

Withers, Bowl Team Member, Missile Age Soldier

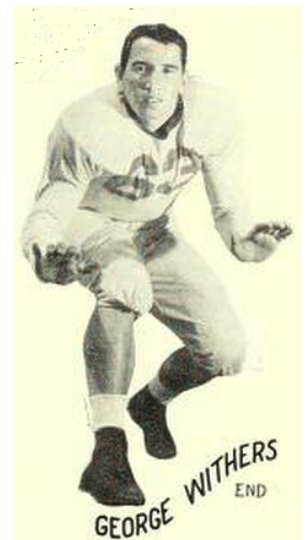
Imagine the difference between December in Florida and the same month in New Mexico. George Wesley Withers, Class of '53, spent three of the last Decembers of his young life in these vastly different climates.

Withers entered Clemson from the small textile town of Spencer, North Carolina. A textile manufacturing major, he joined the football team where he earned a starting role on defense. As such, Withers journeyed to Florida with head coach Frank Howard and his Tiger teammates to participate in successive bowl games, the 1951 Orange and the 1952 Gator.



In addition to his studies and football, Withers found time for membership in the Block C Club which he served as treasurer. An ROTC cadet, Withers attended summer training at Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland.

Howard's 1950 Tigers were among his most successful squads. They opened the season with three straight shutouts, beating Presbyterian, Missouri and North Carolina State by a combined 115-0! The Big Thursday game in Columbia proved to be the only blemish on a perfect season as the Tigers needed a late field goal to tie the Gamecocks. Six consecutive wins closed out the season, including a 40-0 shellacking of those other Tigers in Auburn. A regular season record of 8-0-1 earned the Tigers a ticket to the Orange Bowl and a match-up against hometown Miami. In a storied contest, the Tigers prevailed 15-14 on the strength of Sterling Smith's tackle of a Miami runner in the end zone for a safety.



Withers, wearing #63, started for the Tigers at right defensive end in a day when most offenses relied on the running game. Standing 6 feet, 2 inches tall, the lanky Withers tipped the scales at a lean 173 pounds. In 1951, Withers and the Tigers battled to a 7-3 finish and a #19 final ranking. They closed the season back in Florida where they lost a rematch to Miami in the 1952 Gator Bowl. The '51 Orange and '52 Gator Bowls were Clemson's first back-to-back post-season appearances.

Withers graduated from Clemson and was assigned to the Army's White Sands Proving Ground in New Mexico. It was the dawn of the Missile Age and Clemson men, as usual, were among the leaders in the new technology. Rocket science was evolving into missile technology and the Army was testing and modifying new versions of its Nike missile in the New Mexico desert.

On December 3, 1954, Withers crammed his lanky frame into the observer's seat of a small airplane. His mission that Friday was to spot missiles as they were fired down range. At around 1 pm, Withers was killed when the plane crashed.

Withers was survived by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. B. R. Withers of Spencer, North Carolina and was buried at the Salisbury National Cemetery.