

## Hall of Fame

# A Giant among us

## Vinny Clements played in the NFL and is still the benchmark for UConn runners

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SPORTS WRITER

Vinny Clements stood at attention while the crowd cheered for UConn's 1970 football team during alumni festivities this fall. Forty years have passed since the lanky Southington sprinter ran over defenses on the way to a Yankee Conference championship. Slowed by a stroke in recent years, the silent star grinned at fans while his wife, Sue, shuffled through index cards to deliver a prepared statement

### Athlete



COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

**Southington's Vinny Clements reaches the end zone during his storied career at UConn. Clements played three years in the NFL.**

She spoke about the characteristics that helped shape her husband as a player and a man—qualities like self-discipline, self-mastery, determination, and courage. She spoke about the camaraderie and teamwork which carried him on and off the field. She spoke about those plays that end poorly and how she watched him pick himself up to try again.

She spoke about Vinny Clements, and the crowd cheered like they've always done.

"We talked about the things that football had done for him and could do for anybody if they allow it to," she said. "Those attributes that come out of playing really blessed him his whole life. Those are the things you take with you and apply in everything you do, as well as the friendships that were forged."

Sue Benjamin Clements has no trouble speaking for her husband because she has been there every step of the way, first as his high school sweetheart, then as his college girlfriend, and finally as his wife. Nestled together on the couch, the couple unravels his story like a long walk down Memory Lane.

She mentioned the pressure of a three-year winning streak that was snapped his senior year at Southington High School, and Clements nodded in agreement. She boasted about his records at UConn, his NFL days, and two years in Hawaii, and her husband just smiled. She remembered a knee injury in the fourth game of his senior season in college, but Clements shook his head and held up three fingers.

"Three? Oh, well," she said and flashed an apologetic smile. "He blew out his knee, so he didn't really play a lot his senior season."

Long before football fans converged on

Rentschler Field, long before UConn played bowl games, or challenged teams on TV, Clements paved the way for his university team. Few Southington athletes have dominated sports as much as he did from high school, to college, and into the pros. Clements was never far from the spotlight.

His freshman coach Andy Baylock remembers one of his first meetings on campus with his future star during orientation. They met under the willow trees at the side of a lake, and Clements shared the fears typical to a college freshman. His coach assured him that he'd do fine, but even Baylock couldn't have predicted Clements' rise to the top.

"He was our prime, big-time recruit out of Southington High, and he came in with a trio of Connecticut all-staters," said Baylock. "In my opinion, if you had to pick out a half dozen guys that were our all-time greats up here, he was one of them."

Clements quickly rose to the top of his freshman team and carried that momentum into his sophomore season as he scampered for 962 yards (5.2 yards per carry) with seven touchdowns and 83 total points. As a junior, Clements eclipsed the 1,000 yard mark (1,060) and scored nine times on the ground.

By the time the dust had settled on his collegiate career, Clements had rushed for 3,500 all-purpose yards as dozens of school records fell to the Southington star. He was just the second first team all-American player to be selected at UConn, and 40 years later Clements still holds the school record for total yardage per game (105.8).

Clements is ranked in the top 10 in seven career categories from rushing

yardage (2,327) to touchdowns (23). He's ranked in the top 10 in nine single season categories from all-purpose yardage (1,820) to consecutive games over 100 yards (6). He's ranked in the top 10 in four single game categories from carries (33) and rushing yards (273) to the longest run from scrimmage (75) and longest punt return (72).

"I think it's amazing," Sue Clements said. "When people talk about his records, he being broken, I always say that they really haven't been legitimately broken in the sense that, when we went to UConn you couldn't play varsity sports as a freshman. You had to play freshman football. It was a separate team played at a separate time. The guys that are now breaking his records are doing it with a lot more games to play, and they are doing it in four years."

As a hall of fame baseball coach, Baylock has seen more than 100 former players advance to the professional ranks. He's coached players like Joe Girardi as the manager for Team USA, so Baylock knows a top athlete when he sees one. He lists Clements as one of the best.

"He would stack right up there. He had size. He had speed and pass-catching ability," said the coach. "He had all the tools. He would still be a pro prospect today if he was just coming through."

Clements was such a good athlete that coaches inserted him into the defense as a defensive back for goal-line stands. When the school released its all-century team in 1986, Clements was listed at the top of the list. Baylock still remembers a 75-yard run against Rhode Island in 1969 that still ranks among the top 10 plays from scrimmage in UConn's football history.

