

GRIDIRON GREATS

Presented by the
Thunderbird
Football
Alumni

Chris Ciezki, Arts '07

**JIM COOPER
AND
CHRIS CIEZKI**



April 3, 2022

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CHRIS CIEZKI

#33, RB
2004–2007

Bachelor of Arts, Class of 2007.
Chris works for Edmonton Fire
Rescue Services as a firefighter.
He and his wife Laurie have two
daughters, Sophia and Alyse.

T-Bird Legacy



- 4-year varsity letterman
- 3-time offensive co-captain ('05, '06, '07)
- Invited to the CIS East-West Bowl ('05)
- Led CW in: rushing—1,100 (8.9 yards per carry); scoring—102 pts; and touchdowns—15 ('06)
- Set CW record for most rushing touchdowns scored (5 against SFU, Oct. 18th, 2006)
- Led UBC in rushing ('04, '05, '06, '07)
- CW All-Star ('04, '05, '06)
- CIS All-Canadian ('06)
- Invited to the CFL National Combine ('06)
- Signed with the Edmonton Eskimos as an undrafted free agent ('07)

Career Stats: 3,214 rushing yards, 40 receptions, 332 receiving yards, 440 carries, 32 touchdowns. Named to the Top-100 player rankings ('16), named to the 2000's All-Decade team ('20).

1. All great RB's need outstanding offensive linemen to succeed. Tell us about the group who blocked for all those rushing yards?

During my years our offensive line group was great to be a part of. They were led by Coach Bob Beveridge. The running back group and offensive line group spent a lot of time together over the years in meetings, watching film, walkthrough, practice, and battling together in games. We worked hard together and shared a lot of laughs. When it came down to business, everyone did their job. Spencer Smid was our center and I guess was kind of like the QB of the O-line. Scott Downey was probably the funniest of the group and a great offensive tackle. Rory was very strong as



a guard and I got to play a few seasons with a young Mike Morris. Apple and Kuch were also very good at their position. I also need to mention Kevin Kraft, it makes a big difference on offence for the tailback when you have a true fullback and he was. It is evident through everyone's commitment and hard work we were able to have the success that we did.

2. Tell us about your 328 yards, 5-TD game vs. SFU, Oct. 18, 2006.

2006 was the best UBC team I was a part of. It was Blake's last year as QB and we had a veteran group of offensive personnel. Collectively as a unit we had over 500 yards on the ground that day. Our coaches did a great job of preparing us, and the results

showed—we were unstoppable. Everyone did their job and when all the pieces came together, we showed everyone how good of a team we were. As a running back, when you are one-on-one against a second-level defender in open field, you should win that matchup, especially when it is a wet game. The O-line and receivers gave me a lot of those opportunities that day.

3. What was your reaction to being named to the Thunderbird Top-100 player rankings?

It was very humbling, many feelings of gratitude and appreciation towards all the members who shared the path with me. When I joined UBC football in 2004, I



remember walking into the Heritage Room for the first time. There were articles and newspaper clippings posted all over the walls highlighting UBC football. I really enjoyed reading about the history and the tradition of the program and all the people who made it possible. I was even lucky enough to be coached and mentored by some of those people. To be put on the same list as those players is such a great honour. It is also a testament to my coaches and teammates at the time—they were all instrumental to my success as a football player and beyond.

4. Why UBC? tell us about your recruiting and who was involved in the decision-making?

It was not one person or thing that drew me to UBC, but a collection of people and circumstances. I believe Coach Butschler was the first to contact me, I also spoke with Coach DesLauriers and both coaches had strong ties with UBC football, its history, and were very passionate about the program. I probably spent the most time speaking with Coach Ted Goveia.

Secondly, a former junior teammate of mine (Dustin Cherniawski) was playing at UBC. His experiences living out on the West Coast and everything were very positive. The first time I came to UBC was in the spring of 2004 and for a prairie kid, everything at UBC seemed amazing. Going to Thunderbird Stadium for the first time was an experience also, I could just feel something special being there on field level. Being a running back, I also liked that both UBCs practice and game fields were grass. I was already aware of UBC's academic reputation, and the Winter Olympics were coming up, so it helped to see many of UBC's facilities.

