

DAVE WILCOX

Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 2000

By Joe Horrigan

Most serious pro football observers will agree that the outside linebacker position requires an extraordinary kind of athlete. He must possess size and strength sufficient to bring down a powerful fullback or tight end running with a full head of steam, and speed enough to chase down the most elusive halfback dashing around end on a sweep. He must always be acutely aware of his surroundings recognizing what is going on in front of him as well as behind. Some will suggest that he may be the best all-around athlete on the defensive side of the football.

Those who witnessed outside linebacker Dave Wilcox perform during his 11 stellar seasons with the San Francisco 49ers, 1964 to 1974, will tell you that he was that "extraordinary kind of athlete." They will also tell you his election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2000, was too long in coming.

Selected in the third round of the 1964 National Football League draft, Wilcox was converted to linebacker after playing guard on offense and end on defense at the University of Oregon. A natural at the linebacker position, he quickly became regarded as one of the toughest men in the NFL.

A five-time All-NFL selection, Dave was ideally suited, both mentally and physically to play linebacker. Known for his ability to disrupt play, he was particularly tough on tight ends. He simply didn't let anybody off the line of scrimmage whether to block or get into a pass route. He thrived on action and wanted it all directed his way. "What I do best," he once stated "is not let people block me. I just hate to be blocked."

"Wilcox has the size to control the tight end and the speed to stay with the backs. And he is the best open-field tackler I have ever seen," former San Francisco head coach Dick Nolan once said of his star linebacker. Detroit Lions Hall of Fame linebacker Joe Schmidt, who played and coached against Wilcox, was impressed by his strength. "He gave us fits," Schmidt recalled. "The lead block had to really come out hard to take him on because he was so strong."

One of eight children, (six brothers and one sister) Wilcox was born in Ontario, Oregon but grew up on a farm in Vale, Oregon, a small rural community near the Idaho State Line.

"There were 320 kids in our high school," he recalled, "and about 90 of them turned out for football. Football was kind of the whole thing over there. We won the state championship twice in our classification." Wilcox, a two-way end on the football team, was an all-around athlete. He earned nine letters in high school, three each in football, baseball, and basketball.

He first played collegiate football at Boise Junior College, where he was a junior college All-America. Among other accomplishments at Boise, he set a record by blocking eight kicks in one season. After two years at Boise, Dave transferred to Oregon, where his older brother John had attended before joining the Philadelphia Eagles in 1960. John was the first of three Wilcox family members to attend Oregon and then move on to the pros. Dave's son Josh, who signed with the New Orleans Saints in 1998, was the third.

At Oregon, Wilcox was initially used as an offensive and defensive end, but was switched to guard before his last season. It was a switch that at first overwhelmed him. "I didn't know what I was doing," he said. "I was a pulling guard for (Mel) Renfro and he used to run over me." But eventually he got the hang of the position and went on to distinguish himself and was picked to play in the Hula Bowl, Coaches' All-America Game, and the College All-Star Game.

Wilcox became somewhat of a rarity in the pros when he became a starter, as a rookie, at one of the game's most demanding positions. Bill "Cannonball" Cooper and Matt Hazeltine were scheduled to be the 49ers' outside linebackers. Cooper, however, sustained a serious knee injury in the second game of

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the season. A week later, his replacement Ed Pine came up with a lime burn when groundskeepers lined the field with lime instead of chalk. The freak accident proved to be a huge break for Wilcox. The raw-boned understudy started the following week against the champion Chicago Bears.

"I'm worried," he told a reporter prior to his first start. "I know what I'm supposed to do, but now I have to think about it. It isn't automatic." Perhaps in an effort to relieve some of the pressure, head coach Jack Christiansen publicly announced that if needed, Pine could see action. Pine wasn't needed, however, and Wilcox never looked back. From that day forward, Dave Wilcox was the 49ers' starting left outside linebacker.

Although he had a good rookie season, his coaches felt that he was still too light and needed to improve his upper body strength. Contributing to his problem was the fact that ever since his college days, he suffered from chronic shoulder pain.

"I weighed around 230 my first two years, but kept having trouble with my shoulders," Wilcox said. "They ached so bad I couldn't sleep." Dave spent his first off-season in the Army, so he couldn't participate in any rehab or weightlifting program with the team. But starting his second season he dedicated himself to the weight room, adding pounds and the needed upper body strength.

With a healthy shoulder he was even more explosive off the ball as he rushed quarterbacks and leveled ball carriers. The impact of a Wilcox hit, it was said, could be measured on the Richter Scale. By his third season he was considered by most as one of the league's most dominant defensive players.

Unfortunately, the team was not so dominant. After posting a 4-10 record in 1964, the 49ers improved to 7-6-1 in 1965, only to fall to 6-6-2 the following season. In 1967, after a 5-1 start, the 49ers, plagued by injuries, dropped six consecutive games and finished with a 7-7 record. Wilcox was one of the few 49ers bright spots during that period.

