

The Purple Gold Diggers

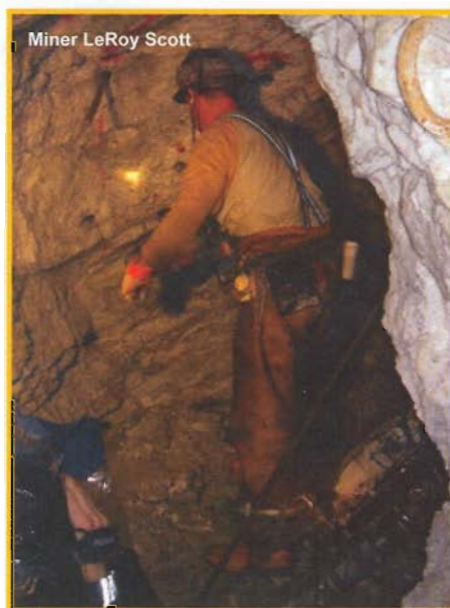
More than 30 years after investing in a gold mine, several former Vikings are excited about a return to the jackpot.

In a high-rise office building, a Hollywood executive stares blankly at a nervous screenwriter making a pitch for the next epic movie blockbuster.

"Go ahead, kid. I'm a busy man. You've got 30 seconds. Talk to me."

"OK. It's like this. An NFL player convinces his buddies to buy into a gold mine after he hears from a long-lost relative who may not be related to him at all. They put the money in, time goes by, nothing happens and most of them give up — except the main character. Oh yeah. He travels the world and spends time in the Middle East in the 1980s. James Bond kind of stuff. He ends up in Idaho in a town of 25 people and a grizzled old guy with a divining rod that can find gold. Did I mention he went to the same school as the Unabomber? Oh yeah. And one of his best friends is a composer who has won a bunch of Academy Awards. I tell you, it has everything. It's a John Wayne western. It has football. It has Hollywood. It's Platoon. It's Titanic. It's got a Frank Capra ending. I tell you, it can't miss!"

Moments later, the silence is broken by the executive saying, "Are you kidding? Nobody will ever believe it. Beat it, kid, before I call security."



With that and a flick of the wrist the script of The John Beasley Story hits a gold-plated wastebasket.

In a sport filled with the lore and tales of accomplishment, Hollywood and football have had a long and storied marriage. They often push the believability envelope to extremes in order to assure a happy ending, but some of the strangest tales are the ones that are true and not the work of Hollywood

revisionist history.

John Beasley, a Vikings tight end from 1967-73, always dreamed of being an NFL golden boy. Instead, he had to settle for being the Silver King ... at least for a while.

In January 1970, just two weeks removed from the heartbreaking Super Bowl IV loss to Kansas City, Beasley received a letter from Joseph Beasley Jr. of Lovelock, Nev. The latter was convinced the two were related. John thought Joe was nuts — or some obsessive, deluded fan bragging he's related to an NFL player — and ignored the letter. A year later, Beasley received another letter — but this one was different. Joe Beasley was still convinced they were related, but this note came on the letterhead of Humbolt Silver Company and listed the other Beasley as its president.

"He told me I could make \$60,000 in the offseason," John Beasley said. "That was more than I was making playing football, so I was definitely interested in what he had to say then."

Following the 1971 season, Beasley prepared to fly to Reno to see his long-lost "relative" and told his bizarre story to sportswriter Bruce Bennett of The Duluth News Tribune. The Associated Press picked



Bob Berry, John Beasley (back), Jim Marshall, Bob Lurtsema

up Bennett's story and it went nationwide.

"Guys around the league started calling me the Silver King after that," Beasley said. "It really made the rounds and got a lot of publicity."

The promises of Joe Beasley proved to be incorrect. Not only were Joe and John not related, but Joe's monetary promises fell short as well.

"I didn't even come close to making \$60,000," Beasley said. "I wish I had made that kind of money. But if I had, (the Vikings) probably would have cut my pay."

While everything fell through with the non-related Beasley, John still found promise in the mountains. Instead of silver, he got bitten by the gold bug and stories of untold millions buried deep in the Montana and Idaho mountains. Thanks to the publicity generated from the first story, former Vikings general manager Jim Finks made an introduction between Beasley and a friend of his in the gold mining industry that kept his interest piqued.

"By the time it was determined Joe Beasley and I weren't related, I had a real interest in the mining business," John said. "The more I learned about it, the more I thought there might be something here."

When he returned to Minnesota in 1973, he was looking to invest in the Golden Chest – a mine in the nearly abandoned town of Murray, Idaho – a town with 25 people, no running water and two taverns. He sought out several teammates and coaches to join him in purchasing an interest in the mine. In the end, he found 10 others – Bob Berry, Frank Gallagher, John Henderson, Joe Kapp, Bob Lurtsema, Jocko Nelson, Jack Patera, Mike Wells, Nate Wright and Godfrey Zaunbrecher – willing to pony up anywhere between \$1,000 and \$2,000 to get in the venture.

"Some people thought we were just a bunch of airheads – and maybe they were right," Zaunbrecher said. "We knew we might never see anything come of it, but John did a great selling job. He was excited about it and it got us excited at the prospect, too."

Backed with support money, Beasley bought an interest in the Golden Chest from Johnny Green – a four-time Academy Award-winning composer. A teen piano prodigy, Green was discovered by George Gershwin and went on to be the composer for many of Hollywood's top musicals of the era, including Oscar wins for "Easter Parade" with Judy Garland and Fred Astaire, "An American in Paris" with Gene Kelly and later for the films "West Side Story" and "Oliver!" These two were quite an odd couple, but became fast friends – leading to some interesting moments with some of Hollywood's top stars.

"We were pretty much like Mutt and Jeff," Beasley said. "He was a little guy and I was pretty big, so we looked a little different when we'd enter a room. Everyone in Hollywood knew Johnny and he would take me to some of the big parties. Celebrities would introduce themselves to me and ask who I was. I would tell them, 'I run Johnny's gold mine.' Their reactions to that were great. It was a lot of fun."

What wasn't fun, however, was that the market for gold would soon bottom out. The costs of extracting gold are high, meaning that not only does a significant amount of gold need to be found, but the market needs to be at a level to make selling it profitable. Both were issues and years passed with nothing happening, but Beasley never let the investment project get too far out of his sights. But, needing to support his family, Beasley reluctantly put the Golden Chest on the back burner.

A Cal-Berkley graduate, Beasley took a job with Gulf Oil in Houston and advanced to the position of hemisphere chief based out of London. His travels often took him into the Middle East during a time of heightened tension between U.S. interests during the turnover of power in Iran in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He visited several

countries in the region, from U.S.-friendly Saudi Arabia to U.S.-iffy Libya. Travelling the world several times over, Beasley never forgot his football buddies who had put their money where his mouth – or at least his recommendation – was.

"My feeling was that you never desert a teammate or a friend," Beasley said. "It wasn't a lot of money we invested in the big picture of things, but at the time, if you invested \$2,000, that was a significant portion of your annual paycheck. I felt I owed the guys who invested in the mine to keep managing it and make sure that we wouldn't give up."

Part of Beasley's unwavering optimism came from the way the Golden Chest had been mined almost a century before. He had no clue how much gold would be found, but he did know there was gold to be had.

"I knew it was in there simply because

of how the old-timers mined it," Beasley said. "They didn't take it all. If they couldn't visually see it, they couldn't take it. They didn't have the technology we have now that can help determine if there is gold and where it's at. They left it because they had no other choice. We basically decided to use technology and metallurgy to get it out."

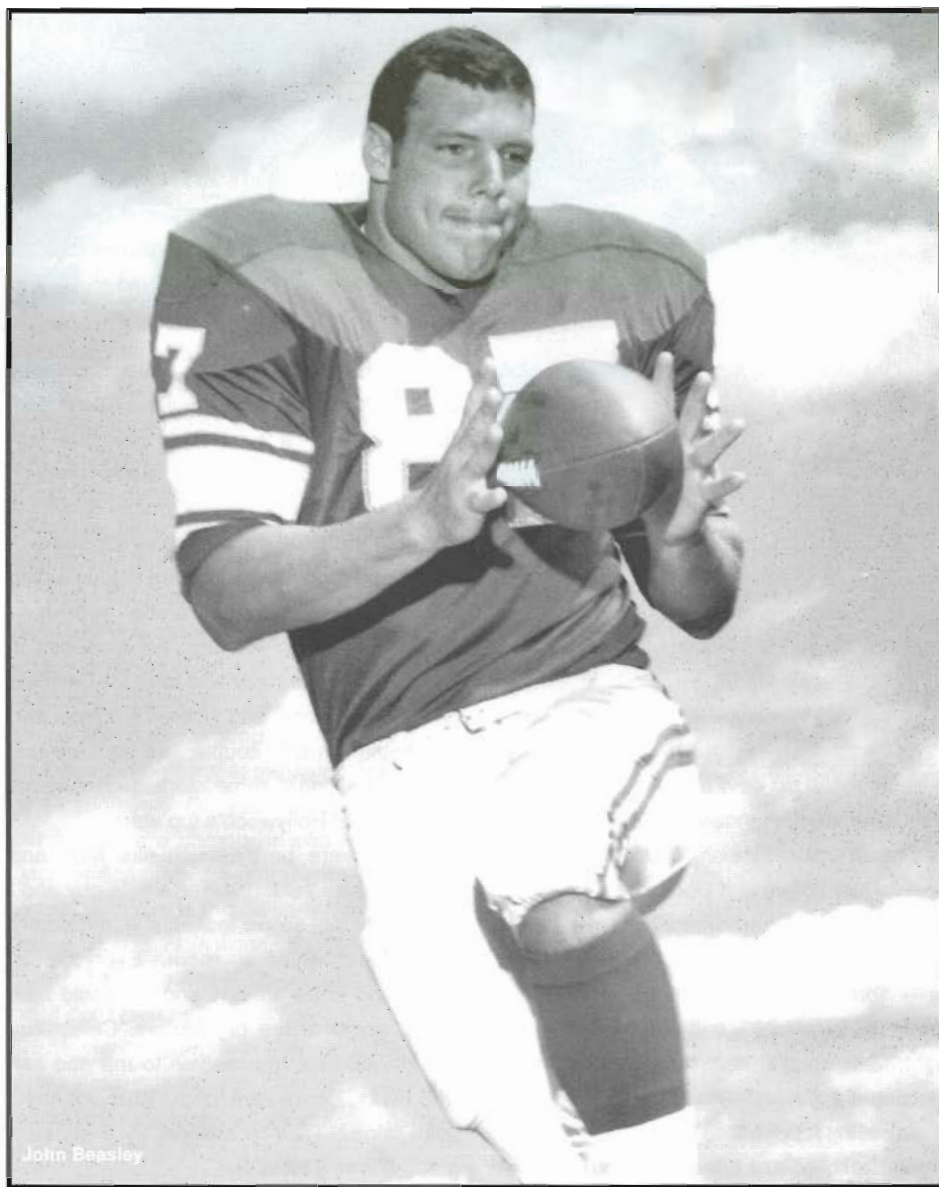
But even then, getting it out would be a daunting task. After more than a decade of relative inactivity, a flicker of hope came in 1987 in the form of the Newmont Mining Corporation. An industrial giant, Newmont was willing to invest \$1 million to drill for the gold. Unfortunately for Beasley and the rest of his investment group, the bottom line for a huge corporation is profit – and a lot of it. After extensive testing, Newmont determined there were about 250,000 ounces of gold. Most would consider that great news, but Newmont said to proceed there would have to be a million ounces or more.

"They just bailed out of the project and left it with me," Beasley said. "They knew there was gold in there, but not enough for what they were looking for from their investment. It was a business decision. I basically sat on the project until three years ago."

That was when the New Jersey Mining Company came in. The company had state-of-the-art technology on its side and the resources to go after the gold deposits aggressively. Beasley, who had built a cabin on the property and considered himself one of Murray's 25 residents, was ecstatic with the new business partner. But, even with the advanced technology, Beasley wasn't above incorporating the local voodoo rituals of the gold witcher.

The what? Gold witchers were common back in the early days of mining. Much like those who claimed they could find water for well digging, a grizzled area character told Beasley he could find exactly where the gold was deposited and where to dig. Akin to a flim-flam rainmaker in his mind, Beasley was understandably skeptical.

"This guy was something," Beasley said. "I'd never heard of water-witching, much less gold-witching. He came out with a divining rod with a small gold nugget on the end of it. Needless to say, when I saw that I had my doubts. We had already drilled a hole and hid it from him. We knew where some gold was and how deep it was. He came out with



John Beasley

his stick and it starting dipping and moving strangely. He said the number of dips would tell you the depth. When he was done, he said the gold was at 120 feet. We had found gold at 122 feet. I wasn't as skeptical then."

The new partners used much more than sticks to find the gold and were aggressive, digging an exhaustive tunnel system. And in late 2004, they found what they were looking for – and then some. Convinced enough to drill mine shafts instead of borings, they hit one of the biggest gold strikes in the U.S. in years – an estimated 1.6 million ounces of gold with an estimated value of \$700 million. For Beasley, who had invested 30 years of his life for this moment, seeing the vein in the ground was a sight that made all the waiting worthwhile.

