

Where Are They Now? Charlie Sells, former football, basketball and track star

By DAN RALEY, P-I REPORTER Published 10:00 pm, Tuesday, January 29, 2008

When it came to [Charlie Sells](#), everyone else was buying. In 1962, this Seattle native was a versatile Washington State basketball player and high jumper who was looking for a place to land as a professional athlete. Opportunity was everywhere. The [NBA's](#) St. Louis Hawks and the Hawaii Chiefs of the [American Basketball League](#), the forerunner to the [ABA](#), drafted Sells that spring. He signed a contract with the renegade franchise for twice the money the Hawks were offering. Shortly after depositing his bonus check in the bank, he was notified that the team had folded.

Figuring he was a free agent, the 6-foot-7 Sells, who possessed exceptional speed and jumping ability, accepted an invitation to attend the [Dallas Cowboys](#) training camp in Marquette, Mich., as a receiver candidate. He hadn't played football since he was a [Roosevelt High School](#) senior, though he was tempted to turn out at WSU, largely because he roomed with All-America end [Hugh Campbell](#).

[Gil Brandt](#), Cowboys vice president of player personnel and chief scout, was sitting with Cougars basketball coach [Marv Harshman](#) when he spotted Sells at a track meet in Pullman. Brandt asked if the big guy played football. "In high school he was great," responded Harshman, who had signed the forward as part of his first WSU recruiting class. "I didn't let him play here."

Sells appeared in four exhibition games that fall for Dallas, including a doubleheader in Cleveland that drew 86,000 fans. He caught a pair of touchdown passes from starting quarterback [Eddie LeBaron](#) in scrimmages. He had a good shot at making the roster of the NFL team until coach [Tom Landry](#) relayed some strange news to him. The ABL's Hawaii franchise had been reorganized in Long Beach, Calif., and was threatening to sue the Cowboys if Sells didn't honor his basketball contract and report to the team.

"Landry called me in and said, 'You're not going to like this,' " recalled Sells, who was handed a plane ticket. "He said I was welcome to come back."

Sells played in just 24 games in the six-team ABL, founded and operated by [Harlem Globetrotters](#) owner [Abe Saperstein](#), before the whole thing

disbanded on New Year's Eve, ending a two-year run. The former WSU player had roomed with [Bill Spivey](#), a [Kentucky center](#) banned from the NBA for his involvement in a college point-shaving scandal. Sells had answered to Chiefs coach [Al Brightman](#), whose previous stops had included [Seattle University](#). He had watched in amazement as a fight broke out in Kansas City involving players and fans, a brawl that forced the Long Beach team to ride back to its hotel in police cars.

Sells, who had a wife and young son back in the Northwest, was able to collect the rest of the \$10,000 owed to him, packed up his stuff in a U-Haul trailer and drove home, turning down an NBA offer. "I had a chance to go to the [Lakers](#), but I said no," he said. "I was going back to Seattle to get a job."

Sells grew up playing sports year-round in his hometown. His Roosevelt football teammates included [Duane Locknane](#), [Bob Monroe](#), [Mike Kuklenski](#) and [Lee Folkins](#), all eventual Washington players, with Folkins getting an NFL shot. Sells held the city high jump record of 6 feet, 4 inches for several years. In basketball, he led the Roughriders to the 1958 state tournament and was one of the city's first high school players to dunk in a game.

"I stole the ball and did a two-hand stuff," Sells said. "The ref called a technical and said, 'You can't do that,' and I said, 'Just watch me.' (Roosevelt coach) [John Fuller](#) loved it. The biggest thing I had was my jumping ability. I could take three steps and hit my elbow on the rim."

His athletic prowess was no secret. Michigan, USC, UCLA and the UW were among those offering scholarships, but he settled on the Cougars because of his affection for the newly hired Harshman. His freshman team went unbeaten, yet six teammates flunked out of school, leaving him to play for mediocre WSU varsity teams thereafter. Still, he averaged double-double totals for his college career, 12.6 points and 10.9 rebounds.

A Mill Creek resident, Sells, 68, and his wife of 46 years, Judy, have three sons, Kass, Jeff and Todd, and nine grandchildren. Once his pro football and basketball aspirations were exhausted, Sells went to work in the steel industry. He runs a company that fills orders throughout the Northwest while shipping materials from California. People ask him why he doesn't retire. Sells enjoys selling.