Where Are They Now?

Sports Illustrated

SUMMER DOUBLE ISSUE

TO HELL AND BACK
Earl Campbell
The runner stumbles and rises again

CATCHING UP WITH:
Reggie Jackson
Shawn Kemp
Greg Louganis
Ben Hefgott
Chris Dudley
Bill Mikkelson
John Paciorek
Ray LeBlanc
Roy Blount Jr.
AND MORE...

BULL DURHAM
Crash, Annie and Nuke recall a “minor” movie classic

FUTURE GAME CHANGERS
Eight stars of tomorrow, and where to find them today

WHY DON'T MORE ATHLETES TAKE A STAND?

BY GARY SMITH

BY LEE JENKINS

BY CHRIS NASHAWATY

SL.COM
n a quiet block in downtown Austin, a few broken-field runs from the University of Texas, is a beige Craftsman bungalow fronted by a white fence, an overgrown yard and a dark-red door that has been left unlocked. The house could easily be mistaken for an upperclassman’s off-campus crash pad or the jam space for Sixth Street dreamers. Cardboard boxes line the hardwood floors and R&B plays even though nobody seems to be home. The living room is empty, except for two orange parrot fish swimming in a tank, a stuffed bobcat with a bird in its mouth 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.
through the corner of the end zone and plowed into Bevo, the school’s 1,700-pound pot Longhorn. “I hit it in the flank, right here,” Campbell says, pointing at the midsection of a longhorn sculpture that happens to be on hand. “I fell off his shoulder pads like loot. 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. Defense dispatched one convoy to slow him and another to ground him. On one touchdown run at Texas, Campbell raced full speed to the 25 and thugs, so there was no place to hit him, but I jumped up, and 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 funny 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, ‘Raad, I’ve got to be here awhile, I think you knocked out my eyes.’ ”

“I realized later it wasn’t my eyes. He hit me so hard that both my contacts flew out. The next day we were watching film with our defensive coordinator, Jerry Glanville, and he asked me why I was running the wrong direction the rest of the game. I told him, ‘Coach, I couldn’t see s---. Earl Campbell knocked my contacts out of my head.’ ”

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mix and raises it to his lips. He chews as he chews. Earl 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 impossible to punish people with the ball in his hands.

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Tyler 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, Tyler and the mother of the woman Campbell is expanding from sausage to microwavable plates of shredded pork and chicken and brisket.

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."