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Charlie Krueger

This article was written by Matthew Keddie.

Known for his tenacity and strength, Charlie Krueger lined up along the defensive front for 16 seasons (1958 to 1973) as a member of the San Francisco 49ers. He routinely walloped opposing ball carriers and fought his way through blocks. This style of play earned him the nickname the 'Textbook Tackle'. It was said of him, "Charlie was a real hard knocker. They always had two or three guys blocking on him in a game. That enabled the other linemen to do their job. He got a lot of respect. With the 49ers, he was a quiet leader. He was like E.F. Hutton. When he said something, people listened."¹



Former teammate Len Rohde, who joined him on defense for 13 years said, "How can I describe Charlie? Very, very intense."² John David Crow, who played with him on the 49ers and in college at Texas A&M University elaborated, "He would knock your brains out. He was a very, very tough football player. He wasn't as big when he was playing college as he was with the 49ers. He was a good teammate, a good guy and one of the reasons we had a good football team."³

For the time in which he played, Krueger's durability was outstanding considering the beating he took. His 198 career games played ranks seventh in 49ers history. The only defensive players who played more were Bryant Young (208) and Jimmy Johnson (213).⁴ He also earned two trips to the Pro Bowl (1960, 1964) and was named a second-team all-



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pro in three distinct seasons (1960, 1965, 1966) by the Associated Press and the UPI.⁵ Linebacker and teammate Dave Wilcox said of him, “Charlie Krueger was one of the best.”⁶

Krueger's attitude on how he approached the game never changed. It was always a high degree of focus and dedication. He said, “Every game was a big game for me. I didn't want to get my butt whipped out there. I didn't want to embarrass myself.”⁷ Krueger was also the recipient of the Len Eshmont award in 1964, given to the 49ers player that most demonstrated the spirit and leadership of the organization, as voted by his teammates.

One of his greatest memories was when he received the game ball following a game. Krueger recollected, “The first game ball I ever got is something I won't forget. We were playing the Browns in Cleveland. There was snow flurries blowing across the field and about five-foot snow banks. I was playing against Lou Groza, who must have been about 34 at the time, and I was about 21. I made a few tackles and stopped Jim Brown for a couple of losses. The team captains Bob St. Clair and Y.A. Tittle, gave me the game ball.”⁸

Through all the highs, Krueger's career was not without adversity. During his 16 seasons, the San Francisco defensive units demonstrated sporadic play, despite the high quality of talent that included future Hall of Famers in linebackers Leo Nomellini, Dave Wilcox and defensive back Jimmy Johnson. The unit was ranked in the top five in scoring just twice (1959, 1960), while ranked tenth or lower eight times.⁹

It was believed that part of the defensive failures hung on the responsibility of head coach Red Hickey. According to many of the players, he rubbed them the wrong way, as a result of his personality and coaching style. Gordy Soltau shared the sentiment described his feelings on Hickey, “He tore the team apart. He traded away good players. He called me in and said, 'I want you to retire, but I want you to be one of my coaches.' I told him, 'I don't mind you retiring me, but I could never coach for you.’”¹² Krueger gave Hickey the benefit of the doubt, but was more subtle, “Red was a pretty smart coach, the first guy to come along with the Shotgun. It's still here, basically, so it must have been a good offense. ... He treated me fairly, though I didn't care for him. I just didn't go around yelling about it. A lot of people did.”¹³

One of Hickey's assistants, Jack Christensen, was promoted to head coach. The move did not make much of a difference. Christensen did not do much to improve the defense, and it showed.

In 1965, the unit yielded 402 points, the most points allowed in a season in franchise history, to date.¹⁴ It was a mark that would stand until 1980. Speaking of lows, the worst



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a 22-21 victory over the division winning Green Bay Packers. The 49ers led throughout until the fourth quarter when Jim Taylor ran for a 40-yard touchdown, giving the Packers their only lead of the game. But, Tommy Davis won it for the 49ers on a 14-yard field goal.¹⁹ Speaking of Taylor, Krueger complimented him highly saying, “I tell you, we saw some great runners. Jimmy Taylor was in his own league as far as toughness. He was a physical animal. He preferred running right over you instead of around you. He was not a polished runner like Jim Brown, but he was fierce.”²⁰

Dick Nolan took over the head coaching duties from Christiansen for the 1968 season. He picked up key pieces through the draft such as tight end Ted Kwalik, center Forrest Blue, receiver Gene Washington, defensive end Cedric Hardman and defensive back Bruce Taylor. That group help lead the club to a run of three consecutive NFL West Division titles and playoff appearances from 1970 through 1972.²¹ The 1970 NFL West Division title was the first of such in team history. In the Divisional Round of the playoffs, the 49ers met the Minnesota Vikings, whom they defeated in a narrow, 17-14 contest inside Minnesota's Metropolitan Stadium.²² Taylor and Jim Sniadecki each hauled in key interceptions of Vikings quarterback Gary Cuozzo, who went just 9 of 27 passing.

