

Wildcat Legend Eddy “Snow” Whitley

by Jeff Chapman, Contributing Writer for The Manhattan Mercury

As a kid in Port Arthur, Texas, Whitley grew up as a Catholic and was attending an all-black Catholic grade school where they didn't have sports of any kind. But the white catholic grade school just down the road, on the “other side of the tracks” did offer sports and so the two schools worked together to offer opportunities to play football, basketball.

In high school Eddy was eager to play everything and signed up for football, basketball, and track. To stay in shape for football he ran the mile medley and did the high jump. He was super competitive in all and had goals of being all district in each, which he did.

Chapman: Eddy, I am going to age you a bit here, but how were the landing pits in those days?

Whitley: Haha, Jeff, they were very bad. Some were sand, some were piles of hay, and we had this thick foam pad, but the wind might move it while you were in the air!

Chapman: Ouch. Did you ever get hurt?

Whitley: I did and it's a great story. I did not do the Fosbury Flop like they do today. Back then the only type of jump that existed was the Straddle. I rolled over the bar face down instead, but I could jump about 6ft at one point. That day I was jumping, and it wasn't even the landing that hurt, my left leg broke as I was pushing off and I had a bad compound fracture.

Chapman: Did you have surgery?

Whitley: Well, yes, once we got to our hospital. But we were on the road, as it wasn't a home meet and when they called the ambulance to take me to the emergency room, my track coach intervened for my safety. You see, we were in the town of Vidor, Texas.

According to Wikipedia, Vidor had a reputation as a "sundown town", where African Americans are not allowed after sunset. Even as recent as 1993, after district court judge William Wayne Justice ordered that thirty-six counties in East Texas, including Vidor, desegregate public housing by making some units available for minorities, the Ku Klux Klan held a march in the community after a long legal battle was lost by Vidor's leaders.

Whitley: As a black person growing up in that part of Texas, we all knew of the tragic things that has happened in that town, such as an incident involving a black hitchhiker being dragged in chains behind a car around town. And knowing that history, we were afraid of having a Vidor doctor look at me, so my track coach asked for an alternative transportation back to the hospital in Port Arthur, and to our surprise a black hearse was sent!

Wildcat Legend Eddy “Snow” Whitley

by Jeff Chapman, Contributing Writer for The Manhattan Mercury

Chapman: (I was wide eyed and gaping mouth in shock as Eddy told this) Was it a long drive? Surgery go ok?

Whitley: It was a very rough, painful couple of hours, and my surgery went ok. That same left knee has bothered me throughout my career and still does today.

Chapman: You received All – District honors in all sports, I assume that is what got you to be recruited?

Whitley: Yes, Kinda. I was only recruited by two schools, Rice University in Houston, TX, and Kansas State for football. And probably only K-State because All State linebacker Bobby Leopold (my high school & grade school classmate) was being recruited by K-State as well. He (Leopold) went on to play for Notre Dame and the 49ers.

Chapman: What made you decide to take the visit?

Whitley: When I asked the two schools who they played against, I already knew the Southwest Conference schools well, but when I learned the Wildcats played against Nebraska and Oklahoma every year, I was like Oh I want to go there and play against those guys. And that was it.

Chapman: What was your first experience in Manhattan?

Whitley: Getting there was the first adventure. A small 4-person Cessna was sent to the airport near me, and it was the pilot, me, and the recruiting coach in the back seat from Texas to Manhattan. I had never flown in my life. After we re-fueled in Oklahoma somewhere, the pilot asked me if I wanted to fly, so I grabbed the wheel and he says, “You’re flyin’” and I did that for a while and then I asked him if I could land it!

Chapman: Well good thing you didn’t, so you made it safely. How was your visit?

Whitley: It was very good. I stayed in a hotel for recruiting visits, which doesn’t exist anymore, and I met a few of the players, we went to Aggieville and had a great time!

Chapman: Was there any academic focus involved?

Whitley: Yes, I wanted to be an architect. And during my campus tour I met Chuck Burton who would not only be my future professor, but a long-time friend through today. He tried to talk me out of being an architect. I learned he was a construction science guy later.

Chapman: Tell me, your recruiting visit was different than they are today. No media publicity, and your parents weren’t along.

Wildcat Legend Eddy “Snow” Whitley

by Jeff Chapman, Contributing Writer for The Manhattan Mercury

Whitley: My parents drove me to Manhattan to drop me off later that summer. We went to some restaurant south of town by the Holidome that’s probably long since gone. Then, I remember them pulling away from the football dorm, Edwards Hall, reading their Texas license plate as it got smaller and that was it, I was on my own.

