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Matthew Hodges 06
Linfield University

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Streaking into the history books

By Matthew Hodges '06

It wasn't the stuff of Hollywood movie legend. There was no last-second shot to win a championship, Hail Mary pass to win the big game or inspirational halftime speech to rally a team of lovable but scrappy underdogs.

Regardless, what happened Oct. 6, 1956, on Maxwell Field echoes to this day through Linfield history and the college football record books.

Linfield was coming off back-to-back losing seasons that had ended with identical 3-6 records, and things weren't looking better early in the 1956 campaign. The season had started with a lack-luster tie against Portland State and a loss to Lewis & Clark.

Across the field was a semi-professional team in the midst of a dynastic run. The Seattle Ramblers won 10 conference titles in the 14 years between 1948 and 1964, and the team's roster was made up of former college and professional players who knew their business. They had beaten Linfield the year before on the way to a 5-1 record of their own.

Members of the Linfield team recall many players on the Ramblers being significantly taller and heavier than the Wildcats and remember seeing a defensive end standing 6-foot-8 who was able to pick opponents up with one hand.

The crowd packed into the grandstand for the evening spectacle cheered as Linfield quarterback Ron Parrish '59 fired a 30-yard pass to Jerry Beier '58 in the opening quarter for the first touchdown of the game. In the second quarter, the Wildcats put together a 60-yard drive that culminated when fullback Sel Spray '63 plunged into the end zone to give the 'Cats an unexpected 13-0 advantage at halftime.

As they came off the field, Coach Paul Durham told his young team not to pay attention to the Ramblers in the neighboring locker room.

"And of course, because he told us not to look, we looked," Paul Ward '59, who played guard, remembered. "And they are in there, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes at halftime. So, we knew we kinda had them the second half because they did run out of gas."

Linfield held on to win the game 13-7 and would never lose again that season.

"Once we had a winning season, we knew we could win. We had to experience it and build up over the years."

– Paul Ward '59

1956 Linfield Football Scores

	Linfield	Opponent
Portland State College	0	0
Lewis & Clark	17	19
Seattle Ramblers	13	7
OCE (Western Oregon)	27	13
Whitman	14	13
Willamette	12	12
College of Idaho	20	7
Pacific	21	7
SOC (Southern Oregon)	27	13

Overall: 6-1-2 Conference: 3-1-1

Illustrations by Ward Hooper



Front row from left: M. Bergan, H. Edgar, V. Marshall, B. McLaren, R. Traux, R. Grady, P. Ward, J. Langenbach, G. Wells, H. Crawford, B. Hughey, R. Hinz, T. Warren, A. Willis. **Second row:** D. Holliday, B. LeMaster, V. Fox, B. Flood, S. Spray, H. Morris, R. Parrish, J. Beier, R. Kofford, B. Cotman, D. Umbarger, H. Glenn, C. Allen, D. Dye. **Back row:** D. Spray, D. Youngs, B. Stewart, G. Davidson, J. Whipple, M. Harsh, R. Putman, N. Fridley, B. Holmes, L. Adams, J. Lytle, J. Crawford, C. Zimmerman, G. Manley, D. Tank, L. Stanphill, Coach P. Durham.



During Ward's time at Linfield, the Wildcats would follow his 3-6 freshman season by winning 21 games over the next three years while losing only three games total.

They had no way to know it, but theirs was the first winning season in what would become "The Streak," a run of the most consecutive winning seasons in college football history.

"Once we had a winning season, we knew we could win," Ward said. "We had to experience it and build up over the years."

And so they did. But coming to Linfield the year before, Ward would never have imagined this team of small-town kids and war veterans would start a legacy that would outlive them all – let alone that they'd be talked about in 2021.



At 5-foot-8 and 155 pounds, Ward was not the biggest member of the Wildcat football team. As Ward describes it, during his freshman year at Linfield, he "had a lot of eye-opening experiences right off the bat."

He had come to college after attending three high schools in three states. After earning all-league honors as a senior at Newport High School, his football coaches, Leroy Merchant '51 and Jesse Edwards '48, called Durham about their transient young star.

"Durham accepted me. I could come and turn up for football," Ward said. That meant a lot to Ward at the time, although he now jokes, with the advantage of time and distance, "I think if anyone could walk and chew gum at the same time, you were probably accepted."

On his first day in McMinnville, Ward drove his old car onto campus and realized they were handing out gear. He hustled over to Memorial Stadium to get in line.

"The guy in front of me was 6-foot-2, a 27-year-old Korean War veteran with two kids and was married," Ward remembered. "I asked him what position he played, and he said guard. And that was me (my position)."

He also was surprised that all the gear – jocks, t-shirts and socks – was pink.

"I thought, 'why in the hell would a football team have pink socks and jerseys?'" Ward said. "I found out later on that it was to keep people from running away with them."

The interview with Paul Ward '59 is part of an oral history project organized by Linfield University Archives. Videos, photos and transcripts from interviews with members of the 1956 football team will be available on the Linfield website in fall 2021. If you are interested in adding to the 1956 football oral history project, contact Rich Schmidt, director of archives and resource sharing, at 503-883-2734 or rschmidt@linfield.edu.

Matthew Hodges '06 is a development officer at Linfield University and is project director for "The Streak: The National Record that Continues."

The opening day of practice did little to build the diminutive freshman's confidence.

"The very first time I lined up – they lined you all up to do blocking against each other – I was on defense and the other guy was on offense," Ward remembered. "I got pancaked."

But Ward worked hard in practice, making the 32-player traveling squad in his first year.

"I was just hanging on in those days," Ward recalled. "I was happy to be part of the traveling squad. I didn't [make the starting lineup] until I was a senior. But I still enjoyed every bit of it. I even enjoyed running wind sprints."



Ward wasn't the only seemingly unconventional member of the team. With the Korean War ending in 1953, many players were returning from active duty and using their G.I. Bill benefits to attend college. The 1956 roster listed 53 players, of which 12 were 21 years of age or older and nine were married.

"We had some really dedicated players – Fox and Morris," Ward remembered, referring to Vic Fox '58 and Howard Morris '58, who along with Ad Rutschman '54 are the only Linfield football players to have their jersey numbers retired.

During Ward's time at Linfield, the Wildcats would follow his 3-6 freshman season by winning 21 games over the next three years while losing only three games total. They claimed a conference championship in 1956, only the second in school history, and laid the groundwork for Linfield's first playoff appearance and first run to the national championship game, which would come in 1961.

It was a run of domination the team would never have the audacity to even dream about on that chilly October night against the Seattle Ramblers.

"I can guarantee you that in 1956, nobody had any idea there would be any kind of streak," Ward said. "We were just happy that we could get through the season with a win."

