

# **BILL WALSH**

## **All-Pro Center and AFL-NFL Coach**

**By Jim Sargent**

When former Irish center Bill Walsh was hired to be an assistant football coach at Notre Dame in 1955, the university summarized his play from 1945 through 1948 in a press release:

"In four years at Notre Dame, Walsh established himself as one of football's real iron men. He played center in every one of the scheduled 38 games and started 27. The Irish went unbeaten three of Walsh's four seasons and won two national championships."

Walsh, a three-sport, nine-letter winner at Phillipsburg High in Phillipsburg, New Jersey, where he graduated in 1945, earned the starting center position at Notre Dame that fall. But circumstances changed in 1946, when several players returned from serving in World War II. George Strohmeier won the regular position and became an All-American.

Walsh persevered in practice. After the third game of 1947, he was elevated to the first team and Strohmeier moved to the second squad. The 6'2" 205-pound Walsh, who was strong, aggressive, and tough, held the starting position through the 1948 season, his senior year.

Not chosen for any All-American teams, Walsh was still drafted number three by the Pittsburgh Steelers in 1949. He was also selected to play in the annual College All-Star game at Soldier Field in Chicago. After three weeks of practice, the collegians were whipped by the National Football League Champion Philadelphia Eagles. But Walsh went on to become the Steelers' regular center for six straight years and started in the first two Pro Bowls.

A modest, quiet, and hard-working athlete who lived and breathed football, Walsh began a new career as an offensive line coach with Notre Dame in 1955. He spent three seasons with the Irish, moved to Kansas State for a year, and launched his pro career with Hank Stram of the Dallas Texans of the American Football League in 1960.

When he retired after the 1991 campaign, Walsh had coached for 32 seasons in the AFL and the NFL. His experience included stints with the Texans, who became the Kansas City Chiefs in 1963, the Atlanta Falcons, the Houston Oilers, and the Philadelphia Eagles.

Born on September 8, 1927, the youngest son of Scotty and Ruth Walsh, Bill grew up in Phillipsburg. Like his older brother Jim, Bill always loved sports, especially football.

"Phillipsburg was a real big football school in that day," Walsh told me. "I think in my four years we lost two games. We lost the big Thanksgiving game to Easton, one time, and we lost to Allentown."

Walsh completed high school just after the Allies defeated Nazi Germany in May 1945: "I graduated from high school in '45 and went to Notre Dame. They were on three semesters during World War II, and the war ended a couple months after I got there. I ended up playing first string. I was going to be second-string. But the center who was there, Frank Syzmanski, had been declared ineligible, and that moved me up to first string. So I started at Notre Dame in my freshman year.

"Then Frank Leahy and everybody came back from the war, and I ended up being third-string center in '46. I made the traveling squad and all, so we had a good time. I started at center in '47 and '48. My first year we lost to Army and Great Lakes Naval Station, and we were undefeated for three years, with a tie to Army."

The New Jersey native was drafted third by the Steelers in 1949, after tailback Joe Geri from the University of Georgia and running back Bobby Gage from Clemson University.

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Pittsburgh finished 6-5-1 in Walsh's rookie season, well behind the Eastern Division champion Eagles: "We came in second place to the Eagles, and they were 11-1. The Steelers were single wing in those days, and that's the interesting story.

"John Michelosen was our coach, and he had taken over for Jock Sutherland in '48. John was young, about 32 or 33. He was a real nice man, but he emulated Jock, who was always real stern."

Walsh continued, "I was a single wing center in high school. In Sutherland's system, which was Michelosen's, you grabbed the ball with your fingertips on the laces, your thumb on the laces, then your index finger went along the seam, and your other hand went under the ball. You sort of 'flipped' it back. The ball rotated two and a half times to the tailback or the fullback.

"The backs took the ball on a lean, and they had their hands in such a way that with Sutherland's method, the ball was rotating in such a way that it would hit the upper hand and would drop down. If you had a spiral, it could go through. I was a single wing center in high school, and a T-formation center in college for four years, and I'm drafted third by the Steelers.

"Heck, I'm thinking, 'Single wing, Wow!'