Finally, my Grandmother passed away in 2003 and my 92-year-old Grandfather had recently moved from Edmonton to Ladner with my aunt (not only did I get to spend an extra six months with him, but he even got to watch me play at Thunderbird Stadium). After all that, UBC seemed to be the perfect place to join a traditioned football program, attend a great university, and live by the ocean.

5. The team offensive stats are very impressive between '04-'07, can you describe the preparation, talent, and coaching? Who were the difference makers?

Preparation as a varsity football player is a year-long thing. In the off-season we would have our strength & conditioning programs and testing twice a year, before spring camp and main camp. Our coaches did a great job preparing us every week during the season. Coach Goveia was the mastermind behind our offence for those years and he knew what was necessary for our group to be successful. We would spend lots of time watching film, breaking down the defences, looking at their tendencies, & going over weekly game insertions. Before every game, we would get blank sheets with all the opposing defence's fronts, and I remember drawing out all the stunts and blitzes our opponents would do. Blake was the quarterback for three of my years and when you have a QB who can stretch the field like Blake did, it opens up the running game. Many of the receivers I played with were also on the All-Decade team, all of whom were great pass catchers and blockers. And I have to mention Derek Townsend. He would always give us good field position on kickoff and punt returns and was equally dominant as a running back. But there are also teammates who





aren't on that All-Decade list who were big contributors. We were all difference makers and contributors in our own way, and I am grateful to have shared that uniform with so many great people.

6. UBC has honoured All-Decade teams from 1950-2010. Is there one All-Decade team you would like to play with or against, any former stars?

It would be the 1990's All-Decade team that included several members of the '97 Vanier squad. Mark Nohra and Akbal Singh were two players I would have enjoyed watching live. I remember reading about them in the Heritage Room and looking at some of their individual statistics as running backs, and they achieved it all during their tenure at UBC. I'd hear stories on how they would train and prepare, I wanted to contribute even a portion of the things they achieved at UBC. Bob Beveridge was also on that team and was our O-line coach when I played. There were other alumni from the 90's team who would come out to coach or help at specific times. All these individuals were great people to learn from and to be around.

7. Thunderbird Stadium is a second home for the players. What are your favorite memories of the locker room or home games?

Without a doubt my favorite memories at Thunderbird Stadium



would be coming into the locker room after a win. Just knowing that all the work and preparation our team put in came to fruition. Even though we were all banged up and tired, it did not matter. Everyone was in great spirits. There'd be loud music, smiles and laughs. For that day we'd enjoy it.

And there's something to be said about playing a night game at Thunderbird Stadium on the grass that only a T-Bird would get.

8. After graduation you went on to play in the CFL, do you remember your first professional game?

My first professional game was on June 13, 2008, against the Stampeders in Calgary. Between junior and university football I had spent a lot of time in that visiting locker room at McMahon Stadium. I remember being calm and relaxed—this was an opportunity to showcase what I could do. After I made the active roster, my first game as a paid professional was on June 28, 2008. This day was my football vindication date. I was released from the B.C. Lions the previous year and I was bitter. The countless hours I spent training and working hard had finally arrived. I made it. That first game in Regina, the stadium was packed with green and white, and it was very exciting. But once the opening whistle blew it was simple, play football. Even though we lost that game, I proved myself. I was lucky to play three seasons in the CFL before a career-ending injury and for two of those years, I led our team in special teams tackles.

JIM COOPER

**#60, OL
1993–1997**

T-Bird Legacy

**5-year varsity letterman
Hardy Cup finalist ('96)
Atlantic Bowl Champion ('97)
Vanier Cup Champion ('97)
CW All-Star ('97)
CIAU All-Canadian ('97)
CFL Draft 5th Rd, 33rd overall ('98)
Named to UBC's Top-100 careers
Named to UBC's 1990's All-Decade team**



Bachelor of Human Kinetics, Class of 1999. Jim is the President and CEO of Suite 60 consulting. He and his wife Shelley have two children: son Jamie and daughter Payton.

