

Sports / Saskatchewan Roughriders / Local Sports / Football / CFL

## Former Roughriders president and CEO Jim Hopson has died

*Hopson died on Tuesday at the age of 73*

Taylor Shire

Published Apr 03, 2024 • Last updated 22 hours ago • 4 minute read

☐ Join the conversation



Former Roughriders president and CEO Jim Hopson in 2014. PHOTO BY DON HEALY /Regina Leader-Post

Jim Hopson has died at the age of 73.

The Saskatchewan Roughriders confirmed the news on Wednesday morning that their former president and CEO died on Tuesday after a three-year battle with colon cancer.

“As president, Jim ushered in a new era for our organization that included two Grey Cup championships, incredible financial success, and perhaps most importantly, a belief in Roughrider football that will never fade away,” current Roughriders president and CEO Craig Reynolds said in a statement. “But more than that, Jim was an optimist, someone who made you feel better by just being around him and a friend to all who knew him.

“On behalf of Rider Nation, I want to send our condolences to Brenda, Tyler and Carrie, as well as our thanks for everything Jim brought to our team, and our community.”

After playing along the offensive line for his hometown Roughriders from 1973 to 1976, Hopson joined the front office years later as he was named the club’s first full-time president and CEO in 2005. He remained in the role until his retirement in 2015.

During his time as president and CEO, Hopson guided the club to substantial growth and helped turn the Roughriders into a marquee franchise in the Canadian Football League.

On the field, the team appeared in four Grey Cups during his tenure — winning twice — while setting record profits off the field. He also helped set the foundation for the construction of a new stadium in the city.

Hopson was originally diagnosed with colon cancer on April 9, 2021, and underwent 46 chemotherapy treatments and two surgeries during his battle.

This past September, Hopson started another treatment, but it eventually proved to not be effective and on Jan. 10, he was informed there were no further treatment options.

“The diagnosis is not good,” Hopson told the Leader-Post in January. “We knew this day was going to come.

“At the end of the day, I’m going to be 73 here pretty quick and I’ve had a great run; a great life.”

Born in Regina in 1951, Hopson attended Imperial School before graduating from Thom Collegiate. He earned an education degree at the University of Regina while also playing for the Regina Rams junior football team and eventually the Roughriders.

For all the work he did in the CFL, Hopson received many honours including an induction into the Canadian Football Hall of Fame in 2019. He also received the Saskatchewan Centennial Medal in 2005, the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012, the CFL’s Hugh Campbell Distinguished Leadership Award in 2014 and a University of Regina Alumni Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award in 2015.

In 2018, he was inducted into the Saskatchewan Roughriders’ Plaza of Honour before being inducted into the Regina Sports Hall of Fame and Mike Ditka’s Gridiron Greats Assistance Fund Hall of Fame in 2022.

“As my predecessors on the Board of Directors began the search for the first full-time president of the Saskatchewan Roughriders Football Club, they were looking for someone who could dream big and harness all the potential that our organization had to offer,” Roughriders board chair Dave Pettigrew said in a statement. “Jim Hopson took that challenge and exceeded all expectations, setting the standard for Rider pride.

“Jim’s contributions to the club, to Canadian football and to the community will never be forgotten, nor will the warmth and joy he brought to every conversation. He will be immensely missed.”

There will be a celebration of life for Hopson at the Conexus Arts Centre on May 3.

### **Statement from CFL commissioner Randy Ambrosie**

“Jim liked to tell people he was just a big, old offensive lineman. That sounded like self deprecation to some. But fellow members of the most unique fraternity in sport understood that he was really signalling his pride, in having blocked for the likes of Lancaster and Reed, and the responsibility he felt, to protect his beloved Saskatchewan Roughriders and grow the game.

”The truth is Jim could have left out the part about being big — that was obvious to all of us who were fortunate enough to know him. And it wasn’t just his physical stature. His beaming smile, his loud voice, his crushing handshake — and most of all, his dreams for football in Saskatchewan — were only available in size XXXL.

”As the Riders’ first full-time president and CEO, he played an equally big role in the transformation of the Saskatchewan Roughriders from the little engine that could to a powerhouse of a modern franchise, working with the team’s talented Board of Directors and passionate fan base.

