

SUMMER DOUBLE ISSUE

# Where Are They Now?

# Sports Illustrated

JULY 9-16, 2012 SI.COM

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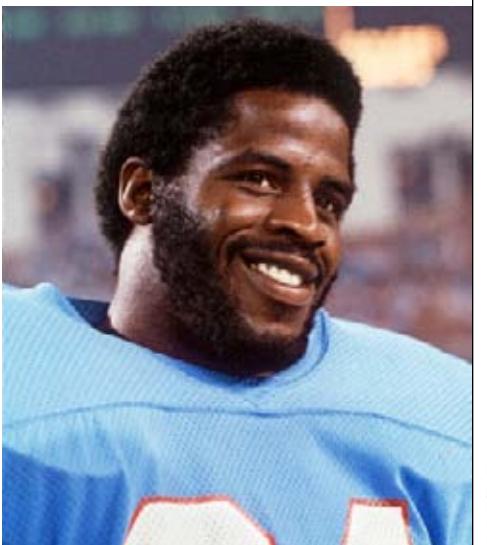


EARL CAMPBELL

# Life's Roses (and Sausages)

He was the most punishing runner of his generation. But there was a price to pay, addiction to overcome, a child's illness to face down. Yeah, the Tyler Rose has seen a thing or two

by LEE JENKINS



HEINZ KLEINER

## DON'T MESS WITH TEXAS

The Oiler boom of the 1980s was fueled by Campbell, who after receiving the '77 Heisman at UT, won three rushing titles with Houston. By his late 40s, though, he was in a wheelchair.

