

## Friendship with Jim LeClair

By Tom “Bo” Johnson

I met Jim when we were in grade school. He came over to the Johnson house all the time with my older brother Mark. Jim went with the family to the beach. We played touch football and Jim taught me how to be a center—we played the single wing at South St. Paul so every snap was three to four yards deep. We also practiced long snaps for punts.

Jim was on the South St. Paul wrestling team so he would try new holds on me in the backyard. Jim went to U of M Crookston, which was a two-year school at one time and they played in the northern division of the Minnesota Junior College League with Brainerd, Vermilion, Mesabi, Hibbing, Rainy River and Fergus Falls. Jim had to get his grades up and it was a great fit for him. (read more...) He played linebacker and running back; he was the team MVP and MCCC All-State. He was also state champ for Crookston in wrestling both years. He went on to the University of North Dakota, where he played football and finished his degree. He was an All-American in football and in 1999 was inducted in College Football Hall of Fame.

When I was a high school senior, Jim talked to me about playing at a state junior college, saying it is a good place to start. Inver Hills was the new college just a few miles away from where I grew up. Carl Richards from Farmington High School, state champs in 1969, was the new Inver Hills football coach. He called me up and asked me to play. My experience long-snapping gave me playing time. Besides playing nose tackle on defense, I played center on extra points and punts.

After North Dakota, Jim was drafted by the Cincinnati Bengals and owner/coach Paul Brown. He started on special teams in 1972 and by 1976 became starting middle linebacker. He made All Pro in 1977. He was thinking of leaving NFL football in 1980. He was ready to become head football coach at Inver Hills, but Forrest Gregg talked him into playing another season, and in 1981 the Bengals had their best team ever with rookies like Cris Collinsworth. They played in the Super Bowl and lost 26–21 to Joe Montana’s San Francisco 49ers.

In 1983, Jim played his 12th and last season for the Bengals. His last game was at the Metro Dome versus the Vikings. I had a sideline pass and wore a Bengals jacket. I made it all the way to the locker room and nobody asked for my pass. Jim coached at Mayville State University in North Dakota and was mayor of Mayville. In 2014, he was inducted into the North Dakota Sports Hall of Fame.