

THE GRAND PRIZE

Receiving Recognition

Biletnikoff Award Catches National Attention



WHAT COMES TO MIND when you think of football and Tallahassee?

For most of us, the answer to that question lies either in Florida State University's Doak Campbell Stadium, where the Seminoles vie each year for a national title, or Bragg Stadium, where we rally 'round Florida A&M University's Rattlers in their quest for success in the Mid-East Athletic Conference.

Since 1994, however, the Tallahassee Quarterback Club Foundation has sharpened the city's football focus even more. As founder of the Biletnikoff Award, recognizing the top receiver in college football, the foundation has augmented and enhanced our standing in football circles around the country. Walter Manley, one of the driving forces behind the award, notes that the idea behind recognizing a receiver was nothing new when the foundation began its consideration.

"The Lou Groza people thought about it" before devoting their award to the nation's premiere kicker, Manley says. Although there were awards for quarterbacks and running backs and the Heisman

Trophy for the nation's best player, a receivers award was conspicuously absent. "Lots of people considered this type of award," Manley says, "but until we came along,

nobody did it. This was a group effort, with about 20 people in key roles, that really put Tallahassee on the map."

Those 20 people include names prominent both in business and sports. Tom Cox, Gene Davidson, Christopher Campbell and Rocky Bevis joined with Manley to form the Tallahassee Quarterback Club Foundation to bring the receivers award to life. Both Manley and Bevis emphasize that the Quarterback Club and the Quarterback Club Foundation are two unique entities.

In the Beginning ...

"The Quarterback Club, an organization of some 200 football fans, is 50 years old," says Bevis. "About three years ago, when we started pursuing the idea of this award, we formed the Receivers Committee to develop the trophy and the Foundation as the money-handing arm to pull it all together." Bevis, too, notes the myriad awards rec-

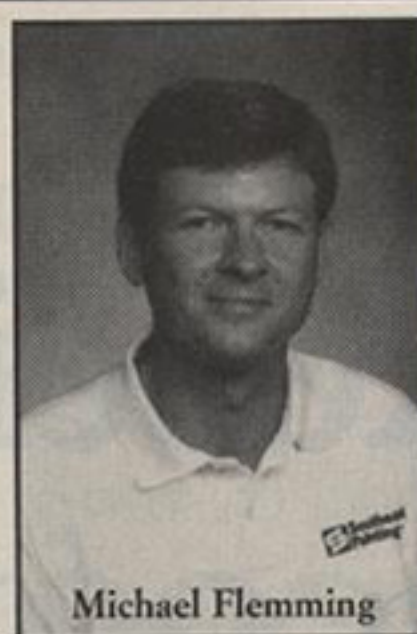
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Michael Flemming

ognizing the gamut of football positions — the Butkus Award for linebackers and the Doak Walker for running backs among them.

Both Manley and Bevis want it known that the Biletnikoff trophy is awarded to the best receiver in the country — anyone who has caught the football, not just wide receivers, those glamour players who get most of the pass-catching glory. As for how the trophy earned its name, that story is a little longer and more complex.

"We knew there had been some great receivers in football — Don Hudson, Raymond Berry and Jerry Rice among them," Bevis says. "But Fred Biletnikoff personified what a receiver should be. He wasn't extremely fast, he didn't have great ability, he just worked hard."

However, even all that wasn't enough to make Biletnikoff a hands-down choice. You see, the Quarterback Club Foundation wanted its trophy to be a national award, and committee members were wary of what Bevis calls "the FSU connection. We were sensitive about the fact that this was not an FSU award, it wasn't even a southern award, but we still kept coming back to Fred. With all his qualifications, it wouldn't have been fair to just write him off." Among those qualifications — selection as an All-America player at FSU, election to the Collegiate Football Hall of Fame and its professional counterpart, Super Bowl Most Valuable Player and coach for the Oakland Raiders of the National Football League. Factor in the decision to make the award a receivers award for anyone who catches the football — tight ends, slot backs, wide receivers or running backs — and "that makes Fred an even more logical choice," says Bevis.

Open to All

To further demonstrate that the Biletnikoff Award is a national honor, not local or regional, Bevis notes that none of the voters is from Tallahassee. And any receiver from a Division 1-A school can win, he says, whether the player is a Gator, Hurricane or other Seminole opponent. Nor is the Biletnikoff necessarily awarded to a school noted for its passing game. "The first three recipients were from Penn State (Bobby Engram), Ohio State

