

The Legend of "Wild Man" Willey

By Ron Pollack

(Reprinted from *Pro Football Weekly*)

As he does for every Eagle home game, Norman Willey is directing the opposing team's players onto the field.

As usual, none of these young athletes recognizes Willey. Just as no one recognized the 67-year-old former Eagle the previous game at Veterans Stadium. Just as none of the performers will recognize him at any home games next season. Willey is simply the guy in the NFL Alumni jacket telling them when and where to go as game time draws near.

If only they knew the legend of "Wild Man" Willey. Then their eyes would light up. They'd get in line to shake his hand if only they knew.

In the 1950's, Wild Man Willey was a pass-rushing terror. In his greatest moment of glory, he turned in a single-game performance that, by all rights, should be immortalized with Babe Ruth's called shot in baseball, Wilt Chamberlain's 100-point performance in basketball, and Bob Beamon's record-shattering long jump in the 1968 Olympics. Lightning in a bottle. Unforgettable one-day performances that grow in stature through the passage of time.

Willey can bask in no such larger-than-life company for one simple reason. He owns the record that history forgot.

The Day was Oct. 26, 1952. The Polo Grounds. Eagle's vs. Giants.

The Eagles won 14-10, but those numbers are relatively unimportant 32 years later. Only one number matters. According to Philadelphia newspaper accounts through the decades, Wild Man Willey had 17 sacks that day.

Sacks were not kept in those days, so the NFL record book lists the official mark as a mere pittance of seven by Kansas City's Derrick Thomas in a Nov. 11, 1990, game against the Seahawks.

There is no way to prove Willey's mark. Time has seemingly erased all scientific proof, but those who were there that day saw a performance for the ages. A performance virtually forgotten over the years by all but Eagle fans.

Charlie Conerly was the Giant quarterback that day. He was lucky to get out with his life.

"I almost felt sorry for Charlie," says Jim Trimble, the head coach of the Eagles from 1952 to '55." I remember vividly Charlie having a heck of a time just getting up. He was just mauled by Norm."

Eventually, Conerly was like an over-matched prize fighter who'd been knocked down one. time too many.

Norman Earl Willey

Defensive End

6-02 224 Marshall College

Born: 8/22/1927, Hastings, WV

Drafted 13th Round by Philadelphia 1950

Pro Bowl after 1954-1955 seasons

All-Pro

1953 UP, NY News

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1954 AP, UP, NEA, NY News

Year	Team	Gm
1950	Phil	12
1951	Phil	11
1952	Phil	12
1953	Phil	12
1954	Phil	12
1955	Phil	12
1956	Phil	9
1957	Phil	12
8 Yrs		92

"Charlie went out of the ballgame," says Willey. "He said he'd had enough. You hate to blow your own horn. I had a good day. He was bleeding, and he limped off the field."

In came rookie QB Fred Benners. New guy, same results. On the day, the Giants were credited with 182 yards passing minus 127 in lost yards passing (another way of saying sacks), giving them a mere net of 55 yards passing.

"We were just loving it," says Pete Pihos, who played for the Eagles from 1947 to `55.

Trimble says, "I had a fight with the chaplain of the Giants, Father Dudley, right afterward because he felt we were abusing Charlie Conerly. As we were going off the field, we had an argument about how abusive we had been."

Total domination. Totally ignored by the NFL record books.

"It hurts me to think that they don't put my name in there someplace or put people's names down before they kept records as honorable mention or something like that," says Willey.

Part of the problem is that no one knows exactly how many sacks to give Willey credit for that day.

"If it wasn't 17, it was pretty close," says Pihos."

Bucko Kuroy, who played for the Eagles from 1943 to `55, says, "He had an exceptional day. I thought it was maybe 12 sacks or something like that, which would be phenomenal. They couldn't block him. I thought it was 12. Somebody said it was more than that."

Willey used to say it was 17, but no one would believe it, so now he's lowered his claim to 15 sacks for that game. Not that 15 sacks is much more believable for modern-day naysayers who didn't see the game.

