



Interview

Emery Barnes: From the Streets of New Orleans to the Halls of the B.C. Legislature

Emery Barnes was born in New Orleans. He later moved to Oregon where he was a football and track and field star at the University of Oregon. In 1952 he was an alternate selection for the United States Olympic Team in the high jump. He later played football for the Green Bay Packers and the British Columbia Lions. First elected to the British Columbia Legislature in 1972, he has been re-elected in each subsequent election. He was interviewed for the Canadian Parliamentary Review in Vancouver in January 1987.

Your background is probably one of the most unusual among the eleven hundred or so federal and provincial legislators in Canada. Tell us a bit about how you first came to this country?

I came out of the US army in 1956 and had a tryout with the Green Bay Packers of the National Football League. That was before Vince Lombardi and the great teams but they did have some good players like Bart Starr and Ralph Goldston who became a good friend of mine and was instrumental in my coming to Canada.

During the exhibition season we went to Greensboro North Carolina for a game. We stopped at a restaurant for dinner and all the white players went into the dining room. The other blacks had played in the south before and knew what to expect. Not me. I walked right in and sat down to eat.

A waiter came over in a flash and told me to eat in the kitchen with the other blacks. I was furious and ready to fight but Goldston and the others

convinced me that was the way it was in the south. The same thing when it came to sleeping. The blacks all had to go over to an all black motel.

Having lived in the south you must have known about segregation?

I guess what really bothered me was the way my white team mates and coaches refused to stand up for me and the other blacks. It was not just the segregation. One day a team mate, Dave "Hog" Hanner, a real southern cracker, knocked on the door of my room. He said he saw me ignore a little white boy who had asked for my autograph. He told me never to do that again and knocked me back against the wall with one punch after another. I went down. That touched off one of the deadliest fights of my life. We were both big and strong and went at it for what seemed like an eternity.

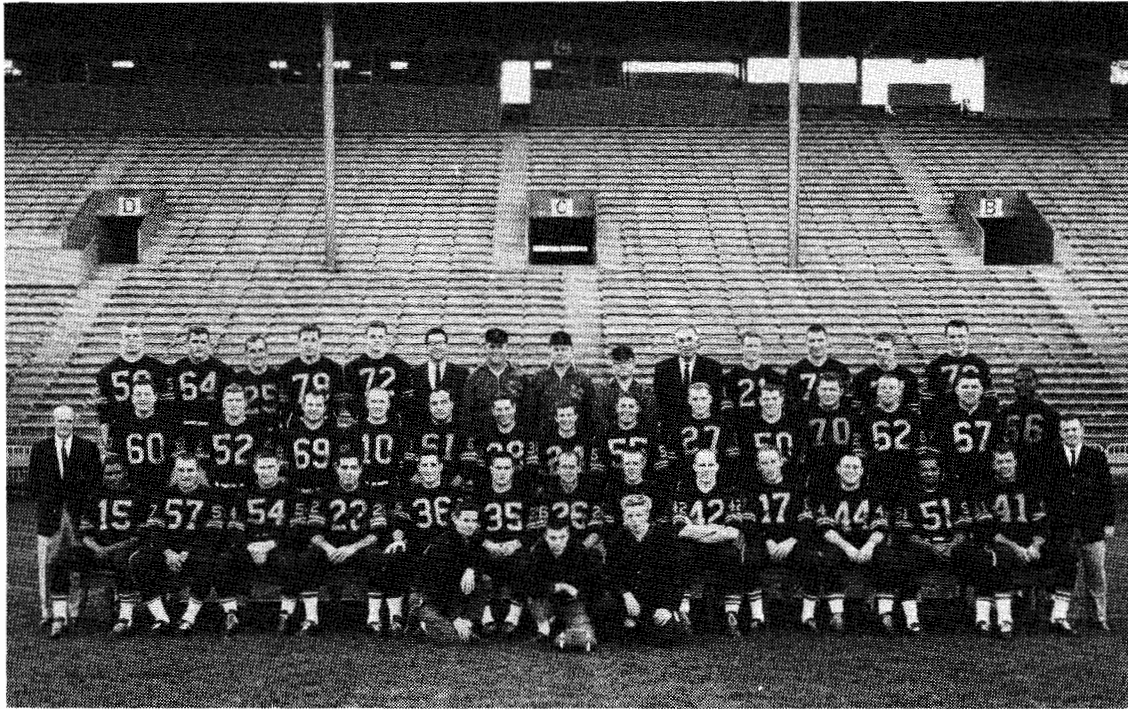
By the time I finally had him subdued I was so furious I started to carry him over to the stairway with the

idea of tossing him about five flights through the stairwell. I might have killed him if some team mates both white and black had not stopped me.

