

WILLIE THROWER

THE FIRST BLACK QB IN THE NFL

By Robert B. Van Atta

"I felt like the Jackie Robinson of football" at a time "there were no black quarterbacks ... it just didn't happen." So reminisced Willie Thrower of New Kensington, Pa., who in 1953 became the first black quarterback in the National Football League as an understudy for George Blanda of the Chicago Bears.

His pioneering effort followed a similar achievement at Michigan State University, where the converted high school single wing halfback was the first black QB in the Big Ten also.

Thrower's football career took root at the end of World War II when, in the fall of 1945, he made the varsity as a freshman at then powerful New Kensington High, a western Pennsylvania power in a booming industrial town and sports hotbed.

During his next three years, Thrower's team lost only one game as it claimed two Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League championships. Playing regularly at halfback, Thrower's forte was appropriate for his name – throwing the football.

His arm carried Thrower to All-WPIAL and all-state first team honors, and he was named captain for an All-American scholastic selection covering the nation east of the Mississippi.

Widely recruited, he chose Biggie Munn's Michigan State football team, along with some of his high school team members, for his collegiate career. There, he played quarterback on a team which won 28 games in a row and a national championship. Although Thrower rarely started, he frequently had a key role in the game.

One that he remembers well was as a senior in 1952 – his biggest thrill in college football. He came off the bench in a close and crucial game against Notre Dame with the Spartans holding a narrow 7-3 lead. Thrower threw for one touchdown and directed the team to another to spark a 21-3 win for his team. That victory was critical to the national championship won by Michigan State that fall.

After completion of his collegiate career, Willie Thrower was given the opportunity to make the Chicago Bears team in the NFL by Coach George Halas, and he did just that. He was understudy for Bear regular George Blanda.

He was also Blanda's roommate, a coincidence since both quarterbacks were from Westmoreland County in Pennsylvania. That county then was one of the most productive sources of college and pro talent in the nation.

Thrower got to play in only one game that year, but it made history. On October 18, the Bears were hosting the San Francisco 49ers when Halas inserted him into the game as a replacement for the erratic Blanda. In that brief stint, Willie Thrower completed three of eight passes for 27 yards with one interception and a longest gain of 12 yards.

Of little consequence nor long remembered is the fact that the Bears lost that day, 35-28, enroute to a dismal 3-8-1 record. But history was made as the first black quarterback, 5-11 and 182- pound Willie Thrower had played football in the National Football League, opening the way for those who have followed.

Thrower was accustomed to playing and winning. His high school team had lost one game in three years, and the same happened to his college team. He had contributed.

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He didn't, on the other hand, relish his obscure role with the Bears and a future as an understudy for George Blanda. As a consequence, he headed north.

Thrower played for three years in the Canadian Football League for the Toronto Argonauts and Winnipeg Blue Bombers, where he had Bud Grant as a receiving target for his passes.

However, a shoulder injury brought a premature end to his professional football career.

His name and ability as a thrower of footballs earned Willie another niche of fame when Robert Ripley featured throwing accomplishments of Thrower in one of his nationally syndicated cartoons of "Believe It Or Not."

His football career over, Willie worked for a few years in youth development and training on the east coast before returning to his hometown of New Kensington. There, he became employed as a construction foreman and opened a bar and lounge on the side.

In 1979, he was elected to the Westmoreland County Sports Hall of Fame in his home area, joining about 100 athletes in all sports who had achieved that honor in a quite productive county, sportswise. George Blanda had been inducted into the same Hall of Fame ahead of him, but this time Willie Thrower didn't seem to mind finishing second.