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Carey Henley

This article is by Budd Bailey.

Carey Henley almost always was associated with football, touching the lives of many along the way. His relationship stretched from high school to college to the pros and back to high school. Henley's stay at the game's highest level wasn't as long as he would have liked but at least he joined a very exclusive club in the process.

Carey Ernest Henley was born on September 24, 1936, in West Point, Mississippi. His parents were named W.L. (Bud) and Annie Rea. In spite of its name, West Point is located in the northeast section of the state. The city of a little more than 10,000 people is 106 miles west of Birmingham, Alabama. While the area has produced several pro athletes, its most famous residents probably are musicians. Barrett Strong had Motown's first hit with "Money," while Howlin' Wolf (real name Chester Bennett) was a well-known blues musician.



Henley didn't play any football until eighth grade, when his athletic ability turned a head. "I always liked it but I lived in the country where transportation was a problem," he told Chattanooga Times writer Ray Deering. "We had races in my physical education class and the coach liked my speed. He told me if I'd come out (for football), he would carry me home every night after practice." The first time Carey saw a football game, he played in it.¹



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From there it was on to West Point High School, where he was an all-conference pick for two years. As a senior, the 5-foot-10 Henley was the leading high school scorer in all of Mississippi with 138 points.ⁱⁱ You'd think the University of Mississippi would be interested in recruiting a native son like that but the Rebels didn't talk to him because they thought he was too small. "We just made a mistake in not taking him," Mississippi staff member Tom Swayze said to Chattanooga reporter Wirt Gammon a few years later.ⁱⁱⁱ

After graduating in 1955 Henley was off to the University of Chattanooga for a year but he had a detour in the form of two years in the Marines. Along the way he was stationed at Camp LeJuene in North Carolina. Carey did play some football while in the service and was an All-Marine and All-Service pick in 1958.

Then it was back to the University of Chattanooga and more college football. Henley was the Mocs' best running back for three seasons and he was captain of the 1961 team. Carey ran for a total of 2,164 yards (a school record) and 16 touchdowns on 433 carries. Henley was an honorable mention Little All-American in 1959 and 1960. He was named a second-team Little All-American and Methodist All-American in 1961. That senior year saw him run for 730 yards and seven scores.

He established a reputation for toughness along the way, as recounted by team manager Larry McCoy on a legacy webpage. "I remember Carey having his upper lip ripped during a game," he wrote. "One couldn't help but feel his pain. Trainer taped it together and he was put back in to play for a losing cause. It's been 60 years now but I still remember this courageous young man who you couldn't help but admire."^{iv}

Henley had the chance to play for a legend at Chattanooga. The coach's full name was Andrew Cecil Moore, Jr. but it's his nickname that jumps off the page: "Scrappy." It was earned for his play as a quarterback at the University of Georgia in the 1920s. Moore was the head coach at Chattanooga from 1931 to 1967 (missing two years because of World War II), going 170-148-14. At one point, no college football coach had held a head coaching job at the same school for a longer period of time than Moore. He even turned down the chance to coach at LSU, citing a family vote not to leave Chattanooga. Moore went into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1980. To this day, the mascot there is named "Scrappy."^v

"Coach Moore was ahead of his time," Henley said years later in a video clip that was used on a documentary about Moore. "He was a lot better coach than some coaching today at major universities, I can tell you that."^{vi}



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The Mocs were rather mediocre in the won-loss department despite the best efforts of Henley and Moore. They finished 3-7 in 1959, 5-5 in 1960, and 4-6 in 1961. Part of the problem was the schedule. The Mocs played some of their games against similarly sized schools like Jacksonville State and Abilene Christian. But others saw the team take road trips to play Southern powers like Alabama, Auburn and Mississippi along with Tennessee. While the record wasn't too good, Henley made an impact. "He's one of the finest running backs we ever had at UC," Moore said to the Associated Press near the end of the running back's college career. "He can do just about anything he wants on a football field."^{vii}

After the season ended, Henley had the chance to play in the All-American Bowl in Tucson, Arizona, with some other top seniors from across the country. "They had me playing as a flanker most of the time," he told a Chattanooga Daily Times reporter later. "But I enjoyed it; played defense a lot too."

Henley finished his college football career at a time when he had a wealth of opportunities waiting for him in pro football. The American Football League had two seasons under its belt, and it was willing to look anywhere for players. That included a draft of 34 rounds before the 1962 season. Henley went in Round 21 of the selection process, as he was taken by the Buffalo Bills at No. 164. Buffalo had a rather odd draft

ⁱ Deering, Ray. "Short Shots." Chattanooga Daily Times, September 16, 1961. https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/604262096/?terms=%22Carey%20Henley%22%20Bills&pqsid=tgXuWB-DEly_XclLVFjS0g%3A31475%3A1600089518&match=1.

ⁱⁱ Rawlins, Bill. "Carey Henley Thinks Mocs Must Pass Against Rebels." Knoxville Journal, Nov 9, 1961. <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/588131228/?terms=%22Carey%20Henley%22&pqsid=1AkuEPtS1-KnslZMmNKaLA%3A2212392%3A1743377585&match=1>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gammon, Wirt. "Just Between Us Fans." Chattanooga Daily Times, October 31, 1961. https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/604261943/?terms=%22Tom%20Swayze%22%20%22Carey%20Henley%22&pqsid=KkA9mfOwtk1eC0HVgn_k4w%3A1502402%3A1509878095&match=1

^{iv} "Carey E. Henley." Dignity Memorial. <https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/east-ridge-tn/carey-henley-5499041>

^v Beise, Brian. "Against All Odds – Scappy Moore." CityScope. <https://chattanoogahighschoolfootball.com/football/against-all-odds-scappy-moore/>.

