

Chris Spielman

By Roger Gordon

Chris Spielman of the Cleveland Browns. It has a nice ring to it. Chris Spielman, head coach: Ohio State Buckeyes. Sounds better yet.

The former nearly occurred, the latter still may.

Spielman has expressed interest in one day coaching the scarlet-and-gray. First, though, he must pay his dues - *and* wait patiently for Jim Tressel to one day hand over the Buckeye reins. Whereas Spielman must wait and see regarding the Buckeyes' coaching job, he did once don the brown and orange, if only for a short time. The former linebacker was traded to the reborn expansion Browns from the Buffalo Bills on Feb. 15, 1999, but later that year in the preseason suffered bruises to his spinal cord. He reluctantly heeded doctors' advice and retired from the game he loved on Aug. 30, less than two weeks before the season opener.

Spielman was a second-round draft choice by Detroit in 1988. He led the Lions in tackles each of his eight seasons there - the only Lion to ever do that - and made the Pro Bowl four times. He amassed 206 tackles for the Bills in 1996, second most by a Bill in one season, before a neck injury sidelined him midway through the 1997 season.

Health problems caused Spielman to miss the entire 1998 season. They weren't his, however, but those of his wife Stefanie. Stefanie underwent treatment for breast cancer, but her husband refused to allow her to go it alone. Chris took the year off to be with Stefanie, putting his priorities in proper order. "Chris has always been an honest, upfront family man," said Mike Currence, Spielman's head coach at Massillon (Ohio) Washington High School from 1981-83.

When Stefanie's health improved, her husband was primed and ready to return to action on the football field as a member of the Browns, thanks to strenuous conditioning that kept his 6-foot-1, 245-pound frame in tiptop shape during his absence from the gridiron. He could not have been happier; his wife was fine, and he was playing football again.

"It feels good to be back," Spielman said at the time. "[Browns head] coach [Chris] Palmer gave a fine first impression. He's finally got his chance to show what he can do at the head-coaching level." Spielman saw a lot of himself in the new Cleveland coach. "I'm impressed with his drive, his determination. He's got the same philosophy on football as me."

A 1984 graduate of Massillon and a 1988 alumnus of Ohio State University - both former stomping grounds of the late, great Paul Brown - Spielman was not only glad to be back in football but happy to be playing for an Ohio-based team again. He never really went too far away from home, though, for Detroit and Buffalo are not exactly Dallas and San Diego.

Spielman hoped to be a big part of the formative years, the first three at least - the duration of his contract - of the new Browns. Three years before, owner Art Modell moved the original Browns to Baltimore, where they became the Ravens. Spielman, though, was wary of looking too far ahead.

"I'm going to take it day by day," he said at the time, which is something he and his family learned to do for some 18 months prior. "It's been rough, but I'm very grateful for the widespread support me and my family have received from the people of Stark County (in which Massillon lies). I want to say thank you to everyone who showed they cared. We're very appreciative."

Spielman was an all-everything linebacker in high school who led Massillon to a combined 21-2 record his junior and senior seasons of 1982 and '83. Included was a Division I state-championship game appearance in 1982, a game the Tigers lost badly to "Mighty Mo," perennial parochial-school power Cincinnati Moeller, in Ohio Stadium in Columbus. (Moeller is where Gerry Faust, the University of Notre Dame's head coach at the time, became famous.) The defeat was Massillon's second in three years to Moeller in the big-school state title game.

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Currence, Massillon's head coach from 1976-84, remembered Spielman as his team's only hope that afternoon, a day in which the Francisco brothers - Hiawatha and D'Juan - ran rampant over and through the Tigers' defense. "Chris came out for a play and said to me, 'Coach, you've got to talk to these guys ... I'm only one tackler.' I told him, 'Chris, you're the only one who can *tackle* them.'"

Spielman put his own spin on the game. "We were self-proclaimed public-school champions that year," he chuckled.

Spielman, whose 13 career interceptions tie him with Bob Graber for second in team annals, said Massillon's victories over archrival Canton McKinley in 1982 and '83 remain vivid in his memory. In the '82 game in Massillon's Paul Brown Tiger Stadium, Spielman, doubling as a running back, scored from a yard out to break a scoreless tie early in the fourth quarter in a 7-0 Massillon victory. He finished the day with 19 rushes for 101 yards, and five receptions for 52 more. The '83 affair, an 18-7 Tigers win in Canton's Fawcett Stadium, holds a special place in his heart. "Being from Canton and going back there and winning that game was something I'll never forget," he said.

Some 16 years later, on Aug. 9, 1999, Spielman was on the sidelines in Fawcett once again as the reborn Browns defeated the Dallas Cowboys in overtime, 20-17, in the annual Pro Football Hall of Fame Game.