QUICKLY FORGOTTEN

His quiet off-the-field demeanor coupled with the team's lackluster performances year-in and year-out, resulted in Dave never fully receiving the kind of national attention a player of his caliber should expect. Still, he was named to the Pro Bowl following the 1966 season and All-NFL in 1967. As one NFL observer remarked, however, "No one played better or was forgotten faster than Dave Wilcox."

Some of the unintentional oversight, especially in the early years of his career, could be blamed on playing along side a respected veteran like Matt Hazeltine.

In 1966, when Baltimore Colts center Dick Szymanski was asked to name the most underrated player in the league, he wanted to cast his vote for Wilcox, but he couldn't remember his name. "That guy from San Francisco," he replied. "That linebacker is one guy you never hear about but who does a heck of a job. Not Hazeltine, the other one, at the other corner."

After soliciting assistance from a teammate Szymanski confirmed, "Wilcox. Yeah, Wilcox, that's right. He's a good one."

For his part, Dave was content to lead by example and was never bothered by his lack of notoriety.

All he ever wanted was to be the best outside linebacker in the league. "You have to have enough pride to want to be the best," he said. "When no one completes a pass on your side or runs your hole, that gives you a better feeling than what someone says about you in a book."

Though soft spoken off the field, Wilcox was ferocious on the field. In fact his coaches nicknamed him "The Intimidator." In the early 1970s, an informal poll of NFL coaches, players and scouts for the book, *Inside Pro Football*, named Wilcox as one of the 12 toughest men in the league.

"Wilcox has earned a league-wide reputation as a 'hitter,'" the book reported. "He doesn't push or pull and shove. He hits people with hard hammer blows that send them reeling. Tight ends who run patterns across the field are pet targets of the San Francisco defensive star. More than once Dave has almost decapitated an unwary tight end. Now most of them look for him before they start across the middle."

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One of the more colorful descriptions of Wilcox came from long-time sports writer Dave Newhouse, who wrote, "Wilcox hit fullbacks and tight ends like a misplaced steer wrestler, grabbing them at the top of both arms, or by the shirt, and flinging them to the ground. A Dave Wilcox tackle, starts at the shoulders and hurts all the way down."

Aided by his speed and an unusually long reach, he was also very effective in pass coverage and managed to intercept 14 passes during his career. His somewhat unorthodox arm-tackling technique and his style of play in general were a combination of experience and theory.

"My thinking when tackling is that if I have to leave my feet, I'm doing exactly what the ball carrier wants – for me to extend myself," he said. "I try to think his way. He'll put a move on to get you to move so he can make another move around you. I wait until he stops. Usually you have to reach out some and get him anyway, so I must use my arms somewhat." With arms that measured size 39 in sleeve length it's easy to see how his arm-tackling style was so effective.

A true student of the game Wilcox was always prepared and worked tirelessly to be "fundamentally correct." "There is no use in playing football just to be playing," he suggested. "You should always try to be the best."

BETTER TIMES

It wasn't, however, until Dick Nolan took over as head coach in 1968 that the 49ers', and Wilcox's fortunes began to soar. In 1970, the team captured the first of three consecutive NFC Western Division titles and Wilcox was named to the first of four consecutive All-NFL teams. In the 1971 NFC Championship Game against the Dallas Cowboys, the veteran linebacker recorded four tackles, five assists, two passes defended and one sack. Suddenly, the 49ers and Wilcox were news. It wasn't, however, news to Nolan or his staff.

"Dave comes to play," Nolan remarked. "You'd have to shoot him to keep him out. He's something special." Line coach Dick Stanfel once rated Wilcox as the best in the game. "As far as I'm concerned," he said, "Dave is the finest outside linebacker I have ever seen in pro football."

After each season, the San Francisco coaching staff would rate every player based upon his performance. The typical score for a linebacker was 750. Wilcox's score in 1973 was 1,306. The score reflected a season that included 104 solo tackles, four forced fumbles, and 13 tackles behind the line of scrimmage.

Prior to the start of the 1974 season, Wilcox had a second surgery on a troublesome right knee. Although he somehow managed to play, he admitted it wasn't at his usual all-pro level. "It's frustrating not being able to do something you normally can because of a restriction you have no control over," Wilcox said midway through the season. By season's end, it was apparent that his brilliant – though sometimes overlooked – career was over.

With his election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Dave Wilcox has finally gotten the recognition that for far too long has eluded him. It is without question a just reward for a player who had just "enough pride to want to be the best."

YA GOTTA GET A GIMMICK!

Wilcox never achieved the notoriety of an earlier 49ers linebacker named Hardy Brown. Although Brown was just an average player in most ways, he had one skill that set him apart – he knocked people cold. Instead of tackling opponents, he would launch himself, shoulder pad first, at his target's chin. When he connected, the opponent was usually carried off unconscious. Reportedly, in one game, he kayoed the enemy's entire starting backfield.