^{vi} Wiedmer, Mark. "Scappy documentary a fitting tribute to a coach ahead of his time." Chattanooga Times Free Press; September 1, 2021. <https://www.aol.com/news/mark-wiedmer-scappy-documentary-fitting-150000524.html>

^{vii} Rawlins, Bill.



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that year. It either whiffed on several top picks because they didn't sign that player (for example, top choice Ernie Davis) or they didn't pan out. But the Bills did take two players who became standouts – linebacker Mike Stratton and defensive tackle Tom Sestak.

Henley arrived at the Bills' training camp in the summer of 1962 and he joined a team that was in the middle of change. Lou Saban had been hired as the head coach in the offseason, replacing Buster Ramsey. Saban certainly was going to put his own imprint on the roster in an attempt to jump-start a team that had been mediocre in its first two seasons.

Henley's arrival at camp must have provided him with at least one eye-opening moment. Chattanooga had never had an African-American athlete on scholarship during Carey's days at the school; the first was a basketball player in 1968. Therefore, it's likely that Henley's first experience with a Black teammate in high school, college or the pros (not counting All-Star games) came with the Bills.

Henley received a look by the team but there wasn't much room in the days of a 33-man roster. He did see some action in the preseason, catching an 18-yard pass from quarterback Manch Wheeler in a game against Boston on August 16. The rookie was cut on September 4 shortly before the regular season began. There was an uncredited report in the Chattanooga Times in that period that Henley's contract was assigned to the Hamilton Tiger-Cats of the Canadian Football League but he refused to report.

However, the Bills needed a running back after three games, and Henley was available. He signed a contract and was pressed into service for a game on September 30 against the Dallas Texans in the Cotton Bowl. Carey was given the job of returning kickoffs, and he was quite busy during a day that saw the Texans take a 41-21 victory. Henley ran for 90 yards on five returns, an average of 18.0 yards per play. Carey also had the chance to run the ball three times, gaining two yards.



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That was it for Henley's pro career. Elbert Dubenion, one of the Bills' top players in their first few years, took time off from receiving duties to catch some kickoffs the following week. Henley was placed on waivers on October 2 ... but at least he had a moment in the sun. But that doesn't mean he wasn't surprised by the move.

"In the grading of the films I made a 98 for my play in that game," Henley said about the contest with the Texans to the Chattanooga Daily Times. "You never know in this pro game from one week until the next."^{viii}

Henley's contract was assigned to the Hamilton Tiger-Cats of the Canadian Football League but after some thought he refused to report.^{ix} The running back received a tryout with the Denver Broncos a year later but was cut before the start of the season.

It was time to move on with the rest of his life, although he was hardly done with football. Carey took the logical step of returning to the scene of his greatest triumphs - Chattanooga. He played with the Chattanooga Cherokees, a semipro team, in 1963 through 1965. Henley also was an assistant coach on that team. That squad represented an

^{viii} Short, George. "Short Shots." Chattanooga Daily Times; October 5, 1962.

https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/604262096/?terms=%22Carey%20Henley%22%20Bills&pqid=tgXuWB-DEly_XclLVFjS0g%3A31475%3A1600089518&match=1.

^{ix} "Garney Henley, Not Carey, Scored Three Tiger-Cat TD's." Chattanooga Times; October 18, 1962.

https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/604266309/?terms=%22Carey%20Henley%22%20Bills&pqid=tgXuWB-DEly_XclLVFjS0g%3A31475%3A1600089518&match=1



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attempt by businessman Charles O. Ragan Sr. to try to establish pro football in the Tennessee city that was a rung below the top professionals. The Cherokees played from 1963 to 1966 and mostly featured graduates from the University of Chattanooga. ^x

Eventually, Henley finished playing football, but the game was part of his life for decades more. Carey was a physical education major in college and had planned on moving into coaching. He earned a Masters' degree and landed a job at Kirkman Technical High School in Chattanooga, where he eventually became the head football coach and athletic director. He held the same titles at two other high schools in that area – Brainerd and Tyner. Henley not surprisingly picked up the nickname “Coach” during that era and kept it through the rest of his life.

One of his high school players, Anthony Jackson, remembered him this way on a legacy webpage: “Coach Henley was a good football coach but he was twice as good as a human being. He was fair, tough and a very good motivator, I always looked forward to the pre- and after-game speeches; they were always uplifting and inspiring whether we won or lost.”^{xi}

When it was time to retire from that career after 30 years in 1991, Carey slipped smoothly into a position with nearby WindStone Golf Club in Ringgold, Georgia. It was a great job for someone who enjoyed talking to people and Henley worked there for more than 20 years. He also spent time in retirement playing golf (three holes-in-one during his life) and dominoes with his friends.^{xii}

Henley died on April 15, 2013 in East Ridge, Tennessee. He and wife Betty were married for 51 years. They had a daughter, Cara and two grandsons at the time of Carey's death.^{xiii} He was inducted into Chattanooga's Hall of Fame in 1993 and picked as a member of Tennessee's All-Century football team.^{xiv}

^x Summers, Jerry. “Chattanooga's Pro Football (1963-1966).” Chattanooga.com; May 21, 2021. <https://www.chattanooga.com/2021/5/21/428422/Jerry-Summers-Chattanooga-s-Pro.aspx>.

^{xi} “Carey E. Henley.”

^{xii} “Carey E. Henley.”

^{xiii} “Carey E. Henley.”

^{xiv} “Carey Henley.” Chattanooga Mocs. <https://gomocs.com/honors/hall-of-fame/carey-henley/139>.



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