According to Currence, Spielman not only was a great player when it counted, but set a fine example in practice too. "We had to restrict Chris' hitting in practice," he said. "He loved contact. He thrived on it. If he didn't have it every day, he was unhappy. Chris had the ability to really hurt some of our players. I told him, 'Chris, hitting's OK, but you can't be hitting our sophomore backs. You'll kill 'em!' On non-contact days, he'd come up to me and say, 'Coach, we didn't hit any today. We've got to hit!'"

Spielman's intensity in practice, Currence said, proved to be a plus come game day, when his passion for the sport sizzled. "Chris always had a great attitude," he recalled. "He loved football. He loved sports, but football was his favorite. He was always focused on the task for that week. He was one guy we didn't have to worry about being ready to play."

Currence remembered his star linebacker was frustrated on several occasions when he was pulled from games the Tigers had well in hand. "He refused to sit down. I never - not *once* - saw Chris sitting down on the sideline. He'd pace back and forth until the final gun. He always wanted back in the game."

Craig Johnson, a teammate of Spielman's at Massillon who prospered as a running back at Michigan State University, agreed. "What I remember most about Chris was his intensity, his hunger for the game," he said. "He did everything with reckless abandon. He gave 100 percent all the time."

Spielman's career at Massillon, which included Associated Press (AP) First Team All-Ohio honors for his play at linebacker his last two years, was capped by his appearance on the *Wheaties* cereal box his senior year.

Despite his tremendous work ethic and fine athletic skills, Johnson admitted Chris' success beyond high school surprised himself and many of his teammates. "But I did know," he added, "that if he continued to play that way, good things would happen for him."

Good things *did* happen for Spielman - but nearly in "That State up North." According to Currence, Spielman nearly wound up in the enemy's maize-and-blue. "[Former University of Michigan head coach] Bo Schembechler almost had him," he said. "I told Chris, 'If you ever want to live in Ohio, you better go to OSU.'"

And he did.

Spielman continued his stellar play at linebacker at Ohio State, where he was a starter from nearly the git-go (the only reason he did not start the Buckeyes' opening game his freshman year was due to injury, and that only kept him out until the second quarter). Currence was astounded. "I figured by his sophomore, junior year, he would maybe break into the starting lineup. But he worked his tail off over the summer [in 1984]. He was outstanding as a freshman. I was shocked at that point."

Spielman's Ohio State days included a Rose Bowl trip his freshman year and AP First Team All-American honors his junior and senior years. One of his greatest games was when he intercepted All-American Chuck Long twice and had 19 tackles in leading the Buckeyes to an unforgettable rain-soaked upset of top-ranked

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Iowa his sophomore year. Another was the Buckeyes' bitter loss to Michigan his junior year when he totaled 29 tackles, which ties him with Tom Cousineau for the most in one game by Buckeye.

Spielman's fondest memory of his days as a Buckeye occurred inside - where else? - Michigan Stadium in his final collegiate game. The date was Nov. 21, 1987, and Ohio State entered the Michigan game with an un-Buckeye-like record of 5-4-1. "There was absolutely nothing on the line," he said. "But it was [former Ohio State head coach] Earle Bruce's last game; he'd been fired earlier in the week. We could've easily packed it in, but we went up there and rallied around coach Bruce and won the game (23-20). It was a great feeling. I'll never forget how it felt to see coach Bruce getting carried off the field by our players after the game."

Spielman has gone from covering running backs and receivers to covering the game itself, for he is now a color commentator for ESPN college football games. He also hosts a radio sports talk show in Columbus, Ohio. As much as he enjoys the broadcast end of the game, Spielman's forte was on the field. He credited much of his success to playing under a coach the likes of Currence in high school. "He was great. He never really got the credit he deserved. He was an innovator. We used the run-and-shoot when no one else did. He's to be commended."

Currence coached at several Cleveland-area high schools in his pre-Massillon days, and was blessed with a ton of talent. "I had some great ones," he said.

One was defensive back Thom Darden, who went on to play for both the University of Michigan and the Browns. Another was linebacker Tom Cousineau who, prior to his days with Ohio State, the Canadian Football League's Montreal Alouettes, the Browns, and the San Francisco 49ers, played for Currence at Lakewood St. Edward High School. "Cousineau was a great player," Currence recalled, "but he was a different person than Chris. As soon as 'Cous' got to Ohio State his freshman year, he had to have the Corvette. I'm not saying that's bad, it was just a different way of thinking than Chris had. Chris was just a laid-back guy. All he's ever needed was a pair of gym shoes, ragged jeans and a ripped T-shirt. He probably drives an old truck.

"All three of them - Darden, Cousineau and Chris - were great players, but when it comes down to it I would have to rank Chris as the best I've ever coached."
