

Dave Casper: Class of 2002

Courtesy of Pro Football Hall of Fame

DAVE CASPER

Casper, David John (The Ghost)
Notre Dame

B: 9 / 26 / 1951, Bemidji, MN

Drafted: 1974 Round 2 Oak

TE

6-4, 240

HS: Chilton [WI]

Year	Team	Receiving		Yards	Avg.	TD
		G	No.			
1974	OAK	14	4	26	6.5	3
1975	OAK	14	5	71	14.2	1
1976	OAK	13	53	691	13.0	10
1977	OAK	14	48	584	12.2	6
1978	OAK	16	62	852	13.7	9
1979	OAK	15	57	771	13.5	3
1980	OAK/HOU	16	56	796	14.2	4
1981	HOU	16	33	572	17.3	8
1982	HOU	9	36	573	15.9	6
1983	HOU/MIN	13	20	251	12.6	0
1984	L.A. RAI	7	4	29	7.3	2
TOTALS		147	378	5216	13.8	52

Additional Career Statistics: Rushing: 6-27; Fumble Recovery for TD: 1

Pro Football Hall of Fame 2002

All-Pro: 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979

All-AFC: 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979

Pro Bowls: 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981

1970's All-Decade Team

Super Bowl Silver Anniversary Team

Tight end Dave Casper may have been nicknamed "The Ghost," but to the opposition he was anything but invisible. His broad size alone - 6-4 and 240 pounds -- made him visibly conspicuous. But, more than that, his dominant play during 11 years with the Oakland/Los Angeles Raiders, Houston Oilers, and Minnesota Vikings demonstrated he was no phantom player. He was the complete package. There have been tight ends in pro football who blocked well, some who possessed speed and agility, and others who were adept at catching passes. But, Casper did it all.

A gifted athlete, Dave had always been a versatile player. In high school, he played football, golf, baseball, and basketball, first at St. Edward High School in Elgin, Illinois, then at Chilton (Wisconsin) High. As a senior, his Chilton High football team went undefeated and was unscored upon. Four years later in 1973, he captained Notre Dame's unbeaten national championship team that defeated Alabama 24-23 in one of the most memorable Sugar Bowls ever played.

A three-year starter for the Fighting Irish, Casper was an All-America choice at tight end as a senior and an All-America Honorable Mention at tackle as a junior. In addition to being a gifted athlete, he was also a solid student. He graduated with a degree in economics and earned Academic All America honors his junior year, the same year he was voted the team's Most Valuable Player.

Oakland selected Casper in the second round, the 45th player chosen overall in the 1974 NFL Draft. It was a pick that delighted the Raiders, but initially disappointed Casper. "I didn't think I'd be one of the first players taken," he told a reporter, "but I thought I'd be in the top twenty-five, at least in the top two tight ends." The fact was, five other tight ends were chosen ahead of the Notre Dame All-America.

Somehow a rumor got started that Casper wasn't interested in playing pro football and several teams passed on the opportunity to draft him. Then-Raiders personnel director Ron Wolf confessed that Oakland was well aware of Casper's plans to play pro football. Wolf, well in advance of the draft called Casper, used a phony name and asked him point blank whether he intended to play pro ball. Assured that that was his hope, Wolf endorsed the pick.

When Casper reported to the Raiders he weighed 255 pounds. For a short time, coach John Madden considered converting him to a lineman. "Casper had been a lineman his first three years in college and weighed 255 pounds as a backup tight end during his rookie season with us," Madden explained. "During the winter of 1975, we talked about moving him to offensive tackle. We had an off-season workout that spring and put him in the line to try some pass blocking during drills. He was pretty damned good too."

Although he didn't complain about Madden's experiment, when Dave reported to training camp that summer, he had shed 30 pounds. Casper's subtlety was noted. He wanted to be a tight end and Madden was pleased. "I think what happened was that he had a meeting with himself and decided he wanted to remain a tight end," Madden stated.

Casper was used primarily in a backup role and on special teams during his first two years in Oakland. He was moved up to the No. 1 spot in 1976 when the expansion team Tampa Bay Buccaneers selected Raiders tight end Bob Moore in the player allocation draft. "The Ghost" immediately made his presence known, catching a team-high 53 passes for 691 yards and 10 touchdowns.