"Then my coach, Chuck Cherundolo, who was the center for the Steelers the year before me, took me up on the field that first Sunday, and showed me how they did it, and I said, 'How?'

"Later, I found out you can do anything with that. I wouldn't want to go back to the spiral."

In Walsh's first pro season the NFL still had players going both ways. The free-substitution rule began in 1950, when the league consolidated and took three teams from the All-America Football Conference. After that, most players specialized on offense or defense.

Walsh was a starter from the first day. One of his friends was offensive guard George Hughes, the William and Mary All-American who started every game for Pittsburgh during his five seasons, 1950 through 1954.

Talking about Walsh, Hughes observed, "Bill was a great center, and he was one of the leaders of our line. You were required to do a lot of things as a single-wing center, and Bill did everything well. He was also one of our best blockers, and he filled in on defense whenever they needed him."

Walsh recalled the rugged regimen of the Steelers: "In those days we used to leave the house at eight o'clock and we'd get home by four o'clock. That was during the season. We used to work out at Forbes Field, where the Pirates played. We'd practice in the morning from about nine o'clock to eleven-thirty or twelve, and they'd break for lunch. You were on your own. We'd take a break, and we'd have a meeting at one-thirty.

"They never used to break the film down. You had big 1600-foot reels, and everyone watched the film together. We'd watch the kicking, and we'd watch our team on defense, because you might end up playing defense. Nobody fooled anybody in those days, but later on, in my coaching career, My, God! Things really have changed."

During Walsh's six years, the Steelers did not have another winner. Five straight times the club finished fourth: 6-6 in 1950, 4-7-1 in 1951, 5-7 in 1952, 6-6 in 1953, and 5-7 in 1954.

Walsh explained that Pittsburgh usually started strong, but the club could not finish strong. He recalled the 1954 season as an example of how close Pittsburgh came to having a fine team: "I think in '54 we led the league for about half the season. We got off to a 4-1 start, and we beat the Browns in Pittsburgh. Otto Graham was intercepted about four times, and two were returned for touchdowns. Then we lost to the Cardinals, and we won only one game after that." In fact, the other win came at Forbes Field, a squeaker over the Cardinals, 20-17.

"We always said," Walsh recalled, "'We would have loved to have been a winner on that town,' because the people were so good to you. All the players talked that way, and it was true. It was a great town."

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Even if the Steelers weren't strong, Walsh's outstanding play was reflected by his selection to the Pro Bowl in 1951 and 1952. Further, he was named honorable mention All-Pro by the Associated Press and the United Press in 1950, first team All-Pro by the UP in 1952, honorable mention All-Pro by the AP and the UP in 1953, and first team All-Pro by both wire services in 1954.

"I hadn't gotten hurt with the Steelers," Walsh explained. "But one of the big things was trying to get a job in the off-season. You needed to get work if you wanted to save your football check, you know. You could live on it real good for a year, but if you wanted to put it away and save it, you had to get a job."

Walsh gave up playing in the NFL because he needed to get a steady job in the off-season, and by 1955 he couldn't find one. As a result, he accepted an offer from Terry Brennan to join Notre Dame's football staff.

Walsh signed with Pittsburgh for \$7,500 in 1949, and he got a raise each season: "I don't have any regrets about that. Anyone who played in those days was happy, because there were people working for fifty cents an hour. You could save your money and get a real nice down payment on a house, as long as you were working in the off-season.

"The NFL was good, I mean, it really was."

But he couldn't pass up the opportunity to coach in South Bend: "I went out to Notre Dame and coached in the spring of '54. Dick Syzmanski was going to be the center for the 1954 season. He ended up getting hurt against Penn, he lost his spleen.

"I went out and worked with Syzmanski, one-on-one. I lived out there with a couple of former players, we lived in the firehouse at Notre Dame on campus. They paid me a salary. I took a leave of absence from the Miller High Life Brewery, because the president of the brewery was Freddie Miller, who was captain of the Notre Dame team in '28, or something like that."

Walsh added, "I had a lot of fun in Pittsburgh. Then I went to Notre Dame, and I really loved coaching there. I was there four years with Terry Brennan, and he had been there one year before. He had an opening, and I went out there, and we got fired after the '58 season."

