

# Pro Football

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Byron White balanced brains, sports, character

By Nick Lowery

Byron R. White was a legend in sports as a lightning-quick running back, punter and kicker. At the University of Colorado, my father saw him take a kickoff deep in the end zone, reverse field and cut a path like a bullet — a "Whizzer" — through the entire University of Utah team for a touchdown. He was a phenomenal student: top of his class in college and at Yale Law School, a Rhodes Scholar. The same year he led the NFL in rushing, he finished No. 1 at Yale Law School. He received the largest bonus to sign ever accorded an NFL player at the time. He led the NFL twice in rushing, in 1938 and '40, then in May 1961 proceeded to lead 400 federal marshals into Selma, Ala., as an assistant attorney general under Robert F. Kennedy to protect against the very real threat of violence during the civil rights marches. For those who witnessed firsthand the tensions at the time, this took real courage.



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Retired Supreme Court Justice Byron R. White, who died Monday, is shown in a Detroit Lions uniform in 1944.

Byron White was also my neighbor for 40 years. We moved into our homes on Hampshire Road the same day in 1962. I grew up next door in McLean, Va., to this humble, powerfully straightforward man. I played basketball with him in my driveway against Nancy, his daughter and Olympic field hockey player, and my brothers, Mark and Chris. We won. The next day, Byron was on crutches. He only knew one way: full on.

He became a symbol for me of a remarkable balance of brains and athleticism, of character and compassion. His Supreme Court record showed it, as he became the swing vote in many crucial votes during his 31 years on the bench, advocating a clear, if limited, role for the federal government that required accountability with its power. As a former clerk said, history changed, administrations changed, fashions changed, but Byron White never changed.

He inspired me to think about that unique balance as an athlete and as a citizen — how to use the remarkable blessing of a pro football career to inspire others to make a difference in their communities. Byron R. White (he actually didn't like the nickname "Whizzer") was a legend because his actions were always more important than his words.

In 1979, he sat down with me and told me about Bill Bradley and the balance he found as a student, athlete and U.S. senator. In 1980, at the end of my first season with the Kansas City Chiefs, he sat in the icy stands of Baltimore's frozen Memorial Stadium and watched me kick the fourth-quarter, go-ahead field goal as we went on to beat the Colts 38-28.

In 1993, I received the Byron R. "Whizzer" White Award, the NFL Players Association's finest humanitarian award, for work off the field as well as on it for the Chiefs. Nothing made me prouder, however, than the next year, when for the first time, a now-retired Justice White could present the award in his name and I could introduce my mentor, my friend, my next-door neighbor, for what his steel-eyed presence had meant to me as I was cut 11 times by eight NFL teams before finally making it with the Chiefs in 1980 and for what he symbolizes to pro athletes searching for a meaningful way to give back for the extraordinary blessings they have received.

Almost exactly a year ago, on a warm, sunny Easter Sunday in McLean, my then 7-year-old nephew Zachary and I joined Byron, sporting his cane and cap, for his daily walk down the street. We pointed out each fresh cherry blossom and dogwood exploding with new life. Byron clearly reveled in my nephew's appreciation for nature's presents to us that day, and I was very aware, as I think he was, that this might well be the last time I walked alongside this most remarkable of gifts to our nation, this oak tree of a man. I will cherish that precious springtime moment when three generations came together to celebrate new life. I will never forget how lucky I was to know him, how he inspired me to never

give up finding my own path.

Before we pronounce this generation of athletes and this generation of civil servants a lost cause, let's remember that there are many future Byron Whites waiting to come out of their shells, aching to discover their destinies, their calling, their purpose. Let's tell them about Byron R. White and people like him, who not only excelled on the field but who also cut a path through life that helped make this country more just, more proud and more strong. Let's tell our children to look out for them. They will never be forgotten.

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