Quarterback Ken Stabler sang Casper's praises even before the season was half over. "I think he's already the best tight end in the league," he proclaimed. "I can't think of anyone I'd rather have. He's very intelligent and just knows how to get open. He knows how to beat a defensive back one-on-one, or he can find the open spot in a zone. He's so big and strong he overpowers anybody he goes against, blocking or receiving. If other teams try to double up on Fred Biletnikoff or Cliff Branch, Casper can kill them."

The following season it was much the same. Casper led all Raiders receivers for the second time and was named to the second of his four consecutive All-Pro teams (1976-1979) and the second of his five consecutive Pro Bowl teams (1977-1981).

Not one to seek a lot of attention, Casper deflected praise by sharing it with his teammates. "Most teams double Fred and Cliff and put a linebacker on me," he said. "I'm usually open, so if Kenny can't find Fred or Cliff, he'll throw to my way. I might not be a flashy tight end, but I can catch the ball and block."

"When a team throws a double zone against us," offered Madden, "then Casper goes up the middle. Zingo! Just like that. When you have one, or even two great receivers, then defenses can double up. When you have three, it's impossible to stop them. And we have three."

While most pro football observers were taking note of Casper's pass catching abilities, Madden liked to point out his tight end's blocking skills. "He's so big and wide," the coach offered, "that not only can defenders not get around him to the ball, sometimes they can't even see it coming ... I think it would be very fair to say he's possibly the best blocking tight end we've had since I've been here...in fact it would be fair to say he's one of the best blocking tight ends in football."

Blocking was something Casper took seriously and did exceptionally well. "A lot of tight ends around the league seldom take on the linebacker ahead of them," he once noted. "They release and just go out and try to block the safety. At Oakland, we block like a tackle does."

Even though he averaged more than 55 receptions for five consecutive seasons after becoming a starter in 1976, he continued to downplay his pass catching accomplishments. "I'm only a fair pass receiver," he once said. "I'm a better blocker." Maybe he was a better blocker, but by every account, he was more than a "fair receiver."

Casper's 53 receptions in 1976 seemed to be the final ingredient needed to push the Raiders from contenders to Super Bowl champions. Game stats from the Raiders' 32-14 win over the Minnesota Vikings in Super Bowl XI, show that Casper caught four passes for 70 yards and a touchdown. It was the same number of passes caught by game MVP Fred Biletnikoff and just nine yards fewer. What the stats

books don't indicate is how effective Casper and the Raiders' offensive line that featured future Hall of Fame stars Art Shell and Gene Upshaw, were at run blocking. Raiders running backs that day rushed for a combined 266 yards.

Casper realized how fans and the media largely overlooked the importance of line play. Rather than capitalize on his fame as a receiver, he preferred to talk about protecting the passer and opening gaps for running backs. He even downplayed his forever-famous playoff receptions that sent the Raiders to the 1977 AFC title game. "It wasn't any big thing," he said in a 1978 interview. "I was more involved in my blocking than pass catching."

For the record, Casper's "no big thing," was huge. The 1977 AFC Divisional Playoff Game between the Raiders and Baltimore Colts was at that time, the third longest ever game played. In the six-quarter contest, Stabler threw three touchdown passes to Casper, the last 43 seconds into the sixth period, as the Raiders defeated the Colts 37-31.

It was, however, a non-scoring pass that he is best remembered for that day. With less than three minutes remaining in the game and the Raiders on the short side of a 31-28 score, Madden's crew had one more shot. "We had time so it wasn't like we needed a miracle," Madden remembered. "Snake (Stabler) was so good at using the clock. So we weren't really worried. Well, put it this way, we weren't any more worried than usual."

After Stabler passed for a first down, the Raiders came up with the single most critical play of the game. Today it's simply known as "Ghost to the Post." All afternoon Casper had been running short curls and crossing patterns underneath the Colts formidable defense. This time Stabler sent him deep on a post route.

