

Six ORHS Wildcats have played for the NFL

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 26, 2022)

Carolyn Krause brings us the second in a series on Oak Ridgers who have excelled in Professional Sports.

The Oak Ridge High School football team has a rich, colorful 76-year history, capped earlier this year by former Wildcat Tee Higgins' impressive performance as a wide receiver on a National Football League team. He caught six passes for 103 yards, leading the Cincinnati Bengals in receiving yards and helping them win in overtime the AFC conference championship game 27–24 against the Kansas City Chiefs and thus advance to Super Bowl LVI.

He played exceptionally well in the 2022 Super Bowl, in which the Bengals lost to the Los Angeles Rams by a close score of 23-20. In that game Higgins caught four passes, scored two touchdowns and tallied the most receiving yards by a player on either team.

But Higgins is not the only ORHS Wildcat who has played on NFL teams. Five other Wildcats who played in the NFL are Jason McAddley, Mike Caldwell, Bob Winkel, Stan Fritts and Bobby Richards.

Higgins, who played football three years for Clemson University, has been a wide receiver with the Bengals since 2020. His life and football career are described in Wikipedia, as is the career of Caldwell. After the Super Bowl, Higgins had shoulder surgery but is expected to start with the Bengals this fall. The lives and football careers of both Higgins and Caldwell, who played in the NFL for 11 seasons and is now defensive coordinator for the Jacksonville Jaguars (NFL team in Florida), are described in Wikipedia. But let's start with the successes of other Wildcats who played in the NFL.

Robert Griffin “Bobby” Richards played football from 1958 through 1961 with Louisiana State University before being drafted in the 15th round (210th overall) by the Philadelphia Eagles in 1962. He played defensive end and defensive tackle with the Eagles for four years (1962-65) and then with the Atlanta Falcons for two years (1966-67).

According to Earl Nall (director of technology for the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association for 15 years and an important source for this article), Bobby is the brother of Larry Richards, one of the stars of the 1958 Oak Ridge Wildcats team that finished first in the nation based on statistics (total offense and rushing). That same year that ORHS was the national high school football champion, Bobby Richards was a starter with the 1958 LSU college football national champion.

Stanley Allen “Stan” Fritts played football at Murray State and then North Carolina State universities. He was a running back for the Cincinnati Bengals in 1975 and 1976. He scored 13 touchdowns and rushed for a total of 575 yards. He had 15 receptions for a total of 138 yards. The Bengals drafted him in the 4th round (97th overall).

Robert Alexander “Bob” Winkel was born in Paducah, Ky., but later moved with his family to Oak Ridge where he played with the ORHS Wildcats. He played on the University of Kentucky football team from 1974 through 1978. In 1979 he was drafted by the Minnesota Vikings (7th round, 181st overall). He played defensive tackle and defensive end for the New York Jets in 1979 and 1980.

Jason Christopher McAddley, a Brooklyn, N.Y. native and football player on the ORHS Wildcats and University of Alabama Crimson Tide teams, was drafted by the Arizona Cardinals in the 5th round in the 2002 NFL Draft. He played wide receiver for the Cardinals for two years and then played briefly for the Tennessee Titans (2004) and San Francisco 49ers, finishing his pro career in 2005. In his four years in the NFL, he scored one touchdown and had 38 receptions for 578 yards.

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Tamaurice William “Tee” Higgins, 23, was drafted by the Bengals as the 33rd overall pick in the 2020 NFL draft. He played college football at Clemson, where as a sophomore he helped the team win the 2019 College Football Playoff National Championship. In that game he had three receptions for 81 yards in the 44-16 victory over Alabama. He finished the season with 59 receptions for 936 receiving yards and 12 receiving touchdowns.

In his junior season, Higgins had 1,167 receiving yards and 13 touchdowns as his team finished with a 14–1 record, making it all the way to the 2020 National Championship, which Clemson lost to LSU by a score of 42–25. Higgins had a 36-yard rushing touchdown in the game. LSU won largely because of the performance by its quarterback, Joe Burrow, a Heisman Trophy winner who now plays with Higgins for the Bengals.

