

Aurora Sports Hall of Fame inductee Robert Reid relishes his retirement gig as an actor and his CFL career as an Ottawa Rough Rider tailback



Robert Reid, who will be inducted next month into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame as an outstanding high school, university, and professional football player, is on his way down to Toronto for a television shoot as my phone call coincides with his commute to a perfect retirement gig.

Reid was not only a star tailback in the CIAU at Simon Fraser University and in the CFL with the Ottawa Rough Riders, but he is an engaging raconteur.

Our hour-long conversation was enjoyably circuitous, covering everything from his football career to his current acting career opportunities and accomplishments.

Reid's transition from football to acting has been a seamless one; he maintains that life is so good and his post-playing acting career has ranged from being principal actor before COVID to doing background work with Law and Order, Murdoch Mysteries, a Hallmark production The White Home, as well as roles on Reacher and Interview with a Vampire.

The actor is in awe of how many Ontario residents are involved in the film and television production business in the GTA.

The business itself involves so much Canadian content and so many Canadian performers are in demand. It's also amazing to see how Toronto can be changed into an American city by the production crew.

It's evident that Reid appreciates not only Aurora's proximity to his shoots in Toronto, but his upcoming enshrinement in the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame.

It was surreal when I was contacted by the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame about being inducted. I said to myself: Who? Me? We feel connected to the Town. The kids grew up in Aurora and we've been in Aurora for 31 years. We've seen it grow from a sleepy town to a town where we've got almost everything here. At one time, we'd have to travel to Richmond Hill to go to a Home Depot or even to see a movie. The restaurants and the night life are all so good. It's been my home for over 30 years [and] to be a part of the community and to be enshrined in that community is kind of sobering. The guy that got cut from his high school football team. A

walk-on at Simon Fraser. I often think about what made my dad come out with me to SFU and support my choice to work my way on to the football team, but it changed my life.

?My dad and I went out to British Columbia. After I played well during the first week of training camp, the Coach gave me a scholarship and residence?as a walk-on. After four years of playing running back at SFU, I was drafted in the first round by the Saskatchewan Roughriders.?

Prior to the culmination of his university football career in BC, the Toronto-born-and-raised Reid discussed his formative years as a football player at Newtonbrook Secondary School in North York. The multi-sport athlete remembered with great sentiment his perfect high school football season in his final year at Newtonbrook.

?The football team went 8-0. It was our only championship in my five years there, but, in 1979, we beat Downsview and their great quarterback Paddy O'Neil. We beat them 44-20 or something. Everything was working that game. We were well-coached by Bob Mayo who coached football, track, and basketball. He went on to have a great run of success with the Bathurst Heights Bears as a basketball coach.?

It's evident that Reid, as a Canadian football player who has flourished at the high school, university, and professional levels, is singularly unimpressed with the proposed changes to CFL field dimensions and rules.

?Changing the length of the field goes against what makes Canadian football Canadian. We always talk about how exciting CFL game are and how entertaining the championship games are. It doesn't seem to make sense since it is the difference between the CFL and the NFL.?

Reflecting on the prospect of these changes brought back his best professional football memories as an Ottawa Rough Rider.

?The coaching staff in Ottawa decided to let me play tailback in 1986. Back in my day, not many Canadian players got scholarships or opportunities in football. Just a handful of guys?like Chris Schultz or Rueben Mayes?went to D1 schools and played in the NFL so there was a bias about putting Canadians in premier positions, but Ottawa and BC had decided to go with Canadians in the backfield.

?We were a talented group of running backs across the league and we were just as good as our American counterparts. Ottawa made Orville Lee from Simon Fraser their first overall pick and he won the Rookie of the Year Award. Chris Skinner played in Ottawa at fullback and won a Grey Cup in Edmonton. Mervyn Fernandez was the CFL's Most Outstanding Player in BC before playing for the Raiders in the NFL. My career highlight in Ottawa was not only starting in the backfield in 1986, but how nice it was to play at the same time as these guys for three years.?

Reid's 1986 season with Ottawa and its Canadian backfield featured personal bests including four touchdowns and an impressive kickoff return average of 19.1 yards. In his natural position as a tailback, Reid rushed for 314 yards and averaged 4.5 yards per carry.

Reid's legacy for Canadian football players is evident as we chat about current training methods compared to the workouts he did when his playing career started with Saskatchewan in 1984.

?When I got to Saskatchewan, I could out-bench some of the linemen. Not everybody was in the weight room in 1984. Now, everyone knows what to eat and they train year-round. The way people train has changed?it's so much more a science. With all the better training and coaching available to young players across the country, over the years, we've seen more Canadians earn the premier positions in the CFL.?

The personable Reid acknowledged that the bias against Canadian-raised football players worked against him in his rookie season in Saskatchewan. In his reflective state, Reid chuckled when he recounted his initial undersized role as a Roughrider: ?Canadians were at a disadvantage. American coaches in the CFL had a pool of guys from US Colleges and there was a bias towards American

players so Canadians were given the fill-in spots like Strong Safety, Outside Linebacker, and Fullback. When I got drafted by Saskatchewan, I had a pretty good camp that year, but my only opportunity to make the team and stay on the roster was as a Fullback. You try containing a Defensive End at 280 pounds who runs like the wind when you're 5'11, 185!?

Reid was disappointed with his experience and roles with the Green Riders in 1984 and 1985: ?I was a backup tailback in Saskatchewan and never got the best chance. When I got traded to Ottawa in 1985, there were better opportunities as the Roughriders were transitioning from an American backfield to a Canadian one, and I was able to take advantage of their big change in coaching philosophy in Ottawa.?

Robert Reid will be inducted into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame on Thursday, November 6 during a ceremony and celebration evening at the Royal Venetian Mansion.

By Jim StewartLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter