

Johnny Bright

By Brian Marshall

It was mid-July of 1952 when 22-year-old Johnny Bright checked in at the training camp of the Calgary Stampeders of the WIFU (Western Interprovincial Football Union). Bright had been a star at pretty much every sport he played, dating back to his years at Central High School in Fort Wayne, Indiana, where he was all-state in football, basketball and track. At the time, basketball seemed to be Johnny's best sport; he could dunk, and that is considered quite a feat for someone only 6 feet tall. He was recruited by Drake University for basketball and track, but Johnny wanted to play football. He told Drake he would come, providing he could also try out for the football team.

Johnny not only made the team -- he starred on the team. The Drake University Bulldogs, at the time, were part of the Missouri Valley Conference. In 1948, as a freshman, Bright was red shirted, but in 1949 he was a three-sport star (football, basketball and track) and led the nation in total offense with 1,950 yards, which coincidentally broke down to 975 yards rushing and 975 yards passing. It was the third-best total in NCAA Division I-A history behind Frank Sinkwich's 2,187 in 1942 and Stan Heath's 1,992 in 1948.

Bright had his best single-game rushing performance of 1949 against Emporia State on September 23, rushing for 179 yards on only 12 carries (14.92 yards per carry) and scoring three touchdowns. Bright's best single-game passing yardage came against Saint Mary's on October 28 when he passed for 169 yards and two touchdowns. His longest play was a 72-yard pass to Tom Bienemann against Emporia State.

As it turned out, Bright's 1949 season was only a teaser because in 1950, as a 20-year-old, 190-pound junior, he rewrote the NCAA record book for total offense. Bright set new marks for yardage with 2,400 yards on 320 plays; average yards per game with 266.67 (nine games); and touchdowns responsible for with 30 (18 by rushing and 12 by passing). The 2,400 yards broke Sinkwich's record from 1942; the 30 touchdowns broke the former mark of 23, held by Stan Heath and Charlie Justice; and the 266.67 average yards per game broke Heath's

record of 221.33. Bright also became the first player to rush for 1,000 yards (1,232) and pass for 1,000 yards (1,168) in a single season. The 2,400 yards of total offense brought his two-year total to 4,350, which bettered Sinkwich's 1941-42 total of 4,003.



Johnny Bright

Illustration by the late Bob Carroll

Bright's best single-game rushing performance of 1950 came against South Dakota on September 30 when he rushed for 246 yards on only 15 carries (16.40 yards per carry) and scored 3 touchdowns. His best single-game passing yardage came against Iowa State Teachers on October 14 when he passed for 265 yards and one touchdown. From a total offense point of view, his best single game came on November 4 against Bradley when he passed and rushed for 436 yards on 53 plays and was responsible for a season-high 6 touchdowns (3 by rushing and 3 by passing). Johnny's longest run in 1950 was 86 yards against South Dakota.

There is another story to be told about Johnny Bright's total offense numbers in 1950 and that has to do with his value to the Drake Bulldogs. The big back from Fort Wayne was responsible

for 180 of the team's 247 points (an amazing 72.87 percent), 320 of the team's 576 offensive plays (55.56 percent), 2,400 of the team's 3,384 offensive yards (70.92 percent) and 30 of the team's 34 offensive touchdowns (a whopping 88.24 percent).

Many considered the Missouri Valley Conference one of college football's "minor leagues," and this reduced Bright's exposure and the significance assigned to his exploits on the football field. Still, his 1950 season caused the All-America selectors to take notice, and he was named to the Associated Press second offensive team at one backfield position. He was also named to AP's All-Western team.

The 1951 season started off well for Bright, now a 6-foot-tall, 205-pound senior. On September 29 against Bradley, he set the career total offense mark as his 242 yards on 49 plays gave him a total of 5,077 yards on 729 plays. The former mark of 4,871 yards had been held by Choo-Choo Justice of North Carolina. After the first five games, Bright's total offense statistics were 1,274 yards on 195 plays, 15 touchdowns responsible for, and he was averaging 254.80 yards per game. Johnny was slightly behind his pace from 1950, but well on his way to another banner season.

Then, as if someone flipped a switch, Bright's season changed with a single play on October 20 in Stillwater, Oklahoma, against Oklahoma A&M. As photos of the play clearly indicate, Johnny was intentionally hit by lineman Wilbanks Smith with a forearm smash to the right side of his face after handing the ball off to fullback Gene Macomber. Bright was only in the game for about seven minutes and during that time received several blows to the face, the last one fracturing his jaw. He attempted to continue playing but eventually had to be helped from the field. While in the game he did manage to throw to Jim Pilkington for a 61-yard touchdown. Bright had a total of five plays for 75 yards in total offense.

Not surprisingly, given the times, the location and the fact that Bright was black, he was not allowed to stay at the hotel with the team and had to be housed with a black preacher several miles away.