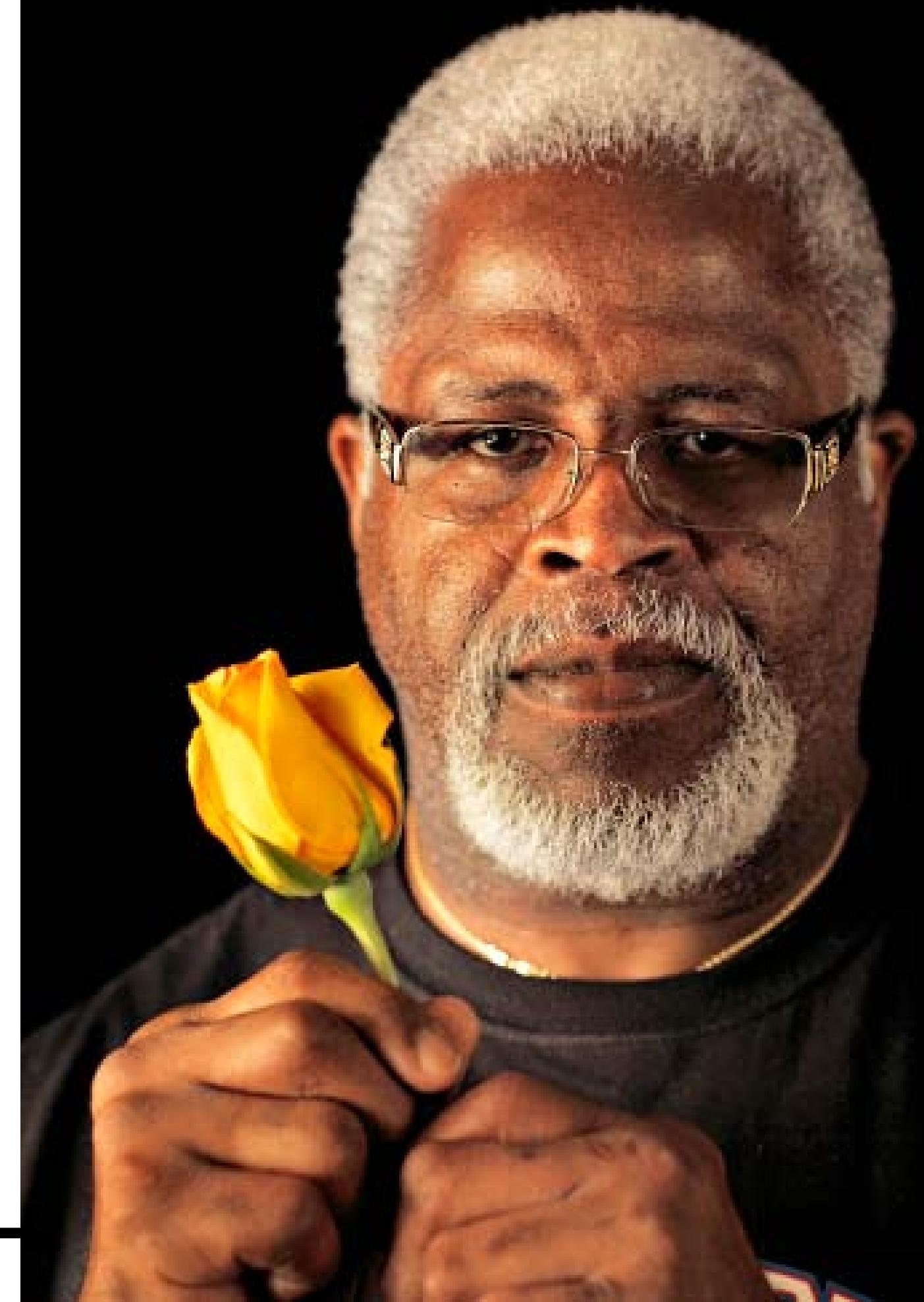
Photograph by  
DARREN CARROLL

# O

and a familiar bronze figure spinning on a lazy Susan. The figure is the 1977 Heisman Trophy. The only thing guarding it is the bobcat.

The owner of the trophy calls out from a backroom in a leisurely baritone drawl that is part country, part blues. Fifty-seven-year-old Earl Campbell is sitting at the head of a conference table, walker by his side, white hair matching his white goatee. He wears a Longhorns logo on every article of clothing, including his burnt-orange mesh shorts, which are skimpy enough to reveal his thighs. Football may have ravaged the man's knees, his back and his feet, but it spared his thighs. They are still thicker than watercoolers. They barely fit under the table.

Through his gold-rimmed glasses, Campbell eyes a bottle of orange juice and a bag of trail mix in front of him. "Jack Tatum is the orange juice," he says. "I'm the trail mix." It is 1979 again, and the Oilers are on the Raiders' one-yard line as baby-blue pom-poms shake in unison inside the Astrodome. Campbell is the Oilers' tailback, positioned about eight yards deep, as was his habit. Tatum is the Raiders' free safety, creeping toward the line of scrimmage, as was his. The juice and the nuts stand across from each other.



"We had a wingback named Rob Carpenter," Campbell says. "Our coach, Bum Phillips, told Carpenter, 'I want you to go in motion, and when you get down on the right guard's ass, I want you to turn up into the hole. That's where you're going to meet Jack Tatum.' Then Carpenter goes in motion, but for some reason he keeps running to the sideline. And old Jack says, 'Nah, I ain't fallin' for that.' So when I get the ball, I turn up in the hole, and there's Jack waiting for me." Campbell inches the glass toward the nuts. "He put a hit on me I will never forget. He knocked the hell out of me. My neck popped out. My sternum shot back. But, you know, he forgot to wrap up, so I spun out of there and backed into the end zone."

Campbell reaches for his keys, slices open the bag of trail mix and raises it to his lips. He chuckles as he chews.

**E**arl Campbell never wanted to be a running back. He preferred to deliver the hits. Campbell played linebacker during his first three years of high school, a self-styled Dick Butkus, and coaches at Texas had to push him out of defensive drills. They gave him a 9-millimeter film of Jim Brown, and as Campbell studied the tape in his dorm room, he became convinced it was possible to punish people with the ball in his hands.

Campbell was Butkus with an eight-yard running start, taking safeties on 10-yard piggyback rides before brushing them off his shoulder pads like lint. He mimicked Brown, staggering back to every huddle as if he were hurt, only to unleash yet another combination of head butts and stiff arms. Defenses dispatched one convoy to slow him and another to ground him.

On one touchdown run at Texas, Campbell raced full speed

ass and thighs, so there was no place to hit him, but I jumped up, and I hit him square. I mean I popped him face-to-face. After I hit him, I couldn't see anything. All I could see was black. I thought I was blind. Then I opened my eyes, and I was lying on my back in the end zone, and I could make out the lights on the ceiling. They were all fuzzy and blurry and spinning. I thought I was in heaven. Then I turned my head, and Earl was lying right next to me. He reached his hand over to help me up, and I said, 'Earl, I've got to lie here awhile; I think you knocked out my eyes.'