When we got back to Green Bay I had a meeting with the coaches. They told me I did not fit into their plans and they did not have to draw me a picture. As I was packing to leave I got a note from Hanner asking me to see him in the club training room. I ignored it but Goldston said that sometimes you have to do unpleasant things. I went not knowing what to expect. Hanner was friendly, but in a serious frame of mind. He told me I was one hell of a man to stand up for what I believed and that he had learned something. He wished me well. But what a high price to pay for those few words.

You were not unhappy to leave the United States?

I was just out of the army, with a young family to support. I had a college degree but could not get a job. In fact I asked for help from an Oregon



Number 66, a member of the British Columbia Lions, 1963 Western Conference Champions.

Alumni Booster Club Member who had tried to recruit me with athletic scholarship a few years earlier. I could not get to see him personally but was told they would try to get me a job as a Red Cap at the local train station.

I had always believed in the United States, its constitution and the principles it stood for. I may have been naive but I believed all the slogans. When I left to play football in Canada I felt like a political refugee.

Do you still feel bitter toward the United States?

I am a Canadian citizen and have no regrets. Over the years I have come to realize that prejudice is not limited to the USA. There are different kinds of people in all societies. None is perfect. I am less quick to condemn anyone and have probably mellowed a bit. With age and experience I have come to believe that we are the architects of our own destiny. I am more interested in the evolution of society and of my situation as an individual than in blaming any group or any society for all the evils on earth.

What were some of the memorable moments of your professional football career in Canada?

I came to Vancouver to play for the BC Lions in 1957 but suffered a severe leg

injury that year that sidelined me for eighteen months. I missed the entire 1958 season. I took a degree in social work at the University of British Columbia. As an American ex-serviceman I was entitled to some \$150 a month under the G.I. Bill. My family lived on that. They were hard times. The following year Hamilton gave me a try out. But they had already established players at defensive tackle. There was no way I was going to make their team.

I stayed out of football for three years putting my degree in social work to use with youth on various projects including the Narcotics Addiction Foundation and supervisor of Social Training at the Haney Correctional Institute. My predecessor there was Dave Barrett who went into politics and later became Premier of British Columbia.

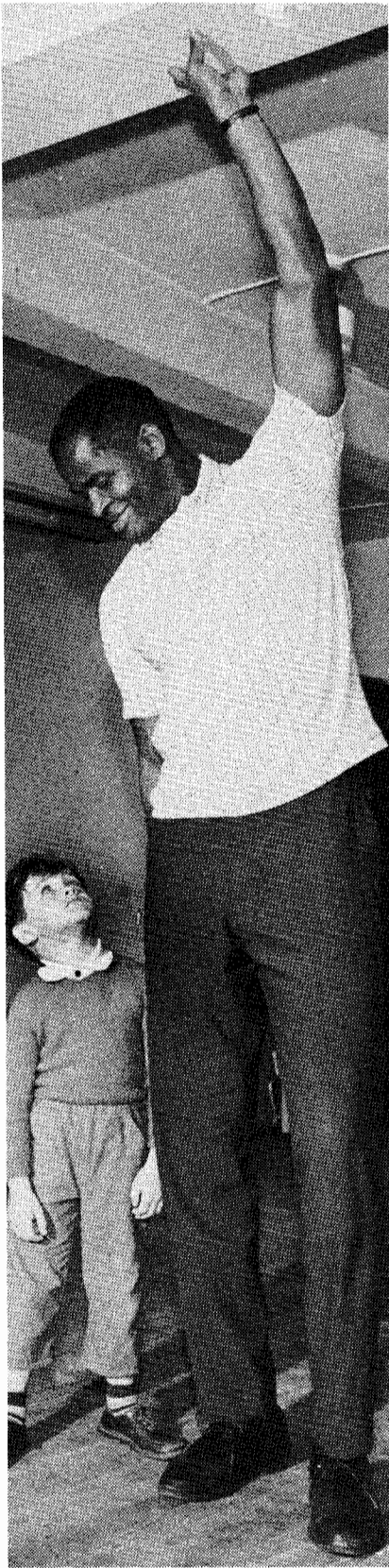
I was still hoping to play football again and in 1962 coach Dave Skrein gave me a chance when one of the BC linemen was injured in mid season. I was a starter the rest of the season. In 1963 we made the Grey Cup final. Then 24 hours before that game the defensive coach Jim Champion told me I would not be playing or even dressing for the final game. I often wondered if the issue of race did not enter his decision. He was the type of coach who could say about Willie Fleming, our star player, "the faster that guy runs the whiter he looks".