"On talk shows they'll say, `What? That's impossible Forget it. No one can do that kind of thing," says Willey.

Thus, more time passes in which the legend of Wild Man Willey is ignored. The only thing he got for his day of QB mayhem was a tidy bonus. The going rate for a sack, even though that name had not as yet been coined back then was \$10. Unofficially.

"This was illegal" says Willey. "The teams did it. Tuesday you came back to practice, and they showed the film. One of the assistants would sit down and on a Monday they showed the film to the coaches, and on Tuesday they show it to the team. He writes down who makes what and gives us credit for the money. Then they come up with it. The league, I think, made them stop doing it because it was illegal, giving incentives for hitting quarterbacks."

But they did it, anyway?

"Yes," says Willey.

How much did Willey get for the game against the Giants?

"I got \$170," he says.

Reminded that he has amended his sack total for that game to 15, Willey says, "Oh, yeah. Put \$150 down."

What makes the anonymity, of Willey's performance all the more difficult to fathom is the fact that he was such a colorful performer.

Take his nickname, for instance. He earned it in one of his first scrimmages with the Eagles as a rookie.

"(Eagle coach) Greasy Neale put me in there, and I went hellbent and knocked (QB) Tommy Thompson down and a few other people and kept doing that, and Greasy took me out," says Willey. "Then Tommy looked up again, and I was back in, and he said, 'Oh, my god, there comes that wild man again.' Then the newspaper picks it up. I was called 'Mad Man' for a while, then it stuck with me as 'Wild Man.'"

Vic Sears, who played for the Eagles from 1941 to '53, says, "He was the 'Wild Man.' That was his nature. He went full blast and did a good job. He played harder than he did with good sense sometimes, but he played hard. He played instinctive football. That was his way. He wasn't concerned about what the game plan was. He played things his way, and it worked out good for him. Probably the only way he could have made it was his way."

Indeed it was. Trimble recalls a time in his first year as Eagle head coach in 1952 when he tried to harness Willey's style. Impressed by Willey's pass rush, Trimble asked him to stay after practice one day: "I said, 'Norm, if (the opposing player) takes a three-yard split, you've got to meet him and get to the passer. But, if he takes more than a three-yard split, get inside and beat him.'"

The next game it was almost halftime, and Willey had been virtually invisible. So Trimble started watching him and, much to his horror, Willey was spending so much time counting the number of steps in the opposing player's split that he was completely taking himself out of the game. One-yard split .. two yards... hike!... uh, three. Hey, where'd everybody go?

"I had enough common sense at halftime to say, 'Norm, forget anything I ever told you. Just play like you played before I talked to you,'" says Trimble. "He was a spontaneous pass rusher. You just had to tell him, 'Sic 'em.'"

That he did. Willey estimates he "used to average two (sacks) a game."

These days a player can challenge for the league lead in sacks by averaging one a game. Imagine the fuss that would be made over a player who could get two a game. Imagine the fuss that would be made over a player who had double-digit sacks in one game. Imagine the fuss that would be made over Wild Man Willey.

"The ESPN's and TNT's would all be there," says long time Eagle official Jim Gallagher. They'd probably meet him getting off the plane. He was one of the best ever at rushing the quarterback."

After getting over the shock of hearing the legend of Wild Man Willey, agent Leigh Steinberg says, he would approach the value of an invaluable franchise quarterback. In this day and age, the most valuable defensive guys are the guys who can get to the passer. What's a guy like that (two sacks a game) worth? He's worth starting quarterback money."

Unless he does it in an era when sacks aren't kept. The most money Willey ever made in a season with the Eagles was "about \$9,000."

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Of course, why would anybody get excited about sacks in the old days? After all, Wild Man Willey used to get them by the sackful. What was the big deal?

"Sacks are so important now," says Willey. "Guys go berserk. They do back flips. They get paid big money. We just pulled ourselves up off the ground and got back on defense. In those days, no one even slapped each other on the hands, the high-fives and low-fives. You just went out and got a drink of water and kept on playing."

The history books never noticed. Opposing quarterbacks most assuredly did.