"He came around the left end, running at a pretty good rate. The cornerback and the safety were both converging on him. As they got closer to make the tackle, Vinny just put it down another gear," Baylock said. "He was running about a 4.2 at that point and—vrooom—he went right through them and outran them. I went, 'Whoa. That's big-time.'"

Clements was big, fast, and powerful—a perfect combination in sports. He left his biggest mark on the gridiron, but he was a true three-sport athlete at Southington High School. He scored 692 points for the basketball team, including a 20-point game against Rockville as a junior and a 27-point contest against Woodrow Wilson as a senior. He powered the baseball team in the spring with a .303 career batting average and 12 wins on the mound. Clements pitched 114 innings of varsity baseball with 147 strikeouts and just 28 walks. In 1996, he was inducted into the Southington High School baseball hall of fame.

"Vin just loved athletics. He grew up in a time when you would just play sand lot baseball, grab a stick and a ball, and go out on a field with your friends," said his wife. "They played ice hockey in the winter. They just did everything."

Of course, it was football that drew national attention, and Clements was drafted by Minnesota in the fourth round of the 1971 NFL draft despite his nagging knee injury. Although he never took the field for the Vikings, he was traded to the New York Giants in the off-season. For a young man from Southington, that was a dream come true.

"At that time, they played at the original Yankee Stadium, and he's always

Southington Sports  
Hall of Fame



### Inside the Numbers

#### SHS Football

- 1964—81 carries, 859 yards, 10 TDs, 2 PATs.
- 1965—216 carries, 1,502 yards, 17 TDs, 17 PATs.
- 1966—156 carries, 1,056 yards, 15 TDs, 10 PATs.
- Graduated with 3,417 rushing yards, 42 TDs, 10 two-point conversions (PATs), 312 points.
- Team captain (1966)
- All State (1965, 1966)

#### SHS Basketball

- 1964-5—18 games, 107 points (5.9 ppg).
- 1965-6—23 games, 278 points (12.1 ppg).
- 1966-7—21 games, 307 points (14.6 ppg).
- Graduated with 692 points (11.2 ppg).

#### SHS Baseball

- Inducted into SHS baseball hall of fame (1996)
- Batting—.303 batting average.
- Pitching—114 innings, 147 strikeouts, 28 walks, 26 earned runs, 12 wins, 1 no-hitter.

#### UConn Football

- School record for yards per game (105.8).
- Top 10 in seven career categories—*Yards per game (105.8), all-purpose yardage (3,500), rushing attempts (489 carries), rushing yardage (2,327), touchdowns (23), points (167), games over 100 yards (12).*
- Top 10 in nine single season categories—*All purpose yardage (1,820) carries (242), net yardage (1,060), yards per game (117.8), touchdowns (13), consec. games over 100 yds (5), yards per return (26.3), points (83), games over 100 yards (6).*
- Top 10 in four single game categories—*Carries (33), rushing yards (273), longest run from scrimmage (75), longest punt return (72).*
- First Team All-American (1970).
- All Yankee Conference (1968, 1969, 1970).
- Captain (1970).
- Named to UConn All Century Team (1986).

#### National Football League (NFL)

- Drafted by Minnesota Vikings in 4th round, 102nd pick overall (1971)

#### CAREER STATISTICS

Year	Team	RUSHING				RECEIVING		
		G	Att	Yds	TD	Rec	Yds	TD
1971	Vikings	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1972	Giants	4	46	221	0	9	118	0
1973	Giants	12	57	214	1	15	129	1
<b>CAREER TOTALS</b>		<b>16</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>435</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>247</b>	<b>1</b>

said that this was the thrill of his lifetime," his wife said. "Walking out on that field that first day where so many of his heroes had played? So many of the athletes that he had looked up to as a little boy growing up? To be standing out on that field? It was a marvel at the time."

Clements played just four games in 1972, but amassed over 700 yards in two seasons with the Giants. He scored once on the ground and once in the air in 1973 but was released as a free agent following his second year. Clements was picked up by Hawaii's World League Football franchise, and he played two seasons for that team before retiring in 1975. His wife said that he never missed the spotlight.

"I can say this. He is such an even-keeled person that he's always been modest and humble. I don't think it changed him a whole lot," she said. "He always took it

in stride, but he always realized that it was something special and unique. It wasn't really real life."

With his storied career, it was no surprise that Clements was selected in the inaugural class of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. On Wednesday, Nov. 10, he will be honored in an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf.

"It's an honor," Clements said in a statement. "It's very special to be recognized in the town where you grew up."

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

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