

Wayne Frazier

This article is by Budd Bailey.

Wayne Frazier must have had mixed feelings about the sport of football. It plunked him out of a small rural town in southern Alabama, and sent him on a journey that took him to a major college and the professional ranks. Still, he paid a price for it. No doubt Frazier was reminded of the down side of the game whenever he got out of bed in the morning and landed on some fragile knees.



William Wayne Frazier was born on March 5, 1939 in Evergreen, Alabama. For those driving from Mobile to Montgomery on Interstate 65, Evergreen (about 4,000 people) is one of the few “cities” along that route. It’s about halfway between the two bigger cities, and is surrounded by undeveloped land. No wonder it was called “Evergreen” by the first settlers in 1819.

Wayne’s father was named Ellis S. Frazier. He described his job in the 1940 census as a foreman timekeeper in government. For a man who only had an eighth-grade education, that probably wasn’t a bad living. Wife Cora picked up some extra money selling cosmetics part-time. Wayne was only 1 year old for the 1940 census, and his two big brothers were Ellis Jr. and James. Two more sisters came along later.

Frazier once talked about a key figure in his development as an athlete during a speech years later in Evergreen. Sportswriter Lee Peacock reported that Frazier said he was beaten up by a bully every day in elementary school. Wayne was too small then to effectively hit back, but he said the experience “made him tough.” Some years later, that bully dropped out of school and took a job driving a truck filled with pulpwood. When



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the driver drove by the kids on the playground that he used to torment, he'd honk his horn.

Frazier spent his entire childhood, and played on the sandlots of the region with his older brothers. He also went to high school there. He's one of three pro football players to come out of that town, and played more games than either Derrick Oden (35 games) or Bob Meeks (8 games). In fact, Frazier is the only one of the three players to start a game in the pros. Athletic teams there go by the names of the Jaguars, and the school is located on Jaguar Drive. But earlier in the school history, the school was name Evergreen H.S., and its teams went by the Aggies. (There was a merger of two nearby schools in 1988.)

Wendell Hart was the football coach when Frazier was there. He took over for the 1946 season, and had winning seasons in nine of his first 10 seasons. Hart went 82-56-10 through 1960, and returned in 1967 for six more seasons (22-36-1). Frazier earned a varsity letter as a freshman and sophomore in 1953-54, even though he suffered serious facial and cheekbone injuries during a game as a sophomore. As a junior in 1955, Frazier and his teammates had a fine season, going 7-2-1. Frazier earned honorable mention honors in voting for all-state honors at tackle.

The Aggies couldn't match that performance in 1956, slipping to 3-7. Evergreen only scored more than one touchdown in two of the games. However, Frazier must have had a great year on a personal level. He was named an All-American linebacker by the Wigwam Wiseman, a national group organized by "Mose" Simms of Oklahoma City University to pick the nation's best players. The picks were printed in "The Sporting News," one of the nation's top sports publications. Frazier also was a first-team All-Alabama pick by one group and a third-team choice by two others. He played in the annual University of Alabama All-Star Game. Wayne was the captain of the team, and also did the kicking and punting. He won the school's D.T. Stevenson Sportsmanship Trophy. By the way, in the "offseason" Frazier was a member of the basketball, baseball and track teams of the Aggies.

The 6-foot-3, 210-pounder had built up a good-sized reputation as a player by that point. Therefore, he had his choice of schools. Then, as now, the Southeastern Conference was the place to go for top competition in college football. Frazier picked Auburn University (then known formally as Alabama Polytechnic Institute) as his next stop, mostly because of the head coach. Ralph "Shug" Jordan had led the Tigers to four straight winning seasons through 1956, with the team going to the Gator Bowl for the three straight seasons (1953 to 1955). Frazier later said that Jordan's presence was the biggest reason that the high school graduate agreed to go to Auburn.



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As a freshman, Frazier had a good view of the Tigers as they completed a memorable season. Auburn went 7-0 in the SEC and 10-0 in the regular season. It won the Associated Press poll as the nation's top team. However, the Tigers were on probation and not allowed to participate in a postseason bowl game. Ohio State beat Oregon in the Rose Bowl, and the coaches' poll picked the Buckeyes as the nation's best team.

Auburn came off probation after the 1957 season, and went right back to work in 1958. The Tigers finished the season 9-0-1, with a tie against Georgia Tech the only blemish on the schedule. They finished fourth in both major polls; SEC rival LSU earned the No. 1 spot. Frazier, who picked up the nickname of "Cotton" somewhere in his life, was redshirted for that season.

Auburn's long unbeaten streak ended in the 1959 season opener to Tennessee, but it responded with six straight wins to climb to No. 8 in the polls. Losses to Georgia and Alabama left the record at 7-3 and spoiled any hopes of postseason glory. At least Frazier got to play enough to earn his first varsity letter. In 1960, the Tigers had a season that looked like 1959's record. Auburn again lost the opener to Tennessee and the closer to Alabama, but won all eight games in between. That left the Tigers at 8-2 for the season.

Certainly Frazier had some pro scouts watching him in the 1960 season. After all, he was playing alongside Ken Rice, one of the greatest offensive linemen in the history of the SEC. Rice went first overall to Buffalo in the American Football League draft in 1961. Meanwhile, the Chicago Bears took a chance on Frazier by taking him in the 16th round of the NFL draft.

Frazier still had a year of eligibility left at Auburn, and he decided to use it. He was part of a 6-4 team in which the Tigers never won more than two games in a row. Still, Frazier was a favorite of Jordan, as the head coach said one time after a practice, "Frazier is always ready to go, but he had an exceptional afternoon, even for him."

