JOHN WILLITS

John Willits was your classic Castro Valley athlete. He started in soccer and Little League while attending Chabot Elementary, then added basketball, wrestling and track while at Canyon Middle School. Most important, he wanted to play football at Castro Valley High, just as brother Jeff had. Same position (running back). Same number (34).

“All the other sports, I pretty much didn’t care about,” he noted. “I just wanted to play football.” And that he did, starting on the freshman team, but promoted to the varsity by season’s end.

In his three-plus varsity seasons, he earned Hayward Area Athletic League Offensive Player of the Year honors, as well as two-way all-league status at running back and linebacker. All while serving as the team’s punter and chief kick returner. He also competed in soccer and track at CVHS.

One of John’s most vivid sports memories came after he decided to take his football talents to Chabot College. That’s where he found himself lining up alongside brothers Jeff and Joe, both of whom had decided to resume their education at the Hayward campus.

“All three of us were on the field at the same time. It was incredible,” said John, who played safety as a freshman at Chabot.

That lasted one season, after which only John returned to the Gladiators for a second year. This time, he was back at his favorite position -- running back -- and once again winning Offensive Player of the Year honors.

After Chabot, Willits went on to Benedictine College, an NAIA school in Atchison, Kansas, where he won a national rushing title and earned an invitation to the NFL Combine.

“It was the best decision of my life,” he now says of his college choice. “I loved the lifestyle … the outdoor life, the cornfields, the snow. It was the exact opposite of what I knew and grew up with. I became a part of Atchison. Everyone in the town went to our football games. Kids coming up to me in the locker room wanting my autograph. Everybody knew who I was.”

John eventually turned down the opportunity to attend the combine, with no regrets. “I try to look at the positive side: no knee injuries or head problems,” he noted.