Bright did not play in two of the final three

games of the season and finished with 1,553 yards of total offense on 230 plays, 19 touchdowns responsible for, and an average of 221.85 yards per game. His best single-game rushing performance of 1951 came against the University of Detroit on October 12 when he rushed for 202 yards on 29 carries and scored four touchdowns. His best single-game passing yardage came against the University of Denver on September 22 when he passed for 129 yards.

After three seasons of football at Drake, Johnny Bright had established new NCAA total offense career records with 5,903 yards (3,134 rushing and 2,769 passing) and yards per game, with an average of 236.12. Keep in mind that Bright played only 25 games and also was responsible for 64 touchdowns, 40 by rushing and 24 by passing.

On December 4 the results of the Heisman Trophy voting for 1951 were announced. Bright was fifth with 230 votes, behind Dick Kazmaier, Hank Lauricella, Babe Parilli and Bill McColl. Then on December 6 Johnny was added to the West squad for the East-West Shrine football game that was played on December 29 in San Francisco. The NFL draft took place on January 17, 1952, and he was the first choice of the Philadelphia Eagles, and fifth selection overall.

Johnny Bright graduated from Drake University with a Bachelor of Science degree in education and had his sights set on advancing his education with football paying the bills. He thought about his NFL opportunity with the Eagles, but had some concerns related to the kind of treatment he might receive in the NFL given the racial climate at the time, so he elected to play pro football in Canada.

As a rookie with Calgary in 1952, he led the WIFU in rushing with 815 yards on 144 carries and won the Eddie James Memorial Trophy, which is awarded to the leading rusher. Johnny scored only two rushing touchdowns but one came on a 75-yard run, and he had the most carries in a single game with 19. A case of acute appendicitis caused him to miss or see limited action in four of the 16 regular-season games while recovering from his operation in late September, but on October 24 he was named to the WIFU All-Star team at fullback.

The Calgary Stampeders brought in a bruising back by the name of John Henry Johnson out of Arizona State for the 1953 season and Bright saw limited action on offense, carrying the ball only 38 times for 128 yards. Johnny played mostly on the defensive side of the ball and the kick return teams. On September 28 during the ninth game of the season against the Edmonton Eskimos, Bright separated his shoulder tackling the hard-running Normie Kwong and was lost for the season. While Bright's offensive statistics weren't the greatest, he did manage to intercept three passes; in fact, the Stampeders played him at defensive back for the first time in the first game of the season (August 29 against the Saskatchewan Roughriders) and he intercepted two passes.

After the season, on December 1, John Henry Johnson, who had won the Jeff Nicklin Memorial Trophy awarded to the WIFU's MVP, signed with the NFL's San Francisco 49ers. Looking for someone to replace Johnson, the Stampeders settled on Howard Waugh out of Tulsa. This was not a good sign for Johnny Bright, and after two games (only one of which he played in) he was dropped by the Stampeders in late August 1954, to meet the Canadian Rugby Union's ten-import rule. The imports kept by the Stampeders included Eddie LeBaron, Howard Waugh, Eddie Macon, Lowell Wagner and Gene Brito.

On August 30 Bright was picked up, apparently on a "loan for one year" basis, by the Edmonton Eskimos, who had been hit hard by injuries to key players. After the first three games with Edmonton, games in which Bright saw offensive action, he played mostly on defense; he was even listed at end for one game (October 4 against Calgary) and in three of the games he wasn't in the lineup at all. (Howard Waugh, meanwhile, led the WIFU in rushing with 1,043 yards on 166 carries.)

Still, the 1954 season ended up being pretty special because it marked the first of three consecutive years the Edmonton Eskimos played the Montreal Alouettes in the Grey Cup, and it was Bright's first trip to the big game. Johnny was listed at linebacker, wearing jersey number 84, for the 1954 Grey Cup game; he didn't see any offensive action but did intercept a pass by Sam Etcheverry in the third quarter. Edmonton went on to win the Grey Cup 26-25 on a controversial play late in the fourth quarter

that was ruled a fumble, although some observers thought the play was a forward pass by Montreal's Chuck Hunsinger. The loose ball was picked up by Edmonton's Jackie Parker, who ran 90 yards for the score to tie the game. Bright was on the field, just behind Parker when he scooped up the ball. The conversion gave Edmonton the win. The famous "Hunsinger" play originated on the Edmonton ten-yard line after the Alouettes had recovered an Eskimo fumble in their opponents' territory.

The 1955 season marked Bright's return to offensive action and although he missed four games due to a badly sprained ankle, the 210-pound fullback finished fifth in the WIFU with 643 yards rushing on 107 carries. Normie Kwong, his Eskimo teammate, led the WIFU in rushing with 1,250 yards on 241 carries. The Eskimos returned to the Grey Cup and defeated the Montreal Alouettes again, this time by a score of 34-19. Bright scored two touchdowns, including one on a 42-yard run around the right side where he ran over four Alouettes along the way. He was selected as a halfback on the West team for the first annual East-West All-Star Shrine Bowl game played on December 3, 1955 at Varsity Stadium in Toronto. Ted Reeve also selected Bright as a halfback on his annual All-Canada 12 Team which appeared in *Weekend Magazine*.