The following week, the 49ers fell to the Dallas Cowboys in the NFC Championship Game, 17-10. The result would haunt the club, as over the next two seasons, the 49ers would succumb to the Cowboys in the playoffs.²³

Krueger retired following the 1973 season as a result from knee pain. He recorded an unofficial 54.0 career sacks and recovered seven fumbles. In one of the greatest honors, his number 70 was retired by the team the next year in 1974.²⁴ He was inducted into the team's Hall of Fame in 2009. Krueger is also a member of the College Football Hall of Fame (1983) and the Texas Sports Hall of Fame (2014).²⁵

1 9 “Green Bay Packers at San Francisco 49ers – December 10th, 1961,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 4, 2024, [Green Bay Packers at San Francisco 49ers - December 10th, 1961 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 0 Hession, Joseph. *Forty Niners Looking Back* (San Francisco, CA: Foghorn Press, 1985), 114.

2 1 “San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 4, 2024, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 2 “1970 San Francisco 49ers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 4, 2024, [1970 San Francisco 49ers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 3 “San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 4, 2024, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 4 “Charlie Krueger,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 4, 2024, [Charlie Krueger Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 5 “Charlie Krueger,” FootballFoundation.org, accessed June 4, 2024, [Charlie Krueger \(1983\) - Hall of Fame - National Football Foundation](#).



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Born Charles Andrew Krueger on January 28, 1937, he spent the early years of his youth growing up in Caldwell, Texas. Charlie said, “I was born above a fire station. That's where we lived, in a flat above the fire station. My dad worked for a municipality in Caldwell, a town of about 2,000. Cotton was king, and there was corn, soybeans ... commodities.”²⁶

Charlie started playing football prior to his teen years, then starred at Caldwell High School as a lineman because of his size at over 6'2” and nearly 200 pounds. He received much attention locally, drawing offers from Rice University, the University of Texas, and Texas A&M University.²⁷ Krueger said, “I was a fat kid in a small town in Texas. If you didn't play sports or you weren't in the band, no one knew who you were. If I could get close enough to hit you, I would. I was squatty as a freshman. By my sophomore year, I was 6-2 and 190 pounds.”²⁸

Legendary coach Paul “Bear” Bryant convinced him to attend Texas A&M, where Krueger learned his toughness and dedication. He remembered, in college, “There wasn't a day in my four years at A&M where I didn't dread going to practice. You never knew when Coach Bryant would twist off and beat you to death. Scholarships didn't mean anything to him; they only lasted until dark.”²⁹ Further, he stated, “It was late August, and I started picking up the paper and reading about it [training camp]. One day I got back to the dorm, and my roommate was gone. His [Bryant's] practices were tough, and he made everything tough. He (Bryant) was an ordeal by fire, and I prayed a lot.” “All of us feared him. But as long as he lived, I never crossed him.”³⁰

Bryant was nothing short of a legend, arriving at the school in 1954, after having had coaching success at the University of Kentucky. He led the Wildcats to a 60-23-5 record over the previous eight seasons that included the 1950 national championship.³¹ He turned the Aggies around quickly with a 7-2-1 record in 1955, from 1-9 in 1954. The next year in 1956, Texas A&M went undefeated at 9-0-1, winning the Southwest Conference championship. Despite the conference title, the team did not play in a bowl game because it was on probation resulting from recruiting violations.³²

2 6 Hession, Joseph. *Forty Niners Looking Back* (San Francisco, CA: Foghorn Press, 1985), 148.

2 7 “'Textbook Tackle' Dies at 84,” newser.com, February 7, 2021, accessed June 4, 2024, ['Textbook Tackle' Dies at 84 \(newser.com\)](#).