Chapman: What was your first team interaction like?

Whitley: (Laughing) I was walking towards Edwards Hall and saw this huge dude with a beard, looking about forty and I said, ‘Hey Coach!’ And that was Ray Butler, a freshman defensive lineman, who responded, ‘Hey, I am a freshman defensive lineman on the team.’

Chapman: What was your first practice like?

Whitley: Funny, the first practice all of us freshmen were in the stands watching the team do 100 yard gassers. They were falling down, getting sick, and several trainers were running along throwing packets of ice on them to cool them down, then head to the next person down. I had never seen anything like this before.

Then the coach comes up and says, tomorrow, you will be doing that!’

Chapman: So, you played for Ellis Rainsberger, how was that?

Whitley: My freshman year, I had earned one of the starting wide receiver positions. The following Spring, I was switched to tight end and had worked hard enough to earn a starting position over Paul Coffman, but eventually lost it due to not reporting to camp as requested by my coaches. I needed a car and had an oil refinery job working extra-long hours to make enough money to buy a car. This decision caused me to be late returning to summer practice. That mistake led me to have a reputation with the coaching staff about not caring for the team, about having other more personal priorities and I was quickly demoted to 10th on the depth chart. In addition to my pulling my own plug, the team was in turmoil, complete chaos.

Chapman: Was this because of all the losing?

Whitley: It was losing games, no teamwork. It was lack of individual respect and then it started to be the white guys vs the black guys too and it wasn’t a very good place to be in. One day the entire new recruiting class of guys walked off the team. One player had no car, packed a suitcase, and was walking out of town, when the coaches found him and drove him back to campus.

Chapman: Was that what ended the Rainsberger era?

Wildcat Legend Eddy “Snow” Whitley

by Jeff Chapman, Contributing Writer for The Manhattan Mercury

Whitley: Could be. Hard to say. But when that coaching staff left, I got a new life!

Chapman: Jim Dickey and his staff were fun to play for?

Whitley: After Ellis was gone, one winter day, a bunch of us guys from the team were playing catch with the football over at Ahearn. Dickey and his staff were watching us guys practice running routes and asking questions from different players about what their names and positions were. Coach Jim Donnan called me over and asked me, what’s your name? And when I said ‘Snow’ he said to Dickey, ‘Coach, we got one, this is our tight end right here.’ And from that moment I was back.

Chapman: Had you been blackballed?

Whitley: I later learned that my file was filled with lots of negative notes about my attitude, but positive notes about my skills, and this staff wanted to give me a fresh start.

According to K-State Athletics Rainsberger returned to his alma mater to serve as head football coach at Kansas State from 1975 to 1977. He started his tenure there while, winning his first three games, but ultimately compiled a record of 6–27.

Chapman: Was that what launched your career?

Whitley: Absolutely! I was playing in a big-time league BIG * Conference and earned second team All-Big-8-Conference two years and really enjoyed playing.

Chapman: You wore number 26, That’s a wide receiver number not a tight end?

Whitley: I was a starting wide receiver my first year wearing #26. They moved me to tight end and tried to give me a different number, but I insisted. In fact, I threw a bit of a tantrum, probably further contributing to my attitude reputation, but everyone knew me as 26, and so I was from then on.

Chapman: Who did you enjoy playing with most at quarterback?

Whitley: I liked them all. I started with Wendell Hendricksen, but Dan Manucci and Darrel Ray Dickey were both very talented and played to win. They could really throw it well. The issue for all of them was, we were not as strong upfront as we needed to be and they spent a lot of time scrambling, but what great attitudes.

Chapman: So, the wins were starting to really happen, or more close games?

Whitley: Well, we began to play more competitively and win a few games now and then. We played hard for Coach Dickey and liked what he and his staff were doing. My favorite big win

Wildcat Legend Eddy “Snow” Whitley

by Jeff Chapman, Contributing Writer for The Manhattan Mercury

was at the University of Missouri Homecoming. They were ranked in the top 20 and they had Phil Bradley and Kellen Winslow. That day I had two touch downs, two extra points and was dancing in the end zone in front of their glittering golden girls... It was impressive because it was their homecoming.

Chapman: Weren't you (KSU) everyone's homecoming opponent?

Whitley: Hahaha, yes. Every week.

Chapman: So, your dream of playing at OU and NU finally came true. How was it really?

