

ON THE OUTDOORS BY LEW FREEDMAN

Former Bear sinks claws in

Tim Wrightman goes from NFL tight end to outdoorsman with a retreat in Idaho

The name of Tim Wrightman's retreat in the Idaho woods is Lazy Bear Ranch.

Call it a play on words and attitude. Wrightman, the former Bears tight end, clearly wishes to maintain his old team connection. But he didn't play lazily when he competed for the 1985 Super Bowl champions under coach Mike Ditka. He jokingly suggests the description is a reference to his "retirement" outlook now.

Wrightman has been a football player and a Hollywood actor and, at 45, is embarking on the next phase of his life. He is trying to make a living from another passion, bird hunting. This fall Wrightman cooked up the idea of capitalizing on his dream location and his Bears background by wooing hunters for a "Bears and Birds Weekend."

"I hunted when I was younger," Wrightman said recently from his home in Weiser, Idaho. "But once I started playing football, there really wasn't much time."

Wrightman owns 150 acres along the Weiser River in Lewis and Clark territory and the southwestern Idaho area is where Curt Gowdy used to hunt pheasants with Bing Crosby and Phil Harris during some of the most memorable episodes of "The American Sportsman."

A converted 5,700-square-foot Western barn serves as Wrightman's new lodge. He calls its appearance "sophisticated rustic," and he has a 9-foot Alaska grizzly sow bear mount for decoration. It took him three shots to put it down with a .358 rifle four years ago. He has mounts of mule deer and turkey as well.

King-sized bear aside, he is headquartered in bird territory. Pheasant, quail, ducks and geese are available in the neighborhood.

He began hunting quail and dove in California and Arizona and now raises English point-

ers and Labrador retrievers too. Wrightman, who bought the land in late 2000, also has worked to create wetlands habitat with food plots.

"I planted 500 trees," Wrightman said, "and I leave close to 10 acres of milo and corn for the birds through the winter."

Bears of one sort or another have run through Wrightman's life for decades. Wrightman spent just two seasons with the Bears in Chicago after a college career playing for UCLA—the Bruins. Wrightman was a third-round pick in 1982 but spent injury-slowed seasons with the Chicago Blitz of the USFL before joining the NFL.

Hall of Famer Ditka once complimented Wrightman by saying that he reminded him of himself.

"He played with a lot of desire," Ditka said in an interview last week. "I like guys who put it on the line. Tim was a guy who probably was a better receiver than a blocker, but he did both very well."

During the Super Bowl season, Wrightman caught 24 passes. The next season, Wrightman's last healthy one

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with the Bears before wrecking a knee in the 1987 exhibition season, he caught 22 passes. Being part of the title-winning club was special then and endures.

"It really is, being part of a team that was the caliber of that 1985 team," Wrightman said. "It was a team that transcended football."

While in Chicago, Wrightman tried standup comedy, making open microphone appearances and serving as master of ceremonies at comedy clubs.

"He just started doing that stuff when he was here," said Emery Moorehead, who shared tight end with Wrightman.

After six knee surgeries, Wrightman went Hollywood. He said he made about 30 commercials and decided "this acting stuff is pretty easy." His résumé lists guest work on "Baywatch," "Mad About You," "The Drew Carey Show," "Walker, Texas Ranger" and

other TV shows. Wrightman said his last show, about 1½ years ago, was an appearance on "Still Standing" with former Bears teammates Willie Gault and Mike Tomczak.

Then Wrightman tired of living in Santa Monica, Calif., and auditioning all the time, so he transplanted himself to Idaho. The packages he is developing (so far he has two hunters signed up) are built around fall weekends with a guest former Bears teammate or other NFL player flown in.

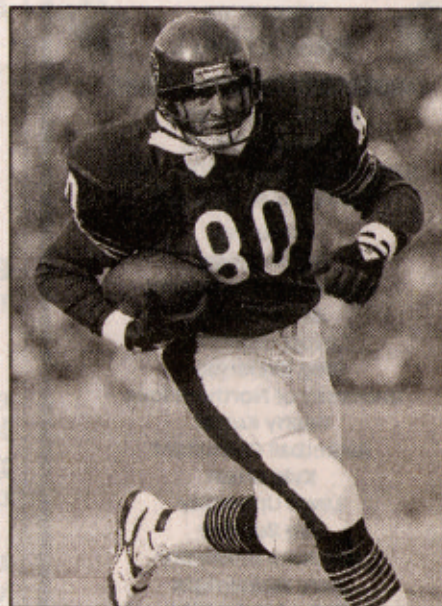
The hunters will stay at the lodge, hang out with Wrightman and his partner, be treated to a gourmet meal on Friday night, hunt birds Saturday, and then have a cookout Sunday and watch the Bears game with the ex-Bears.

Moorehead, who still lives in the Chicago area, said Wrightman invited him.

"I might go out there and check it out," Moorehead said.

Ditka said he is unlikely to fill such a role.

"I decided a long time ago that I'm not going to shoot anything, and I don't want anything to shoot me," he said.



Tribune file photo

Once a Chicago Bear, Tim Wrightman now owns and operates the Lazy Bear Ranch.

Wrightman said he has former Bears center Jay Hilgenberg lined up and that other prospects are Tomczak and former All-Pro Cowboys defensive lineman Ed "Too Tall" Jones.

NFL Films already has visited Wrightman's Idaho spread to film him for a planned Christmas special on the 1985 Bears.

"I'll probably get 20 seconds of time, or I'll end up on the editing floor," Wrightman said.

Actually, it's a good bet the ex-Bear will be shown standing next to his Alaska bear.

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