

Mark Day

Where Are They Now: Mark Day

Former Renton, UW star survives life of hard knocks

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On anyone's calendar, he has always been a Day to remember, a Day to celebrate.

In 1967, Mark Day was part of a Renton High School football team that was as powerful and unbeatable as any put together in or around Seattle. He supplied the speed, settling under long touchdown heaves sent his way by an NFL-bound quarterback. He shared in the surplus of Division I scholarships showered on this group.

Forty-two years later, Day is a detective sergeant for the Renton Police Department. He pulls a 6 a.m.-to-4 p.m. shift four times weekly. He supervises crime scenes, collects evidence and pulls criminal records.

What has happened to this man besides catching passes and catching suspects is why there should be a holiday named for him.

Day, 59, has survived massive kidney failure and multiple myeloma cancer against great odds, each time requiring bone-marrow transplants to kick-start his health. Eight-teen months ago, his kidneys were shut down by a virulent strain of salmonella poisoning. He doesn't know how or where he contracted it, only that it was extra-venomous.

"I died twice, and they brought me back," Day said. "One time, I was in a coma for a week. I woke up, and I was blinded by it. I was bleeding from the brain. My wife said I went into a seizure. The doctor thought I had died. He said, 'He's gone.'"

Ten years earlier, he learned a cancer had spread to his spine and with it came a 6-percent survival rate.

A bone-marrow transplant has been the solution for all of Day's life-threatening moments. As he explains it, this is no more intricate than having someone use a Black & Decker saw to drill into his backbone, blow compressed air to build up the bone and then Super-Glue everything back together.

"I am coming back," he said. "I'm on kidney dialysis and getting off it, free and clear."

Say this about Day, his life has never been mundane or boring.

As a Renton High senior, he played for a 10-0 football team that was considered the state's finest and received national attention. The Indians had just one close game that season, a 27-20 victory over Puyallup in the opener. They beat everyone else by 21 to 46 points.

Day scored 11 times, repeatedly slipping behind the opposing secondary to haul in a bulletlike pass from quarterback Bill Donckers, who would later play for San Diego State and the NFL's St. Louis Cardinals.

"It was like 'Friday Night Lights' when I played," Day said. "We had big crowds. It was a very blue-collar town, and it followed its football team."

While Donckers went elsewhere to college, Renton offensive tackle Tom Nelson and Day, nicknamed "Mr. Meat and Mr. Fleet," accepted Washington scholarships and were joined there a year later by Indians defensive tackle and the recently deceased Gordy Guinn.

Day was a starter at safety for the Huskies in his first varsity season, as a sophomore. This definitely wasn't Renton High anymore. The UW finished a disastrous 1-9. Yet he came away with memories. Stanford's Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback Jim Plunkett didn't complete a pass on him. Legendary Ohio State coach Woody Hayes goaded him.

"Woody Hayes, now there was a piece of work," he said. "If you got knocked down, he would yell at you, at an opposing player, and say: 'Are you going to let them do that to you? Get up!' He did that to me."

His UW career would take a fateful turn that spring. Running pass routes for a new quarterback named Sonny Sixkiller, Day crashed into a steeplechase inside Husky Stadium and tore up a knee, requiring surgery. He could no longer backpedal effectively. He returned as a reserve wide receiver.

Day has been a Renton police officer for 22 years, a career that has been no easier on his body than football or salmonella. He has broken an arm, hand, fingers and nose, eight bones in all while dealing with unruly characters.

For a decade, he also was a canine officer, a job that came with no shortage of excitement or attention. A book was written about Day and his police dog both dealing with cancer at the same time, with the animal dying in his arms. Ted Koppel, formerly of ABC-TV's "Nightline," interviewed him after learning that Day was going to have another of his tracking dogs blessed at his Catholic church, which stirred some controversy.

"He called and said, 'They won't even make women priests and you're going to baptize your dog?' and I said, 'No, we're going to bless him,' " Day recalled.

As Day reclaims his health once more, he lives in Covington with his wife and Renton High sweetheart, Marcia. They have three grown children, Natalie, Kyle and Aaron, the last a Montana state trooper.

Although good medical care can't be discounted, Day has helped himself by staying incredibly upbeat throughout his travails.

"You always think of yourself being able to overcome everything," he said.

In other words, every day is a good day for Mark Day.