1. Do you remember your first game as a Thunderbird?

Absolutely! Week 1 in 1993 was the Manitoba Bisons. This is where I would get my first taste of the travel limitations in the Canada West, when the roster size at the time was only 32 players. We had a roster of approximately 70, so over half of the players would be staying home. I was getting a really quick education on the reality of university football, and that rookies don't normally play in year 1, let

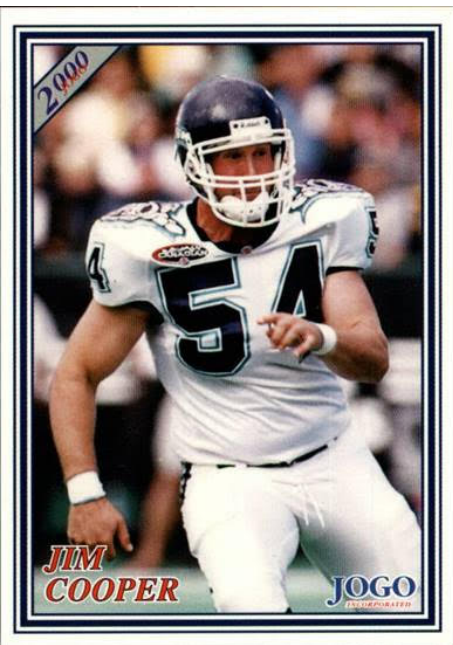
alone travel in the Canada West. When the travel list was posted, my name was on it! Holy Crap!!! I called home, and the first thing my father says is... 'Well, I guess I will see you in Winnipeg.' We left for Winnipeg on Thursday, and so did my father, except he drove! I actually remember the practice on Thursday more than the game, as I just couldn't seem to get some of our pass pro correct. It was bugging me. Fortunately for me, I played a lot of specials, and played sparingly on the O-line that day. It was a great introduction to university football in the West. All I know is I wanted more. That day kicked off a wonderful 5 year career for me at UBC, playing in every game of my career except 1. Not too bad for a kid from Ontario chasing a football dream.

2. How did playing in the '96 Hardy Cup Final prepare you for the '97 championship season?

The '96 Hardy Cup Final gave us focus and determination, but more importantly, validation that we belonged there. For those of us that were in our 4th and 5th years in '97, it was a long climb to get to that point after enduring a 1-8-1 season in 1994. We put in the work, committed to each other, and got back on track, never not believing in each other and the process Casey had put in place for us.

3. Who were the locker room characters during your UBC career?

I had some incredible role models. Guys like Jon Salter, Mike Williams, Gary Spaan, and Brad Yamaoka. These guys taught me what it meant to be a university football player. I was grateful they took me under their wings and helped me get ready for what ended



up being a very special career at UBC. As the years went on, there was a core group of guys who set the example for everyone, John Saari, Bob Beveridge, Mark Nohra, and Alex Charles. Consummate Pro's who just went to work, day in and day out, grinding to achieve greatness.

4. What kind of leader was Casey Smith, any memorable or motivational speeches?

Casey was 100% the main reason I chose to attend UBC. From the first day I met him, there was something special about him that

that just made you want to play for him. He was light years ahead of his time when it came to football knowledge and concepts, and was definitely a player's coach. My most memorable moment of Casey isn't a motivational speech, but a post-game celebration after the Vanier Cup in '97. In the locker room of the Skydome, during his post-game congratulatory message, Casey breaks into dance and busts out the moonwalk. I think that it was finally his chance to outwardly show his emotions for just how happy he was for all of us that believed in him as our Head Coach, and that he was finally able to put his own stamp on his legacy as one of the greatest coaches in UBC history.

5. If you could play a game with your 1990's All-Decade team, which other decade team would you choose? Any player you would want to play against?

You are always reminded of the great teams that came before you.

Those teams are the measuring stick, and those players are the names of lore. I remember being told stories of the teams and players from the 1980's, and seeing articles and pictures in the Heritage Room. So many greats! Those guys were the litmus test for how good you wanted to be. But I would be doing a massive disservice if I didn't mention the players that I had the opportunity to watch in person winning the 2015 Vanier Cup in Québec City. That team was also loaded with talent. Michael O'Connor, Taylor Loffler, Stavros Katsantonis, Dakota Shepley, the Davis Brothers. That team was pretty darn good too.

I am honoured to be able to say that I get to stand amongst these greats as equals. I would not want to compete against any of them, as we all share a common bond. What I would rather do, is join them in kicking some Husky, Dino, Bear, Bison, and Ram teams to the curb once more!

