

# WHERE ARE THEY NOW? Jeff Pyburn

Patrick Garbin | Staff



JEFF PYBURN: (L to R) Georgia quarterback-turned-professional baseball player-turned-longtime lawyer in Arizona.

The son of a two-sport All-American at Auburn, Major League Baseball player, and a Georgia defensive assistant for 16 seasons, Jim Pyburn, Jeff was a *Parade* All-American quarterback as a senior in 1976 at Cedar Shoals High School. Recruited by most every major school in the country, Pyburn chose to stay close to home at Georgia.

On the gridiron, Pyburn was the Bulldogs' starting quarterback in 1977, 1978, and the beginning of the 1979 season before experiencing some adversity, only to end his football career on a fitting, winning note. As an All-SEC baseball player, Pyburn hit for a .345 career average in three seasons, and remains the only Bulldog to hit 30 home runs and steal 30 bases in a career. But, perhaps more so, Pyburn excelled in the classroom as an Academic All-American, was known for his Christian values and, according to Vince Dooley, was the "hardest worker I've ever seen."

Pyburn, the fifth overall pick of the 1980 MLB Draft—the highest a Bulldog has ever been chosen—hit .295, had an on-base percentage of nearly .400, and stole 74 bases in three seasons in the San Diego Padres organization before, remarkably, being invited to the Buffalo Bills' training camp as a defensive back nearly four years since he had last played football.

Ever since Pyburn's professional sports career ended in 1983, he has lived and work in Arizona. The following is our recent Q&A session—a real treat for me since some of my very first memories of Georgia football involve Jeff. At just a few years old, I knew of Jeff Pyburn as not only the Bulldogs' starting quarterback, but a Georgia player who had grown up just a stone's throw away from where I was living in Athens.

**PG: Jeff, you and I have at least one thing in common: We both grew up on the eastside of Athens. Where did you live?**

JP: I lived in the Green Acres neighborhood. There were a number of assistant coaches at the time living over in those areas [on the eastside]. Erk Russell lived over there. Coach [Joel] Eaves, the athletic director, had a house not

too far from us. Coach [Bill] Pace (offensive coordinator, 1974-1979) lived nearby in Cedar Creek. There were some others, I believe.

**PG: With National Signing Day coming up, I have to ask you about your recruiting process. Since you were from Athens, and your father was an assistant coach for the Bulldogs, was there any doubt you'd attend the University of Georgia?**

JP: There was a *huge* doubt. My Dad being there, quite frankly, was an issue against Georgia. I had some options, but a game changer for me is that I wanted to play two sports. It came down to Georgia and another school. On my official visit to that other school, I went to a big party and spoke with a former player, and asked what was the “real deal”—could I play two sports there? He was brutally honest and said that the school might tell you that you can, but they will put a lot of pressure on you not to play two sports. I didn't want to have to fight that fight. On the other hand at Georgia, Andy Johnson (Bulldogs quarterback, 1971-1973) had been my idol growing up, and he had been able to play two sports. So, after weighing everything, I thought staying home was the right decision for me, primarily considering the fact I'd be given the opportunity to play both football and baseball.

**PG: Did your dad take part in your recruiting process at all?**

JP: No, Sam Mitchell (secondary coach), who recently passed away, primarily recruited me. In fact, he helped me in my decision of whether to come to Georgia or not because my dad was an assistant coach. He said, “Look, Jeff, your dad is going to be on the other side of the ball. If he was going to be your position coach, it might be a different deal [on whether to go to UGA or not]. But, he's going to be coaching guys to take your head off.”

**PG: You came to Georgia as an “all-everything” quarterback, but were moved to halfback on the 1976 varsity team (starting quarterback for freshman team). Of course, back then, not too many true freshmen played on the varsity. What was that experience like?**

JP: With seniors Ray Goff and Matt Robinson in front of me at quarterback, I knew I wasn't going to play much there. Plus, I think it was the first day of two-a-days, I injured my knee and was out several weeks rehabbing it which, thankfully, didn't require surgery. But, yes, I got some time at halfback as a true freshman (10 carries), and I was on the kickoff coverage team and ran back some kickoffs (second on the team in kickoff returns). I recall my first game against Alabama in '76. And, I have a vivid recollection of my first play. I wanted to be the first guy down the field on the kickoff, and I'm just hauling it. Then, some guy from Alabama came across the field and really hit me up under the chin. It felt like he sent me into the upper deck of Sanford Stadium—it was like, “Welcome to the SEC, son!”

(Notably, for Georgia's first offensive play against Alabama in 1976, Pyburn threw a long halfback pass to speedster Gene Washington, which was called for defensive pass interference. Resulting a couple of games later against Vanderbilt, Pyburn has the distinction of completing the only pass for the Bulldogs in a game—an 11-yarder on another halfback pass—and, two days later as the freshman team's quarterback, passing for a touchdown in a win for the Bullpups over Auburn.)

**PG: While at Georgia, was playing baseball ever an issue—did it conflict with playing football?**

JP: It never was an issue with me. I went through some spring football practice if we didn't have a baseball game on those days. But, if we had a game, I'd play baseball that day. I played baseball for three seasons, missing my first year (1977) when I made the choice to not play baseball because I wanted to concentrate on winning the starting quarterback job.

