

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE FOOTBALL

Sivert has distinction of oldest Vol letterman



Jim Sivert is more than a Vol for Life. He's a Vol for a Long Life.

The 94-year-old native of Gate City, Virginia, was recently informed he's the oldest living Tennessee football letterman. Now living in the Memphis suburb of Bartlett, he's 10 months older than former teammate Jim Miner.

A versatile player at 5-foot-10 and 185 pounds, Sivert played blocking back, center and linebacker for the General Robert Neyland-coached Vols. He was even listed as quarterback on the team's archives.

The 1949 Tennessee Football Brochure had the following description of him: This veteran of all positions was shifted to blocking back in the spring and he fits in it as he would a "custom-made suit"....He is a great defensive man, but his play of late indicates that he was made for a blocker...when he hits something gives.

VIRGINIA PREP STAR

Sivert played football as a running back at Shoemaker High School from 1940-42 before World War II changed his course. A 1942 Shoemaker program for their Oct. 16 game against Tazewell pointed out that he led the team in scoring to date with 34 points. The next highest player was Tommy Campbell with 20 points.

"They cut out football at Shoemaker in 1943 because of World War II with the gas rations and tires," Sivert said. "I got a scholarship to Fork Union Military Academy and was up there for the football season before I got drafted and had to go into service."

His senior year, Sivert scored four touchdowns to lead Fork Union to a 31-7 win over Staunton Military Academy in the state championship game.

"That's where I had my good football year in military school before I went to service," he said. "I was voted co-captain and Virginia all-state. I had 18 touchdowns and 18 extra points."

Sivert set a Virginia high school scoring record with 120 points that season. A newspaper account of the championship game said two minutes before the game ended, the husky 200-pound fullback left the field as a thunderous ovation went up from the crowd.

AN AMERICAN HERO

Still a teenager, the Navy sent him to radio school at Miami (Ohio) University. There, he played one year of football under future Chargers coach Sid Gillman, who Sivert said, “More or less put in the spread offense.”

Later, he saw overseas action with a Navy hospital unit. He was there for the invasion of Iwo Jima and Okinawa with the gruesome job of transporting injured servicemen back to the hospital. He said he was “tickled to death” when the war ended, afraid there would be so many casualties with an invasion of the Japanese mainland.

WHAT WAS GENERAL NEYLAND LIKE?

Neyland, who has become an almost mythical figure in Tennessee lore, was nothing like the stereotypes associated with a hardened military man and tough coach. He wasn’t one to yell at and berate players. Sivert remembered him as a distinguished person whom the players looked up to. He added the general’s word was good as gold.

“General Neyland was a gentleman and a person who never lost control of himself,” Sivert said. “He was an intelligent person who had the respect of all his players and assistant coaches. Whatever he told you, it was the truth. Whatever he promised you, he would come through.”

As for the proper pronunciation, Sivert said the general’s son always said “Nay-land” instead of “Nee-land.” Sivert described Neyland as tough, but fair and honest. He appreciated the way the general dealt with the players as he didn’t embarrass them publicly.

“I have to say one thing for him, he treated you like you were his son,” Sivert recalled. “If he had trouble with a student, he didn’t take it out on him on the field. ‘Come see my after practice,’ is what he would tell them.”

FIRST IN FLIGHT

Sivert was on the Tennessee football program’s first charter flight to Durham, N.C., to play Duke in 1948. As one can imagine, there were quite a few anxious moments with it being the first time most had been on an airplane.

“After everybody got on that plane, they started the motors up. Those old props started up and the fire came around them like it does,” Sivert recalled. “One boy on the team was looking out the window, he was like, ‘We’re on fire! We’re on fire! We’re going to crash!’ Everybody got so quiet you could hear a pin drop on the plane.”

He recalled General Neyland wouldn’t fly after the fog started in the fall. They would go back to train and bus travel then.

One trip from Birmingham to Knoxville in 1949 was especially memorable for Sivert. As the train came to a stop, there was a knock on the door with the news that Sivert’s wife was giving birth to his son Mike at Fort Sanders Hospital.

PLAYING FOR THE VOLS

Despite his experience at Miami (Ohio), Sivert was still a freshman in 1946 after returning from the war. It meant he couldn’t play on the varsity.

“There was still had the rule that freshmen could not play on the varsity, no matter how old you were,” he said. “The first year I played in the B-games, I got my knee tore up. They had to operate on that and they were going to hold me out for the 1947 season.

