

Hall of Fame

Just gimme the ball

Tom Cichowski was more than just a big blocker

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

In 1962, Southington football coaches thought Tom Cichowski was trying to be funny when he asked for a tryout as a running back for the team. The young man tipped the scales at 230 pounds. For three seasons, he anchored the offensive line.

Running back? They laughed, but Cichowski wasn't joking.

"I said, 'I bet I could beat half of the backs you have here or better in a 50-yard dash,'" he remembers. "I said, 'Line us up at the end of practice just for the heck of it.' Well, I finished second. The rest of spring practice, we started to mess around with me carrying the ball."

Athlete

Coaches never did regret it. Cichowski powered through defenders for 72 points in his one season as a ball carrier. He scored 10 times with six extra point conversions. The six-foot-four giant rolled through defenses like a bowling ball, scattering athletes like pins.

"All I needed was a little hole," said the lineman-turned-running back. "Even if two or three guys hit me—as big as I was—there weren't too many guys that could stop me."

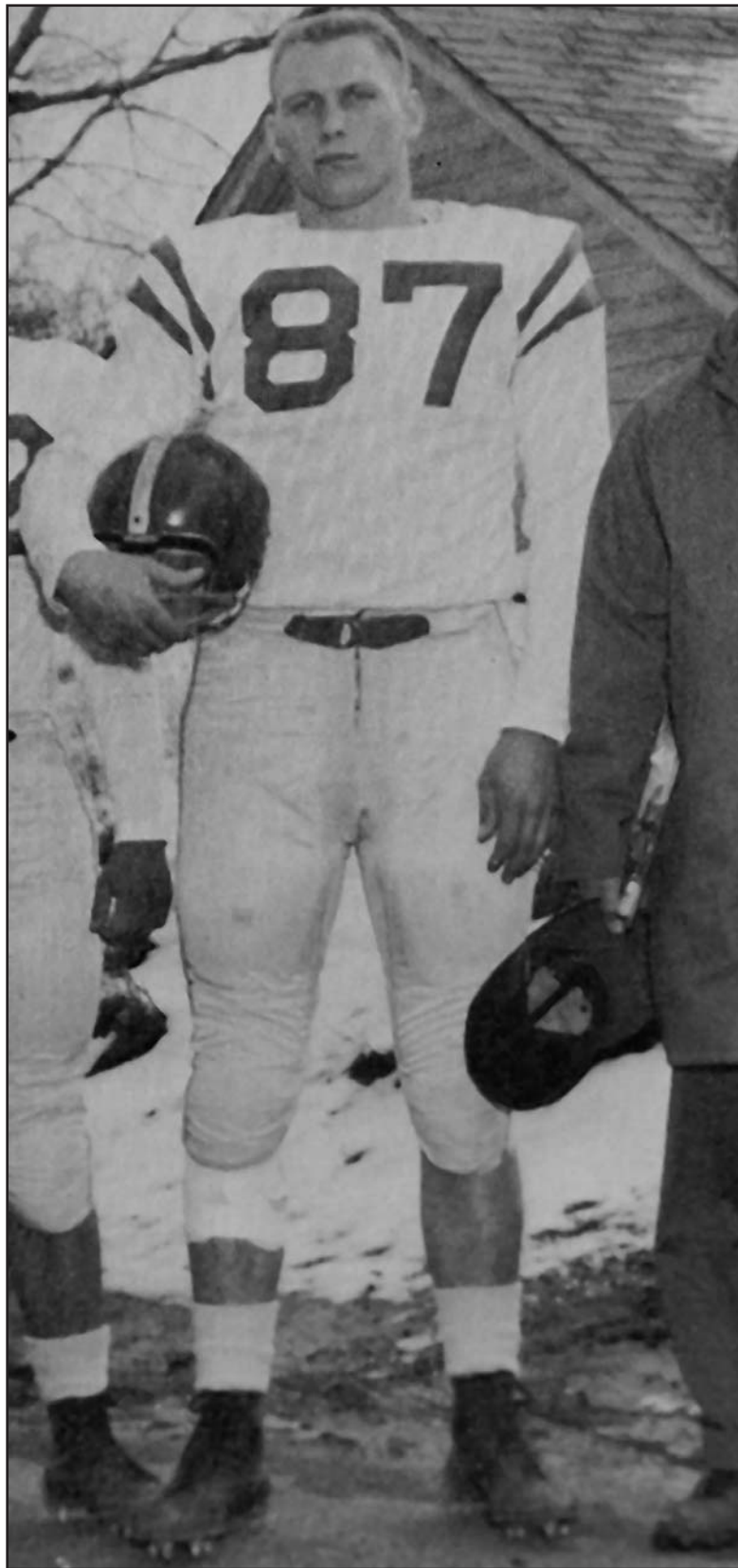
Even off the ball, Cichowski dominated the game. As a fullback, he cleared holes for his teammates and protected the quarterback on passes. Southington outscored opponents, 236-54, and won every contest but one. Cichowski was never far from the action.

"I loved to block people, so as a fullback I could go through the hole and block the middle linebacker or corner linebacker," he said. "We could run around the end, and I could block him. I didn't care whether I carried the ball or somebody else did. We had a great team effort that year. We just played ball and had a great time."

It didn't take long for his effort to attract college scouts, and Cichowski earned a scholarship to the University of Maryland. Once again, the big man seized his opportunity. At a preseason practice, Cichowski found himself competing against dozens of running backs, but the Terrapins were thin on the line. Cichowski saw a small band of six linemen practicing on a far field, so he asked his coach for a chance to try out.