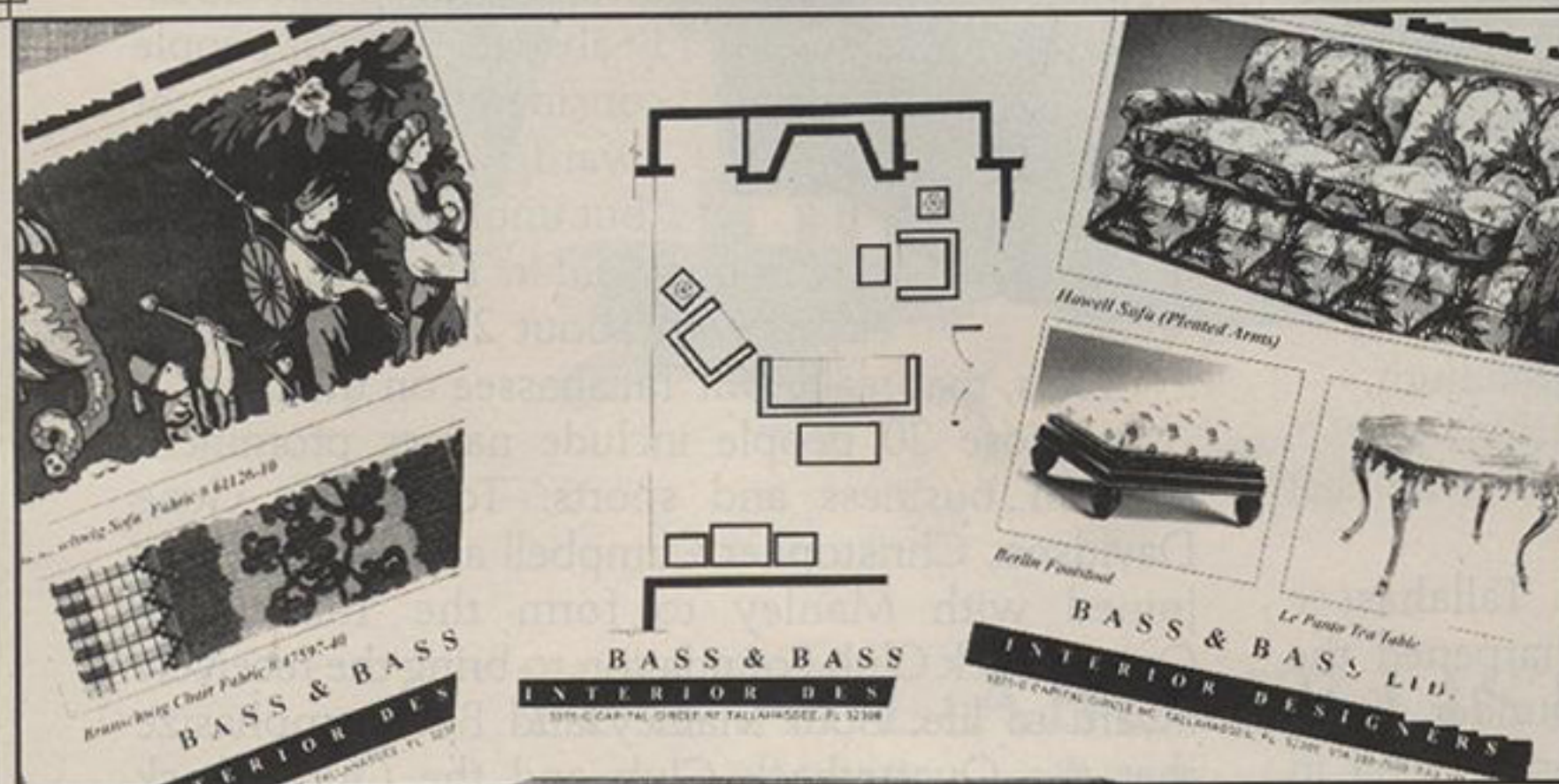


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(Terry Glenn) and Wyoming (Marcus Harris), none of which is exactly a pass-happy school," Bevis adds.

With namesake in place, foundation members turned to creating a trophy representing the ideal receiver. The Trophy Committee envisioned a player, arms outstretched, reaching to pull in a ball just slightly beyond his reach. Vaughn Mancha, former FSU coach and College Football Hall of Fame member, photographed ex-Seminole receiver Matt Frier in numerous positions reminiscent of Biletnikoff. Idea in place, the committee turned to Tallahassee wildlife artist Jonathan Livingston. The proposal presented a unique challenge for the man who to that point had never sculpted anything.

"They asked to see my bronzes," Livingston chuckles, "and I had to tell them I didn't have any. As a wildlife artist, I hadn't even painted that many people, but I assured them that they wouldn't be disappointed." After conversations with Biletnikoff and studying photographs from the player's career at FSU, Livingston set to work.

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"I'm a self-taught sculptor," Livingston relates. "I read several books on anatomy and worked it (the sculpture) up from the muscle out. I had to rebuild the head and helmet three times because the proportions weren't right." The Trophy Committee had presented him with another daunting challenge: "They needed it done in 90 days" Livingston says. "I told them I'd have it done in 89, and I did it in 89 on the mark."

In Good Company

The finished product consists of an 18-inch-high figure resting on a half-inch bronze plate laser etched with

the award logo. To accurately portray Biletnikoff, the player is dressed in a uniform and helmet from circa 1965. R.S. Owens & Co., the same Chicago foundry that crafts the Academy Awards, the Emmys, the Miss America Award and the National Football League Most Valuable Player Award, bronzes the finished sculpture trophy in an antique-gold finish. The figure and plate sit atop a five-inch polished black marble base that is 12 inches in diameter and is added by Hugh Davis, former owner of Davis Trophies. At 56 pounds, the Biletnikoff Award is the largest trophy in collegiate sports.

What does all this mean to the trophy's namesake? "The best way to explain it," according to Fred Biletnikoff, "is that you can get a lot of things in your life, a lot of honors, but seldom will have something like this that's nationally known (dedicated to you). It's tough to explain. Nobody really knows the impact." TM

Kathy Grobe is managing editor of Tallahassee Magazine.



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