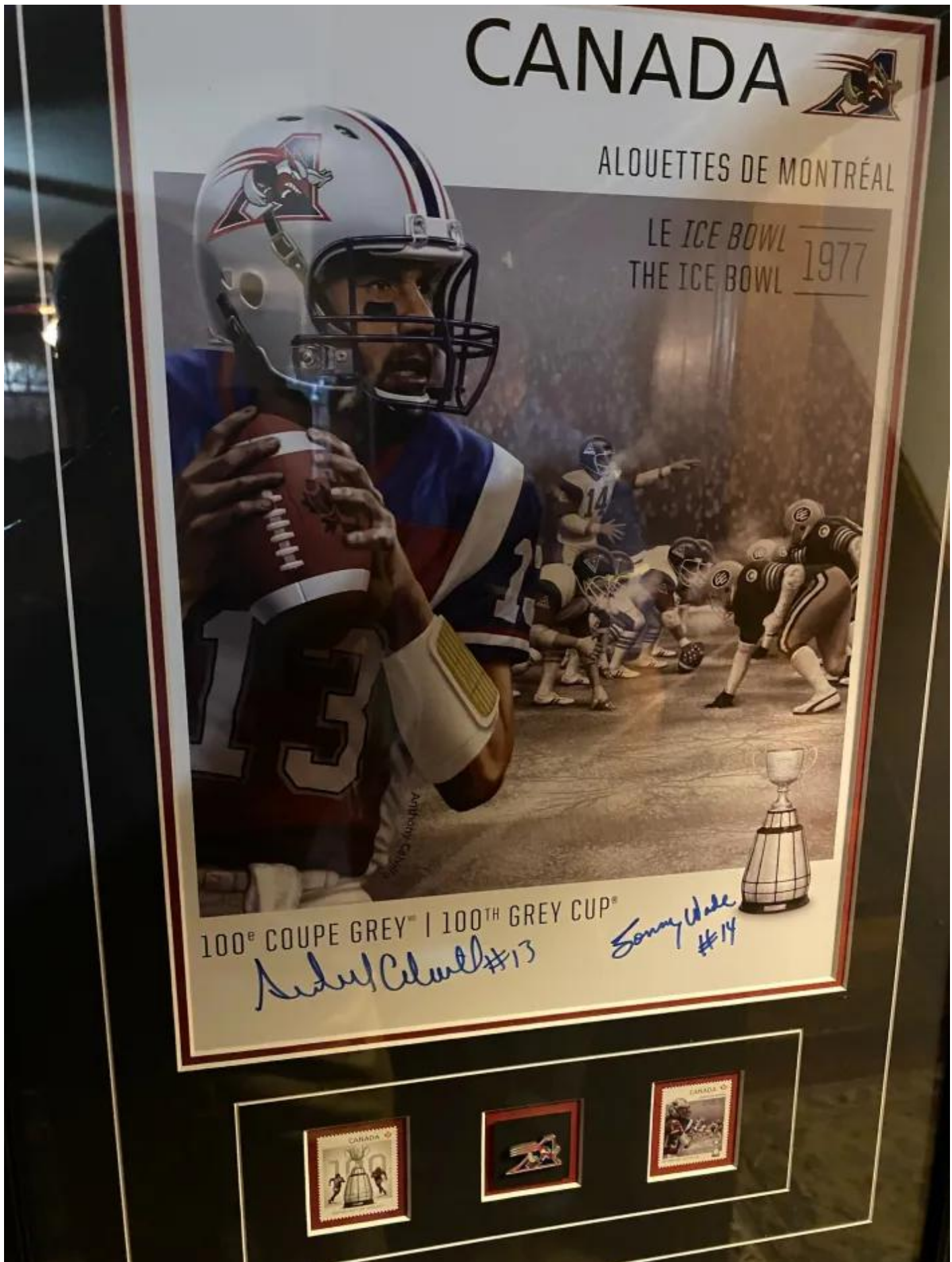
Their three sons are in their 40s. Grandchildren have joined the Wade roster. Relics and remnants of two decades of gridiron greatness rest in memorabilia and memories.

Two knee surgeries, a broken neck and a torn ligament in his foot all conspired to send Wade to the sidelines for good.