2 8 Hession, Joseph. *Forty Niners Looking Back* (San Francisco, CA: Foghorn Press, 1985), 148.

2 9 Hession, Joseph. *Forty Niners Looking Back* (San Francisco, CA: Foghorn Press, 1985), 150.

3 0 Hession, Joseph. *Forty Niners Looking Back* (San Francisco, CA: Foghorn Press, 1985), 151.

3 1 “Bear Bryant,” sports-reference.com, accessed June 4, 2024, [Bear Bryant College Coaching Records, Awards and Leaderboards | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

3 2 1956,” myaggienation.com, March 23, 2017, accessed June 4, 2024, [1956 | Texas A&M Football History | myaggienation.com](#).



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The defense on the 1957 team was special, allowing just 50 points all season for the 8-3 squad. Aggies running back John David Crow also won the Heisman Trophy, given to the nation's most outstanding player. On the award Crow said, "I got way too much credit for what we did. Our linemen were darn good. Charlie was a very good offensive lineman. We played both ways back then, and you made the team on defense first and then found a place to play on offense. That's the way Coach Bryant thought about things."³³

Krueger was a first-team All-Southwest Conference choice and earned first-team All-American honors in both 1956 and 1957 as a two-way lineman. He participated in the 1958 College All-Star Game as team captain that led a defeat of the defending NFL champion Detroit Lions, 35-19.³⁴

Krueger was married to Kristin Adler for 48 years prior to his death on February 5, 2021. After his football days he suffered health problems including chronic knee pain, kidney and heart failure which led to his death.³⁵ He filed a lawsuit against the 49ers for legal damages over the team knowing he played without a ligament in his knee for years. After coming to a settlement of over \$1 million in damages he recalls, "I had more trouble (with the knee) as I went on. It's something I live with. The judge ruled in my favor after I was involved with it for nine years."³⁶ Prior to his death he said, "I still have bad dreams about football. I get some sleep, but if I stay still long enough my body starts hurting. The best way I can explain it is that I lived through so many football seasons."³⁷

Despite the pain, Krueger garnered much camaraderie among his teammates because of his personality and good sense of humor. Dave Wilcox recalls, "He [Krueger] liked to pull little tricks on people. He got Howard Mudd good one time. Howard used to chew Copenhagen. Somehow, Charlie Krueger found a little tree frog and put it in Howard's Copenhagen before practice. Everyone knew about it but Howard, so we were all waiting to see him put it in his mouth. As soon as he did, he knew something was up. But he wouldn't let on. He wouldn't spit the frog out. He didn't want to give everyone the satisfaction of seeing that."³⁸ Another time Ken Willard was the victim. Wilcox recalled, "... One time – I think it was after he had a bad game – he showed up at practice wearing

3 3 Werner, John. "Hall of Fame Profile: Ex-aggie DL Charlie Krueger would knock your brains out," WacoTrib.com, July 10, 2020, [Hall of Fame profile: Ex-Aggie DL Charlie Krueger 'would knock your brains out' \(wacotrib.com\)](#).

3 4 "Charlie Krueger," FootballFoundation.org, accessed June 4, 2024, [Charlie Krueger \(1983\) - Hall of Fame - National Football Foundation](#).

3 5 Padwe, Sandy. "When Trust is betrayed, Charlie Krueger gave the 49ers more than they deserved," vault.si.com, June 27, 1988, [WHEN TRUST IS BETRAYED - Sports Illustrated Vault | SI.com](#).

3 6 Padwe, Sandy. "When Trust is betrayed, Charlie Krueger gave the 49ers more than they deserved," vault.si.com, June 27, 1988, [WHEN TRUST IS BETRAYED - Sports Illustrated Vault | SI.com](#).

3 7 Padwe, Sandy. "When Trust is betrayed, Charlie Krueger gave the 49ers more than they deserved," vault.si.com, June 27, 1988, [WHEN TRUST IS BETRAYED - Sports Illustrated Vault | SI.com](#).

3 8 Hession, Joseph. *Forty Niners Looking Back* (San Francisco, CA: Foghorn Press, 1985), 111.



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those fake glasses with the big nose and mustache. That really cracked up (Dick) Nolan. We were all little kids at heart. But it was the guys that played the hardest that were usually the biggest pranksters.”³⁹

End Notes:

3 9 Hession, Joseph. *Forty Niners Looking Back* (San Francisco, CA: Foghorn Press, 1985), 111.