

BULLET BILL DUDLEY

by Jim Sargent

"Bullet Bill" Dudley, the former ace running back from Bluefield, Virginia, who became the University of Virginia's first consensus football All-American, fondly recalls his final college game.

In 1941, for the first time in nine years, Virginia beat the University of North Carolina, 28-7, and Dudley scored three touchdowns, passed for another, and kicked all four extra points.

"I was tremendously honored to make the All-American team," Dudley told sportswriter Lawrence Elliott in 1954, "but I don't feel that I have to strain to live up to some mythical something. Yesterday's sports hero is a lot like yesterday's newspaper--you always know there's a fresh one coming tomorrow."

But Dudley's football career went well beyond his honors at Virginia: he became an outstanding running back, defensive back, and place-kicker in the National Football League, starring three years each for the Pittsburgh Steelers, the Detroit Lions, and the Washington Redskins. In between, he spent two years in the Army during World War II. Later, he was enshrined in 1956 as part of the fourth class of Pro Football's Hall of Fame.

Ironically, Dudley, who played in the NFL at 5'9" and 170-175 pounds, was considered too small for football until he was a 110-pound junior at Bluefield's Graham High School. An intense competitor, Bill grew up playing sandlot ball. He taught himself to drop-kick, pass, and run the ball, and he seldom missed an opportunity to watch and study football.

As a senior under new coach Marshall Shearer, who taught Bill to place-kick, Dudley won fame as the "Bluefield Bullet" and led his team to a winning record. Although not blessed with great speed, Bill started quickly, ran elusively, changed directions almost intuitively, maneuvered behind blockers, and often spun away from would-be tacklers. Graham's 1938 highlight came when the "Bullet" kicked a 35-yard field goal near the end of the season's finale to beat favored Princeton High, 10-7.

Dreaming of playing college football, Dudley got only one scholarship offer. Coach Shearer helped persuade Virginia Coach Frank Murray to recruit his determined protege as an extra-point specialist. As a result, Dudley received a \$500 grant, out of which he paid for room, board, and books.

Bill launched his college career as a 16-year-old 150-pound tailback in 1938. The next season he began as a fifth back but, due to a teammate's injury, played several games. In 1940, as a junior, he started every game at tailback and led the South in total offense, but his team struggled to a 4-5 record.

But in 1941, after switching from the single wing to the T-formation, the Cavaliers fashioned an 8-1 record (the loss, 21-19, came at the hands of Yale). Dudley's performance won him recognition as a consensus All-American. Also, he was named by the Maxwell Memorial Club of Philadelphia and he received the Washington Touchdown Club's Camp Memorial Trophy as the outstanding college football player of the year.

His effort came against North Carolina earned him high praise from famous sportswriter Grantland Rice among others. Playing in Chapel Hill, Dudley accounted for all 28 points by: connecting on a 67-yard pass play for the first touchdown, running around end for more than 60 yards to score a TD, scoring off a fake punt -- when he ran, dodged, ducked, and twisted for an 89-yard TD, driving three yards up the middle for his third TD. Further, he called the offensive signals, handled the punting (averaging 42 yards); threw passes gaining 117 yards, carried the ball from scrimmage for 215 yards, and, of course, played defense where he made several tough tackles; and intercepted one pass!

In 1994, reflecting on his greatest collegiate day, Dudley said, "That was kind of the 'big game' of the year because we hadn't beaten North Carolina in nine years. This was the ninth year, and they had a good football team.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 18, No. 4 (1996)

Overall in 1941, Dudley topped the nation's major colleges with 134 points (18 TDs, 23 PATs, one field goal) and in total yards gained with 2,441, including rushing, passes caught, interceptions returned, and punt and kickoff runbacks. He also completed 57 passes for 856 yards and scored almost half of Virginia's 279 points.

"I scored a lot of points," Dudley recalled, "but a lot of people forget that we only allowed something like 40-some points scored against us all year. And 21 of those points were scored by Yale in one ball game.

"We had a very good defensive football team. North Carolina only scored once, VMI scored twice, and I think that was it."

After the season, Dudley traveled to New Orleans and starred in the East-West Shrine game, intercepting four passes and throwing for his team's touchdown in a 6-6 tie.

Happy, Dark Days

By the time he graduated in June 1942, World War II was underway and Dudley aspired to be a Navy pilot. He never planned to play pro football: "The Pittsburgh Steelers drafted me number one. Of course, I knew about the University of Pittsburgh, but I didn't know a thing about the Steelers. I knew a little bit about the Washington Redskins. We used to go up and see them play.

