

Tony Gabriel, one of the best tight ends in the history of the Canadian Football league. Tony was born and raised in Burlington, Ontario, Canada. He started his career off in the CFL by playing for the Hamilton Tiger - Cats from 1971-1974. He then went and played for Ottawa Rough Riders (now know as Saskatchewan Rough Riders) from 1975-1981.

He won the Grey Cup twice in his 72' & 76' seasons. 1972 Tony won it with Hamilton and 1976 Tony won it with Ottawa Tony was named a Canadian Football League All-Star 8 times in his 10 year career. Tony Gabriel has received almost every award possible for an athlete in the Canadian Football League. In 1974, 1976, 1977, & 1978 Tony Gabriel was voted for Most Outstanding Canadian in the Grey Cup. In 1976 Tony led the Canadian Football League in receiving yards with 1320 yards, then in 1977 with 1362 yards. For a tight-end to lead the Canadian Football League in receiving yards is un-heard of. In 1978 Gabriel was awarded the Most Outstanding Player in the Canadian Football League. Then in 1972 Tony was selected All-East All-Star team for the Canadian Football League. Tony was selected to the All-Canadian All-Star team. Tony was inducted into the Canadian Football Hall of Fame in 1985. To top it off Tony was inducted into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame. So easy enough to say he is no regular football player, he is one of the best to ever been watched and cheered by adoring fans, he is one of the best to ever graced a Hamilton Tiger - Cats jersey, or an Ottawa Rough Riders jersey.

Tony Gabriel, like all All-Star athletes, had an arch rival on the field, his name was Tony Proudfoot, a linebacker for the Montreal Alouettes. Not many tight - ends liked line backers, and Tony Proudfoot was no exception. They battled each other on the field all the time, and fans and spectators reminisce about a big play/ big hit laid out on both of them.

“We were at the Big O. It must have been ’77. Clements (Tommy Clements, former Notre Dame college star, now coaching with the NFL’s Green Bay Packers) is throwing,” recalls Gabriel. “I’m diving for the ball and Proudfoot is diving for the ball. We both hit mid-air. Helmet to helmet. You could hear it on TV. Thundering doesn’t do it justice.”

This is how those two athletes played each other, all out, all or nothing. They were going to play their butts off no matter what, especially when they played against each other. Their teams met in the 1976 Grey Cup, but Proudfoot was injured and claims that Montreal Alouettes would have won if he was healthy.

Tony Gabriel is a humble athlete, who has high respects for his competitors. Even after years of hating each other on and off the field, he still is able to show how much he cares and respects his nemesis.

‘Tony Gabriel, Rough Rider alumnus, came charging into the official Alouettes’ pre-Cup party. The perennial Eastern Final opponent of Tony’s Als spent a career trying to shake free of Tony Proudfoot’s defensive coverages. This time he made a beeline for his adversary. Never one for flamboyant endzone celebrations, Gabriel surprised even himself and kissed Proudfoot on the head. Tony gave his signature thumbs-up gesture, shocked look all over his face. Gabriel departed as suddenly as he’d arrived.’

Right from the draft the coaches were anticipating that he would be the best tight end’s around, and one of the best prospects.

“Gabriel is going to be one of the finest tight ends in football” predicts Dorow.

In one of their first games he already started an impact, catching touchdowns in one of

his first games, however ending in a loss.

Tony Gabriel was one of the best tight ends ever to step on to the field, to ever be cheered on by adoring fans, and the best to wear a Hamilton Tiger Cats or an Ottawa Rough Riders jersey. Tony is known as one of the greatest Canadians to ever play the game. It is nice to see that he is given the respect he deserves and has the deserving awards.

I didn't know he was such a good football player and now after doing some research, I can't believe I have never heard of him. I have gained a respect for him, and can't wait to interview such a legend. Tony Gabriel is truly a great Canadian athlete, and represented our country well. He put up big numbers in big games, and helped lead his team to a couple grey cups, which is something I think many can only dream of.

## The Interview

Tony Gabriel, was introduced to the sport of football by his father, who enjoyed watching the Green Bay Packers play (NFL), at a young age. They would watch it together often and when the time came in where Tony was big enough, he started to play it.

Tony says 'Their weren't many football clubs for youngsters around like now a days, where one can sign up and go play. So I had to wait until High School.'