“General Neyland came to me and asked if I would give up that season and go play the last four games at linebacker. He had a good boy at center and linebacker, but something happened and he had to let him go. He told me he would make it up to me later, but I didn’t know what he meant.”

Sivert agreed to play those final games and his best showing came in the Vols’ 13-7 win over the Bear Bryant-coached Kentucky Wildcats with future Pro Football Hall of Fame quarterback George Blanda. Sivert led the team in tackles and caused a fumble.

Sivert explained that 1947 was the last year the team was made up primarily of returning servicemen. Over the next couple of years, Neyland brought in top recruits — including College Football Hall of Famers Hank Lauricella and Doug Atkins.

The Vols had up and down seasons during the time Sivert was on campus. They were SEC champions and played in the Orange Bowl in 1946, but

followed with 5-5 and 4-4-2 campaigns. It changed Sivert's senior season when the Vols went 7-2-1 and were ranked No. 18 in the final AP poll.

They finished with wins in their last three games, including being a thorn in Bryant's side again with a 6-0 victory at No. 11 Kentucky.

It set them on the course for two incredible seasons.

Tennessee went 11-1 in 1950, beating Texas in the Cotton Bowl and declared national champions by multiple rankings. They finished No. 4 in the Associated Press poll, although they had a win over Kentucky which defeated AP champion Oklahoma in the Sugar Bowl.

The next season, the Vols were undefeated in the regular season and claimed their first AP national title. Sivert enjoyed the success as a graduate assistant.

"I was still there in '50 when he made the year up to me. I needed two subjects to graduate and he called me in the office," Sivert said. "He said, 'You're going to be here and help with the freshmen.' Of course, I had been there already when they brought Lauricella and those guys in. Where I was working with the freshmen, I got to be around the bunch in '50."

LOCAL FRIENDSHIP

In 1949, the Vols featured other Tri-Cities area players including Hal Littleford and Gene Felty. Sivert became close friends with Littleford, who led the Vols in rushing the 1947-48 seasons.

A Korean War veteran, Littleford later served as ETSU coach and Johnson City Mayor. Sivert remembered his old friend as someone General Neyland liked and trusted in any situation.

"I remember one game when Hal was the punter and the game was getting close," Sivert said. "The general always won close games in the fourth quarter where he outsmarted most people and played position football. He believed if you could keep teams past the 40-yard line, very few teams could go 60-70 yards without making a mistake.

"They trained the guys to have the center snap the ball over the punter's head and then run back, grab it and either pass it or kick it. I remember Hal

ran back, got the ball, kicked it and put them in a hole where they didn't have a chance."

GOING EAST TO WEST

Sivert got his chance to stay in teaching and football, taking a job at Memphis Tech High School. He coached there 31 years until 1980 and stayed as a faculty member five more years.

Upon the request of the school's principal, he remained a substitute teacher for another 23 years, giving him nearly 60 years as an educator. Among the players he taught and coached was his son Mike, who went on to play for ETSU's 1969 team that went 10-0-1 and defeated Terry Bradshaw-led Louisiana Tech in the Grantland Rice Bowl.

Mike Sivert was drafted by the Minnesota Vikings in 1972 before going on to coach for more than 40 years at Twin Springs (Va.) and Cherokee High Schools. The proud father said, "Mike was a better coach than I was."

PROUD TENNESSEE ALUM

Jim Sivert remains proud to be a part of the Tennessee football tradition. Despite the struggles in recent years, Tennessee still ranks ninth all-time in wins, third in bowl appearances and sixth in bowl wins. For Sivert, however, it's more about the personal connection.

"I'm still a great Vols fan. I think of the days I was there and what a good school it was," Sivert said. "All the coaches have been good to me. I think Tennessee has always looked after their players."

Sivert last attended a Tennessee game in 2011. He would like to get back to another game, but the ride from Memphis to Knoxville is a little much for his 94-year-old back. Overall, he's still in good shape, exercising regularly and with a full head of hair which, he pointed out, "still has some dark in it."

Asked the secret of his long life, he credited working out and good genes.

"My mother lived to be 98 and two aunts lived to be 94. Grandma Hutchins, who lived around Church Hill, lived to be 101," he said. "I guess it's a combination of good genes and how I've been a freak for conditioning. In

my younger days, I would run about everywhere instead of driving a car. I would get out in Gate City and just take off running.”