



## Ben Gregory

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Ben Gregory played one season with the Buffalo Bills after being a fifth-round draft choice from the University of Nebraska. He appeared in six games for the 1968 Bills that finished with a league worst 1-12-1 record. Gregory was having an excellent season before a knee injury abruptly ended it. At Nebraska he helped lead the Cornhuskers to the Orange Bowl and Sugar Bowl, while being named All-Big Eight twice.



Photo Credit: Robert L. Smith

Bennett Maurice Gregory was born on October 31, 1946 (a Halloween baby) in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. He grew up in Uniontown and attended Uniontown High School, graduating in 1964. At Uniontown he starred in football and played on the basketball team.

Gregory scored 16 touchdowns in his senior season and rushed for just shy of 1,000 yards, leading Uniontown to a 7-1-1 record. In his junior year he led the Maroon to an undefeated 10-0 season and the WPIAL Class AA Championship. He was selected to the prestigious Pennsylvania Big-33 All State scholastic football squad at the conclusion of his senior season. As part of that selection, he also played in a football game against an All-Star team from Texas on August 1, 1964. Gregory was the star of the All-Star game, returning a fourth quarter punt 90-yards for the game-winning touchdown in Pennsylvania's 12-6 victory.



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Gregory was recruited by the University of Nebraska along with his cousin, future NBA star Stu Lantz, who played basketball for the Cornhuskers. He accepted a scholarship from Nebraska, but it took him a while to adjust to life in Lincoln. Once he did, he came to love it there.

Gregory shared a story in 1995, “I always thought Nebraska was a special place. When I went there, I was sitting in the Lincoln airport and wondering what to do next. A woman running the counter asked if I had a ride to campus. I told her I didn’t, and I was supposed to be at the university. She closed the counter and gave me a ride to town. Looking back, it was that woman who gave me a ride that convinced me the Midwest was a very special place.”<sup>i</sup>

He played halfback for the Nebraska freshman team in 1964, and for the varsity from 1965 to 1967. Ben was the only Cornhusker to play both offense and defense in 1966. He was named to the All-Big Eight team in both 1966 and 1967.

As sophomore he was a back-up to Harry Wilson. Gregory played very well on defense and made a game-saving play against Missouri. Nebraska won the game 16-14 because of Gregory’s play, preserving its undefeated regular season. He tackled Charlie Brown, preventing a game-winning touchdown late in the game. Midway through his sophomore season it was said about him, “Gregory is turning out to be one of the most versatile backs on the squad and threw the only halfback option pass of the season, a 23-yard effort to Larry Casey in the K-State victory.”<sup>ii</sup>

Nebraska finished Gregory’s sophomore season with a perfect 10-0 record, a #3 national ranking and an invitation to play fourth ranked Alabama in the Orange Bowl on New Year’s evening. They also were Big Eight Conference Champions. The Orange Bowl game became the defacto National Championship when earlier on New Year’s Day the #1 rated Michigan State Spartans and #2 rated Arkansas both lost.

Nebraska fell behind Alabama 24-6, but Gregory came up with a big play to get the Cornhuskers back in the game. Early in the second half, Nebraska quarterback Bob Churchich connected on a pass to Gregory for 26 yards to the Alabama 23, and Ben lugged it the rest of the way home for a touchdown. Nebraska cut the lead to 24-13 but could get no closer as Alabama went on to become National Champions, with a 39-28 victory.

Gregory finally got his chance, in his junior season, to start on offense after Ron Kirkland was injured. His best game that year turned out to be the only regular season game loss for the Huskers. Gregory rushed for 109 yards in a 10-9 loss to Oklahoma. Gregory had a solid season with 418 yards rushing, a 4.5 per carry average, and seven touchdowns.



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Nebraska finished the regular season at 9-1, winning the Big Eight Conference Championship again, and earning a spot in the Sugar Bowl. They played Alabama in a rematch from the prior year's Orange Bowl. The rematch was no contest, with the Crimson Tide burying Nebraska 34-7. Gregory rushed four times and caught four passes in the loss.

Gregory was co-captain with Marv Mueller in 1967. They had a disappointing 6-4 record. Their defense was strong, but they had only one game the team scored over 20 points. Gregory rushed for 412 yards, but only averaged 3.2 yards per carry and was limited to three touchdowns. Nebraska did not earn a Bowl invitation in 1967. In his career, Gregory rushed for a total of 1,024 yards, scored nine rushing touchdowns, and three pass receiving touchdowns on 30 receptions.

Legendary Nebraska coach Bob Devaney once described Ben as “as good a football player as Johnny Rodgers.”<sup>iii</sup> He went on to say, “Ben Gregory was one of the best all-around football players we ever had at Nebraska. Ben could throw the football; he could catch the football; he could run with it, and he could play defense.”<sup>iv</sup>

Gregory was drafted in the fifth round of the 1968 NFL draft. He was the 114th player taken. Coming out of Nebraska he was considered the best blocking back the Cornhuskers had ever produced, per the Bills 1968 media guide. He was also regarded as a good pass catcher in addition to his running abilities. His idol in sports was the late Ernie Davis, who spent part of his childhood in Uniontown.