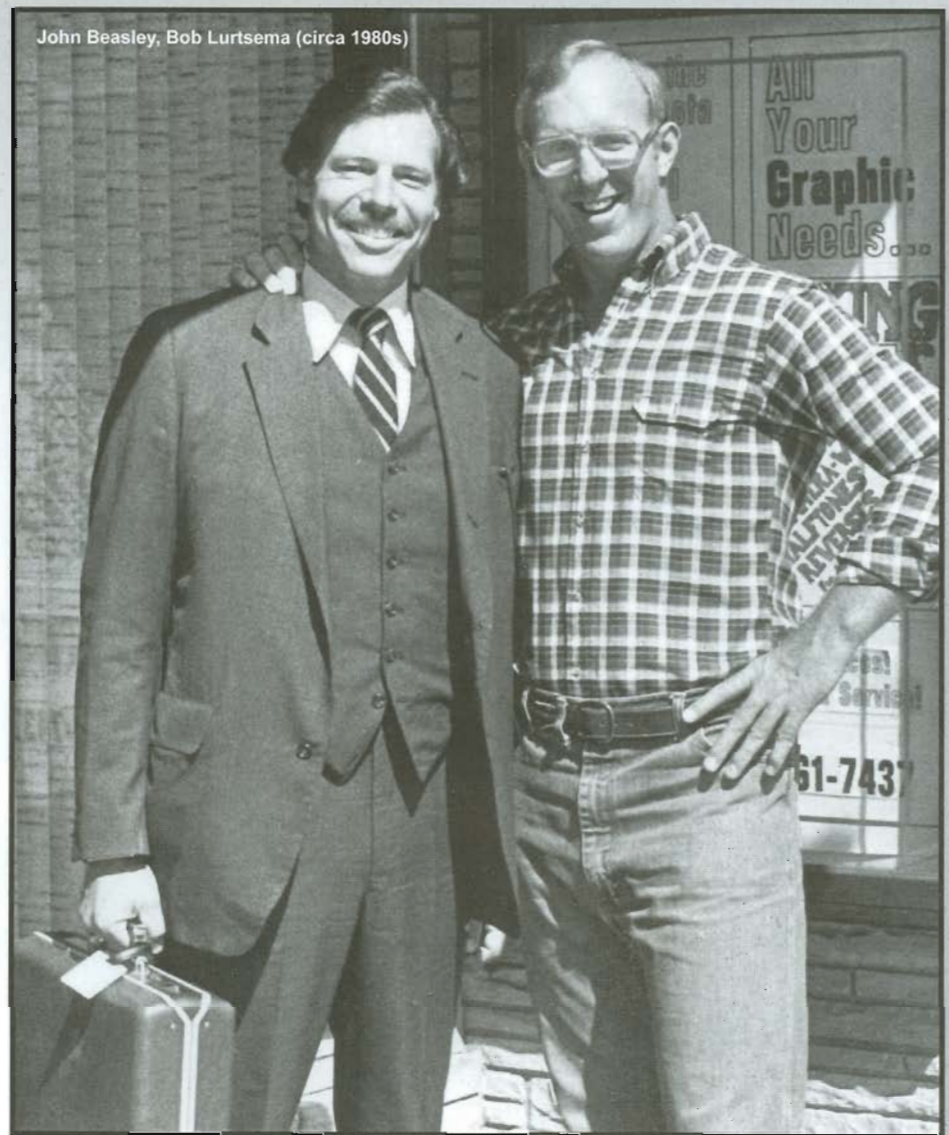
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—John Beasley

"They took me down into the mine and my heart was pounding," Beasley said. "We were going through the usual stuff and all of a sudden I turned a corner and saw the quartz vein the gold was in. It was bright white and stuck out like a lightning bolt. It was pretty obvious we had something big."

With the discovery, Beasley had the happy chore of informing the rest of his investors. That wouldn't be as easy as it would seem. Over the years, many of them had given up hope of finding anything and lost touch. For players like Zaunbrecher, it was a little hard to believe that after all this time the mine had come through.

"(Beasley) tried tracking me down and, when he explained why, most people he talked to thought he was crazy as a loon," Zaunbrecher said. "He did a Google search and tracked down my cousin Ed, who coaches



for the University of Illinois. He called Ed, Ed called my mom and 20 minutes later, I found out it was true. She thought it was a hoax, because I'm not sure I'd even mentioned it before. After so much time, I'd pretty much forgotten about it."

The discovery went public earlier this year and, as they had done 31 years before, four former Vikings (Beasley, Berry, Lurtsema and Jim Marshall) that had been immortalized in a story in *Pro* magazine returned to the Golden Chest, along with a crew from NFL Films to document their amazing odyssey that will air in November.

"The whole story is pretty unbelievable," Berry said. "I had always kidded John that he was living up there in a shack with Ted (the Unabomber) Kaczynski. When I was told they had found a lot of gold, I was ecstatic and, heading back up there after 30 years was a tremendous experience that brought back

a lot of memories. But, I haven't seen any checks yet, so get back to me when they start coming and I'll really be happy."

For 30 years, the man who wouldn't be an NFL golden boy but was known in some circles as the Silver King had chased a dream as improbable as a gold witcher's uncannily accurate prediction. As it turned out, Beasley was the Golden Boy – to an even greater extent than he could have imagined. And, as the story winds down to its final chapters, even Beasley can now admit that, while he never gave up hope, he wasn't positive any of this would come to fruition.

"I thought I'd be in an urn on a mantle piece somewhere before I'd see this," Beasley said.

Sometimes the best Hollywood stories are the ones that haven't been filmed for the big screen. Beasley's story fits into that category, and why not? Who would believe it? ■