"I said that I wanted to go down there and play," he said. "I told them that there were 15 fullbacks. They were all probably better than me as far as being a fullback, but they probably can't block as well as I do. I told them that I had three years of playing offensive tackle, and I'd just soon as go down there."

It didn't take long to work his way onto the field and into the starting lineup as a sophomore. Cichowski had a knack for making his own opportunities. It served him well in high school, and it car-



COURTESY OF THE 1962 SHS YEARBOOK

Tom Cichowski moved from blocker to runner in his senior season, and Southington High School went 8-1 that year. Cichowski went on to play for the NFL.

ried into college. It wasn't limited to football. Cichowski was always pushing his limits.

"I was an athlete," he said. "I used to like to run. I liked to jump. It didn't really matter *what* I was doing, but *that* I was doing."

Whether it was football or basketball, Cichowski was always breaking stereotypes and pushing his comfort zone. In high school basketball, his size earned him a spot as a center where he started three seasons. He scored almost 400 points, led the team with double-digit rebounding, but actually earned a few starts on the perimeter and won one postseason overtime contest at the free throw line.


In the spring, he turned to track and quickly rose to the elite level in the shot put and discus. In

the discus, he reached the New England championships as a sophomore. The next two seasons, he placed at the New England meet in the shot put. Cichowski was always trying something new.


"I just wanted to play," he said. "I was always a team guy, and I wasn't out for myself."

Cichowski was used to overcoming adversity, and that wasn't limited to athletics. An undiagnosed hearing problem caused him to fall behind academically. He struggled in his first years of college and flunked off the team, but Cichowski was determined to return to the sidelines.

He went home to his family, attended night school, and took reading courses. He kept in contact with his college girlfriend, who



*Southington Sports
Hall of Fame*



Inside the Numbers

Football

- Earned 4 varsity letters (1958, 1959, 1960, 1961)
- All-State (1961)
- Co-captain (1961)
- Starting tackle (1958, 1959, 1960)
- Starting fullback (1961)
- 1961—10 touchdowns, 6 two-point conversions (72 pts)
- Played offensive tackle for Univ. of Maryland (1962-1966)
 - Earned Jim Tatum lineman award (1966)
 - Drafted by Packers and Raiders (1966)
 - Played with Denver Broncos (1967-1968)

Basketball

- Earned 3 varsity letters (1960, 1961, 1962)
- Averaged 18-22 rebounds per game in 1962
- 1961—24 games, 96 points (4.0 per game)
- 1961—19 games, 140 points (7.4 per game)
- 1961—20 games, 143 points (7.2 per game)

Track

- Earned 4 varsity letters (1959, 1960, 1961, 1962)
- All-state (1959, 1960, 1961, 1962)
- All-New England (Discus, 1960. Shot put, 1961, 1962)

tutored him when he returned to school. They quickly married, and his father-in-law, an engineer, began tutoring him in math and physics.

"When I got reaccepted back to Maryland, I had to be red-shirted one year," he said. "After that, I could play. I got my grade-point average up, and I didn't have any more problems. I met my wife in college, and she helped me right along. She was really good at English and reading. I'm still with the same woman 45 years later."

The delay created another opportunity for Cichowski's athletic career. In his final season, Coach Lou Saban took over the Maryland program. It was a one-season stop between NFL programs, and he took a liking to his Southington lineman.

Cichowski was drafted in the second round of the NFC draft by the Green Bay Packers and the Oakland Raiders, but opted to join the Packers to play under Vince Lombardi. He was competing against veteran lineman Steve Gawronski at right tackle and Jerry Kramer at right guard. Cichowski was the last man cut as the Packers formed their 40-man roster, but the team hoped to keep him available in case of injury.

Saban had taken a position at Denver, and he saw Cichowski pop up on the waiver list.

"At that time, they had to put you up on waivers," said Cichowski. "Lombardi listed me as a defensive tackle because that year, in the league, they had a lot of defensive people. But Lou Saban knew I was an offensive tackle. He called my dad, and told him that he wanted to talk to me."

Saban signed Cichowski to the Denver Broncos, and it didn't take long for the young lineman to make the starting lineup. He played two years for the Broncos before an injury ended his professional career. On a punt return, Cichowski was clipped and suffered ligament damage with a torn Achilles tendon.

"I was already getting beat up in my shoulders pretty good the first year. When I got that injury, I never really recovered," he said. "For about three years, even though I wasn't playing anymore, when I took a walk in the woods that thing would just swell up."

Cichowski never returned to the NFL. He settled with his family in Montana where he rides horses and stays active.

Despite his storied career and professional accomplishments, he was shocked to be selected in the inaugural class of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. On Wednesday, Nov. 10, Cichowski will be honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf.

"I was kind of surprised," he said. "I thought, man, people still remember who I was back home? I graduated in 1962. Even though I went out to college and played pro ball after that, I sort of dropped out of the picture. It's a big honor."

For tickets to the hall of fame ceremony, contact Jim Verderame, (860) 628-7335, or purchase tickets at Anthony Jacks Wood Fired Grill restaurant, Bonterra Italian Bistro, or the Southington chamber of commerce.

To comment on this story or to contact sports writer John GoralSKI, email him at jgoralski@southingtonobserver.com.