6. Your backfield had Mark Nohra and Akbal Singh. What was it like to block for those two outstanding players?

You know when you finally get the ingredients right in a favorite dish? That's what it was like having these 2 incredible athletes together!

I spent my entire playing career at UBC with Mark. I knew there was something special about him Day 1 of our first training camp together in 1993 when he decided to go toe-to-toe with our #1



defensive lineman and hold his own! If we were looking for a guy that wasn't afraid to mix it up and get nasty with the big boys, we found our guy. Speed, strength, no-fear attitude, and humble persona made it easy to want to do your best to block for him.

Then along comes Akbal. A shifty runner with speed to match. One second he was running straight at you, the next second he was 5 yards to the side of you and leaving you in his dust. Akbal, like Mark, was always appreciative of the guys up front and always let us know it. I am so very blessed to have had the opportunity to play with these two UBC greats.

7. Can you tell us about the '97 Vanier Cup game vs. Ottawa in Toronto, and lifting the trophy?

We beat Calgary to win the Hardy and it was off to Halifax. We were without our star RB Mark Nohra and Mt. Allison's star running back Eric Lapointe was out for the game. All of the news leading up to the game was focused around if either of them would be ready to go.

Neither ended up playing that day, and in another ironic twist, the highlight of the game, which is hands down one of the best catches I have ever seen, was made by Greg Hallifax...in Halifax!!!

Toronto Bound!

This was a homecoming of sorts. Bob Beveridge, Mark Nohra, Alex Charles, Brian Emanuel, Frank Luisser, Paul Girodo, Shane Phillips, Chris Lennon, Adrian Fawcett, Oba Harding, Dan Schaer, Paul Oraziotti, and I were all from Ontario. The first time many of us had the opportunity to play in front of family in a long time. The night before the game Bob, Mark, and I were celebrated at the All-Canadian

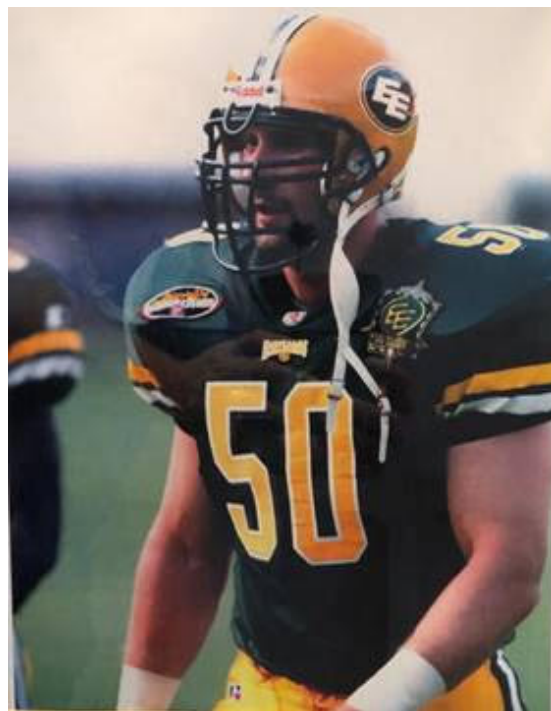
awards banquet, and Mark was awarded the Hec Crighton trophy. It wasn't until Friday that Mark was cleared to play in the National Championship. Upon the announcement we felt unstoppable! And that's exactly what we were...UNSTOPPABLE! We scored at will, either putting touchdowns in the endzone, or with Aaron Roed's foot. Our Defence played like madmen, stopping everything in their path. The clock ticked zero, we snapped the ball in Victory Formation, and we were CHAMPIONS!

You won't find me in the on-field celebratory pictures. I was in the stands, celebrating with my family, who 5 years prior supported my decision to travel over 3000 km away from home to chase a dream. I didn't actually hoist the trophy until we were back in the locker room, where it was private, real, and without outside interference. I quietly, at my stall, took my moment with the Vanier Cup, made my mark, and passed it to my father, my biggest fan and supporter.

The remainder of that night, and the celebrations that took place are now stories of legend. What happened in the early morning hours in Toronto, will stay with us forever.

