

# Ewatski proud part of CFL official's legacy with Winnipeg Police Service

By Derek Holtom

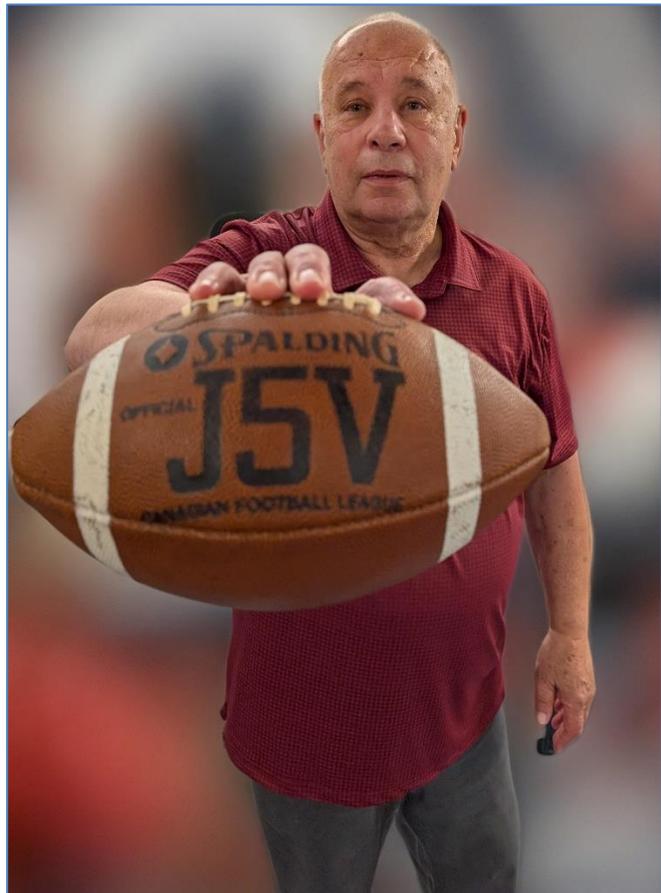
**W**hen the topic of Canadian Football League officials who have also worked for the Winnipeg Police Service comes up, it's usually regarding some of the more well-known men who have donned the black and white stripes – the likes of Brian Chrupalo, Al Bradbury and Ritchie Miller.

There's another member who served as a CFL official for one year that perhaps doesn't come immediately to mind – and that is Mike Ewatski.

The 78-year-old has lived a life full of enough stories to fill several autobiographies. He's been a high school football coach, a salesman, football referee, CP Rail employee, owner and operator of his own taxi cab, 911 operator and more. And he's still punching the clock, so to speak, answering telephone calls from the public and using his decade's long experience with the WPS to assist the public with their questions.

Ewatski, brother of former police Jack Ewatski (and he has another brother Jamie who was an officer with the Edmonton police), truly started his road to officiating in Virden, where he was stationed for work. The son of the family he was boarding with played on the local high school team, and he decided to go watch practice, having been a former player himself.

The team's coach soon asked Ewatski if he wanted to help him coach, to which he quickly said yes. Then things escalated rather quickly, all for the positive.

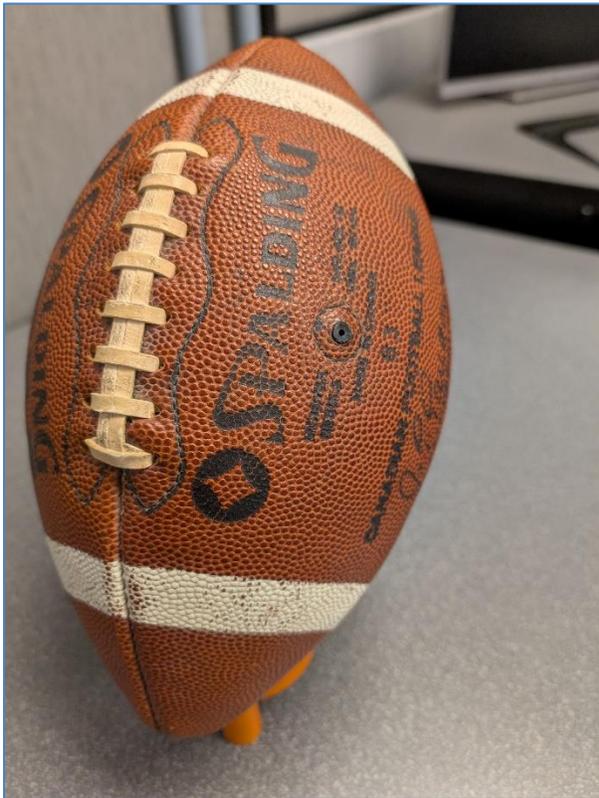


*Mike Ewatski has done it all, from driving and owning a taxi, to 911 operator with the WPS, to officiating in the CFL.*

“The teacher at the school told me I’d have to take over as head coach, as his wife was expecting a child any day now, and he needed to spend more time with her,” says Ewatski. “So that’s how I got thrown into that.”