"I realized later it wasn't my eyes. He hit me so hard that



#### STEER CLEAR

Campbell's north-south, molar-rattling style grabbed even the notice of the Longhorns' 1,700-pound mascot; son Tyler (above) was a grind-it-out fullback.

**T**he bungalow is the headquarters of Earl Campbell Meat Products, and the founder just moved in two weeks ago. His yellow Hall of Fame blazer still hangs by the fireplace. Campbell started the company in 1991 with \$150,000 and built it into the ninth-biggest

## "[EARL] REACHED HIS HAND OVER TO HELP ME UP," EASON RECALLS OF A HIT HE PUT ON CAMPBELL. "I SAID, 'EARL I'VE GOT TO LIE HERE A WHILE. I THINK YOU KNOCKED OUT MY EYES.'"

through the corner of the end zone and plowed into Bevo, the school's 1,700-pound pet Longhorn. "I hit him in the flank, right here," Campbell says, pointing at the midsection of a longhorn sculpture that happens to be on hand. "Bevo took most of the blow. He didn't fall, but I could feel him stumble backward. After he got his balance, he looked at me and said, 'Moo.'"

Drafted first overall by the Oilers in 1978, Campbell vowed that he would play seven years in the NFL but stuck around for eight. He helped inspire the elimination of tearaway jerseys and the creation of yards-after-contact statistics. He defined mesquite-tough masculinity for a generation in Texas and beyond. Five times he cleared 300 carries and 1,300 yards. When former defenders describe what it felt like to tackle him, they sound as if they are recalling a near-death experience. This was just one collision, during a meaningless exhibition game before the start of Campbell's final season, in 1985. By then he had been traded to New Orleans, supposedly washed up. He was playing his old team.

"It was at the Superdome, and the Saints were on the one-yard line coming in," says former Oilers safety Bo Eason. "My job was to jump over the goal line and meet Earl at the peak. He was all

sausage manufacturer in the country, selling more than 11 million pounds per year in 38 states. He is also special assistant to Texas athletic director DeLoss Dodds, in charge of mentoring Longhorns athletes. "I don't know what's wrong with college kids today," Campbell says. "They want the world. They want all these material things. I know a kid who got drafted by the Ravens and made \$55 million. Guess where he is now, son. He's back home, broke, living with his parents."

On the day the Oilers handed Campbell his \$1.5 million signing bonus, Bum Phillips told him, "You're kind of country like I am. You go put that money over there." Phillips was pointing at Fannin Bank, down the road from the Oilers' training facility. Campbell never hired an agent. Local bankers and accountants managed his portfolio. He met with them after practice, sometimes in his jersey and cleats. The only major purchase he remembers, besides a barbecue pit so wide it barely fit through the fence in his backyard, was the house he bought his mother in Tyler, Texas. Ann Campbell didn't care much for locks on her house, either. She thought neighbors should be able to see her boy's Heisman when they pleased.

RICH CLARKSON

Campbell's career was successful, charmed even. He didn't go broke, and only once did he miss more than two games in a season. He married his high school sweetheart, Reuna, and they had two sons, Christian and Tyler. The meat company was born at a tailgate party before a Texas-Colorado game, when Campbell was tinkering with sausage recipes, and guests raved about the one with black pepper. A friend told him, "I want you to take these hot links down Interstate 10 and keep straight until you come to a little town called Waelder. Ask for a guy named Big Danny."

Big Danny was Danny Janecka, who owned the J Bar B sausage plant and would become Campbell's business partner. To peddle the sausage, Campbell burned through three Chevy Suburbans driving across Texas. He stood for hours next to displays at Fiesta Mart. He showed up at radio stations at 5 a.m. and served hot links to the disc jockeys in hopes they would mention them on their morning shows. He told Christian and Tyler, "I'm not going to be home all the time, but I'm building something for you."

In advertisements, Campbell posed next to a flaming grill in his cowboy hat and silver belt buckle, looking as strong as a bull rider. On Friday nights he stood in the bleachers at Westlake High



School in Austin, watching Christian and Tyler play football. On weekends he golfed at Barton Creek Country Club, usually with former Texas coach Darrell Royal. Campbell's teammates didn't know why he retired at 30, until they saw him at 40.

