

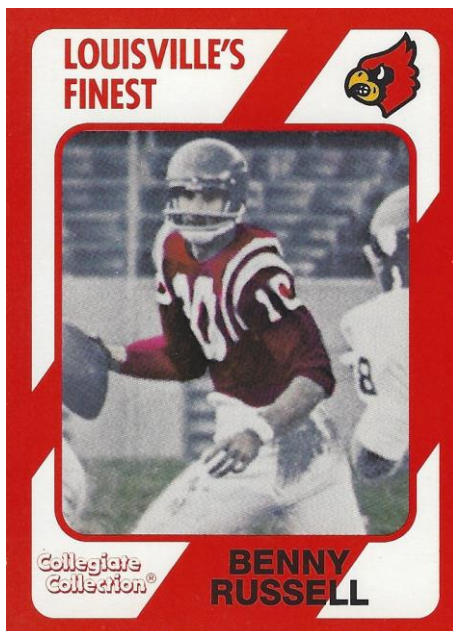


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Benny Russell

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Benny Russell was an outstanding college football player at the University of Louisville, breaking most of John Unitas' school records while being a two-time All Missouri Valley Conference quarterback. He was an emergency replacement quarterback for the Buffalo Bills in 1968 and had a solid minor league football career for the Hartford Knights of the Atlantic Coast Football League, leading them to two title game appearances.



Russell was the Buffalo Bills 11th selection in the 1966 AFL Redshirt draft. He was also selected by the St. Louis Cardinals with their 17th selection but chose to sign with the Bills. Coming out of college Russell was known as a drop back passer with a solid arm that could scramble out of trouble when necessary.

He signed a professional contract with the Bills on February 1, 1967. Russell had an uphill struggle to make the Buffalo squad in 1967 as a rookie. He competed with veteran quarterbacks Jack Kemp and Tom Flores. He impressed early in training camp playing in two scrimmages, one against his own team and the other against the New York Jets. He

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played well in both scrimmages throwing four TD passes, more than Flores and Kemp combined.

The 6-foot 1-inch, 190-pound Russell made his preseason debut for Buffalo versus the Miami Dolphins in the fourth quarter of the Bills 10-7 loss on August 5 in Memphis, Tennessee. He did not see action in the Bills other two preseason games at Detroit and versus the Boston Patriots in Rochester, before being released on August 22, 1967.

He was signed to the Bills taxi-squad, where he spent the full regular season as Buffalo struggled through a 4-10 season with Kemp and Flores at the controls. The Bills 1968 media guide said of Russell's taxi-squad role in 1967, he "showed improvement in throwing as the season progressed."

Russell was a member of the Kentucky Air National Guard and was activated for duty on January 26, 1968 for service in the Vietnam War. He was stationed at Richards-Gebaur Air Force base near Kansas City, Missouri. The Bills placed him on their inactive taxi-squad list.

He missed the Bills 1968 training camp because of his service commitment. However, the Bills suffered many quarterback casualties throughout the 1968 season as Kemp, Flores, and Kay Stephenson all suffered season ending injuries at various points. The team was down to only banged-up rookie Dan Darragh and emergency quarterback Ed Rutkowski in mid-November when they contacted and signed Russell on November 12. Russell requested a furlough from the Air Force to join the Bills for the last four games of the regular season.

Russell made his professional debut on November 17 versus the San Diego Chargers. Darragh started the Chargers game at QB for the 1-8-1 Bills and played an ineffective first half. With the Bills trailing 21-3 at half-time coach Joe Collier inserted Rutkowski at QB. On the first series of the third quarter Russell replaced Rutkowski on a third and six play from the Chargers 12 yard-line. He tossed a three-yard pass to Mini-Max Anderson but Anderson came-up short of the first down and the Bills settled for a field goal.

Russell replaced Rutkowski for a single play in the fourth quarter after he was shaken up. Facing a fourth and goal from the Chargers seven, Russell attempted a pass that was deflected by San Diego defensive tackle Russ Washington and the pass fell harmlessly incomplete. The Chargers took possession of the ball. Rutkowski returned for the final

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series of the game and Russell's debut was complete, playing only those two plays completing 1 of 2 passes for three yards. He was the teams' back-up QB for the final three games of the season but did not see any action.

The Bills drafted a QB in the 1969 NFL draft, James Harris, making it more difficult for Russell to make the squad. At the start of training camp, he was the Bills fourth string signal caller, behind Kemp, Flores, Harris and Darragh. The Bills released him on July 15 and then optioned him to their minor league affiliate, the Hartford Knights of the Atlantic Coast Football League (ACFL) on July 18. The move to Hartford provided Russell an opportunity to play full-time.

Hartford Coach Fred Wallner immediately named Russell the team's starting quarterback. He led the club to 10 straight victories to open the season, including impressive wins over the Pottstown Firebirds 18-3, the Bridgeport Jets 23-14 and a 31-3 win over the Quincy Giants with Russell passing for 235 yards on eight completions and three TD passes of 67, 65 and 34 yards. The Knights finished the regular season as Northern Division Champions with a 10-2 record. For the season Russell completed 86 of 199 passes for 1564 yards and 14 touchdowns with 14 interceptions. Russell was second in the league in passing yards and third in touchdown passes.

Hartford lost the Championship game, at Dillon Stadium in Hartford, 20-0 to the Pottstown Firebirds. Russell was under duress throughout the game until he was knocked out of the contest on a vicious hit by defensive end Tom Carr in the third quarter with the Knights trailing 10-0. Russell completed only 4 of 14 passes for 33 yards and was sacked for losses totaling 45 yards.