"But I never knew anything about the rest of the league, basically, because it just didn't enter my mind. College football, and the bowl games, were the big thing."

Dudley also recalled, "I was originally going to go in the Naval Air Corps. I was sworn in the Naval Air Corps in late May or early June of 1942.

"But when they started checking my papers, this came out later, they found out I had to have my parents' consent, because I wasn't twenty-one.

"So in the meantime, I went out to play in the College All-Star game in Chicago, and I signed a professional football contract. I played there with the Steelers mainly for the money," Dudley explained. "They signed me for \$5,000, because I was the number-one draft choice."

As a Steeler rookie, Dudley played in All-Star games against the Bears in Chicago and the Eagles in Philadelphia. He injured both ankles against the Eagles, but he was ready to play against Philadelphia on the NFL's opening day.

On a trap play up the middle, "Bullet Bill" ran 55 yards for a touchdown, boosting the Steelers to a quick 7-0 lead. The Eagles won, 24-14, but Dudley established himself as a tough and spirited big-league athlete.

His first game foreshadowed his NFL career. He always played all-out and he would not hesitate to criticize a player who didn't give his best effort.

"I can't stand a ballplayer that doesn't put out," Dudley later explained. "There's no reason for a ballplayer to hang back at any particular time, particularly when they're getting beat. That drives me up a wall!"

Pittsburgh lost its second game to Washington, 28-14. Inspired by Dudley, however, the Steelers bounced back and won seven of their last nine contests. Art Rooney's club, coached by Walt Kiesling, finished at 7-4, the franchise's first winning record, and placed second in the East Division behind the 10-1 Redskins.

Reflecting further, Dudley added, "We had a lot of fun. Pittsburgh in '42 was probably one of the most 'fun' years I ever had. I didn't know anything about Pittsburgh, the sun, it's dark. All the steel mills were in full blast. You couldn't see the sun for the smoke.

"Probably we'd work out from one to three o'clock in the afternoon, and it was just overcast all morning long."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 18, No. 4 (1996)

Running out of the single wing, Dudley led the league in rushing with 696 yards, averaging 4.3 yards per carry, and scored five touchdowns on the ground. He also completed 35 of 94 passes for 438 yards and two TDs, punted 18 times for a 32.0 mark, returned 20 punts for 271 yards (14.0 avg), and ran back 11 kickoffs 298 for yards (27.0 avg), scoring once--against Philly.

Asked about his honors in 1942, Dudley replied, matter-of-factly, "I was Rookie of the Year, and All-League, and I was just beat out for MVP, coming in second to Don Hutson."

Army Days and a Famous Battle

Facing the draft in Lynchburg, Dudley had enlisted in the Army Air Corps in September 1942. But because of the large number of recruits, a three-month delay resulted, which allowed him to finish his rookie season.

Along with thousands of other young Americans, Dudley spent the next two years in the service. He went through basic training in Florida and various flight schools in Texas. At Randolph Field he was asked to play football, which was deemed "essential" to the war effort as a "morale booster." Bill agreed. In 1944 his team went 12-0, he was named MVP, and he made the All-Service squad.

Dudley was shipped to the Pacific near the war's end, and he was able to fly two supply missions. Upon his return to Hawaii, the Army's top brass coopted him to play in three football games against All-Star teams. His reward: he could fly home in two days, as opposed to enduring a six-week voyage by troopship.

That fall Dudley returned to Pittsburgh, shared an apartment with center George Titus, and played the last four games of the 1945 season. Against the Chicago Cardinals at Forbes Field, "Bullet Bill" flashed his prewar form, running for two touchdowns and kicking two points-after in a 23-0 victory, only Pittsburgh's second win in a 2-8 season under Coach Jim Leonard.

By tallying 20 points, Dudley scored more than any other Steeler in 1945. Further, he rushed for 204 yards (3.6 avg), connected on 10 of 32 aerials, ran back five punts for 20 yards, and returned three kickoffs for 65 yards.

His explosive performance in 1946 is still remarkable. Pittsburgh, now coached by the austere Jock Sutherland, tied Washington for third place with a 5-5-1 record, and Dudley accounted for the biggest chunk of the club's offense.

Playing tailback and safety, Dudley scored 48 points and led the league in three different categories: rushing, with 604 yards (4.1 avg); 10 interceptions, which he returned for 242 yards; and 27 punt returns on which he picked up 385 yards, a 14.0 average.

For his outstanding season, Bill was named All-Pro as well as the NFL's Most Valuable Player.