The 6-foot, 220-pound fullback made an impression in the Bills training camp. In the team's first preseason game, Gregory caught an 8-yard touchdown pass from Jack Kemp on August 5, 1968, spurring the Bills to a 13-9 victory. The game-winning touchdown was scored in the second quarter and led the Bills to their first ever win over an NFL opponent. In 1967, Buffalo had lost their two preseason games against NFL opponents, the first year after the merger agreement was announced and they began to play interleague games. At the time these inter-league games were meaningful to the players, coaches, and owners, as signs of which league was superior.

In the Bills second preseason game, a 28-28 tie with Miami in Rochester, New York, Gregory scored another touchdown. This time on a 24-yard touchdown pass from Dan Darragh. Gregory was showing his versatility and skill in the passing game. He scored his third touchdown of the preseason on a one-yard dive in the Bills 22-12 loss to Cleveland on August 30. He not only made the team but earned the starting fullback slot, with his play in the preseason.



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The Bills opened the 1968 regular season at home against the Boston Patriots with the Bills sporting an all-rookie backfield. Gregory was the fullback and he was joined in the backfield by halfback Mini-Max Anderson from Arizona State, and quarterback Dan Darragh from William and Mary. The Bills started the game strong, scoring a touchdown on their first drive of the game. Gregory had a 35-yard run helping to set-up the touchdown, a 6-yard end around by Paul Costa. But the offense sputtered after that drive and the Bills lost 16-7. Gregory led the team in rushing with 42 yards on seven carries in the loss.

The Bills were drubbed the following week against the Raiders 48-6 and head coach Joe Collier was relieved of his duties after the game. Harvey Johnson, Director of Player Personnel, took over as interim head coach. Gregory had a decent game in the loss, rushing for 57 yards on 15 carries.

The coaching change did not help, as the Bills lost to the expansion Cincinnati Bengals 34-23 on September 22 to start the season 0-3. But the next week the Bills turned in one of the biggest upsets in franchise history.

The Bills battled the New York Jets on September 29 at War Memorial Stadium in Buffalo. The Jets were led by quarterback Joe Namath and a bevy of offensive weapons, including receivers Don Maynard, and George Sauer, Jr., and running backs Matt Snell and Emerson Boozer. But this day belonged to the Bills. Namath fired five interceptions with the Bills returning three of them for touchdowns. Gregory had the best game of his career; rushing 12 times for 87 yards, catching two passes for 12 yards, while scoring on a two-yard run in the first quarter that put the Bills ahead 10-7, in the wildly exciting game. His day also included a 67-yard run.

The Bills interception returns for touchdowns were, by Tom Janik (100 yards), Butch Byrd (53 yards), and Booker Edgerson (45 yards). But Namath also threw four touchdown passes for his own team, including a 55-yard beauty to Maynard. The Bills recovered a Jets' onside kick with 59 seconds left to secure the victory, after New York had cut the Bills lead to 37-35 with Namath's fourth touchdown pass. The stunning upset was complete. It would be the Bills only win in a 1-12-1 season, while the Jets became Super Bowl Champions and gave legitimacy to the American Football League.

Gregory had another good game against the Kansas City Chiefs the following week, again leading the team in rushing with 58 yards in the Bills 18-7 defeat. The next week, his excellent season came to a screeching halt. On his second carry of the game, midway through the second quarter, he powered his way for 12 yards and then took a cheap hit on his knee by Dolphins linebacker John Bramlett. The play knocked him out of the game.



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At first it appeared to be a knee sprain but following x-rays it was determined to be torn ligaments, and he was lost for the season.

Gregory had started all six games up to that time and was the club's leading rusher in three of those games. At the time of his injury he was leading the club in rushing with 52 rushes for 283 yards, an impressive 5.44 per carry average. In addition, he displayed his strong blocking skills teaming in the backfield with Anderson.

He underwent knee surgery to repair the torn ligaments immediately and it appeared he was making excellent progress as he was off crutches by January. But after reporting to training camp, it was apparent the surgery was not completely successful, and he was shelved for 1969. During training camp while he was trying to rehab his knee, he was O.J. Simpson's first roommate on the Bills. He helped O.J. acclimate to the pro game, and its expectations while also keeping him on-time for practices and meetings.