But eventually the game hits back, and every stiff arm is returned tenfold. As Campbell charged into middle age, arthritis froze his knees, back and feet. He developed gout and diabetes. Three bone spurs had to be removed from his vertebrae. He underwent more operations than he can remember. Around 2000, still only 45, he played his last round of golf, and soon after he required a wheelchair. He often slept on the couch in the living room of his two-story house because he couldn't make it upstairs to bed. Panic attacks, which had hounded him since retirement, grew more frequent. He wore sunglasses to shield himself from crowds. "I was not comfortable being Earl Campbell," he says.

He started taking Tylenol with codeine, then graduated to OxyContin. He popped as many as 10 pills a day, downing each with a Budweiser. "I didn't do no Scotch or wine or mixed drinks," Campbell says. "I'm from Texas. I'm real Texas. My deal was them four horses." He skipped business meetings and dozed off at public appearances. "He didn't want to do anything," Janecka says. "He was high all the time."

One weekend in 2007, ahead of the 30th anniversary of Campbell's Heisman, 18 fellow winners traveled to Barton Creek to celebrate a legend, but all they found was a cautionary tale. Campbell struggled to

remember names and dates. A reporter wrote that he took six minutes to walk 40 yards. "I stay focused and prayerful that I won't have to deal with the situation of Earl Campbell one day," former Heisman winner and NFL running back Eddie George said that weekend.

"Why I was doing that I don't know," Campbell says. "I got with a doctor, and I figured I needed this pain medication, and I kept wearing him out." Campbell filled his prescriptions at a pharmacy on Guadalupe Street in Austin. He sometimes sent a business partner, Gilbert Velasquez, to pick them up so the pharmacist wouldn't judge him. Once, Velasquez returned with the pills, along with a message from the pharmacist: "This is going to kill you."

**O**f the two boys, Christian's tastes ran urban and eclectic, Tyler's down home. Named after the city where Earl grew up, working in the rose fields, Tyler dressed in Wranglers and cowboy boots like his dad. They listened to the same classic country music: Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings and Merle Haggard. At six, Tyler said he wanted to go into the sausage business, except football eventually interfered. While

Christian played wide receiver, Tyler was a tailback, his running style familiar: bowlegged and pigeon-toed, with a safety or two hanging off his shoulder pads. "I like being knocked down," Tyler says, "and getting back up." After Christian left for the University of South Carolina, where he ran track, Tyler was the one who listened to his father cry at night. He flipped him over on his side when his back buckled.

Tyler turned down a scholarship offer from Texas A&M—"I liked A&M," he says, "but Dad said no"—and followed a former high school teammate to San Diego State. Tyler became a full-back and special teams ace, but was known mainly for what he did off the field, graduating in three years with a business degree, volunteering at the Pro Player Foundation in San Diego and helping the charity raise money for underfunded elementary schools. "He is everything you want your son to grow up to be," says San Diego State assistant coach LeCharles McDaniel.

In December 2007, the day after the Aztecs lost to BYU in the regular-season finale, Tyler woke up in his dorm room and couldn't walk. The entire right side of his body was numb. His vision was blurry and speech slurred. Trainers asked, "Did you get a concussion and not tell us?" But Tyler passed the concussion tests, so they ferried him to Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla, where an MRI revealed lesions on his brain. Only a junior, still a college football player, Tyler's illness was diagnosed as multiple sclerosis. He told the doctors to call his mom. His dad would worry too much.

At first, MS was manageable. Tyler wore a steroid pack under his shirt and an IV under a sleeve to take final exams.

sale." They had bonded in the team lounge at Texas, listening to Willie Nelson pick his guitar, and laughing because Campbell was the only black player interested. After Campbell and Royal retired, they golfed in the twilight at Barton Creek, until they could barely track their balls. Royal shared with Campbell his anguish from burying two children before they turned 30. "It's just not supposed to happen," Campbell says. "The parent is supposed to go first."