Frazier was a third team All-American Academic team selection and an Academic All-SEC pick, having an A average in education. Frazier earned invitations to the Blue-Gray All-Star Game and the Senior Bowl after finishing the season at Auburn. Those were prime showcases for college players to perform in front of pro scouts. The teams in the AFL had plenty of time to consider whether Wayne was pro material. The San Diego Chargers took him with the last pick in the 32nd round, and signed him to a contract. Frazier was ready to try to play at the next level.

In the middle of all of that, Evergreen took time out to salute a favorite son. "Wayne Frazier Day" was celebrated on January 15, 1962. The town had a parade, a program and a banquet in his honor. Mayor Zell Murphy's proclamation began, "Whereas, the people



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of the City of Evergreen are exceedingly and justly proud of the remarkable football exploits of Wayne Frazier, and he is easily the City's Number One Son in the world of sports ...”

Wayne and first wife Anne packed up their belongings and headed to Southern California that summer. Before reporting to training camp, Frazier played in the College All-Star Game in Chicago, and played for the rookies in a loss to the Green Bay Packers. Frazier probably thought he was coming into a good situation in San Diego. The Chargers had lost in the AFL championship game in 1960 and 1961. The team had a legendary head coach in Sid Gillman, who possessed one of the great offensive minds in the history of the game. His assistants were Al Davis and Chuck Noll.

Frazier played in seven games in 1962, and started all of them. An injury prevented him from appearing in more games, although Frazier wasn't alone on the sidelines. Top players like Paul Lowe, Earl Faison, Lance Alworth and Chuck Allen all missed substantial parts of the season. That didn't go over well with Gillman, who called the injured players “ingrates.” The shorthanded Chargers finished 4-10, and there are at least hints in some references that the relationship between Frazier and Gillman may have started to go downhill around that time.



The center signed a contract with the Chargers in June 1963. However, he suffered from a knee infection that required surgery and missed the entire 1963 season. The team went on to win the AFL championship that season, although that squad is also remembered as the first football team to be given anabolic steroids by the training and medical staff. While usage varied by the individual, it is noteworthy that by 2009 10 of the 38 players on the roster were dead. Their average age at the time of death was 53.5 years.



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Then Frazier was one of San Diego's last cuts in 1964. However, Wayne wasn't done with pro football quite yet. He popped up on the roster of the 1965 Houston Oilers, and started 10 games there. The Oilers were a little streaky that season, and not in a good sense. Houston started 4-3 but lost its final seven games to finish a dreary 4-10 season.

Frazier, now 6-foot-3 and 245 pounds, returned to the Oilers' training camp in 1966, but he didn't stay long. Wayne was traded to the Kansas City Chiefs for a 10th-round draft choice. He caught a large break when the usual starting center, Jon Gilliam, suffered a knee injury in preseason and only played one game that season. Frazier had a huge opportunity, and he cashed in on it by taking the starting job. He also had the chance to play for another great coach in Hank Stram, and he was part of the team that ran up an 11-2-1 record in the regular season. Then Kansas City knocked off Buffalo, 31-7, in the AFL Championship Game.

But the Chiefs weren't done with their season yet. They had earned the chance to play in the very first Super Bowl on January 15, 1967. The thrills started even before the opening kickoff. Frazier became the first player to be introduced before the game, and thus made himself a difficult trivia question that will be remembered forever. Gilliam, by the way, was still a co-captain, and was part of the coin toss in Super Bowl I. Chiefs fans know that the game went downhill after a promising first half, as the Green Bay Packers earned a 35-10 win over Kansas City. Still, just playing in the game must have been a career highlight. Since both teams were given rings that year for the only time in Super Bowl history, Frazier had a nice souvenir of the game.

Wayne no doubt was looking forward to another season with the defending AFL champions. However, the Chiefs traded him on September 5 to the Bills for a future draft choice. Frazier arrived to play for a team in transition, starting with the fact that coach Lou Saban had left and had been replaced by defensive coordinator Joel Collier. Buffalo also was hit hard by injuries that season. Frazier played in six games for the Bills in 1967, starting five of them. But by November 4, it was obvious that Buffalo (2-5) was going nowhere fast.

Frazier was placed on waivers. The Chiefs, who had lost three centers to injury already at that point in the season, claimed him. Wayne went back on the Kansas City roster, starting six games. The Chiefs went 5-2 after Frazier arrived, but fell short of a division title as Oakland advanced to the AFL championship game.

That was it for Frazier, whose career came to a close at that point. He finished with 48 games and 42 starts during four seasons. At some point after retirement, Wayne received a full disability settlement of \$4,000 per month from the National Football League for



injuries suffered during his career. Details don't appear to be available in public documents that are accessible on-line.

Frazier moved into a coaching position at Troy State University in Alabama in 1970. Then he went to Brewton, Alabama, to serve for four years as the head coach at W.S. Neal High School. That's not far from Evergreen, right on the Florida border. Frazier also made a coaching stop in nearby Flomaton. Wayne stayed in Brewton for the rest of his life, working with second wife Wilodyne in the insurance business for 36 years. Later in life, he gained a reputation around town as a philanthropist and as a community worker. He was a volunteer with hospice.

"He was a very special person," David Stokes told newspaper reporter Lydia Grimes. "He was an outstanding athlete and played in the first Super Bowl ever watched. I was always humbled by his presence. He is known for what he did in sports, but he and Wilodyne were so good when my father was ill. He was comfortable when they came to sit with him, and he wasn't that way with many. Wayne was always humble and was never pretentious. He was a generous person."



After a long illness, Frazier died on March 11, 2012, just past his 73rd birthday. He was buried back in Evergreen, completing the circle. Wayne and Wilodyne had three sons – William, Sean and Will, and a daughter Tara.



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