

Elder's Feature

Sports, Timber Industry, Tribal Council Make For A Good Life



Photo by Toby McClary

Tribal Elder "Chips" Tom at the 2006 Elder Honor Day.

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everyday life." He remembers helping his father gather whatever they were going to need for winter. He remembers things being a lot slower then.

"And we didn't have any Cadillacs or fancy cars then either," he said.

He then spoke of a big party held above the store (Grand Ronde Shopping Center) around Christmas time when he was a kid.

"Everyone in town would get together and dance," he said. "That old store is still there. I think there is someone living up there now."

Then it was time for the long awaited question: "So, how did you get the name 'Chips,'" I asked.

With a smirk and a chuckle, Tom responded.

"Years ago, when I was about six or seven years old, an Indian man lived next door to my aunt and uncle and his name was Chip Wheeler. I was walking to my aunt and uncle's house because they always had cookies, candy or cake. Chip's place was before you got to there's so I thought I would stop in," he continued. "Chip always had an apple or some damn thing. He wasn't home so I got to looking around his place and I found where he hid his home brew. I sniped one of those bottles and went out behind the wood shed. I took about two drinks and passed out right there. That's where I was all afternoon until Chip found me," he said. "My uncle is the one that hung the name 'Chips' on me and it's been with me ever since."

About a decade after acquiring the name "Chips," Tom would go on to develop what some would consider legendary status in the Willamina athletics program.

A LIFE IN SPORTS

Back when things were a lot slower in the Grand Ronde community, (around the mid to late 40's), Tom was keeping the Willamina sports activities at a very fast pace. Tom

explained that athletic ability came easy to him.

"I was blessed with a family that was very athletic," said Tom. "Both sides of my family had all kinds of ball players so catching a ball and throwing it just came natural to me."

Tom lettered in all of the three sports that he played; baseball, basketball and football. He played third base and catcher in baseball, forward and guard in basketball and fullback in football. When asked which sport was his favorite, Tom said that none of them stood out above the rest.

"I just loved to play ball," he said.

Tom's sports involvement was constantly acknowledged by his peers, coaching staff and the community.

"Chips is arguably the finest athlete that ever attended Willamina High," said Ron Pedersen in a letter written to Smoke Signals. Pedersen also played ball with Tom while attending high school from 1946 to 1948.

"It was my privilege to play ball with the absolute best!" said Pedersen. "These were the years of Chips' legendary exploits. I have yet to see an athlete with his virtuosity and this is from the perspective of playing in the military, college, semi-pros as well as teaching and coaching for many years," he said.

Tom's athleticism was not only creating a local buzz but schools from the northwest were showing interest in him too. Tom explained that he received letters from Oregon State University, the University of Washington and a couple of schools in California who were wishing to recruit him. Also, the rumors of the hard-hitting, bruising fullback had reached not only the east coast but on the professional level as well.

"At that time, the New York Giants were interested in me for football," said Tom. "Their staff contacted my coach, Peter Gretsche, and the principle, Dan Hyatt, and they came and talked to me."

He explained that raising a family and the lack of a secured position on the team was giving him second thoughts.

"To be honest, I couldn't stand the idea of not being able to make it," he said, "which is all nonsense right now looking back at it. I'm pretty sure I could have made it."

In 1947, Tom also played in the first ever football game under the stadium lights for Willamina. He explained that it was very exciting for him and his teammates.

"It was a big deal for us," stated Tom. "To me it wasn't a bad situation. It was the difference between daylight and dark. We just had to adjust a little."

Instead of the National Football League, Tom's focus was now con-



Photos courtesy of Cultural Resources

Grand Ronde basketball team in the 1930's. Little boy in front holding the ball is Merle Leno. Standing from left to right: Don Denver (#5), Rowland Jackson (#7), Leon "Chips" Tom, Bill Riggs (#3), boy at top of pyramid is unidentified, Gus Bannach, Lloyd "Coke" Riggs (#4), Russ Leno (#9).