Hunting, fishing and trapping replaced running, throwing and kicking. The man whose talent produced college football records and pro football championships, became famous at local farmers markets for his produce.

Now?

“I’m known for my tomatoes,” Wade said.



A Montreal Alouettes poster from the 1977 Grey Cup, in which Sonny Wade (No. 14) was the MVP in a 41-6 victory over Edmonton. This became a Canadian postage stamp in 2015. Photo by Robert Anderson.

Roots of success

Ben Ramsey Field lies behind Martinsville Middle School on Cleveland Avenue. It was the Martinsville Bulldogs' home turf from 1952 until 1970.

Time, and an asphalt track that rings the grass, have made the field smaller.

But tucked in behind the school building, the gymnasium and a large bank behind the north end zone, the place looked absolutely huge to an 8-year-old boy watching Sonny Wade punt, pass and kick a football in 1964.

Wearing an odd-number-for-a-quarterback jersey No. 41, Wade helped Martinsville to an 8-1-1 overall record and a district title under head coach J.B. Heldreth and assistants Jim Painter and Dick Hensley where the only Blue Ridge blemish was a 7-7 tie against Covington.

The previous season ended in disappointment when a 9-0 Martinsville team lost by a 9-0 score to a William Byrd team coached by Virginia High School League legend Norman Lineburg with the district title on the line.

Wade, who shared the starting quarterback duties as a junior, flipped the script in 1964. Martinsville scored district victories over Liberty (37-14), Drewry Mason (53-0), Franklin County (39-0), Northside (35-7), Cave Spring (19-2), Bassett (19-0) and Byrd (27-6).

Standing 6 feet, 3 inches and weighing 195 pounds, Wade was bigger than most high school linemen and much more mobile. Also a mainstay on Martinsville's 1964 VHSL Group 1-B state basketball champions and a first baseman who was offered a baseball contract by the Pittsburgh Pirates organization after his senior year, Wade was very familiar to college football recruiters.

He grew up on Bob Gregory Street on the east side of Martinsville. His father, Jesse Sr., worked as a long-haul driver and later the office manager at R.P. Thomas Trucking Co.

However, Wade's father suffered a major heart attack at age 49 and was nursed for the next 40 years by his mother, Lovelene.

"He would light one cigarette with another before it went out," Wade said. "But he stopped smoking and changed his diet. My mother took care of him. I told her, 'If there's a heaven, you're going to it.'"