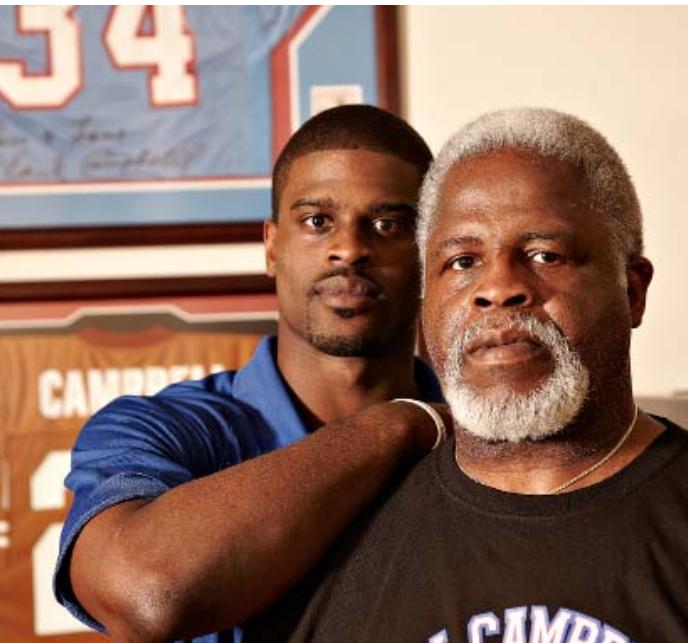
Tyler worked in the sausage factory, as he promised when he was six, and went to a clinic once a month for medication administered through an IV. He commuted 80 minutes each way to Waelder, stuffed meat in casing and then returned home to see his dad drunk or high or both. "He could see my health," Tyler says, "and I could see his." Tyler called Christian, a marketing and public relations executive in Houston, and summoned him home. In November 2009 they approached their father.

"I remember how it went," Earl says. "They came to the house and said, 'Dad, we've got to talk to you,' and I said, 'No, you ain't got to talk to me.' They said, 'Yeah, we do, we've got to talk about the pills.' I told them, 'Just take the pills.' But they said, 'We don't want 'em. We want you.' I told them, 'Well, I ain't going anywhere.' And that's when Tyler said, 'Yeah, you are. You've got to go.'"

They drove him to a rehabilitation center in Austin, and after one meeting Campbell called Reuna and said, "You have to come get me. There's a girl in here talking about cocaine and something called mushrooms and shooting speed in her thighs. I didn't do any of that stuff." Reuna

He has been married almost a year to Shana, who will enroll at Texas this fall in pursuit of her master's in social work. She'd never heard of Earl Campbell when she met his son, and even today she only calls him Father-in-law. He only calls her Daughter-in-law. "I tell her, 'Daughter-in-law, I don't want you to see what Father-in-law used to be,'" Campbell says. "And she tells me, 'Father-in-law, I better not.'"

Campbell has been sober since that day in November '09. When he wakes up, he meditates, then he prays. "I pray for peace in this country," he says. "I pray for all of us to get along. I pray for my family. And I pray that God help me and other drug addicts like



Longhorns strength coach Benny Wylie shouts, "No, he has to do this on his own." When Campbell started training with Wylie last winter, he could not take more than six steps. Now, he leaves his walker by the door and spends 12 minutes on the treadmill, before moving on to the bike, the pool and the rope. He stays for an hour-and-a-half, alongside Jamaal Charles, the injured Chiefs running back and ex-Texas star.

Campbell sleeps on the second floor again, and at night he tells Reuna, "I just want to play a good nine holes of golf." He dreams about Barton Creek, the hook and the slice, the whisper of the wind and the slope of the green. "I'm going to do it," he says.

"I'm going to put that tee in the ground."

Nine holes may sound like a modest goal for the most fearsome runner outside of Jim Brown, but this is the best Campbell has felt in nearly two decades. Even his panic attacks have subsided. "Some people have a chemical imbalance," Campbell says. "I had a chemical imbalance too, until I decided not to put chemicals in there." When he strolls across the Texas campus, sans sunglasses, he approaches freshmen who can't seem to place him. "My name is Earl Campbell," he says. "Who are you? Where are you from?" The reactions make him laugh. "A lot of them jump," he says. Campbell's hobby used to be deer hunting. "I take pictures of them now," he says.

Business is booming, in part because Campbell shows up for the meetings. "He is a completely different person," says Big Danny. Twelve years ago Campbell opened a barbecue restaurant on Sixth Street, and its failure sent his company into temporary bankruptcy. With Tyler overseeing the meat business, he is thinking of trying again. But father and son are in the midst of another, more significant project. As ambassadors for the National MS Society, they have joined Pro Player Foundation to raise money for research. In the past six months they planned a golf tournament, a football camp and benefits in Austin and San Diego, one of which featured five Hall of Famers. "We haven't had a lot of athletes connected to multiple sclerosis," says Debbie Pope of the National MS Society. "There's never been anyone who put himself out there like Tyler."

