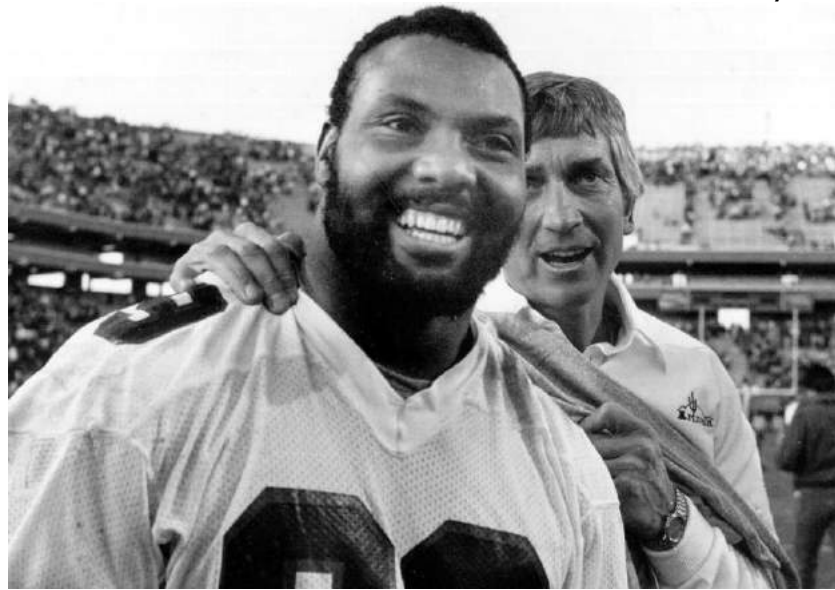


Hansen's Hundred, No. 14: Ricky Hunley was face of UA football as Wildcats started ascent

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Ricky Hunley celebrates with coach Larry Smith after Arizona's 1983 win at ASU. Hunley was part of some of the top wins in UA history during the early 1980s.

Ron Medvescek, Arizona Daily Star 1983

Hunley set the pace for UA's '80s ascent

The Missouri Tigers flew to Tucson to play in the 1998 Insight.com Bowl at Arizona Stadium, although Mizzou coach Larry Smith told his players another story. 'It's Ricky Hunley Stadium,' he said. 'You'll see Ricky's name and number on the wall.'

In a lot of ways, Arizona Stadium is the House that Hunley Built. From 1980-83, when the Wildcats were still new to the Pac-10, Hunley was at the center of three of the most significant victories in school history:

- . A conquest of No. 1 USC in 1981.
- . An epic 1982 victory over undefeated Notre Dame.
- . And a culture-changing upset of No. 6 ASU in 1982, a game that was more responsible for ending the Sun Devils' 25year domination of the Territorial Cup than anything before or since.

There was also a season-opening ranking of No, 3 in the 1983 AP Poll.



Defensive line coach Ricky Hunley pats linebacker Rashie Hodge Jr. on the helmet during a practice on Aug. 7.

Kelly Presnell, Arizona Daily Star

Hunley was the personality of Arizona football during those transformative years, perhaps the Pac-10's leading defensive player of the 1980s, a College Football Hall of Famer who set the pace for the two best decades

Ricky Hunley celebrates with Coach Larry Smith after Arizona's 1983 win at ASU. Hunley was part of some of the top wins in UA history during the early 1980s.

Defensive line coach Ricky Hunley pats linebacker Rashie Hodge Jr. on the helmet during a practice on Aug. 7. in UA football history, the 1980s and 1990s.

No. 14 on our list of Tucson's Top 100 Sports Figures of the last 100 years, Hunley could've gone to Ohio State or Notre Dame or Nebraska, but chose Arizona in the winter of 1980 because he stepped off the plane and saw sunshine, blue skies and thought he could earn a spot on Arizona's nationally prominent baseball team.

Or at least that's the story Hunley has told the last 40 years.

'I loved baseball,' he said. 'That was my best sport.'

Indeed, in the summer of 1977, Hunley hit home runs in three consecutive games for the Petersburg, Virginia, American Legion team. He was a pitcher, catcher and second baseman with size and power, whose football days appeared to be over. Hunley missed his junior football season at Petersburg High School, 1978, with a lower back injury. His mother, Scarlette, pleaded with Ricky not to return to football. But when he did — often hiding his workout clothing in his closet or under his bed — it was too late to turn back.



Much of Arizona's success in the Pac-10 in the 1980s and 1990s can be traced back to Ricky Hunley.

File photo

The Petersburg Crimson Wave won the Virginia state championship in 1979, finishing 13-1, and Hunley was the heart and soul of the Wave, a versatile, never-come-off-the-field leader who played tight end, linebacker and was the team's place-kicker. He scored 71 points in a combination of punt returns, interception returns, blocked kicks, and fumble recoveries.

Everyone noticed. Petersburg had the best record of any Virginia football team in the decade, going 88-6. Over Labor Day weekend, 1983, I visited Hunley's family in Petersburg — Scarlett Hunley has 10 kids and was a foster mother to 56 more through the years — and discovered what a coup it was for Arizona to recruit Hunley away from Top 25 schools in the ACC and Midwest.

'Ricky really only played one full season for us,' Petersburg assistant coach Bernie Brand told me. 'He had the best attitude I've ever seen. He just simply believed he could do anything. And he was the hardest worker on the field. Always optimistic. Always positive.'

Hunley arrived in Tucson three months after Larry Smith was hired to replace Tony Mason, fired for what the NCAA later determined was captaining a slush fund and making illegal payments to players in the 1970s. But there was no Transfer Portal in 1980, so Hunley stuck it out and thrived. He made 566 tackles, an Arizona record that remains today. He was a consensus All-American in 1982 and 1983.

About the only time he left what he calls 'my second home' was to return to Petersburg on Christmas week 1982 to have his jersey, No. 89, retired by the Crimson Wave. He was the second in school history so honored. NBA All-Star Moses Malone, Class of '74, was the first.

Selected No. 7 overall in the 1984 NFL draft, Hunley played seven pro football seasons before rejoining Smith, first on his staff at USC and then spending seven years on Smith's Missouri staff, the last three as assistant head coach.

Smith was like a surrogate father to Hunley. The two had an inseparable bond.

'By the middle of Ricky's freshman year (1980) he was starting at linebacker for us,' Smith told the Columbia (Mo.) Tribune before the 1998 Insight.com Bowl. 'At that point, he was the best linebacker i'd ever coached. He has tremendous enthusiasm. He's my best recruiter. He's relentless.'

New Arizona football coach Jedd Fisch got an up-close look at the Hunley described by Smith in 2001. Hunley was in his first year as Steve Spurrier's defensive line coach at Florida; Fisch was a graduate assistant. The two hit it off and remained in touch for 20 years.

When Fisch was hired by Arizona in December, he phoned Hunley, then working as an executive for an outdoor advertising firm in Los Angeles, and asked if he would like to 'come home.'

Hunley had earlier been rebuffed when he asked ex-UA coaches Rich Rodriguez and Kevin Sumlin if he could help them rebuild the Wildcats to their 1980s level. He had unfinished business. Fisch was sharp enough to realize Hunley wasn't a threat, but an asset. When Hunley was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1998, he said 'I owe it all to the Arizona Wildcats.' Now, as the defensive line coach at his alma mater, he is back home. It only took 38 years.



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FILE PHOTO

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