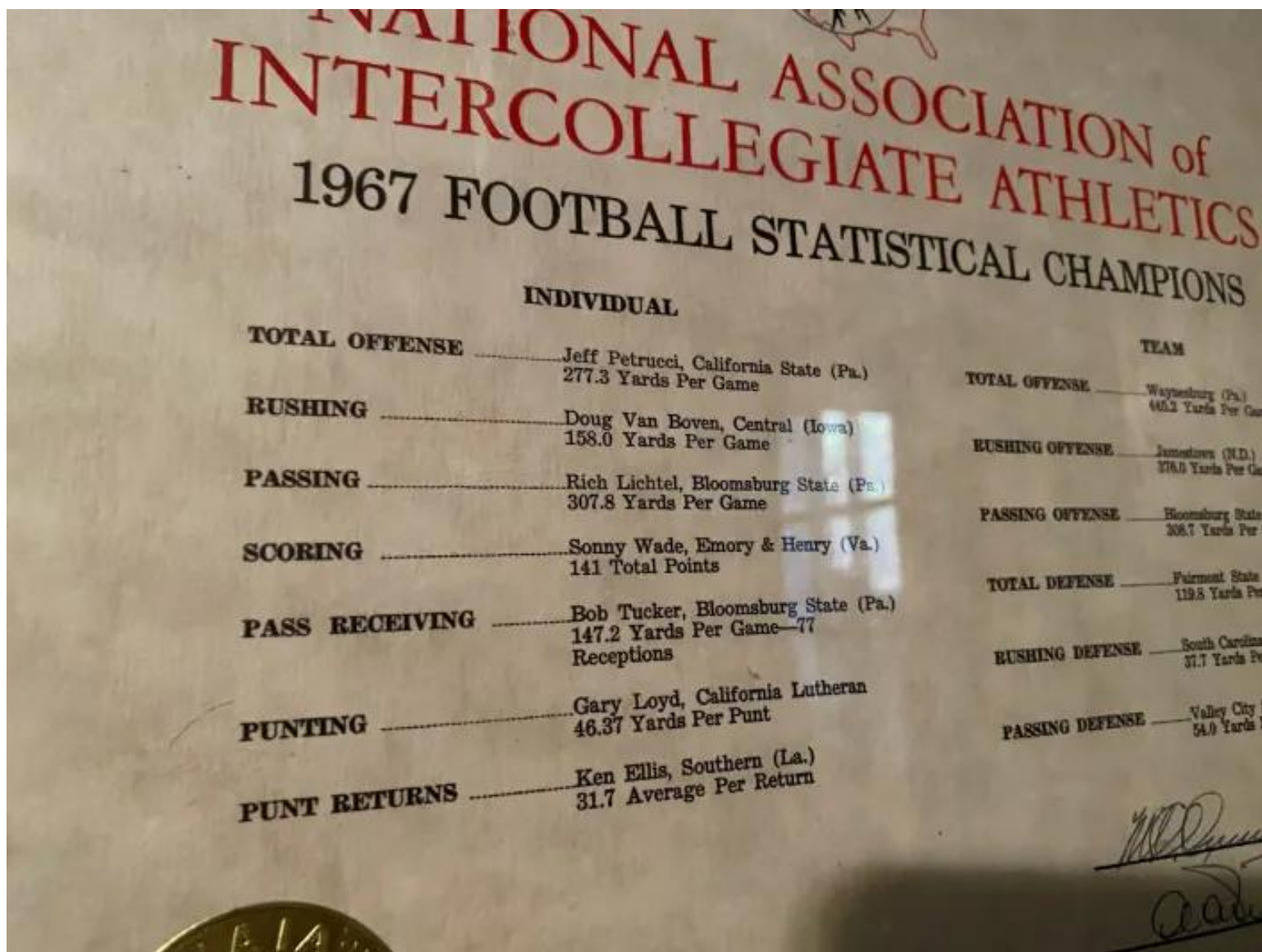
The old Ben Ramsey Field as it exists today at Martinsville Middle School. Courtesy of Martinsville Public Schools.

Wade had multiple football scholarship offers when he graduated from Martinsville in 1965.

He chose Virginia Tech.

Fighting Gobblers head coach Jerry Claiborne, who evidently learned a few things when he played halfback at the University of Kentucky under Paul "Bear" Bryant, knew the secret. He visited the Wades' home for dinner one evening and recruited Wade's mother.

"My mother fell in love with Jerry Claiborne," Wade said. "She would not hear of me not going to Virginia Tech and playing for Claiborne."



Sonny Wade led all NAIA football players in scoring in 1967 with 141 points for Emory & Henry. Photo by Robert Anderson.

Short honeymoon

When Wade showed up in Blacksburg in late summer 1965, he was one of nine contenders vying for the job on Tech's freshman team. Except for a two-year period during the Korean War, the NCAA did not allow freshmen to play varsity football at the Division I level until 1972.

Among the group new recruits was a 5-foot-9 passing whiz from nearby Hillsville High School by the name of Frank Beamer, who quickly was moved to defensive back.

Yes, that Frank Beamer.

Wade stayed at quarterback. Playing in the very first football game ever held in Lane Stadium against Maryland's freshman team, he led a late touchdown drive and scored on a two-point run as the game ended in an 8-all tie.

Wade sustained an injury in the ensuing freshman game at Neyland Stadium in Tennessee. By then, the Martinsville native already was feeling a different type of discomfort, the kind that led him to leave the Virginia Tech program after just one year.

In various newspaper reports covering Wade's departure from Blacksburg, Wade was vague on the reasons for his departure. However, in a recent interview at his home in Axton, he offered some insight.

During full freshman scrimmage in the fall of '65, Claiborne climbed the big observation tower overlooking the practice field. Wade was running the offense, which picked up 9 yards on a first-down play.

"On second down I called a play-action pass. I can see it right now," he recalled. "I completed it for 18 yards. I hear a noise. I look over and [Claiborne] may have hit two rungs coming off that 25-foot ladder.

