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Beilue: The best running back to come from Amarillo leads a quiet life

Posted: October 30, 2014 - 9:03pm

By **JON MARK BEILUE**

The best running back to ever come from Amarillo could walk — or, in this case, hobble — down almost any street in the city, or through Westgate Mall on a busy Saturday afternoon, and 99 out of 100 people would not recognize him. It might be 100 out of 100.

The man who had the best individual performance in the 55-year history of the Amarillo High-Tascosa rivalry will not be at tonight's much-anticipated clash. No, he will be caring for four mentally impaired adults and listening to the game on the radio.

"Besides, I feel like I'd get out of control and want to jump out there and play," he said. "Hell Week, Amarillo High. That never really gets out of your blood."

James Mayberry laughs when he says that. He laughs a lot as we sit on some small bleachers this week at the Tascosa practice field.

Never heard of James Mayberry? That's all right. You're not alone. The best running back to come out of the city has lived a quiet life ever since returning to Amarillo in 1986 after three years in the NFL.

"My friends on the north side, they know me," he said. "But, as far as the public, probably not very many people."

As a third-round NFL draft choice, Mayberry played from 1979 to 1981 with the Atlanta Falcons, mostly on special teams and as a reserve running back, where he gained 347 yards. He gained a bit of notoriety in his first NFL game in 1979.

In overtime against New Orleans, a snap sailed over Saints punter Russell Erxleben, who picked up the football and threw an ill-advised pass. Mayberry intercepted and strolled into the end zone for the 40-34 win.

"I always wanted to make a little history, and that was it," he said. "First thing I thought of was I hoped everyone in Amarillo got to see that."

Before that, the 6-foot, 200-pound Mayberry played at the University of Colorado, having fallen in love with the mountains on a recruiting trip. He left after the 1978 season as the Buffs' No. 2 all-time rusher with 2,550 yards.

As a junior in 1977, he gained 1,299 yards, which included seven 100-yard games, a school-record 40 carries against Kansas State and 250 yards against the vaunted Oklahoma Sooners.

"A piece of heaven, that was Colorado," Mayberry said. "A great place to get an education and play ball."

And before that, he was an offensive weapon at Tascosa. He came to the Rebels in his sophomore year in 1972 after Alamo Catholic dropped football. He came at a time of integration at the school, his easygoing demeanor a model during a time of tension.

"He was a dandy," said former Tascosa head coach Duane Huey, Mayberry's offensive backfield coach. "He was big, quick, could hit and spin. He was one of the few guys I knew who loved workouts.

"He'd take out a defensive back and come back to the huddle like he was having a ball. He was a great athlete and one of those guys who makes you a good coach."

Nearly 40 years ago — Nov. 9, 1974, to be exact — Mayberry, a senior, had the greatest individual game in the AHS-Tascosa rivalry. In a 34-7 Tascosa win, Mayberry's total yardage — 347 — matched the final score. He also scored four touchdowns and kicked four PATs.

On that Saturday afternoon, he rushed 25 times for 133 yards, caught two passes for 124 more and returned a kickoff 90 yards for a touchdown.

"It was a dream game, wow, but still a team game," Mayberry said. "Football just felt like our safe haven."

That game, and Mayberry himself, seem like an unfair footnote in history. He may be Amarillo's most overlooked great athlete, hidden in yesterday's shadows.

He's not in the Panhandle Sports Hall of Fame. He's not in the Tascosa High School Hall of Fame. He's not bitter about it. Doesn't bring it up unless he's put on the spot.

"It hurts," Mayberry said. "I was born here. I thought I represented Amarillo well. Never got in any trouble. What more could I have done? It hurts from time to time, but I say a prayer, throw it up to God."

Mayberry has been a Potter County juvenile detention officer and a guard at the Clements prison unit in notorious Building 3 that housed the worst of the worst.

In 2002, his dad, Loyd Mayberry, died of bone cancer in a nursing home. He watched as he could not feed himself because of an untreated broken arm.

"No one should be treated like that," he said. "I didn't want anyone else to go through that."

So Mayberry went into nursing care. And for the last six years, he's been a care provider for Community Options Inc. Working with mentally handicapped adults is a challenge.

"It's a tough job, but it's rewarding," he said. "But I'm truly blessed. It's my way of saying thank you and giving back."

The oldest of three brothers, Mayberry lives across from his mother, Beth, on Northwest 12th Avenue. He is a divorced father of five adult children — two sons in Atlanta and three daughters, one in Virginia, one in Colorado Springs, the youngest about to graduate from UT-Arlington. He has four grandchildren.

Two years ago, he almost died from fluid surrounding his heart. Walking isn't easy, with his knees shot a long time ago, he said.

Mayberry turns 57 next week, and is engaged to Maria Roseboro, with plans to marry next year. Life is good.

On a postcard-perfect Wednesday afternoon, he trudged to his car away from the Tascosa practice field, a place where he used to run 4.6 in the 40, a place where a football under his arm was an act of aggression and beauty. All of that now can only be found in yellowing newspaper clippings.

"I've been blessed," Mayberry said as he departed. "Be sure to let everyone know that."

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The Game: Amarillo High (8-0, 2-0) vs. Tascosa (7-1, 1-1), 7:30 tonight, Dick Bivins Stadium.

Tickets: Tickets are available at both high schools until 4 p.m., and at the athletic department of the Amarillo ISD Support Center, 7200 I-40 West, until 3:30 p.m. Cost is \$6 for adults, and \$2 for students, first grade through seniors. Tickets go on sale at Dick Bivins Stadium at 6 p.m. All tickets at the gate are \$8.

Additional coverage: see sports, 1D, amarillo.com and AGN TV.

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