The Knights struggled throughout the 1970 season, but Russell steered them on a three-game winning streak to end the season and win the Northern Division with a 7-5 record, on a tiebreaker. Russell led a key fourth quarter comeback in their second to last game of the season keeping their playoff hopes alive. Trailing 7-0 late in the fourth quarter, he led them on a 67-yard TD drive to tie the game capping it off with a nine-yard strike to Bob Stroyer. The Knights got the ball back and in the final minute Russell drove Hartford into field goal range with Wes Bean nailing the kick to win the contest 10-7.

The following week, Russell led the Knights to a 24-17 win over the Jersey Tigers with two touchdown passes as Hartford clinched the Northern Division Championship and a Title game rematch with the Firebirds. Russell was the third highest rated quarterback in

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the ACFL as he completed 118 of 235 passes for 1720 yards with 13 touchdowns and only six interceptions.

The Knights versus Firebirds Championship game on December 12, 1970 is now one of legend. A major snowstorm hit Hartford on Friday evening into Saturday. Arnold Dean the Knights broadcaster described the scene at the game saying, “you could not see anything, the yardage markers or anything else.” Steve Sabol of NFL Films, who was recording the game, said “We had a lot of games on the frozen tundra’s of the NFL, but none more dramatic than that day in Hartford.” With the field iced over and snow covered, the Firebird players unscrewed the spikes on the bottom of their shoes leaving only the studs exposed, which were like nails and allowed them to gain traction in the poor conditions. They took advantage and literally buried the Knights into the snow-covered field, winning the game 31-0. Russell played the first half and only completed 6 of 12 passes for 36 yards with one interception. He was replaced by Tom Sherman, who did no better, as the Knights were shutout for the second consecutive year in the Championship game. During the off-season, Russell decided to hang up his spikes and end his playing career. His final line as an NFL quarterback was 1 of 2 for 3 yards.

Prior to his professional career, Russell was a record-breaking quarterback during his time at Louisville. It was the only college that offered him a scholarship coming out of high school. He repaid their faith in him during his junior and senior seasons as the Cardinals starting quarterback. In his junior year he led the Cardinals, who had won only 4 of 20 games the two previous seasons, to a 6-4 record while completing 115 of 246 passes for 1791 yards and 11 touchdowns.

He led the Cardinals on two stirring comebacks during his junior season. Louisville trailed North Texas on October 2, 1965 21-7 in the third quarter, but behind the sparkling play of Russell the Cardinals scored 22 unanswered points including a 26-yard TD pass, a nine yard TD run plus a two point conversion pass, all by Russell in the 29-21 comeback victory.

On November 13, Louisville trailed Drake 10-0 at halftime and 17-6 in the third quarter, when Russell led another stirring comeback, as the Cardinals scored 26 unanswered points on the way to a 32-17 triumph. Trailing 10-0, Russell scored on an 11-yard TD run, but Drake answered with a TD of their own to lead 17-6. Russell steered a 57-yard drive on the ensuing possession, completing three consecutive passes of 22, 13 and 12 yards with the touchdown drive finished off on a 3-yard run by Al McFarlane. Russell passed for the two-point conversion, cutting Drake’s lead to 17-14.

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On the Cardinals next possession, Russell drove his club for the tying field goal and then on the pen-ultimate drive of the game, Russell scrambled for 25-yards to the Drake one-yard line setting up the go-ahead TD by future Buffalo Bill Wayne Patrick, on a one yard dive. On their next series, Russell added to the Cardinals lead, putting the game away with a 63-yard TD pass.

Russell had an outstanding senior season finishing third in the nation in total offense with 2,289 yards, as he again led the Cardinals to a 6-4 record. He completed 142 of 310 passes for 2016 yards and 14 touchdowns. In addition, he rushed for 273 yards and three TDs.

He had one of the most spectacular games in Cardinals history on October 15, leading Louisville to a 66-26 victory over Drake. He passed for 354 yards including scoring tosses of 37, 66, 15 and 48 yards, respectively. He also ran for TDs of 35 and 11 yards. He was named the Associated Press College Football Player of the Week as he amassed an almost unheard of, at that time, 472 yards of total offense. He broke John Unitas' record of 321 passing yards in a single game for Louisville.

His final college game was the East West Shrine Game on December 31, 1966 at Kezar Stadium in San Francisco. Russell was invited to play in the game for the East team. In a substitute role, he completed 3 of 7 passes for 67 yards including a 49-yard TD pass to Notre Dame All-American Nick Eddy. His pass to Eddy put the team in command of the game at 31-0. Russell's East squad went on to win the game 45-22.

When Russell left Louisville, he held the schools passing records for completions, pass attempts, passing yardage, passing touchdowns, both single season and career. He was inducted into the University of Louisville's Athletics Hall of Fame in 1985.

Following his football career, he was a distinguished educational leader in the Florida Panhandle. Russell began his educational career as a teacher, was an assistant principal, and then was the longest tenured superintendent in the state of Florida, serving in that capacity from 1979 to 1999. Russell was known as an innovative visionary leader, creating many new and successful educational programs across the Santa Rosa, Florida school district. He was a Past President of the Florida Association of School Administrators and was twice named Man of the Year by the Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce.

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Benny was born Bennett Coe Russell on May 12, 1944 in Brewton AL to Claude “Buck” and Elizabeth Russell. As a youngster the family moved to Santa Rosa County in Florida.

He graduated from the University of Louisville in May 1966. He married Kathy Frances McCurley in 1968. They had two daughters, Kimberly, and Kristian. Benny Russell died December 15, 1999 at the young age of 55.

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