"He said, 'What kind of play did you call?' I said, 'It was a play-action pass. If the man's covered I was going to throw it away and pick up first down on third-and-1.' He said, 'Boy, we don't do things like that around here.'

"I thought to myself, 'That's not going to work.'"

Wade said Virginia Tech coaches promised to allow him to play baseball in the spring. The offer quickly was pulled off the table.

"The spring rolled around, they said, 'No, we've got spring [football] practice,'" Wade revealed. "But promised myself I would stay and give it a chance for a year. I fulfilled that."

When 12 months went by, Wade honored his own word. Despite being elevated to the starting quarterback job in preseason practice in 1966, he walked into Claiborne's office the same day and told the coach he was leaving.

“He said, ‘Son, you can’t do that, you’re first-team varsity quarterback,’” Wade recalled. “I said, ‘No, sir, I can do it and I’m going to.’”

“‘He said, ‘Son, you stay here and you’ll be an All-American.’ I said, ‘Well, if I’m going to be an All-American, it’s not going to be here.’”



Sonny Wade’s certificate acknowledging his selection to the first team on the college football Little All-America team at Emory & Henry in 1968. Photo by Robert Anderson.

Making memories at Emory

Wade became an All-American, 100 miles west of Blacksburg, at Emory & Henry.

He was strongly considering transferring to E&H where one of his high school friends, Bill Nease, had enrolled the previous year. Before making the decision, he went over to Nease’s house in Martinsville to get his buddy’s opinion.

“He said, ‘What do you think about me coming to Emory & Henry?’” Nease related. “I said, ‘To do what?’ He said, ‘To play football.’ I said, ‘Well what position would you play?’ He said, ‘Quarterback.’”

“I said, ‘Well, you must have got a whole lot better than when I saw you last time back in high school.’ He said, ‘What do you mean?’ I said, ‘They’ve got a boy up here, and he’s the best player I’ve ever seen play football.’”

That player was Larry Bales, who oddly enough was one of the nine freshman quarterback contenders who showed up at Virginia Tech in the fall of 1965 with Wade. However, Bales left Tech within a week and transferred to E&H, where he was an immediate superstar.

Wade said the ability to play football without sitting out a year was a factor in his decision to transfer to Emory & Henry.

He arrived in Emory during the second week of September 1966. Three days later, he was in a blue, gold and white E&H uniform for the season opener at Elon College in North Carolina.

As the Wasps’ starting punter.

Bales started the game at quarterback, but by the second or third series, Wade took over behind center and Bales moved to wingback.

E&H defeated Elon 14-12 and the rest is history.

“It didn’t take them long to figure out who the quarterback was,” Bales said recently from his home in Abingdon.

After posting a combined 5-14 record the previous two seasons, E&H went 8-2 in 1966, 7-3 in 1967 and 9-1 in 1968 with Wade running the show for head coach Casto Ramsey. He finished his career in style, leading E&H to a 34-28 victory at Appalachian State.

Wade was named Virginia Small College player of the year in all three of his seasons from 1966-68.

With Bales sidelined in 1967 after accidentally shooting himself in the foot with a .22-caliber pistol in an on-campus mishap, Wade turned into a running quarterback and led the NAIA in scoring from the quarterback/place-kicker positions with 141 points.

When Bales returned the following year, E&H’s offense was firing on all cylinders. The Wasps set an NAIA record by averaging 553.3 yards per game. Wade and Bales represented E&H in the North-South Shrine Game in the Orange Bowl on Christmas Day for the South squad coached by Clemson’s Frank Howard.

Wade still stands second on Emory & Henry’s career list in single-season touchdown passes (28) and career points (300), and he is third in career touchdowns (41) and single-season passing yards (2,671).

“Sonny was smart,” Bales said recently from his home in Abingdon. “He was able to analyze. We were never in a bad play.”

Bales still ranks No. 1 at E&H with 1,202 receiving yards in 1968, catching 12 TD passes in 10 games. He was picked in the seventh round of the NFL draft by the Dallas Cowboys and was the last player cut by the team in training camp.

“Larry was the best football player that I ever played with,” Wade said. “I played with Johnny Rodgers in Canada, the Heisman Trophy winner from Nebraska, for three years. Larry was a better all-around player than Rodgers was. The only place Rodgers was better was as a punt returner.”