The Virden Golden Bears didn’t miss a beat, going undefeated in a championship season.

**F**ast forward a few years and Ewatski has switched careers, moving back to Winnipeg and working with CP Rail. Also having an eye on the future, he opted to take a class at Red River College about computers. This was in the 1970s, when computers were only starting to creep into the collective consciousness of society. It was here that Mike met Bob Turnbull, a long-serving and highly regarded amateur official who passed away back in 2019.



*The CFL game ball presented to Mike Ewatski after his first game, last touched by CFL and NFL Hall of Famer Warren Moon.*

“Bob tells me he’s the president of the Manitoba Football Officials Association, and that he remembered me from when I played football,” says Ewatski. “He was a referee when I played juvenile football. And then he asked me if I would be interested in becoming an official.”

Obviously he said yes, and he soon earned a reputation as one of the top amateur football officials in Manitoba. This included officiating national touch football championship in Ottawa in 1979 – the only representative from Western Canada to work that particular tournament.

All this led to Ewatski being recommended to attend a CFL officiating camp by Ken Lazaruk, yet another high-profile CFL official from Winnipeg.

“I was doing a high school game at the old Winnipeg Veldrome, and I found out right before the game the CFL was there in the press box watching me,” he said. “I did the game, didn’t think much of it, and they talked to me after.

“Soon after I was invited to a CFL training weekend at the Viscount Gort Hotel,” he added. “That was May of 1983. By June I was doing my first game.”

Around this time CP Rail was doing heavy layoffs, and Ewatski was one of the last to lose his job. But always with an eye on the future, Mike had already invested in his own taxicab, and didn’t miss a beat. He spent the summer of 1983 driving fares around Winnipeg and officiating CFL games.

“I honestly probably lost money doing CFL games – I was making more money driving a cab,” he said. “But it was a great way to be paid to see the country.”

Ewatski had some memorable experiences in his one and only year as a CFL official. His first-ever game was in Edmonton, and he was able to get the game ball – last touched by CFL and NFL Hall of Famer Warren Moon. He also had the chance to work in B.C. Place in its first year of operation.

He also was involved in another classic CFL moment, one fans of the Winnipeg Blue Bombers might enjoy hearing. Ewatski was the line judge in a classic 24-23 victory by the Ottawa Rough Riders over the Saskatchewan Roughriders on Oct. 1, 1983. The key play of the game was what Green and White fans thought was a fourth quarter fumble recovery for a touchdown. Instead, based on the call by Ewatski, the play was called incomplete and the visitors clung on for a one-point victory.

“You know what Taylor Field (Saskatchewan’s then home field) was like back then – there’s like seven million fans, the farmers are all there, it’s a crazy scene,” says Ewatski. “And I’m working on the Saskatchewan side.

“Ottawa had the ball in the fourth quarter, and they throw it to the sideline,” he continued. “It was a bang-bang play and I ruled it incomplete, though the Saskatchewan player picked it up and ran it into the end zone for a touchdown, where a referee was signalling touchdown.”

The officials conferred (this is before instant replay of course) and with Ewatski being the closest official, they ruled it incomplete, incensing the rowdy Roughrider faithful who didn’t win too many games in the early 1980s.

After the game the Roughrider general manager John Herrera stormed into the officials’ dressing room, but he never got close to Ewatski, who says he called the play right down the middle. He was later offered a chance to watch the video from the CBC feed and he declined, feeling he made the call in real time the way he saw it. No CFL official called him afterwards as they would do on a missed call, which Ewatski took as further validation that he made the right call.

All the officials needed a police escort back to the Hotel Saskatchewan following the game, another sign of the times from the dark days in Riderville.

**A**fter the season Ewatski ended up applying for and earning one of only six 911 operator positions with the WPS, beating out 494 other applicants to earn the position. His knowledge of Winnipeg streets from his taxi driving days and well-rounded job experience and education served him well into earning that position, getting him on with the service in 1984 where he still works to this day.

However, that meant shift work and weekend work – not ideal for a second-year CFL official. And so he made the only decision he could make to support his family and regrettably informed the CFL he would not be back for a second season. He did however continue on officiating amateur football in Winnipeg for a number of years.



*An early staff photo of Mike Ewatski from the WPS.*

To wrap up this story, two weeks after the game in Regina Ewatski picked up a fare in downtown Winnipeg, which just happened to be hosting an in-season meeting of CFL general managers.

The fare got in and they started talking on the way to the airport. It turns out this fare was Don Holtby, the general manager of the Ottawa Rough Riders.

“So I told him you may not know me, but I’m the guy who made the call that let you beat the Roughriders,” said Ewatski. “He was kind of shocked I was driving a taxi, when I corrected him that I own the taxi.

“Later on in the season I was doing a game in Ottawa and (Holtby) walked over and asks ‘How’s the taxi business?’,” he added with a chuckle.

So while it was a short CFL officiating career, you can’t say it was uneventful. And it adds another interesting connection between the CFL and the Winnipeg Police Service, one that continues on to this day.