

Character: Wally Buono
By
Bruce Masterman

The cutthroat trout sipped the Prince nymph and headed upstream, bending the fly rod double and sending Wally Buono into ecstasy. “Hey, I’ve got one,” exclaims the head coach and general manager of the Calgary Stampeders football club, standing knee-deep in the Elk River of southeastern British Columbia. “It feels pretty good.”

Seconds later, Buono cradles the 16-inch dark-spotted trout in the same meat-hook hands that used to maul opposing players during the decade he spent as a linebacker-punter with the Montreal Alouettes. Then he eases the fish back in the water with a gentleness that belies his stocky 220-pound frame and reputation as a tough taskmaster on the gridiron. After watching the fish swim away, Buono adjusts the black wool toque from the 1995 Grey Cup against Baltimore (the Stamps lost), checks his nymph, and resumes casting.

This is Wally’s Other World – a world far from the rigors of leading a Canadian Football League team, a world of player trades, salary caps, injuries and on-field strategy, of demanding fans and pesky press. The rivers, lakes and streams within easy reach of Calgary provide the refuge he needs to keep mind, body and spirit in sync. “Fishing for trout is a tremendous distraction from what I do,” he says. “You can’t buy that kind of peace of mind.”

Buono, 51, started fishing as a kid growing up in North Montreal. After his own dad died when he was nine, a friend’s father used to take Wally with them on fishing trips for eastern brook trout in northern Quebec. Later, as a player at Idaho State and with the Alouettes, Buono fished for trout from New Jersey to Vermont to upper New York State. He and his family – wife Sande, and four children ages 11 to 22 – have lived in Calgary for 12 years, giving him ample opportunity to fish the Bow River and other great trout waters.

Fiercely competitive on the football field, Buono is anything but when on the water. For him, fishing has no stats, and no losers. He doesn’t keep score of how many fish he catches. Buono considers himself a winner every time he goes fishing. “If you catch fish, it’s a bonus, right? Fishing is a nice awakening of your senses and helps put everything into perspective.”

For many years, Buono managed to fish the day before or the morning of every home game. Those chances have decreased in recent years due to increased family and job responsibilities. But he still goes every chance he gets, often with his son or three daughters.

Even on the water, Buono can’t always escape the game. Several years ago, during a lunch break while fishing with his son, Michael, then five, a middle-aged fan approached them. The Stamps were scheduled to take on the Toronto Argonauts that evening. “Well coach,” the fan said. “Are we going to win tonight?”

Buono smiled, much like he does when sports writers ask him about a trade rumor, and replied: “Did you catch any fish?”

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