1956 was a little bit more of the same except Bright missed eight games due to a dislocated shoulder that caused him to wear a "special nylon harness" when he returned to action. He still managed to rush for 573 yards on 93 carries. Again the Eskimos went to the Grey Cup, and again they defeated the Montreal Alouettes, this time by a score of 50-27. In this game Bright set a Grey Cup record by rushing for 171 yards on 28 carries and scored two touchdowns. As a team, the Eskimos set a Grey Cup rushing record with 456 yards.

The 1957 season was somewhat of a breakout year for Johnny Bright because it was the first of five consecutive 1,000-yard rushing seasons. Those five seasons were also the only ones of his pro career in which he played all 16 regular season games. For the second time Johnny led the WIFU in rushing and won the Eddie James Memorial Trophy, but this time he rewrote the WIFU record book. Bright amassed 1,679 yards on 259 carries, both figures breaking marks set

by his teammate Normie Kwong. Bright's best single-game rushing performance of 1957 came on September 21 against the Saskatchewan Roughriders when he gained 176 yards on 29 carries, but he still fell a little short of the records held by Kwong, who carried 30 times for 192 yards against Calgary on October 29, 1955.

Still, Johnny Bright became the first player in WIFU history to average 100 rushing yards per game, and he set another record by rushing for 100 yards in 9 games including 8 in a row, breaking Kwong's record in each case. Bright's 16 rushing touchdowns were second to Gerry James' 18. The 1957 Edmonton Eskimos were another fantastic team, going 14-2 on the season, establishing WIFU rushing records for yards with 4,345, rushing average with 6.01 and first downs with 272. They failed to win the West, however, when they lost two of three in the WIFU Finals to the 12-4 Winnipeg Blue Bombers. The record-setting Bright was a unanimous choice for a backfield position on the WIFU All-Star team; he was also selected for Ted Reeve's All-Canada 12 Team and was named to the West team for the third annual East-West All-Star Shrine game.

Bright's 1957 season might have seemed hard to top, but in 1958 season he did just that, piling up 1,722 yards on 296 carries, both WIFU records. Yes, he played in 16-game seasons, but the Canadian game was also three-down football and Bright averaged only 18.5 carries per game. He also had the season's longest run from scrimmage, 90 yards, against Saskatchewan on August 18. And as you might imagine, he led the WIFU in rushing and won the Eddie James Memorial Trophy. (Incidentally, the runner-up was Cookie Gilchrist of the Saskatchewan Roughriders with 1,254 yards on 235 carries.) Bright was named on all but one of the 36 ballots for a halfback position on the WIFU All-Star team, was selected as fullback on Ted Reeve's 1958 All-Canada 12 Team and was named to the West team for the East-West All-Star Shrine game.

The 1959 season wasn't Bright's best in terms of rushing yardage -- 1,340 yards on 231 carries -- but it was special in that it was the year he won the Schenley Award as the Most Valuable Player in Canadian football, along with the Eddie James Memorial Trophy for leading the WIFU in rushing. For the third consecutive year he was

selected to the WIFU All-Star team as well as Ted Reeve's All-Canada 12 Team. He also rushed for 1,000 yards in each of the 1960 and 1961 seasons, finishing second each year to Earl Lunsford, and was selected to the WIFU All-Star team in each season. In 1960 Bright and the Eskimos made another trip to the Grey Cup, but lost to the Ottawa Rough Riders 16-6. And in the seventh game of the 1961 season he rushed for 178 yards on 13 carries (including an 81-yarder) to pass Normie Kwong's career mark of 9,022 yards. It should be noted that Kwong played from 1948 to 1960 but the WIFU didn't start keeping records until the 1950 season. (In the East, the Big Four didn't start keeping records until 1954.)

Johnny Bright retired after the 1964 season as the career rushing leader in the Canadian Football League with 10,909 yards on 1,969 carries, plus 69 touchdowns. George Reed, who came into the league in 1963, went on to shatter Bright's career rushing records; Earl Lunsford had already broken his single-season rushing record in 1961.

When all was said and done, Bright had a wonderful career. He went out on top, having played with and against many great players and having starred on both sides of the ball. Johnny was inducted into the CFL Hall of Fame in 1970, the College Football Hall of Fame in 1984, the Missouri Valley Conference Hall of Fame in 2003, the Iowa Sports Hall of Fame in 1970, the Alberta Sports Hall of Fame in 2007 and the Edmonton Eskimo Wall of Honour in 1983. In 1969, as part of college football's centennial celebration, Bright was named Drake's top football player of all time; as part of Drake's own centennial celebration, in 1980-81, he was named to the school's all-time team. In 2006 TSN, a Canadian sports network, named its top 50 players of all time, and Bright was no. 19 on the list.

Johnny became an educator in Edmonton and unfortunately left this world far too young, dying of a massive heart attack on December 14, 1983, at the age of 53.