Walsh accepted an offer to move to Kansas State in 1959, where he spent one season. After winning two games, head coach "Bus" Mertes was fired. Walsh could have remained as line coach:

"But I got a call from Hank Stram. The American Football League was just forming, after the '59 season. Hank and I coached together at Notre Dame in '57-58. He helped run the offense, and I had the line." Walsh served as the offensive line coach for 32 seasons in the AFL and the NFL. He coached for these teams: Dallas Texans (1960-62), Kansas City Chiefs (1963-74), Atlanta Falcons (1975-82), Houston Oilers (1983-86), and Philadelphia Eagles (1987-91).

Over the years Walsh experienced countless highlights with the teams he coached, first with head coach Hank Stram and the AFL's Dallas Texans in 1962. Winning the four-team Western Division with an 11-3 mark, Dallas played Eastern champ Houston (11-3) for the title. The Texans started strong, running up a 17-0 halftime lead. But when Charley Tolar scored from one yard out with two minutes remaining, George Blanda tied the score with his extra point. Finally, in the second overtime, Tommy Brooker kicked a 25-yard field goal, his second of the day, giving Dallas a 20-17 win and the AFL Championship.

Walsh recollected, "That was a great, great day for us, because we made about \$1,700 for winning! That was good money for us. We paid off our debts, and I think I bought my wife a dryer. Then we left Dallas for Kansas City."

Kansas City's first excellent season came in 1966. Led by stars such as quarterback Len Dawson, running back Mike Garrett, flanker Otis Taylor, and linemen Jim Tyrer and Ed Budde, the Chiefs won the West with an 11-2-1 record. After beating the Buffalo Bills, 31-7, for the AFL Title, Kansas City came up short against Vince Lombardi's powerhouse Green Bay Packers, 35-10, in a game which the media nicknamed the "Super Bowl."

"We played Green Bay in Super Bowl I in '67, and we lost," Walsh observed. "It was a close ball game, and we had an interception by Willie Wood early in the third quarter, and we sort of fell apart. Green Bay

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was a darn good football team. We held our own for a while, but we didn't have the poise, or something, to handle the bad thing that happened to us. We sort of fell apart. Green Bay beat us, 35-10."

After second-place finishes for the three years, the resurgent Chiefs won the 1969 league playoffs to advance to the Super Bowl. Kansas City stopped the Jets, 13-6, and defeated the Oakland Raiders, 17-7, to win the final AFL Title. To cap a great season, the Chiefs beat the NFL Champion Minnesota Vikings in Super Bowl IV, 23-7.

"People talk about teams that get into the Super Bowl and lose, like Minnesota," Walsh commented. "There are a whole lot of other coaches who would like to be in their shoes, believe me! It's no disgrace to lose a Super Bowl. We wore that loser's ring through three years, before we got that winner's ring.

"Lenny Dawson had a great day, and we won in 1970. There was just a week between our last playoff game in Oakland, and Super Bowl IV in New Orleans. We played at Oakland, we came back on Sunday night, and we left Monday or Tuesday and went right to New Orleans. We had to do the game plan down there. There wasn't much time."

Walsh coached on several playoff teams after 1970, but none of those clubs made it to the Super Bowl. The great linemen he coached include Jim Tyrer, Ed Budde, and "Mo" Moorman with the Chiefs, Mike Kenn, Jeff Van Note, and R.C. Thielemann with the Falcons, and Bruce Matthews, Mike Munchak, Harvey Salem, and Dean Steinkuhler with the Oilers.

Retiring after the '91 season, Walsh and his wife Shirley returned to their Atlanta home which they bought 20 years ago. "I coached 37 years," he said, laughing, "and I tell people, 'I never really worked.'

"You're just fortunate. You're one of the few that can say that. You're doing something that you like and you really enjoy."

A first-class athlete at Notre Dame, the two-time Pro Bowler enjoyed excellent experiences as an NFL center and, later, as a coach in the AFL and NFL. Bill Walsh's career illustrates the kind of quality people who were attracted to professional football during the postwar era.