

## Bear of the past

# Tom Richards: A slotback success with the Eskimos

by Ajay Bhardwaj

He is a member of the Grey Cup champion Edmonton Eskimos. He is the future of the inside passing attack of the flagship franchise of the CFL. And he is a former member of the University of Alberta Golden Bears football team. At only 23 years of age, Tom Richards has a bright future as a football player.

"He has all the attributes to be a superstar: size, speed, determination," said Eskimo Head Coach Joe Faragalli, who knows a great deal about offences.

But the road to becoming a member of the Golden Bears and hence the Eskimos wasn't very smooth for the Strathcona Composite High School graduate. "I tried out (for the Bears) in 1982 straight out of high school and (the coaches) said I wasn't good enough to make the team," said Richards. So Richards learned his trade with the Edmonton Huskies of the Prairie Junior Football Conference. When he finally returned to the Bears, "they needed running-backs and there was a spot for me," Richards said. "I just wanted to keep playing and get better and better."

Obviously he became a better football player because the Eskimos drafted. "I still had four years of eligibility left with Bears, so I didn't think I'd get drafted," said Richards.

"I'd love to become a Rick House as soon as possible." — Richards

"I was a backup to Jeff (Funtasz)." But Frank Morris, the Eskimos' superback, had seen Richards while he played with the Huskies and believed he'd seen enough of Richards to give him a tryout with the Eskis. "When I did get drafted I started wondering if I had a shot."

Richards didn't make the Eskimos on his first try, however. He was moved to slotback when he did return to the Bears. "I figured if I was going to make the Eskimos it would be as a receiver. I don't have the capability to play runningback in the CFL. I'm only 200 pounds."

As a slotback from the University of Alberta, Richards followed the footsteps of a few very famous Golden Bears. Brian Fryer, who was drafted by the Washington Redskins in 1976 and who owns several Grey Cup rings, was a slotback at the U of A. Joe Poplawski, who won a Grey Cup with Winnipeg, is another ex-Golden Bear, as is Marco Cyncar of the Eskimos. But he does not feel

any pressure following these players.

"I put pressure on myself to play well but not because somebody played well before me." His present coach, Joe Faragalli, agrees but feels that Richards is too hard on himself. "He puts too much pressure on himself," said the colorful coach. "He's a young kid and he has to understand that we (the Eskimos) don't lose a game if Tom Richards has a bad game."

The Golden Bears experience was special for Richards, but it did have its bad times too. "I made a lot of good friends and had a lot of good times." His worst memory as a Golden Bear was a loss to the Calgary Dinosaurs in another great Alberta rivalry. "We got steam-rolled," said Richards.

When he broke into the CFL the Eskimos used him to return punts. The special teams coach at the time was Dennis Creehan, who has since become the defensive line coach at the University of California at Berkeley. "Coach Creehan had a lot of confidence in me," recalls Richards. "more than I had in myself." According to the punt returner, it was pure luck that he ended up with that job.

"We were down in Calgary for a game and a couple of our returners got banged up." Coach Creehan looked down the bench, went past a couple of linemen and there I was. "The rest is history. He returned 48 punts that year for 524 yards and one touchdown. Last year, the most exciting player in Canadian football,



Richards (28) as a Golden Bear: A lot of good friends and good times.

Gizmo Williams, replaced Richards on punt return teams. "I don't feel bad (about being replaced)," said Richards. "He has a lot more physical ability than I have."

Because he was replaced on return teams, Richards has seen motivation in the Eskimos' offence. Still, Joe Faragalli believes he hasn't got all he can out of Richards. "We have to use him more," he said. As

a slotback with the Eskimos, Richards has to be able to read defences "like a quarterback."

"Depending on what play is called, I have to act accordingly and change the pattern or do something completely different." Richards also pointed to that very thing as the major difference between the CIAD and the CFL. "The game is so much quicker (in the CFL) that if you're

not on top of it all the time, you're in trouble."

Last year, Richards was a member of the most prolific offence that the CFL has ever seen. Like everybody else on the team, he contributes with his physical abilities. "He has better speed (than the other slotbacks), he has the size," said Faragalli, who thinks that Richards does a great deal for the Eskimos. "He

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