Wade also played baseball and basketball at E&H.

“He came out for baseball. I guess he was bored,” said Bales, who was offered a contract out of Marion High School by the Houston Colt 45s, now known as the Astros. “The first ballgame, I went 4 for 5 with a home run. He went 5 for 5 with a home run.”

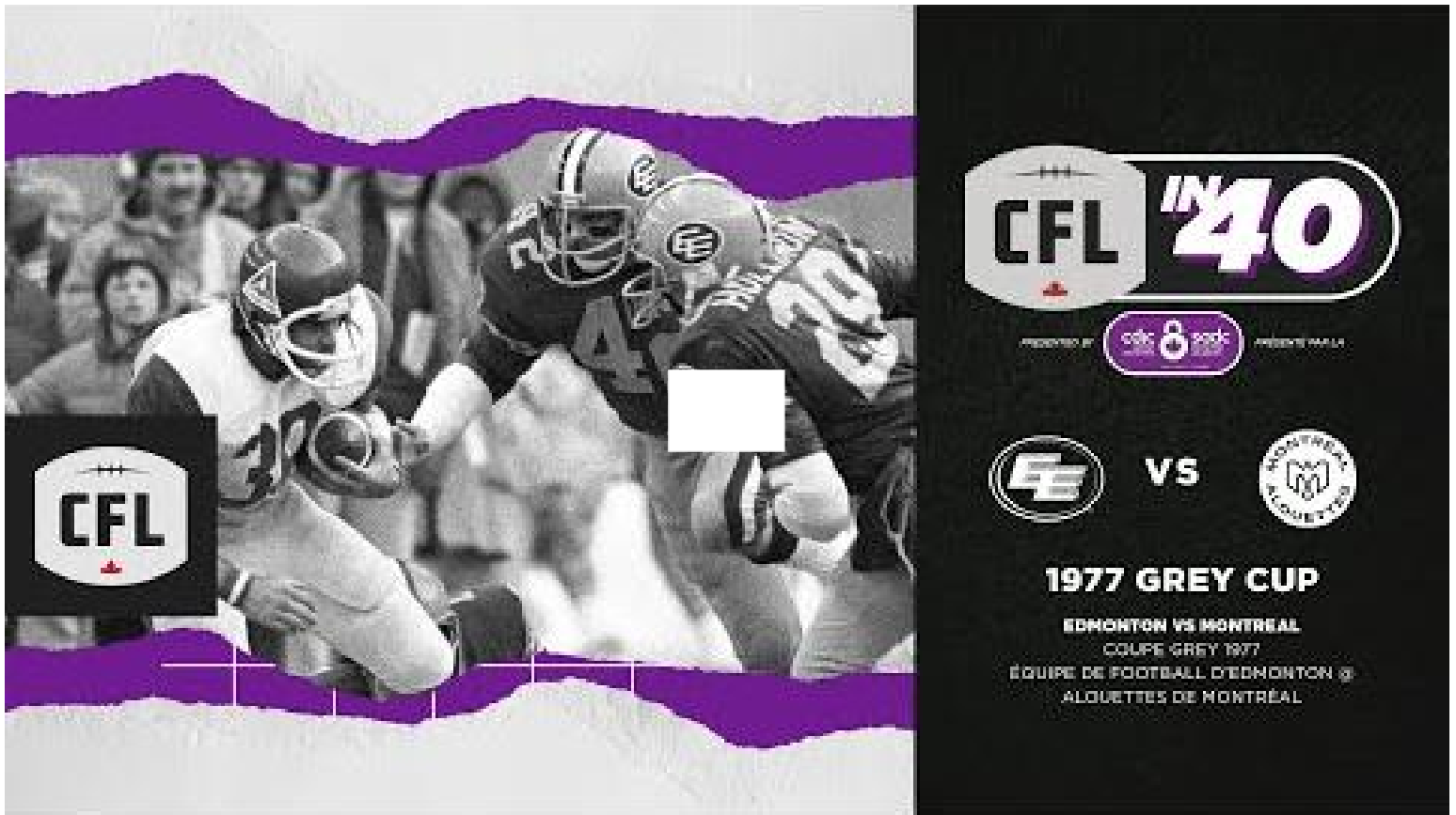
Wade was named a first-team NAIA All-American. Soon thereafter, he got a letter in the mail.