“His many CFL friends are grateful for his contributions, which have earned him a place in the Canadian Football Hall of Fame, as we mourn his passing, and send our sympathies to his beloved Brenda, family and friends.”

<https://thestarphoenix.com/sports/football/cfl/saskatchewan-roughriders/sports-hopson-dies/wcm/c1e7ea72-1330-446b-8045-2fa9cb5e16aa>

The Conexus Centre will be full of Green and White. (With warmer weather, they could have filled Mosaic Stadium.) I wonder with what antics? I might go to it, but the likelihood that Brad Wall will give the eulogy discourages me. Jim and his friend Ralph Eliasson were old-time Saskatchewan Liberals—the best political party we have ever had, after the party got Ross Thatcher out of its system—so I can see how Mr. Wall and Jim could have become friends, with the Liberals having been absorbed into the Saskatchewan Party (with Conservative “partners” soon overwhelming them), moving in the circles they did, each managing highly political profiles. So I can forgive Jim. I once ripped Brad Wall to Jim, and he laughed really hard enjoying my invective. Brad Wall did more than anyone to undermine this province, selling it out. Like Ralph Klein, he saw the parade and where it was going, and set to getting a seat at the front. And the Sask Party saw Dear Bradley as the guy who could sell this to the public. I have no doubt that the Sask Party tried to recruit Jim with the offer of a senior cabinet position, but he was too savvy to bite. (They got Gene Makowsky instead, and only for Social Services, the Cabinet portfolio no one else in the Caucus wants.) And why try to replace the fun of being Rider CEO with the headaches, hypocrisy, and disturbing compromises of neoliberal politics? TJB

I knew Jim well. While I was Youth Care Facilitator (YCF) for Regina Area Shared Service Plan (RASSP) doing crisis intervention in five rural school divisions from Regina to Saskatoon during the 1990's Farm Crisis, Jim as Superintendent for Buffalo Plains School Division was my supervisor. RASSP politics was a constant challenge to manage and navigate through—my predecessor got fired by Easter of the first year—but primarily with Jim's support (and that of his friend Ralph Eliasson with Long Lake/Last Mountain School Division), we managed to keep the program running for the next five years till it was shut down in an "innovative" cost-cutting move. Essentially, a social worker was hired in a replacement model at 2/3 the salary I made as a teacher-psychologist. There might have been more to it than that—beyond Ministry brainwaves being enacted, in such decision-making the makers of them can decide "it's time for a change" when it is not them being discarded—but I/we had a good run doing good work systems now dampen so fixated on public image, "professional ethics," and "ass-covering" avoidance of risk.

Jim and I drank a few beers together, and at a difficult time in his personal life, Jim shared a few things with his YCF. I am honored to have been trusted by Jim; he may have mastered "old school," but was very imaginative, bright, and street smart, with superior instincts and intuition. I also knew that if I was going to venture into such territory with Jim Hopson, I would regret any disloyalty to him. But the confidence I had in him, and the gains in my work let me carefully "break a few rules" in confidentiality and professional ethics to get a kid help, and to provide insight and context to improve a school.

Jim had a wicked sense of humour, and he turned it on himself as much as anyone. He made wry comments about his "good looks." (If I had met Dave Dickenson, I would have teased him he got the head coaching job with the Riders because of his resemblance to Jim.) Stories from his Riders days were self-deprecating. "What was it like facing John Helton?" "I didn't know if the son of a bitch was going to run over me or around me." "I complained to the ref about a holding penalty on a passing play; he gave me another next play with George running. Thank God Ronnie and Steve Mazurek hooked up on a long pass to bail me out of trouble with Eagle." (Jim always gave his pal Steve credit for the marketing genius that saved the Riders as much as anything.) Trips to Ken Preston's office were a dismissive lesson in what "negotiation" was not. Jim played one season with a separated shoulder, which must have been both excruciatingly painful and hampering; only towards the end of my RASSP tenure did Jim lick his painkiller addiction. Jim always felt "on the bubble" of competence as a lineman—even though, for a big man, he was as nimble on his feet as I have ever seen—so not playing could have been the end of his career as someone claimed his place on the starting line, and then the roster. Jim is another one of those people we may well never see the likes of again. TJB