8. Did you have a pre-draft party in anticipation of your 5th Rd selection?

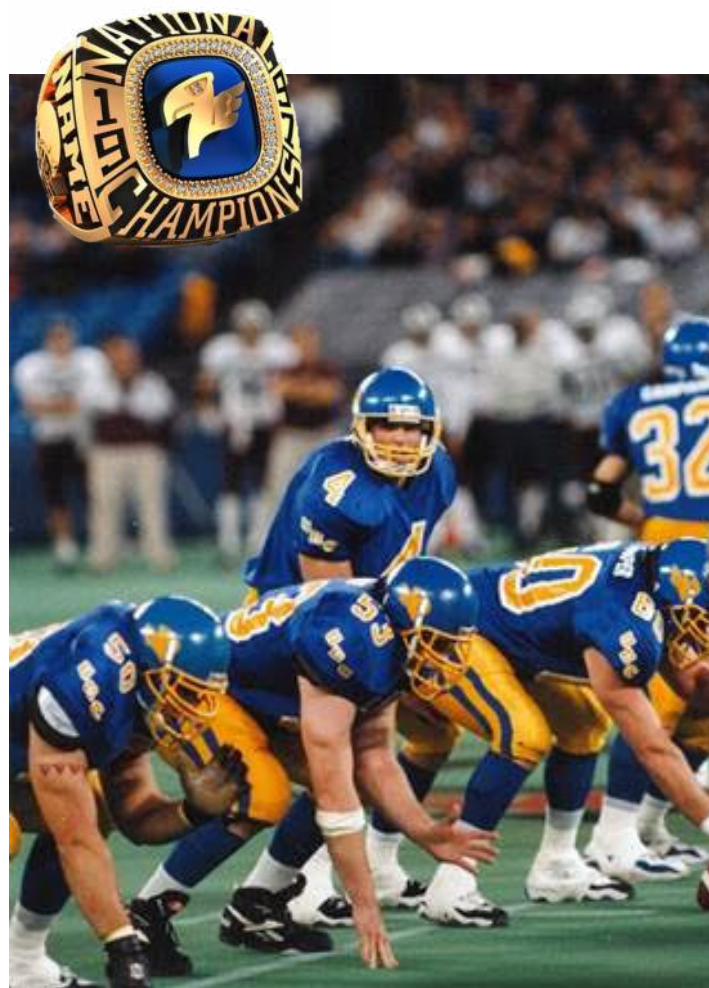
The CFL Draft was a different process than it is now. At that time, the draft was a conference call between the teams only and started at 8 a.m. PST. I wasn't



even sure if I would be a draft pick or not, as I was the lightest offensive lineman in the draft. So I went to my 8 a.m. class. It was actually my prof who told me to go home and wait for my call, so I did. Upon arrival back at my apartment, there was already a message waiting for me from Edmonton, advising me that they drafted me 33rd overall in the 5th round, and to call them as they were wanting to send me a contract. I called home and shared the news with my parents, and then went over to War Memorial to share the news with Coach Casey.

9. Do you stay in contact with your '97 championship team, any special events?

The last group event I was able to attend was Homecoming 2018. What a special day! The number of people from the 1997 team in attendance was incredible. We relived past moments, updated each other on our current situations, and cheered on a group of younger versions of us that now carried the torch. I am looking forward to the next time we can all come together to share new and old stories, and remember our brothers that have passed on.



SAVE THE DATE

Thunderbird Football Alumni (TFA) Inaugural Golf Tournament/Reunion!

Save The Date: Thursday, July 21st, 2022, at Tsawwassen Springs Golf Club

A great day of golf, reuniting with Legendary Teammates and fraternizing with other Alumni Legends.

\$200/ Golfer – Includes Golf, Cart, Dinner, and a chance to reunite with former teammates and other legendary T-Birds.

\$800/Team – We encourage you to book a team of 4 of your Alumni buddies and friends to ensure you get the foursome you want.

There's room for only 128 Golfers (32 teams) to ensure the golf runs at a good pace.

We are looking for various types of Sponsorship, including: Title Sponsors, Hole Sponsors, Auction Items & Opportunities for companies to promote themselves and their products on the Tee Boxes.

There will be a registration link set up very soon, in the meantime the contact person is Braydon Hobbs, Braydonhobbs@hotmail.com . T-Bird4Life!

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