It was not a promising start for a team with high expectations. Augustana's 1959 football team sputtered, stumbled, and stumbled to a 1-2-1 record in its first four games. Injuries were mounting. Hope of improving on the 1958 season's 5-3 record and climbing in the North Central Conference standings were fading. But these Vikings never considered surrendering. Instead, they mounted an offensive that resulted in five straight wins and the only outright NCC championship in school history. Augie's 1942 team earned a share of the title with a 4-4 record.

"If there ever was a great team effort, this was it," said Augie head coach Bob Burns. "Very few times will teams survive so many injuries to key players. At the end of four games we won only one game and were injury-riddled. I didn't think we would win another game."

Augustana had 36 players on its 1959 roster. Most of the starters played both defense and offense. But it was quality not quantity that made the difference. "Resilient, rebellious, talented, and full of huge hearts," responded John Simko when asked to characterize the 1959 squad. Burns built the team around Jim Luce, a standout quarterback he had coached at Sioux Falls High School. Luce was not big, wasn't flashy, and didn't have the strongest arm. But he was a smooth ball handler and a pinpoint passer who knew how to move a football team forward. The Vikings had excellent ball carriers in fullback Denny Peterson and halfbacks Lewy Anderberg and Ronnie Wyatt. Anderberg, the workhorse, did not play much in football in high school because he was too small.

"Anderberg could carry the ball six or eight times in a row," Luce said. "Wyatt was a great running back because he was so hard to tackle."

Simko, a versatile athlete who also played for Burns at Washington High School, combined with Luce to form one of the best aerial partnerships in college football. Simko played right end, left end, and halfback at different times during the season. He was also a key player in Augie's defensive line and secondary.

"John has great hands and an uncanny knack of getting into the open," wrote Argus Leader sports editor Craig Stolze. "When he gets there he usually found one of Luce's deadly accurate tosses hitting him."

Immense was not the word to describe Augie's linemen, but intense was a perfect choice. Backs Denny Johnson, Ron Charlson, Don Quin, and Vernavon were skilled at opening holes on offense and closing them on defense. Another characteristic of the title team was its interchangeable parts. Because of injuries, Jerry Schlieman, a lineman, was inserted at fullback against Iowa Teachers. He scored on a one-yard run with a little more than seven minutes to play, Luce kicked the extra point, and Augie won 7-6. It was the Vikings' first win ever at Cedar Falls.

"That was a key game because we had so many guys hurt," Luce said. "Anderberg went out early in the game and Denny Peterson didn't play at all. Schlieman played fullback and Dale Peterson (an end) played halfback. They both played hurt."

After a tie with North Dakota and a loss to South Dakota, Augie began its title run with a 15-0 win at South Dakota State. Luce and Simko hooked up for a 47-yard touchdown pass and Gene Narrong scored on an 18-yard run. The dramatic win at Cedar Falls was followed by a 47-34 nonconference decision against St. Norbert College in East De Pere, Wis. Augie had 495 yards of offense while posting its biggest post-war score, topping the 40 points rolled up against Northern in 1951.

As the season went on, injuries were piling up, and the defense had to throw much, but when we did pass we were successful."

"If a guy's open, it's not hard to hit him," said Luce.

"The Luce-Simko-Burns tandem ended in 1960 as the Vikings tied for runner-up honors in the NCC. "Flying for Burns was a great experience," Luce said. "We were well coached and well prepared, but there was never a dull moment. He had a knack for winning games. It was a lot of fun."

"It was an exhilarating and entertaining experience," said Simko. "What made him so good was not his knowledge of football, but his knowledge of kids. He knew how each player responded to praise and criticism."

After graduating from Augustana, Luce began teaching at Axtell Park. After four years at Axtell Park he went to Washington High School where he coached and taught until he retired. He taught biology and physical education. He coached basketball, football, and baseball and was the Warriors' head football coach for seven seasons. He is retired and living in Sioux Falls.

Simko had a tryout with the Pittsburgh Steelers before returning to Augustana as an admission representative and assistant football coach. After short stints in coaching, teaching, and business, he entered law school. Today he is a US magistrate judge living in Sioux Falls.