**PG: Jeff, if someone was to look in the record books, they'd see you were the starting quarterback for Vince Dooley's only losing year as a head coach (5-6 in 1977). But, to be fair, when you started for Georgia in '77**

**and played at least a quarter before *not* having to leave a game because of an injury, the Bulldogs were 5-2 that season. You had some injuries your sophomore season, huh?**

JP: Yeah, I hurt my knee in the South Carolina game, and missed the Alabama game the following week. Against Florida [with Georgia leading 7-0 late in the first quarter and driving for another touchdown in an eventual loss], I got run out of bounds. There was a sprinkler system in a hole in the ground which happened to not have its cover on. I stepped into that hole as I got run out of bounds. My cleats got caught up in the wiring and stuff down in the hole, and it just destroyed my knee. I had to have major surgery after that.

**PG: You started every game the following season for the great “Wonderdogs”—the 1978 Georgia team which was preseason picked towards the bottom of the SEC, but finished with a 9-1-1 regular-season record. How did you guys improve so instantly, particularly the offense, after going 5-6 the year before?**

JP: Coming off the knee surgery, I had a bad “wheel” after running the ball a whole lot in ’77. It was decided that we’d go from the Veer offense to the I-formation partly because they knew I wasn’t going to be able to run as much. If you’re going to run the Veer option, your quarterback is going to get the heck knocked out of him a lot. In addition, we had laid the ball on the carpet a whole bunch in ’77 (school records: 57 fumbles, 35 fumbles lost). The “I” was more of a conservative style offense, and we had a stud tailback: Willie [McClendon] was a physical, classic I-formation tailback. It was a brilliant change on offense. We didn’t beat ourselves, like we did the year before. And, on the other side of the ball, we played good, solid defense.

**PG: With you as the starting quarterback for your senior season of 1979, Georgia started off 0-3 with the three losses coming by only a combined 13 points. Suddenly, sophomore Buck Belue is the starter. There’s a misconception that you got yanked from the starting role because of performance, when actually you were injured. Nevertheless, when Belue was injured against Auburn, you had a memorable and fitting moment by starting again under center at Georgia Tech for your final game, and leading the underdog Bulldogs to a 16-3 win. Tell me about your adversity-filled senior year.**

JP: Yeah, those were some tough losses at the beginning of the season. I had separated my shoulder in one of those three games, so I was hurt. For what had been a frustrating senior year, the Georgia Tech game was a great way to finish my career at Georgia. If memory serves, I think we threw the ball more that game than any other game I had played in at Georgia (Pyburn completed 14 of 22 passes). We had a pretty good day against the “Bumble Bees.”

**PG: You spoke of Erk Russell earlier. Something I’ve always found intriguing is that *allformer* players during his time—not just defensive players, but guys on offense and special teams, and even those who were part of the team, but might have never set foot on the field—have great memories of him. What do you remember most about Coach Russell?**

JP: From the coaching staff, Erk Russell was our—I’ll use the term—“emotional leader.” If anybody was going to give a pregame speech, it was Coach Russell. [The speech] was always humorous, but always inspiring and motivational. The simple thing that everybody remembers about Coach Russell, which meant the world to us players and has always sat in my mind, was the “bull in the ring.” Before the game, he would get in the middle of the defensive linemen, and he’d point each player out. One by one, they’d run at him, and he’d butt them with his bare, bald head. His forehead would be all cut up, blood running down his face, and guys would be willing to go kill for him. It would scab over during the week, but then it would open back up during the next “bull in the ring” session.

**PG: You quickly moved up—going from A to AA to AAA in three years—within the San Diego Padres organization, and were destined for the Major Leagues. However, you suddenly gave football a try. What happened?**

JP: After my third year in the Padres organization, the Buffalo Bills called me. They drafted me after my senior season, and had retained the rights to me. A few years later (summer of 1983), the Bills had gotten some guys hurt in their defensive secondary and, I thought, not many guys get to do this (play in the NFL), so I went up to Buffalo. Just before the season started, I tore my knee up again but, this time, it was a career-ending injury—no more football *or* baseball. In retrospect, I probably should've just continued playing baseball, but I didn't. It was just one of those things—injuries happen.

**PG: What did you do when you realized playing sports professionally was no longer an option?**

JP: At first, I didn't know what the heck I was going to do with myself. But, I had bought a house in 1980 in Arizona to live in during the offseason while playing baseball. And, they must have been letting dumb jocks into the Arizona State Law School that year, so I went to law school out here (in Arizona). And, I have lived in the Phoenix area ever since. Since graduating law school, I've been with the same firm, Gallagher & Kennedy, the entire time. They haven't fired me yet (chuckling).

**PG: Are you married, and have any kids?**

JP: Yes, my wife's name is Melanie. I have three kids from a previous marriage. My youngest, Will, is a redshirt freshman quarterback at Jacksonville State. He's 6-foot-5 and a lefty, and has a better arm than I ever had. My daughter, Aubrey, is a junior volleyball player at The Master's College—a Christian college in California. She's my toughest kid. My oldest son, Jay, was a 300-pound offensive lineman at Montana Tech.

**PG: Do you ever make it back to Athens, and what's your current association with the UGA football program?**

JP: I try to get back once a year, or once every other year. Last time I was there was the Clemson game two years ago (2014). Now that I have a son playing, my trips to the South this past year were to Jacksonville, Alabama. But, I really enjoyed my time in Athens, and loved the university. It had a big impact on my life, and opened a lot of doors for me. And, I'll be forever grateful for that. The friendships I have with my college teammates are friendships that I'll have for a lifetime. You've gone to war together and been through a lot together, especially two-a-days and Coach [John] Kasay's (the former strength and conditioning coach) offseason workouts—all that stuff creates a special bond that you just don't get with other people. The discipline, the motivation, and the hard work—all the lessons you learn while playing football—really pay benefits when you have to get out in the real world and do something other than try to go knock somebody's head off.