It was from Jerry Claiborne.

It read “I told you so.”



Sonny Wade's reflection is seen in his 1967 Virginia Small College Player of the Year Award. Photo by Robert Anderson.



Highlights of the 1977 Grey Cup. Wade is No. 14 for Montreal, the team in white.

Birds of a different feather

Wade was chosen by the Philadelphia Eagles in the 10th round of the 1969 NFL Draft. He also was offered a contract to take flight in the CFL with the Alouettes.

Wade said his two rookie offers were identical: a \$20,000 salary plus a signing bonus.

An Alouettes representative visited Wade at E&H and explained that at the time the Canadian dollar was worth 20% more than the American dollar. But he turned down a shot at the NFL because ...

... “I was young and stupid,” he said.

Wade’s CFL career as a 6-foot-3, 214-pound quarterback involved more than dumb luck.

In his second season with the Alouettes, he passed for 2,411 yards and led Montreal to a 23-10 victory over Calgary in the Grey Cup.

He served as a backup QB in 1974, but he led Montreal to a 20-7 Grey Cup triumph over Edmonton in a relief role.

Wade had his best season in 1976 when he completed 205 of 382 passes for 2,504 yards. The following year he led Montreal to a 41-6 victory over Edmonton and his third Grey Cup MVP Award, a CFL feat matched to this day only by BC Lions quarterback Doug Flutie.

Wade's final year in Montreal was 1978, ending with a loss to Edmonton in Montreal's fifth Grey Cup appearance in 10 seasons.

After a decade in pro football that included 15,014 passing yards, 89 TD passes, a 41.2 career punting average and two knee surgeries, he called it quits.

But not for long.

The phone rang one day, and on the other end was Philadelphia Eagles coach Dick Vermeil.

"He said, 'Sonny, I don't know if you know this or not, but I've still got your [draft] rights,'" Wade said. "Ron Jaworski is our quarterback now, but I'd like to you punt, back him up and fill two positions."

Wade agreed. A shot in the NFL looked promising. Then disaster struck.

"We were in the little side practice field running warmup sprints, and I step in a hole and tear a ligament in the arch of my foot so I go home," he said.

The Eagles brought Wade back, but he remained on the injured list for the entire 1979 season and retired. The following year, Philadelphia, with Martinsville High graduate Carl Hairston starting at defensive end, reached Super Bowl XV, losing to the Oakland Raiders.

"I told Vermeil personally my body's telling me something," Wade said. "I've been through too many wars."



A fan's tribute video to Sonny Wade.

Family matters

Gayle Panagos Wade was a freshman at Emory & Henry when Sonny Wade was a senior in the fall of 1968.

The daughter of a high school coach and athletic director in Fairfax County, she knew how to sling a football. Soon, she was on star quarterback's radar.

"Somebody told him there was a girl on campus who could throw better than he could and he ought to go check her out," she said.

Like his college football career, the relationship got off to a slow start.

Things clicked because Wade had extra academic work to complete at E&H because most of his credits would not transfer from Virginia Tech.

He returned to the E&H campus for several years in the offseason early in his CFL career, eventually graduating in 1973. Wade also joined the Army Reserves, splitting his stint between Malone, New York and Marion.



Sonny and Gayle Wade at Emory & Henry in 2022. Courtesy of Emory & Henry.

After Gayle Panagos graduated from E&H in 1972, she and Sonny Wade were married three months later, turning her into a young CFL wife.

The couple spent a few winters in Montreal while Gayle completed a master's degree in English Literature at Concordia University. She attended her husband's home games, prepared for any eventuality.

"I learned to take a book to the games so I would have something to read in the emergency room," she said.

After Sonny retired from football, the Wades made the Martinsville area their home. They raised three sons: Jesse, now 45 and in Martinsville; Danny, 43, in Richmond; and Greg, 40, in Roanoke.

Sonny worked at Bassett-Walker Knitting Co. for 12 years as its national sales manager and worked for the Tultex Corp. as its retail general manager before he retired early at age 53. Gayle spent 24 years as an English professor at Patrick & Henry Community College in Martinsville.