In the meantime, however, a rift had developed between Dudley and Sutherland. During one passing drill at preseason camp, Sutherland, who made sarcastic comments about Dudley's sidearm passing motion, criticized his star for suggesting that it would be easier to complete passes if the defensive squad wore different color jerseys than the offense. Words were exchanged, Dudley later apologized, but after the season, he announced his retirement.

Dudley recollected, "Playing the single wing, I figured, particularly in 1946, that I played about three years of football in one year.

"I was on the field almost 60 minutes, and doing everything. But that's what I was capable of doing, and that's probably one of the reasons I was able to stay in the league. But I did have a good head on my shoulders. You see, you play as much with your brains as you do with your body."

Dudley, who had endured a back injury in 1946, suffered a knee injury in the season finale, a 10-7 loss to the Eagles. Consequently, he secured a position coaching the backfield for the University of Virginia in 1947. At that point, Pittsburgh traded him to Detroit.

Lions and Redskins

When the Lions offered him a guaranteed three-year contract at \$20,000 a season, Dudley decided again to give football his best shot. A player's player, he was unanimously elected captain by his teammates for each of his three seasons in Detroit, where his determined play became the heart of the Lions. Although the team did not have enough talent to fashion a winning season during Dudley's tenure, he led the club in scoring each year.

Dudley's first year the Lions finished fifth (last), the only team in the powerful West Division with a losing record.

Showing his versatility, on October 19 Dudley returned a punt against the Bears for 84 yards and a touchdown, a return which is still fourth longest in franchise history. But during an up-and-down season, Detroit averaged 31 points in three victories and 15 points in nine losses.

Under Coach Bo McMillin in 1948, Detroit remained in last place for the third year in a row. Nagged by injuries, Dudley accounted for six touchdowns, but Camp Wilson paced the club in rushing.

In 1949, again under McMillin, Dudley led Detroit in scoring for the third year. With more talent all around, Detroit won three of the last four games to take fourth place with a 4-8 mark.

"When I went to Detroit, I had a contract that was guaranteed for three years," Dudley reminisced. "At the end of the three-year period, if I didn't play, I was guaranteed one year of coaching.

"Bo traded me to the Redskins, feeling that I might want to exercise that contractual right, you see, as a coach. I was just getting ready to work for the Ford Motor Company. I worked for them one year in the off-season."

Dudley moved to Lynchburg and drove to Washington, where he played for three seasons, 1950-51 and 1953. Each year he led the Redskins in scoring. By that time, however, his knees were giving him more problems, notably with bursitis. Partly as a result, he spent 1952 as the backfield coach for Yale University.

Quarterback Sammy Baugh was the Redskins' leader, but Dudley, as always, made important contributions. On December 3, 1950, he again proved his big-play ability after a 60-yard punt by Pittsburgh's Joe Geri.

The "Bullet" believed in always returning a punt. After running more than 30 yards to start the play, he reached out of bounds and caught the ball--keeping both feet in-bounds at Washington's four-yard line. Running straight up the sideline, Dudley startled the Steelers, who thought they saw the ball go out at the coffin corner. Step-faking a would-be tackler, as if to cut to the middle, Dudley hustled down the sideline, behind gathering blockers, and scored untouched on a 96-yard run.

When he returned for one more season with the Redskins in 1953, Bill performed part-time while coaching the backs, his favorite assignment. Mainly, however, he played defense on passing situations. He also handled the place-kicking, booting a career-high 11 field goals.

At the end of the season, physical wear and tear had accumulated to the point where the "Bullet" decided to retire. He had entered the insurance business in Lynchburg with his brother Jim in 1951, worked with Home Life until switching to Equitable in 1961. During those years he also coached and scouted for, first, the Steelers and, later, the Lions. Today he remains active in the insurance business.

Writing for Sport in 1954, Robert Smith summarized Dudley's greatness: "Despite his lack of breakaway speed, Bill was the most feared kickoff returner in the game He passed sidearm, like a kid, yet he had a fine completion average. He was 'too small,' but he was hardly ever hurt too badly to play. He was the league's top ground gainer, yet he was also one of the fiercest defensive tacklers and the best in the game at interceptions. As one of the men who faced him ruefully admitted, Bill could not throw a pass correctly and 'ran as if he was staggering,' yet he could always find a way to beat you."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 18, No. 4 (1996)

That clutch ability explains why Dudley was able to lead his club in scoring during every one of his nine NFL seasons. Today he is enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, the college Football Hall of Fame, and the Virginia Sports Hall of Fame.