Tony ended up playing at his high school, Burlington Central High School. Tony actually made the team in grade 9, but then in grade 10 he got cut from the squad.

'Coach said I was undersized. I didn't get the growth spurt the coach was expecting over that summer I guess. The summer after however, I grew about 5 inches, and still had a small man's speed and hands.....'

Tony also played for the Burlington Braves football club while playing in highschool which helped him out a lot as well.

'..not only that (he is referring to his growth spurt), but I started playing for the club team in Burlington. That helped my skill development a lot as well.'

When asked to look back on his sporting career he referred to a couple. One actually from high school. Tony was also a basketball player in high school and one game he scored over 40 points, which actually outscored the opposing teams entire total.

'It was somewhere over 40 points. I felt bad, but a part of me just wanted to see how high I could get.'

The greatest highlight he said though was winning the Grey Cup for the second time with

Ottawa in '76, he even caught the winning touchdown which made it THE highlight.

'Yes, I did actually catch the winning touch down for that game too, I see you have done your research. It was a truly special moment. All the practising, preparation, and sweat, and hard work, went into that one catch. It was a great moment to share with my team mates and coaches, and family. Being surrounded by them made it that much better.'

Tony however is a humble man, and his greatest achievement isn't all the individual awards he won, or praise he received, but it was the time he first won the Grey Cup.

'Knowing that I had just accomplished what every football player strives for, was just something else. I had worked so hard for it, and it was only my second year in the league.'

Tony says he learned his hard work ethic, his toughness, and of course his knowledge of the game, from his coaches.

'I have been very lucky to have some great coaches throughout my career. They pushed me, when I didn't want to be pushed, they cared about me when I was down, and they basically emptied all their knowledge into my brain.'

Without them Tony says he wouldn't have made it as far as he did.

'Ben (Schwartzwalder) really got me ready for the CFL. He taught me so much, and really helped speed up my game, and gave me little tips to use that I used all throughout my career.'

When he refers to Ben, he means Ben Schwartzwalder who coached him at Syracuse University before he entered into the CFL.

'Going out there and playing the game you love. Nothing more inspired me to play and reach my goals. I just knew I was blessed to be able to play professional football. I knew I had to

make the most the time I had in the league because football is a rough sport and injuries happen. Hell that is how my career ended.'

In Gabriel's final season, Ottawa made it to the Grey Cup championship. However Gabriel ended up leaving the game after his knee gave out on him.

'Ya it hurt, definitely hurt. It was already in a lot of pain prior to the game, but there came a point where my knee just gave out, I couldn't apply any weight on it. At that point I knew I was done.'

The biggest obstacle Tony faced was his first year in the CFL. Tony said joining a new team and meeting new people, getting the feel for his team mates.

'The first year was the worst. I was a rookie tight - end with a rookie QB, it just didn't seem like I was ever going to be that successful. I went from scoring 4 TD in my last game in University to scoring one in my entire first season. I had to overcome the fact that I wasn't always going to be the guy, especially in my first year in the league. It was humbling actually, and it made me a better player. It really is just a pride thing, which I'm sure you as an athlete are accustomed too.'

'Letting the crowd, and your team down. The worst feeling.'

Tony said the pressures of the team and the fans was always the heaviest.

'Knowing you have to go out and perform your best for the crowd or your going to here some boo's.....the team is always a team, and we play as a team, but there are times when I would drop a ball I should of caught, you look at your team mates, their being supportive, usually, but you can still see the disappointment on their faces.'

At the end of the interview Tony left me with these encouraging words.

‘What ever it is your doing, especially something your good at, do it as best you can.

Strive to be great, work hard, and you’ll go places.’

Tony is a very humble and wise man, I feel honoured to have done a project on him, and just gotten to know of him, I feel is a great privilege.

1) <http://www.cfl.ca/article/moffat-a-proudfoot-secret-finally-revealed> Moffat: A Proudfoot secret finally revealed January 04 2011 Rick Moffat CFL.ca

2) <http://www.cfl.ca/article/team-retro-profile-hamilton-tiger-cats> *Team Retro Profile: Hamilton Tiger-Cats July 28 2010 Brian Snelgrove CFL.ca*

3) New-Look Cats are Purring July 3 1971 Neil MacCarl Toronto Star