As a senior at ORHS, Higgins had 68 receptions for 1,044 yards and 18 touchdowns. A five- star recruit, Higgins originally committed to the University of Tennessee to play college football before changing to Clemson. He also excelled at basketball on the ORHS varsity team, and he was offered numerous college basketball scholarships. But Wildcats Coach Joe Gaddis told him he had a better chance of becoming a pro football player than a pro basketball player, so Higgins joined the Wildcats football team and starred as a wide receiver.

Isaiah “Mike” Caldwell, Jr., 51, has had a colorful career as an NFL player and coach, and he has interacted with famous coaches such as Bill Belichick (New England Patriots head coach) and Nick Saban (University of Alabama head coach). He also knows Tom Brady, 45-year-old quarterback for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, for whom Caldwell served as inside linebackers coach from 2019 to 2021. He played 11 seasons in the NFL as a linebacker with the Cleveland Browns, Baltimore Ravens, Arizona Cardinals, Philadelphia Eagles, Chicago Bears and Carolina Panthers.

After graduating from ORHS, Caldwell played college football as a linebacker at Middle Tennessee State University. There he played 52 games and led the team in 1992 with 76 tackles. He was named a third team All-American.

In 1993 he was drafted in the third round by the Cleveland Browns, where he had immediate impact as a rookie under Belichick and Saban. From 1993 to 1995 he had a total of 152 tackles and three interceptions. With the Ravens he finished with 54 tackles, four sacks and one interception; with the Cardinals, he had 29 tackles, two sacks and one interception; with the Eagles, 221 tackles, five sacks and three interceptions, and with the Bears, 61 tackles and three sacks. He closed out his playing career in 2004 with the Panthers.

Caldwell began his professional coaching career in 2008 with the Philadelphia Eagles. He was promoted to assistant linebackers coach in early 2010 and to linebackers coach in early 2011. From 2015 to 2018, he served as assistant head coach and inside linebackers coach for the New York Jets. Then he moved to Florida where he became linebackers coach for the Buccaneers and currently defensive coordinator for the Jaguars.

Mike Caldwell's niece is **Nikki Caldwell**, a well-known basketball player at ORHS and UT, a women's basketball head coach at two universities and currently president of the Las Vegas Aces of the Women's National Basketball Association.

The Atomic City's products include outstanding athletes and leaders in the world of professional sports.

Thanks again, Carolyn, for this series on Oak Ridgers in professional sports.

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Tee Higgins making catches as a wide receiver for the Cincinnati Bengals



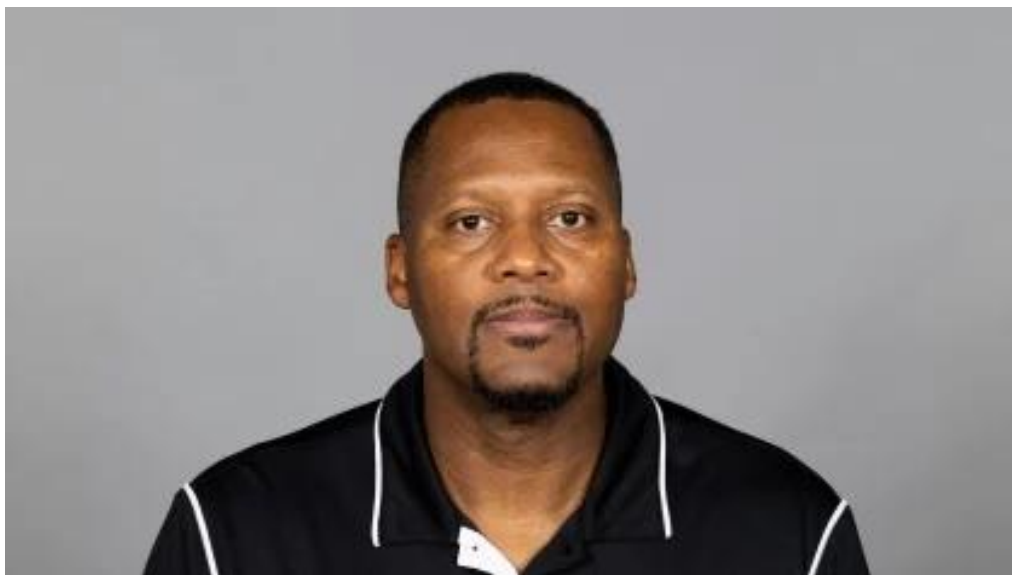
Tee Higgins

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Mike Caldwell as linebackers coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers



Mike Caldwell