Needless to say I was upset by the decision. The next year we also went to Grey Cup and this time we won it but I was injured and missed the final few games. There was a possibility that I might be ready to play in the final and coach Skrein did his best to persuade me to at least dress but I feared the risk of over excitement would lead to serious injury so I had to say "sorry coach".

Have you stayed active in sports since your retirement?

I did some coaching at the University of British Columbia and with the Meralomas of the Junior league. I have always been an aggressive, intense person who believed in using every possible means to accomplish the end result. I did not really enjoy coaching. I found myself trying to pass along values that may not have been the right ones for body contact sports. I stayed in good physical condition and am presently training for some of the Masters track and field meets later this year.

It seems the first part of my life was more oriented toward athletics and actions. The cerebral part developed later. I began to develop a social conscience. I took up completely new activities, like the piano which I started about five years ago and which I love. Maybe I will have my own group one day.



During and after his football career Emery Barnes was a social worker in Vancouver.

Describe the transition from pro football player to member of the legislature?

It certainly was not a direct route. The key person was Dave Barrett. I had known him as a fellow social worker for some time. After he went into politics he kept trying to get me interested. I told him over and over that I was not cut out for politics. But he kept telling me I had something different to contribute.

In the meantime I quit social work and started a night club at Harrison Hot Springs. It was called Emery's Plug and was soon doing a great business. I was having a great time but I guess I was not too good a business manager because I blew it, lost everything. I came back to Vancouver broke and out of work. I called up Barrett and went over to Victoria to see him. It was the first time I had seen the Legislature. He gave me a tour and urged me to think about getting into politics as a candidate for the NDP.

While in the building who do I run into but Herb Cappelletti former general manager of the BC Lions. He wants to visit a while but he was a Social Credit Member and Barrett said no way. Around the same time I got a job with the Killarney Community Centre as its Director of Children and Teenage Programs.

Did you postpone your decision to enter politics?

No, there was an election coming up in 1969 and after looking over three possible ridings I decided to try Vancouver Centre. I will never forget that first nomination. A number of high profile and well qualified individuals were seeking the nomination. I walked into that meeting without knowing the difference between an Executive Committee and a Caucus, submitted my name and got the nomination. I lost the election but got a pretty good popular vote. In 1972 I tried again.

This time it was not as easy to get the nomination. There were great internal battles in the party but perhaps because I was not associated with any faction I got the nomination once again and this time I won the election.

British Columbia politics has spawned some rather unorthodox politicians. You have added to this tradition by your decision to spend two months living on welfare. What is the background to that?

A group of community organizations known as the ELP (End Legislated Poverty) issued a challenge to the Premier and Leader of the Opposition to designate a member to experience

first hand life restricted to income available under BC social assistance.

After seriously considering a number of factors including the political motives of the organizers and potential damage to the party from media comments we decided to take up the challenge.

The rules laid down by the ELP were fairly simple. I would have to live on \$350 for 30 days. Of this no more than \$200 could be spent on rent. I was also required to purchase a bus pass for \$40 in order to look for employment. The rest could be used for food, drink, entertainment or whatever I wanted. I agreed to accept no handouts or freebees although many were offered.

I was supposed to respect the rule whereby any income of \$50 or more had to be reported to my social worker and deducted from my cheque. This rule discourages people from seeking help and punishes them if they get work. The possibility of fraud is really not significant. I found most welfare recipients instinctively struggling for survival. There can be no fraud in trying to survive.

Many people are able to exist on welfare only because of what they receive in donations from others and what they can scrounge in the back alleys. My experience led me to conclude that it would take at least \$700 a month to live even at a subsistence level.

As a public figure some would say my experience was not typical. It is true that at first I generated a lot of media coverage. That is why I extended my stint the extra twenty-three days to the end of February.

This experience must have given you much ammunition to attack the government?

I have tried to take a rather philosophical approach and many may be surprised that I did not attack the government more. I spent a lot of time thinking about my own early days of poverty in New Orleans. I also thought about the immensity of the problem and the futility of trying to address it with mere words or studies. Now more than a year later I am still trying to address some of the thoughts that occurred to me during that period. For example, why do persons from poor backgrounds who reach affluence so often forget what it was like and neglect to help the less fortunate? Even those who give money, do they give out of a sense of guilt? Is money enough? Perhaps they must give of themselves. I thought about all the money that goes for studies, for research, for defence. If the only answer is "that's the way the cookie



Dave Barrett was instrumental in convincing Barnes to enter politics.

crumbles" then maybe we should be looking at a new cookie.

