

THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

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Devastated by injury, former Eskimo just wants to be remembered

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He could never play football again. That was a given. He would probably never walk again. That was next to a certainty. As James Bell lay paralyzed in his bed on the third floor of Edmonton's Aberhart rehabilitation centre, all he wished for was to be back among the moving. Chasing dreams, feeling vital.

Somehow, he made that happen. He was able to climb into a wheelchair before being able to hobble about with a cane. It was hailed a medical miracle.

But that was a long time ago, and in the 25 years since his limp body was carted off the field at B.C. Place, Bell has faded from sight. From our memories, too, and that has been just as difficult for him.

"A lot of people have probably forgotten about what happened and that's hard for me to take," he said softly. "I don't want to be forgotten."

So many players pass through the CFL in a year. One minute they're here, they play, some star, then they're gone. Multiply that over 25 years and the odds are some have fallen on hard times, too proud or unwilling to ask for help. James Bell had hoped to finish his football career in Edmonton, then forge a new life either in Canada or his native United States. He wasn't that lucky.

Although he can walk again, Bell has forever been struggling. At 50, he lives in Port Arthur, Tex., because his wife is from there. He used to work in real estate but the recession helped ruin that. In 1987, the year after he was told by doctors he'd likely be a quadriplegic for life, Bell was awarded a special Grey Cup ring by his Eskimo teammates. He sold that ring two years ago to get by. What he wants is an opportunity to make contacts and friends because these days Bell admits he can use all the friends he can get.

"What I'd like is to come back to Alberta and be able to do speaking engagements, represent the positive will and what to do when adversity sets in," he explained. "I'd like to show people there's a silver lining in this."

It happened late in a game on Sept. 19, 1986, a game already won by Edmonton. B.C. Lions

slotback Jan Carinci caught a pass over the middle and was about to be hit from behind by an Eskimo defender just as Bell stepped up to make a tackle. The force of the two players slamming into the 205-pound Bell did the damage, twisting his C4 and C5 vertebrae as if they were made of Playdough. Edmonton defensive coach Don Sutherin remembers watching Bell make hits and worrying over his safety.

“James had good speed, but the one thing I noticed, he always tackled with his head,” Sutherin said. “I was taught to tackle using your shoulder pads. You pull your neck into your shoulder pads to protect yourself.”

Bell said he was going to tackle Carinci using his shoulder but that the speed of the two players falling forward caught him off guard. He was taken to Vancouver’s Shaughnessy Hospital with no feeling below his neck. There was so much spinal swelling doctors couldn’t operate. (They never did.) Weeks later, they said there was nothing more they could do and suggested Bell be transferred to Edmonton’s Aberhart rehab centre.

Privately, Bell cried himself to sleep at nights thinking his life was over. Publicly, he relied on his athletic background to do all he could to get better. Within five to six months, he had regained some feeling in his limbs. Soon after, he was holding himself up on railings, taking a first step.

Edmonton rallied around Bell. A fund was established to cover his medical costs. Then all the rosiness began to fade. Bell and his Edmonton girlfriend broke up and he decided to return to Albuquerque, N.M., where he had starred in high school and university. He worked at several jobs until money became tight. In 2009, he sold the 1987 Grey Cup ring given to him by his former teammates for \$5,704. It was like unloading a piece of his soul.

“Can you believe that?” he said. “I was so broke, everything of value I had to try and make money from it. It’s been heartbreaking.”

These days, Bell is in need of another comeback. He is quick to say he doesn’t want a handout, only a chance to feel vital again. Ask him what he means by that and he paints a familiar picture.

“I’d love to go back [to Edmonton] and wave to the crowd, give the players an old-fashioned pep talk,” he said. “I think I have a story to tell.”

One worth remembering, he hopes.