WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Earl Campbell
The runner stumbles and rises again

TO HELL AND BACK

CATCHING UP WITH:
Reggie Jackson
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BULL DURHAM
Crash, Annie and Nuhe recall a "minor" movie classic

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

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

Photograph by Darren Carroll

Life’s Roses (and Sausages)
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 chucks 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 coach Don Thomas pushed 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 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 massaging a molar-rattling style grabbed the campbell’s north-south, grind-it-out fullback.

Campbell burns through three Chevy Suburbans a year. He was tinkering with sausage recipes, and guests raved about the company in 1991 with $150,000 and built into the ninth biggest sausage manufacturer in the country, selling more than 11 million pounds per year in 38 states. He is also special assistant to the president of the company, 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 Cherry 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. “I was proud of how he grew at Barton Creek Country Club Club once 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 watched, his face 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 that had rendered 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,ダウンを数える 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, his reporter said 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 swearing him out.” Campbell and his partner, Gilbert Velasquez, to pick them up so the pharmacist wouldn’t judge him. Once, Velasquez walked in with the pills, along with a message from the pharmacist: “This is going to kill you.”

The two boys, Christian’s tastes can run 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, and Big Danny, often a running-back replacement 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, in his senior year, told his father to 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 the Saguaro High coaches,” he says—and followed a former high school teammate to San Diego State. Tyler became a full- and special teams ace, but was known mainly for what he didn’t do. In his sophomore year at business school, 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 Former Diego State La-Coach 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 stop thinking about his old roommate. Thomas (Hollywood) Henderson, the former big man—with a safety or two hanging off his shoulder pads. “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, it’s the only thing,” he says. “I played for my father. Earl said he would sign as many autographs as necessary, but he was our father. He had to sign all the autographs for the family. And I pray that God help me and other drug addicts like me because I’m still one Budweiser away from being a drunk.”

During one of his weekly Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in Aus- tin, 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 shut 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 you flash back to the goal line collision with Jack Tatum, who “I call the Salvation Army every day, and they say, ‘He’s a good man.’”

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

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. “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 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.”

Longhorn coach Bobby Wylie shouts, “No, he has to do the干净 and professional. When Campbell started training with Wylie last winter, he couldn’t hold 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 James 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.” They have adopted a routine. 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 do it.”

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. From his panic attacks have subsided. “Some people have a chemical imbalance,” Campbell says. “I had a chemi- cal 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 am- bassadors 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 benefit for the Turner Cancer 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.”

Persistence is just another trait he inherited from his dad. At the national MS conference, the most fearsome runner outside of Jim Brown, the most fearsome runner outside of Jim Brown, you hear 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, as arthritis is being diagnosed, “I think the disease is more,” 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 his ivory in the pocket of his jacket, while walking, 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 country.

Campbell donated 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.”

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