At age 57, Sonny was still in good enough shape to play pickup basketball, where running into one of his blind-side screens was like hitting a tree.

One day, it was the tree's turn.

Sonny was felling a big hickory on his property in Henry County. The trunk hit the ground, but he violated a cardinal rule of logging.

He forgot to look up.

Part of the tree had broken off at the top and hung in the limb of another tree. It became dislodged and hit Sonny in the head.

"I remember saying to myself, 'That tree fell exactly where I was trying to get it fall,' and I don't remember anything else for two weeks after that."

Greg Wade witnessed the accident and ran up the hill for help after leaning his father against a tree. Danny Wade, a former starting wide receiver at William and Mary, heard the chainsaw stop abruptly and passed his younger brother on the way down.

"I went down there and found him lying on his back," Danny said. "He was filling up with blood, and I rolled him over, got the blood out and he started breathing again."

Gayle Wade spent five weeks sleeping on a cot at the foot of her husband's hospital bed. The recovery was a long one.

"Sonny knew all of us but he did not know his own name," she said. "They would come in every few hours and say, 'Who are you?' and he would say some name, who knows where he pulled it from."

Years earlier, Gayle could not explain her own dream.

The 1977 Grey Cup is known in CFL lore as the Ice Bowl, played on a frozen field. When Canada issued commemorative postage stamps highlighting each CFL team, Wade was one of the Alouettes featured with a photo from the famous game.

Montreal was a two-touchdown underdog to Edmonton. On the eve of the game, Gayle dreamed that the Alouettes won 41-3.

Almost. With Sonny passing for 340 yards and three TDs in a tour de force performance, Montreal rolled 41-6.

"If I'd only known a bookie," Gayle said.



The 1974 Grey Cup game where Wade led Montreal to a 20-7 win over Edmonton.

A true fish story

What are the odds Sonny Wade would have a hand in a Virginia Department of Wildlife Services state fishing record?

Wade's good friend Nease, who once told Wade he might not be good enough to win the quarterback job at Emory & Henry, landed an 18-pound, 11-ounce monster in 1979 in the Smith River. It still rates as the largest brown trout ever caught in state waters.

Nease knew big trout were feeding on alewives below the power plant on the south side of town. But what lure to use?

Another fisherman gave him the magic answer: a topwater plug that mimicked an alewife.

"I said, 'Good God, I know exactly the plug I need. My friend Sonny Wade's got it,'" Nease exclaimed. "I went over to Sonny's and said, 'Hey, how about that plug you caught those big walleyes on. Can I borrow that thing? I'm going up to Smith River and I'm going to catch a state-record trout.'

Virginians in this year's Grey Cup game

This year's Canadian Football League championship game, the Grey Cup, will be played Sunday at 6 p.m. and televised in the U.S.

“He said, ‘Really? Well, when you do, why don’t you come back here and show it to me.’”

Nease and Wade spent hours hunting and fishing when they were students at Emory & Henry. Wade said he caught so many trout while he was in college that the school had enough to host a fish-fry for every varsity sports team.

Wade was inducted into the Virginia Sports Hall of Fame in 1994.

Not bad for a kid who walked away from the starting quarterback job at Virginia Tech, only to set college and Canadian Football League records.

Sunday, Wade will have more than a passing interest in the 2023 Grey Cup. The Alouettes play the Winnipeg Blue Bombers for the CFL championship.

That’s if he’s not out trapping foxes on his property or tossing a football to one of his grandsons.

Wade has lived quite an athletic life.

His Emory & Henry running mate, Bales, gets the final word:

“Sonny Wade, there’s only one.”

on TSN. Both teams include players with Virginia ties.

Montreal Alouettes

William Stanback, running back. Grew up in New York, played at Virginia Union.

Winnipeg Blue Bombers

Malik Clements, linebacker, grew up in Danville, played at George Washington High School and the University of Cincinnati. (*See [previous story](#) on Clements.*)

Ricky Walker, defensive tackle. Grew up in Hampton, played at Virginia Tech. (*See [previous story](#) that mentions Walker.*)

Tyjuan Garbutt, defensive end, on the injured list. Grew up in Fredericksburg, played at Virginia Tech.