Since 1990 the Downtown Club of Richmond has sponsored the Bill Dudley Award, which is given each year to the top college football player in Virginia. That honor is a fitting tribute to Dudley's outstanding dedication, performance, and work ethic, both on and off the gridiron.

WILLIAM McGARVEY (Bullet Bill) DUDLEY
 HB-TB-DB
 5-10, 182 University of Virginia
 Graham High School, Bluefield, VA
 Born: 12/24/1921, Bluefield, VA
 National Football Foundation Hall of Fame 1956
 Pro Football Hall of Fame 1966

Year	Team	LG	GM	RUSHING-----				PASS RECEIVING---			
				ATT	YDS	AVG	TD	NO	YDS	AVG	TD
1942	Pit	N	11	*162	*696	4.3	5	1	24	24.0	0
1943-44 Military Service											
1945	Pit	N	4	57	204	3.5	3	-	-	-	-
1946	Pit	N	11	*146	*604	4.1	3	4	109	27.2	1
1947	Det	N	9	80	302	3.8	2	27	375	13.9	7
1948	Det	N	7	33	97	2.9	0	20	210	10.5	6
1949	Det	N	12	125	402	3.2	4	27	190	7.0	2
1950	Was	N	12	66	339	5.1	1	22	172	7.8	1
1951	Was	N	12	91	398	4.4	2	22	303	13.8	1
1952 Did not play											
1953	Was	N	12	5	15	3.0	0	-	-	-	-
9 years			90	765	3057	4.0	20	123	1383	11.2	18

Year	Team	LG	GM	PASSING-----							INTERCEPTIONS--			
				ATT	COM	PCT.	YDS	TD	IN	AvgG	NO	YDS	AVG	TD
1942	Pit	N	11	94	35	37.2	438	2	5	4.66	3	60	20.0	0
1943-44 Military Service														
1945	Pit	N	4	32	10	31.3	58	0	2	1.81	2	47	23.5	0
1946	Pit	N	11	90	32	35.5	452	2	9	5.02	*10	*242	24.2	1
1947	Det	N	9	4	3	75.0	24	2	0	6.00	5	104	20.8	1
1948	Det	N	7	1	0	0.0	0	0	1	0.00	1	3	3.0	0
1949	Det	N	12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1950	Was	N	12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	3	1.5	0
1951	Was	N	12	1	1	100.0	13	0	0	13.00	-	-	-	-
1952 Did not play														
1953	Was	N	12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
9 years			90	222	81	36.5	985	6	17	4.44	23	459	20.0	2

Year	Team	LG	GM	SCORING-----						PUNTING--		
				TD	XP	XA	FG	FA	PTS	NO	AVG	
1942	Pit	N	11	6	0	0	0	0	0	36	18	32.0
1943-44 Military Service												
1945	Pit	N	4	3	2	3	0	0	0	20	2	18.0
1946	Pit	N	11	5	12	14	2	7	48	60	40.0	
1947	Det	N	9	11	0	0	0	0	66	15	43.8	
1948	Det	N	7	7	0	0	0	0	42	23	35.9	
1949	Det	N	12	6	30	32	5	14	81	32	39.9	
1950	Was	N	12	3	31	31	5	10	64	14	41.8	
1951	Was	N	12	3	21	22	10	13	69	27	34.9	
1952 Did not play												
1953	Was	N	12	0	25	25	11	22	58	-	-	
9 years			90	44	121	127	33	66	484	191	38.2	

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 18, No. 4 (1996)

Year	Team	LG	GM	PUNT RETURNS-----				KICKOFF RETURNS-			
				NO	YDS	AVG	TD	NO	YDS	AVG	TD
1942	Pit	N	11	20	*271	13.5	0	11	298	27.1	1
1943-44 Military Service											
1945	Pit	N	4	5	20	4.0	0	3	65	21.7	0
1946	Pit	N	11	*27	*385	14.2	0	14	280	20.0	0
1947	Det	N	9	11	182	16.5	1	15	359	23.9	0
1948	Det	N	7	8	67	8.4	0	10	204	20.4	0
1949	Det	N	12	11	199	18.1	1	13	246	18.9	0
1950	Was	N	12	12	185	15.4	1	1	43	43.0	0
1951	Was	N	12	22	172	7.8	0	11	248	22.5	0
1952 Did not play											
1953	Was	N	12	8	34	4.3	0	-	-	-	-
9 years			90	124	1515	12.2	3	78	1743	22.3	0

* - Led league