Whitley: It was awesome! I know they beat the heck out of us a lot, but it was so awesome to go into their stadiums full of fans and get to experience that was amazing. And I must say, I had never been hit so hard. They tackled harder than most of the other teams.

Chapman: What was the best memory?

Whitley: Back then the visitors' locker room in Lincoln was crazy small on purpose. We were crammed in there. And then the tunnel to go out is long and skinny, so you must duck your head the whole way and then when you finally emerge it's an intimidating, loud sea of red, right on top of you.

Chapman: Did you ever have those same visions of KSU Stadium?

Whitley: One of my best KSU memories is, I've always wondered what it would be like to have a home stadium with multiple levels. We didn't have what the current players are playing in. As a Golden Cat (former players club) I got the chance to go out to the middle of our current midfield and spun around looking at the whole place and taking in all the purple fans. I will always have this as a favorite memory.

Chapman: But what about when you were playing?

Whitley: I did, in fact, I remember going out there and wondering where everyone was? But the worst part was that old cocaine Willie mascot painted in the center of the field. Things were different back then. The turf was not soft, and the mascot was not part of the turf, it was a hard, painted surface that was not fun to fall on, slick to run on and was just a place to avoid all together.

Chapman: Have you gone back recently?

Wildcat Legend Eddy “Snow” Whitley

by Jeff Chapman, Contributing Writer for The Manhattan Mercury

Whitley: Yes and of course we were told strictly that we could not go out on the field, but I did anyway, I wanted to compare the midfield memories of doing that before there and at NU and OU, and I was so impressed to see the actual crowd, the difference. It was awesome! So much purple.

Chapman: How did you go from KSU to the next level?

Whitley: I was playing really well my Junior and Senior years and the coaching staff was promoting me to the agents and the NFL. I got invited to play in the East-West Shrine Bowl and the Blue Grey Bowl game which was fun to get to play on tv and that was how the Baltimore Colts discovered me.

Chapman: I am assuming draft day wasn't the circus it is today, no television cameras following you, the whole family sitting by the phone?

Whitley: Haha, no. I was drafted in the 10th or 11th round and I was just happy it happened. I thought I was going to stick around and finish my degree, until I got the NFL bug and started to work out for training camp.

Chapman: And then, you got the call and went to the Colts. How was it?

Whitley: My first NFL training camp in Baltimore was 3 weeks straight over one hundred degrees and one of those blistering practice days, I suffered from heat exhaustion. My old leg injury was really bothering me and I was just not feeling well. I overheated so badly the training ordered coolers full of ice, had several linemen carry me out to a waiting ambulance. I believe that overheating occurrence and my old high jump lingering injury kept surfacing at just the wrong time in tryouts for Baltimore Colts, St. Louis Cardinals, and the San Francisco 49ers and even in the USFL.

Chapman: That must have been very frustrating.

Whitley: It was and to be so talented and competitive and then have debilitating pain at critical moments was just bad luck. One guy always said, 'You can't make the club in the tub!'

Chapman: You were on or almost on some great teams though.

Whitley: Yes, it was fun and heartbreaking to watch Joe Montana, Dwight Clark and even my friend from high school, Bobby Leopold go on to win a Superbowl the year I was cut.

Chapman: Who do you remember playing with the most at SF?

Whitley: Ronnie Lott could hit! Being tackled by him was most memorable.

Wildcat Legend Eddy “Snow” Whitley

by Jeff Chapman, Contributing Writer for The Manhattan Mercury

Chapman: Did you catch passes from Joe Montana? Was he a good guy in person?

Whitley: Yeah, but only for a few games in the pre-season and in practice. He had such great touch on the ball. He always through very catchable passes. Montana was such a great guy. One day after practice everyone was gone, but me. I had no car, little money and was living across the street. I was accustomed to grabbing some Burger King for dinner and sticking close by. He asked me “Whitley what are you doing?” and I said, nothing. I don’t know anyone, don’t have a car. Joe said, “Get ready, meet me in 30 minutes, We are going to a bar.” So, Joe Montana, drives me to dinner and at the bar were the other receivers, Dwight Clark and Freddy Solomon. The place was full of single women, and everyone was having a great time. Of course, nobody knew who I was so after a while, I decided to leave, this just wasn’t for me and Joe says, “Just take my car. I have plenty of rides home!” (Hahaha) as he pointed to the ladies. This was before they won their first Super Bowl.