"The pass was right over my head," Casper said. "Kenny throws such a soft ball that it really was a piece of cake to catch. If it looked tough, it really wasn't. I just ran under it and it stuck in my hands," said Casper, the master of understatement. The 42-yard reception put the ball on the Colts 14 yard line. Three consecutive carries by Pete Banaszak moved it a little closer. Then, with 26 seconds left in regulation Errol Mann kicked a 22-yard field goal to send the game into the first overtime period. A scoreless quarter followed. The grueling contest finally ended in the seventy-fifth minute and forty-third second of the game with a 10-yard Stabler to Casper touchdown toss.

When asked by a reporter if the exciting playoff game was "fun," an exhausted and somewhat incredulous Casper replied, "Playing checkers with your daughter is fun. Not this. This was the hardest football game I ever played."

Early the next season, Casper again pulled his team from certain defeat, on a play that would forever be remembered as "The Holy Roller." Down six points to the San Diego Chargers with 10 seconds remaining in the game, Stabler fumbled the ball. The ball rolled 13 yards to the Chargers 11, where Banaszak batted it toward the goal line. At the 5, a quick-thinking Casper continued the ball's forward progress with his foot before finally falling on it in the end zone for the winning touchdown as time expired.

Casper continued to add to his credential as the game's premier tight end. He led all tight ends in the league in 1978 with 62 receptions, which also marked the most by a Raiders receiver since 1964. The next year he didn't catch a pass during the first four games, then caught 57 in the next 12 contests. The four-game drought followed Casper's brief contract holdout.

Midway through the 1980 season, the Raiders surprised the pro football world and Casper himself, when it was announced that the team had traded the All-Pro tight end to the Houston Oilers. At the time "The Ghost" was leading all Raiders receivers with 22 catches. The Oilers paid a high price for Casper, giving up a first- and second-round pick in the 1981 draft and another second-round pick in the 1982 draft.

"Basically, it's a part of football," the unflappable Casper told reporters. "You go where they ship you. This puts me closer to Willie Nelson (his favorite country singer and a Texan). I really enjoy some of those entertainers they have down there...and they have some guy down there playing quarterback that I've heard of before." The quarterback was Kenny Stabler, who was traded to the Oilers the previous winter.

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The Stabler-Casper combination seemed to pick up right where it had left off in Oakland. Casper finished the 1980 season with 56 receptions and his fifth invitation to the Pro Bowl. One season later, in the strike-shortened 1982 season, he led all Oilers receivers with 33 receptions. Dave remained with the Oilers through the first three games of the 1983 season, before returning home to Minnesota where he played 10 games. He returned to his other home, Oakland, for one final season in 1984, before finally calling it a career.

Hardly invisible, "The Ghost" added to his post-career honors by being named to the 1970's All-Decade Team and to the NFL's Super Bowl Silver Anniversary Team. But in 2002, Dave Casper earned his sport's highest honor when he became just the sixth tight end elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

In the NFL Record Book (at the time of his 1984 retirement)

Post-Season Records

[Tied for 1st] Most Touchdowns, Game - 3 (at Baltimore, Dec. 24, 1977)

[Tied for 1st] Most Touchdowns Receiving, Game - 3 (at Baltimore, Dec. 24, 1977)

Regular Season Team Records (at the time of his 1984 retirement)

[1st] Most Pass Receptions, Game - 12 (vs. New England, Oct. 3, 1976)

[3rd] Most Pass Receptions, Career - 255

Team Statistical Titles

Reception Leader: 1976, 1977, 1978 with Oakland, 1982 with Houston)

Championship Games

1974 AFC - Pittsburgh Steelers 24, Oakland Raiders 13

Casper played in the game but did not record a reception. **1975 AFC - Pittsburgh Steelers 16, Oakland Raiders 10**

Casper recorded five receptions for 67 yards. **1976 AFC - Oakland Raiders 24, Pittsburgh Steelers 7**

Casper started at tight end. He recorded one reception for five yards, fumbled once and recovered two fumbles.

1977 AFC - Denver Broncos 20, Oakland Raiders 17

Casper started at tight end. He recorded five receptions for 71 yards and two touchdowns.

Super Bowl

Super Bowl XI - Oakland Raiders 32, Minnesota Vikings 14

Casper started at tight end. He recorded four receptions for 70 yards and one touchdown.