Gregory also protected O.J. He warned him about Bramlett, prior to a game with the Patriots, as not only had Bramlett injured Gregory he also broke Anderson's jaw in a 1968 game. Now Bramlett was playing for the Patriots and prior to a preseason game, "Ben told O.J., just keep an eye on him."<sup>v</sup> O.J. describing a sequence when Bramlett came at him during the game, "He apparently thought that I was on my way down and wouldn't see him, so he put his head down and charged. I dug in and threw a shoulder into him. I really popped him. He went down hard and lay there for a minute. Then he struggled to his feet and staggered to the sidelines like a drunk."<sup>vi</sup> Gregory was excited saying to O.J. after the hit, "Beautiful, you gave a little of his....back to him."<sup>vii</sup>

As the Bills headed into the 1970 season, it appeared Gregory was fully recovered. On July 6 Bills head coach John Rauch said, "Because Ben Gregory will be returning to action, we expect to do more winning in 1970."<sup>viii</sup> Gregory was excited and along with O.J. was one of the first Bills to report to training camp after the National Football League Players Association and the NFL resolved their dispute. Gregory reported on August 3 but did not last long as he was cut a week later, on August 11, and sadly his NFL career was over. The Bills had acquired fullback Wayne Patrick as a free agent during the 1968 season and drafted Bill Enyart in the second round in 1969, so they had depth at the position, making Gregory expendable.

Gregory did not leave the game he loved. He became a graduate assistant, returning to Nebraska under head coach Devaney in 1971 and 1972. The 1971 team won the National Championship with a 13-0 record. Many consider that team one of the greatest college football teams of all-time. Their win over Oklahoma on Thanksgiving Day is considered one of the great college football games ever. It was dubbed the Game of the Century as both teams were unbeaten, and Nebraska was ranked #1 with Oklahoma rated #2. Johnny



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Rodgers of Nebraska had a dazzling 72-yard punt return, and fullback Jeff Kinney rushed for 171 yards, and four touchdowns, the last with 98 seconds remaining as Nebraska pulled out an exciting 35-31 win.

Following his graduate assistantship, Gregory taught school at the Denver Public Schools for nine years. He returned to coaching in 1982 as an assistant coach at Denver East High School. He then coached Montbello High School, leading the school to three Denver Prep League championships between 1987 and 1990.

Gregory was hired by Colorado head coach Bill McCartney in 1991 as running backs coach for the Buffaloes. Gregory had quintuple heart bypass surgery in 1992 but appeared to be doing very well. He continued coaching the running backs at Colorado and helped Rashaan Salaam have one of the greatest seasons in NCAA history with 2,055 yards in 1994. Salaam won the Heisman Trophy at the conclusion of that season.

Gregory had a massive heart attack on April 10, 1997 at his home in Superior, Colorado, and died a short time later. He was only 50 years old at the time of his death.

Colorado head coach Rick Neuheisel said, "It's a devastating loss to our family, both Ben's immediate family as well as the Colorado football family. Ben was a wonderful person as well as a wonderful coach. ... I relied on his wisdom a great deal, and he will be greatly missed. We are all stunned, and we all have heavy hearts."<sup>ix</sup> Nebraska University Coach Tom Osborne said about Gregory, "He had a positive influence on everyone here and is someone we are very proud to call a Nebraska graduate."<sup>x</sup>

Upon hearing of his death, Salaam said, "Coach Gregory was a great person to me. It was more than just a player-coach relationship. It was more like a father-son relationship. He was a great man and a good person at heart."<sup>xi</sup>

He was married to Bonnie Lynn Moon and they had two children, son, Morgan, and daughter Brooke. Morgan played football for Nebraska in 1987-89.



End Notes:

- <sup>i</sup> Hambleton, Ken, “Heart Attack Kills Husker Great,” *Lincoln Journal Star* (Lincoln, Nebraska), April 12, 1997, p21
- <sup>ii</sup> “Huskies Given Holiday,” *Lincoln Journal Star* (Lincoln, Nebraska), November 2, 1965, p11
- <sup>iii</sup> Hambleton, Ken, “Heart Attack Kills Husker Great,” *Lincoln Journal Star* (Lincoln, Nebraska), April 12, 1997, p21
- <sup>iv</sup> Hambleton, Ken, “Heart Attack Kills Husker Great,” *Lincoln Journal Star* (Lincoln, Nebraska), April 12, 1997, p21
- <sup>v</sup> Kaese, Harold, “Patriots won the game—but Simpson racked up the victory,” *Boston Globe*, September 6, 1970, p33
- <sup>vi</sup> Kaese, Harold, “Patriots won the game—but Simpson racked up the victory,” *Boston Globe*, September 6, 1970, p33
- <sup>vii</sup> Kaese, Harold, “Patriots won the game—but Simpson racked up the victory,” *Boston Globe*, September 6, 1970, p33
- <sup>viii</sup> Trent, Tod, “Sports Standard,” *The Morning Herald* (Uniontown, PA), July 6, 1970, p16
- <sup>ix</sup> <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1997/04/11/Colorado-asst-grid-coach-Gregory-dies/3173860731200/>, accessed July 15, 2020
- <sup>x</sup> “Quoteworthy,” *Fremont Tribune* (Fremont, Nebraska), April 12, 1997, p9
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://apnews.com/c98233d95fb0a568d1af9e593a67aa61>, accessed July 15, 2020