It sounds as though the experience shook your faith in the traditional political process?

I think a purely partisan approach distorts our understanding of poverty. Parties will do what they can to address the problem. I am sure my party will do its best but it will need help. The party is formal politics we must not look upon it as an end.

Nor is poverty confined to Vancouver or British Columbia. It is a national and international problem. Its elimination is not the property of one party. So I have not condemned the government or anyone in society. There is a lack of will by all.

The question that interests me is what measures a reasonable man can take to eliminate poverty. The answer is not just through partisan politics although that is part of it. Perhaps the key is in talking to youth or in the streets.

Following my experience I was overwhelmed with requests for speaking engagements. Yet I did not feel ready to give what people were looking for and that is leadership. Talk is cheap and I do not have an answer. Nor am I very interested in looking at other societies either capitalist or socialist. There is good and bad in all.

We must work towards a marriage of capitalism and socialism that gives everyone a fair break from the start. We must govern more realistically in relation to the poverty line. We need a minimum standard of living, including education, accessible to all.

We should stop thinking of society in terms of class and think rather in terms

of brothers and sisters. Above all we have to listen, even to those with whom we disagree. For example I used to be rather contemptuous of society's Fat Cats. But we have to talk to them as well. Anyone insensitive to these larger issues has a lot to learn about life.

Do you not think politicians have an obligation to lead?

Yes, they must be leaders, but I see politicians as catalysts. Though not elected Martin Luther King was as much a catalyst as a leader. He happened to appear on the scene at a time when a little old black lady said she was tired and wanted a seat on the bus. Many people thought that was a reasonable request.



An interest in the piano developed late in life.

The world needs to be ready for change. In the coming months I want to know if my concerns are similar to those of other people in society. That is the key to politics and leadership. It is not something taught in university but acquired through experience. With that knowledge then perhaps I will be in a position to make use of what I learned during my experience.

You have a rather unique perspective from which to view Canadian-American relations. I was wondering what you thought of the future relationship between the two countries?

When you go to the bargaining table you must know what is your bottom line. The United States bargains on the basis of strength and will try to exploit the weaknesses of the other party. There is nothing wrong with that although they may be mistaken

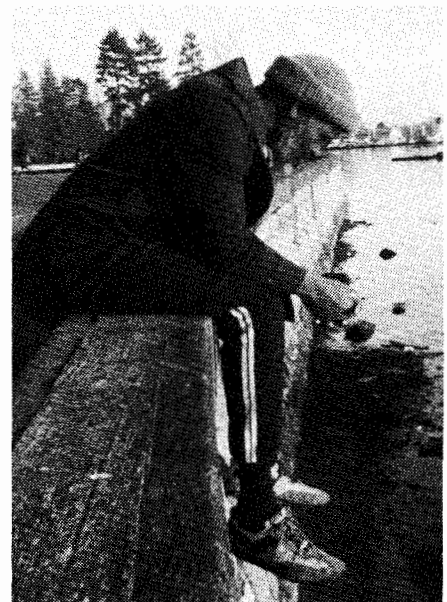
as to what are our weaknesses. They may even spur us on to greater achievements than we would attain otherwise.

Canada has been and still is dependent on trade with the United States for its standard of living. Dependency is not a very attractive situation and the question is when we should stand on our own feet. To my mind political parties should be talking honestly with Canadians about the price they might have to pay for becoming self sufficient. To do otherwise is to start from an unsound premise.

We will never gain the respect of the Americans or anyone else until we are ready to make a collective cost benefit analysis and accept the consequences. We cannot be bluffing since we are talking about the lives of people and our own destiny as a nation. We need a bit of fighting spirit which says "By God we will survive or know the reason why not". Personally I did without long enough that the prospect of putting up or shutting up does not bother me.

In the long term I wonder if the Americans do not need our friendship more than we need them. We should be negotiating from that point of view. In this respect I respect an old adversary, former Premier W.A.C. Bennett who used to say "BC is not for sale". Of course I think it was mostly rhetoric but he had the right idea.

Again I would like to have a better idea of how people feel about this issue. We do not have many plebiscites in this country, perhaps we should have more.



At the Stanley Park Seawall contemplating the fate of the less fortunate in society.