On Campus

Yes, That Happened: Columbia Football Was Once Top of the Ivies

Sixty years ago, a group of talented Lions brought pride to Morningside Heights.

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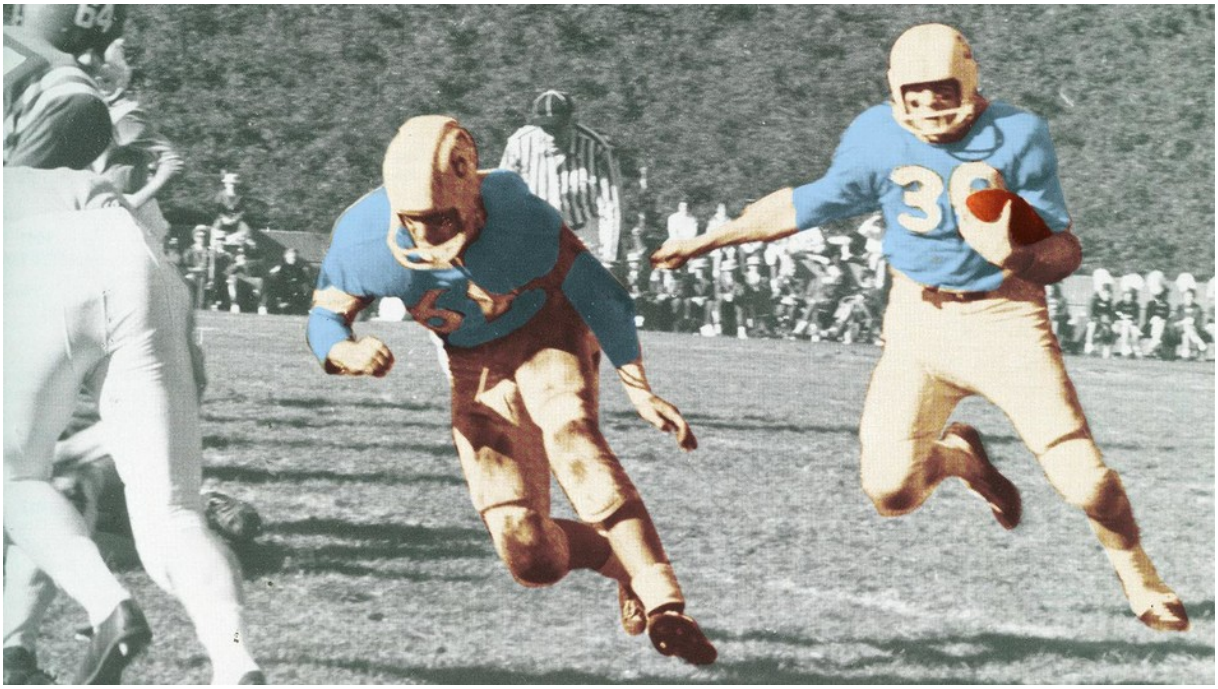
Fall 2021



Captain Bill Campbell (left) leads the way for Tom O'Connor (right). (Columbia Athletics)

In 1958, when an exceptionally talented group of freshman footballers arrived on campus, they quickly came to understand that they were on a mission. After a decade of steady losses by the varsity squad, Columbia's dream of conquering college football's Ivy League, an athletic conference started in 1954, seemed tantalizingly within reach. "Everyone knew it was a special class," says quarterback Tom Vasell '62CC.

Back then, freshmen couldn’t play varsity, so they had their own schedule, and that year the young Lions achieved a winning record of 3–2. The group featured Vasell, running backs Russ Warren ’62CC and Tom Haggerty ’62CC, center Lee “Bugle” Black ’62CC, tight end Dick Hassan ’62CC, tackles Bob Asack ’62CC and Ed Little ’62CC, and linebacker Bill Campbell ’62CC, ’64TC, ’15HON, among others. They played together the next three years on varsity, gradually coalescing under head coach Aldo “Buff” Donelli.

By the beginning of their senior year, in 1961, Campbell was the captain and heart of the team. “Billy Campbell was magnificent as captain,” says Black. “He was 165 pounds and as tough as anyone on the field. He knew how to get the best out of people.”

“Campbell wasn’t just the captain of the team, he was the captain of the class,” says Lions superfan Horace “Que” Spaulding ’62CC, ’63BUS. “Billy knew the physics majors, the math majors, guys who couldn’t care less about sports, and he would implore them to come up to the game and have a good time.”

Even after the Lions went 3–6 in 1960, the 1961 starters, most of them seniors, were confident. Their first test was against Brown in Providence, and the Lions won 50–0. “We just rolled over them something terrible,” says Vasell. Those fifty points remain the most scored by the Lions in an Ivy League game. But the next game, against Princeton, was another story. The guys still talk about the ninety-five-degree heat at Baker Field, and how Lee Black lost twenty pounds during the game, and how the Lions used only fourteen players to the Tigers’ thirty-six, and how, with Princeton up 23–20 in the fourth quarter, the Lions marched downfield and were stopped deep in Tigers territory, and how a Tiger then broke free on a long touchdown run, leaving depleted Lions in his wake. “That was the toughest loss I had at Columbia,” says Russ Warren.

The Princeton heartbreaker set the stage for what Spaulding calls the season’s pivotal game, against Yale. Back in ’58, the freshman Lions had played the Bulldogs and got “absolutely crushed,” says Spaulding. “So now, as seniors, Yale was going to have a lot of the same guys who kicked our ass. I was leery, but we won, and that turned the whole season around.”

On November 18, 1961, the team, having also vanquished Harvard, Dartmouth, and Cornell, was 5–1 in Ivy play and needed to beat the University of Pennsylvania to

clinch the league title. The Lions had not beaten Penn at home since 1937. But this time they mauled the Quakers 37–6, and as the clock wound down, fans poured from the wooden stands and swarmed the turf at Baker Field. “It was bedlam,” says Spaulding. “Euphoric,” says Black. The players hoisted Campbell on their shoulders and carried him off the field.

Columbia and Harvard both finished 6–1 in Ivy play, and though the Lions had defeated the Crimson head-to-head, officially, Columbia and Harvard were co-champions. But the Lions knew better. “We beat Harvard up there,” says Warren, “and I always felt like we won the Ivy League title outright.”

After graduation, the players moved on. “A lot of us got married that June,” says quarterback Vasell. “At almost everybody’s wedding, it seemed, Bill Campbell was the best man.”

The ’61 Lions became businessmen, teachers, surgeons, coaches, and executives. Campbell coached the Lions in the 1970s and later became the “Coach of Silicon Valley.” A management guru to Steve Jobs and Larry Page, he served on the boards of Apple and Intuit. Campbell was named a University Trustee in 2003 and was Trustee chair from 2005 to 2014, as well as a major donor. Today’s Lions, under coach Al Bagnoli, are based in the Campbell Sports Center at West 218th Street.

When Campbell died, in 2016, some two thousand people attended his funeral.

For superfan Spaulding, the best memory of 1961 was the captain’s face after the clincher against Penn. “Billy Campbell played the entire season with an enormous scab on his nose,” Spaulding says. “His nose was always bloody, just from the way he played. Seeing that beat-up face smiling and happy because the Lions had won the title — that was the greatest thing ever.”

This article appears in the Fall 2021 print edition of Columbia Magazine *with the title* "*Lionhearted.*"

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