Perseverance is just another trait he inherited from his dad. At the national MS conference in Dallas last year, Tyler was the keynote speaker, and at the MS 150 bike race from Houston to Austin in April, Tyler and Earl were waiting at the finish line. Earl said he would sign as many autographs as necessary, arthritis be damned. "In the next five to six years," Tyler says, "I want to put the MS Society out of business."

He has already helped save one life. After Earl tucks a pinch of Copenhagen under his bottom lip, a last remaining vice, a stranger walks through the unlocked door and makes his way to the backroom. He is of the generation that turned to Campbell for cues on manhood, on taking licks without complaint. The stranger explains that he went to Texas, rooted for the Oilers and bought sausage from the displays at Fiesta Mart. He says he works around the corner. Campbell reaches into one of the cardboard boxes on the floor and fishes out an old baby-blue number 34 jersey. He flings it into the stranger's unsteady hands. "Nice to meet you," Campbell says. "I want to be a good neighbor." □

## THE REHAB PROGRAM LASTED 28 DAYS, CAMPBELL STAYED 44. "I HAD TO MAKE A CHOICE BETWEEN LIVING AND DYING," HE SAYS. "IT WAS THAT SERIOUS."

He kept the disease a secret, telling only two coaches and two teammates. He played his entire senior season, and though he tired more easily in practice and wasn't squatting 615 pounds anymore, he was still the Aztecs' third-leading rusher. In a loss to Colorado State, with his father in the stands, he caught a pass for 33 yards. Tyler never imagined NFL scouts would be interested in him, but at San Diego State's pro day, several told McDaniel they wanted to sign him as a free agent after the draft.

A week later, however, Tyler's right side went numb again. He rushed to Scripps for more steroids, but this time they didn't work. He lay in a hospital bed for almost a month, accompanied by his mom and a friend on the Aztecs' women's track team named Shana Watson. "She thought I was dying," Tyler says of Watson. Doctors told Tyler he could never play football again, and McDaniel relayed the news to the scouts. In the summer of 2009, Tyler moved back to Austin and found his father racked with guilt. "What did I do wrong?" Campbell asked himself. "Why is this happening to my boy? Why is this happening to me?"

The father thought about Darrell Royal, who had recruited him out of John Tyler High School, even after he told the fabled coach, "If you're here to buy another black athlete, I'm not for

said, "You stay there because you would have started."

Campbell worried that media and fans would find out where he was. But Thomas (Hollywood) Henderson, the former Cowboys linebacker and cocaine addict, told him, "Who cares if they do? You'll be able to help so many people because you don't know anything about cocaine or marijuana. You're like a regular Joe on the street—50, 60, 70 years old—who never even played sports but drinks beer and takes pills. They all think what they're doing is O.K. because their doctor gave them the pills that are running their lives."

The program lasted 28 days. Campbell stayed 44. "I had to make a choice between living and dying," he says. "It was that serious."

**T**yler works in the bungalow, no more than 10 feet from his father, and takes the trips Earl used to make in the Suburban: to Kroger and Wal-Mart, as well as all the independent groceries in the small-town South. This summer, under Tyler's direction, the company is expanding from sausage to microwavable plates of shredded pork and chicken and brisket.

Now 25, Tyler has not suffered an MS episode in 18 months.

me. I pray that he keeps that Budweiser and those pills away from me because I'm still one Budweiser away from being a drunk." During one of his weekly Alcoholic Anonymous meetings in Austin, where he is never anonymous, a member of the group said, "Look at Earl Campbell over there. You never hear him complain." To which Campbell shot back, "What would I complain about?"

For starters, a sport that stole the second half of his life. Campbell shakes a meaty finger in the air. "I don't hold nothing against nobody," he says. "I played the way I wanted to play and ran the way I wanted to run. When you want to be the best at something, nobody is going to tell you how to do it. When it was third-and-four, I didn't just want five yards. I wanted seven." You flash back to the goal line collision with Jack Tatum, who died of a heart attack in 2010, at age 61. How much time was lost because of that play, but then again, how much satisfaction was gained? And how in the world do you calculate the math, the value of such a moment, as opposed to the cost?

Campbell's right knee was replaced last September, his left one in January, and he's traded the wheelchair for the walker. Four times a week he hobbles into the Texas weight room, and as women's volleyball players hustle over to extend a hand,

DARREN CARROLL