Chapman: So, after a few years of frustration with injuries and almost making teams, you finished your degree at K-State?

Whitley: Two things happened. One day in the 49’ers locker room when everyone else was hootin’ and hollerin’ I noticed one teammate off in the corner reading a book. So, I approached him, and he was reading The Power of Positive Thinking. I went and got a copy, read it, and started to believe in it. The second thing that happened was I got a call from my old professor Chuck Burton who invited me to come back to Manhattan and get my degree. He and his wife offered to help me find a job and have a place to stay while doing it. So, I accepted it. I returned and it took another 2.5 years, but I finished.

Chapman: Wow, that’s pretty awesome and generous. Did you get involved with the football team?

Whitley: NO! I actually stayed away from football all together. The coaches were all different anyway and I wanted to stay focused on graduating. I did some odd jobs around town and went to some basketball games in Ahearn. Once I got situated into being a student again, I reconnected with an old girl friend from K-State, who eventually became my wife. Her name is Tracie Dittmore. She worked for the BIG 8 Conference office at the time.

Chapman: How did you end up in Kansas City?

Whitley: Tracie and I decided after living in different cities, it was time to test our relationship in the same city. My first job after graduation was in St. Louis, so we moved and married in St. Louis, MO. After a few years in St. Louis, we decided to move to Kansas City.

Wildcat Legend Eddy “Snow” Whitley

by Jeff Chapman, Contributing Writer for The Manhattan Mercury

Over many years, I was able to work for several companies, gaining construction and sales experience which aided me in finally being in the right place, at the right time, with the right credentials which eventually led me to ownership of Whitley Construction Company, LLC now.

Chapman: Tell me about your family, Tracie, and Grace.

Whitley: Tracie is very accomplished and was working for the Big 8 Conference at the time we met. She went on to work for the NCAA. She and I share a love for K-State and sports.

Whitley: Grace, our daughter, Went to Bishop Miege and was a division 1 volleyball player who played at the University of Oklahoma until she had a career ending injury. I thought I could get her into the construction business, but she ended up in the make-up industry and works with models and weddings and is very successful so far in the Kansas City area.

Chapman: You mentioned that in your career you got laid off. What happened?

Whitley: Following the 2008 stock market crash and recession, I found myself without a job. At that same time, Coach Bill Snyder started hosting career days and connecting former players with upperclassman current players to help mentor and connect them to opportunities. So, I volunteered and while mentoring others, I also carried my own resume around and got recruited into the insurance business doing sales. I was pretty good at it, but it wasn't my passion.

Chapman: You told the Rotary Club a great story about how you got a chance to own your own company. How did that happen?

Whitley: About 20 years ago there was an interest for municipalities to start working officially with minority businesses and during that time, a company called Allied, which was affiliated with JE Dunn, reached out to me to be a minority representative on a construction contract, and from that moment forward, as I proved myself in the industry, the opportunity to own my own construction business was afforded to me and I have now owned Whitley Construction in Lees Summit for 15 years, specializing in high end interior finishes for many well known projects around KC.

Chapman: What are your thoughts on Bill Snyder?

Whitley: Bill is just so great. Coach Snyder is a true leader, gentleman, who has done so much for so many people. What he does for his players, young men who start with nothing and end up with opportunities and leadership qualities and education that would otherwise be impossible is truly special.

Wildcat Legend Eddy “Snow” Whitley

by Jeff Chapman, Contributing Writer for The Manhattan Mercury

Chapman: What do you think of the K-State football program today compared to 1980?

Whitley: When I think of the opportunities, the facilities, the fans, the entire city of Manhattan, and people all over the country now as supporters of the program it is wild, but it kinda makes me wish I could have played in that type of environment. I am proud to have been a part of that program because of it, while there were times in the past when I may not have felt the same.

Chapman: Powercat or cocaine Willie?

Whitley: (Laughs and laughs) Oh, I like them both. I like that K-State has stuck with the traditional uniforms in football and brought back the lavender in basketball. The Powercat is sleek and sharp and is a symbol of success. “Cocaine” Willie, reminds me of my days in school, tradition, excellent basketball, and Big 8 history. So, I like anything purple, lavender or K-State Wildcats!



Eddie Whitley 1979

Published in the Manhattan Mercury January 3, 2025

Link: https://themercury.com/k_state_sports/former-1970s-ksu-standout-eddy-snow-whitley-remembers-his-time-in-manhattan/article_7a5647a4-c6e0-11ef-abe9-1310fcc5986d.html