



## Tommy Nobis

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Lofty standards are part of being selected number one overall in the NFL Draft, not to mention the pressure and the big pay day. One man who embraced the challenge was Tommy Henry Nobis, Jr. (September 20, 1943-December 13, 2017), a hard-hitting, tenacious linebacker who played for 11 seasons with the Atlanta Falcons.<sup>1</sup>

The second Nobis walked onto the field in Atlanta, he set the tone for the quality of a franchise player. Drafted first overall in both the 1966 NFL and AFL drafts by the Atlanta Falcons and Houston Oilers, respectively, Nobis chose to play for Atlanta.<sup>2</sup> Instantly, he was given the nickname “Mr. Falcon” as he was the first draft pick in franchise history.<sup>3</sup> There has not been a more exclusive, iconic player in Falcons history since. Falcons' CEO Rich McKay recalled, “So I come here, and all of the sudden here's Tommy Nobis. First pick of the franchise. Best player on a really bad team. Five Pro Bowl appearances in 11 years. Two times All-Pro. And he's on the all-decade team of the 1960s. So he is recognized as an elite player.”<sup>4</sup> Such high praise for a guy who is not in the pro football hall-of-fame. McKay went on to say, in a discussion regarding franchise players, “But here in Atlanta everybody still refers to Tommy as 'Mr. Falcon' and 'Mr. Falcon' is not in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. It does not make me happy.”<sup>5</sup>

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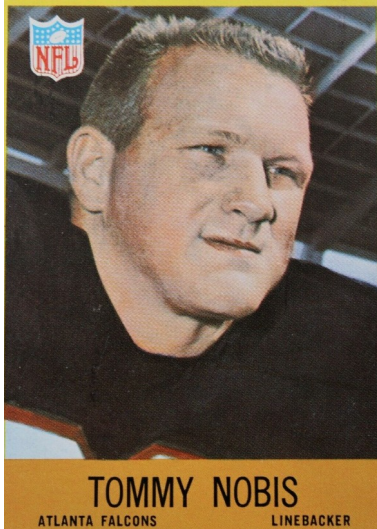
1 “Tommy Nobis,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 18, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/N/NobiTo00.htm>.

2 “Tommy Nobis,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 18, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/N/NobiTo00.htm>.

3 “Falcons Sign Tommy Nobis,” *The Telegraph*, December 14, 1965, 12.

4 Judge, Clark. “Why it 'bothers' Falcons' McKay that former LB Tommy Nobis not in Canton,” *Sports Illustrated.com*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/nfl/mckay-tommy-nobis-pro-football-hall>.

5 Judge, Clark. “Why it 'bothers' Falcons' McKay that former LB Tommy Nobis not in Canton,” *Sports Illustrated.com*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/nfl/mckay-tommy-nobis-pro-football-hall>.



Nobis was also the first player in franchise history, as the Falcons were an expansion club in 1966. Undoubtedly, he was the very best player on a very bad team. The Falcons went 3-11 his rookie year that saw Nobis earn Pro Bowl honors, the Rookie of the Year Award, and pile up an unofficial 294 combined tackles, a franchise record, and NFL record that still stands.<sup>6</sup> Nobis was literally all over the field.

Former Falcons head coach Norm van Brocklin once pointed at Nobis' locker and emphasized, “There's where our football team dresses.”<sup>7</sup> The Falcons never made the playoffs in Nobis' tenure. In fact, eight of his 11 years with the team were losing seasons, under four different head coaches. Atlanta's first winning season was at 9-5 in 1973, good enough for a second place finish.<sup>8</sup> Nobis played in four other Pro Bowls (1967, 1968, 1970, 1972), was named an all-pro two times (1967 first-team, 1968 second-team), and an All-NFC player twice (1967, 1968).<sup>9</sup> Former Falcons athletic trainer Jerry Rhea's two cents, “He was the team. He was the face of the franchise. We weren't winning, but he was a winner.”<sup>9</sup> So much of a winner that Nobis was named to the NFL's 1960s All-Decade Team.

Over the years, calls for Nobis to be inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame have been made. Nobis was once named a finalist, of the Hall's Centennial Class of 2020, but failed to earn election. Nobis is not the only exclusive Falcon to be ignored by Canton: Bill Fralic, Mike Kenn, and George Kunz's bids have all failed to reach induction status.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> McKay, Rich. “It's Time: The Hall of Fame case for Tommy Nobis,” AtlantaFalcons.com, January 7, 2020, <https://www.atlantafalcons.com/news/it-s-time>.



Nobis earned his trade playing high school and college football in the state of Texas. Raised in the San Antonio area, he was an elite talent, and all-state player at Thomas Jefferson High School. He played end on offense and linebacker on defense.<sup>11</sup>

Before starting his NFL days, standing at 6'2" and 240 pounds, he left an outstanding legacy at the University of Texas.<sup>12</sup> Nobis is considered to be one of the most prominent linebackers in college football history.<sup>13</sup> His arrival at the university came at the perfect time, in the midst of the legendary Darrell Royal era, one of the glory ages of Longhorn football history. Royal won 167 games in 20 seasons at UT. Royal's two decades included three national titles and eight conference championships.<sup>14</sup>

Nobis started at linebacker as a sophomore in 1963, the only second year player on Royal's squad to start. The Longhorns achieved a perfect season, going 11-0 on the heels of a tenacious defense. The unit allowed seven points or less in eight of its 11 games. They never ranked outside of the top five the entire season, in the polls.<sup>15</sup> The cherry on top was defeating #2 ranked Navy in the Cotton Bowl, 28-6, that earned them the first national championship in school history.

The 1964 season saw Texas enjoy a 10-1 season, including a berth in the Orange Bowl against the Joe Namath led Alabama Crimson Tide. The game was one for the ages. Texas led 21-7 at halftime, but it took a goal line stand to come out on top.<sup>16</sup> Alabama

- 7 Isaza, Rudy. "Falcons' greatest moment, No. 4: 'Mr. Falcon,'" *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 10, 2015, <https://www.ajc.com/blog/atlanta-falcons/falcons-greatest-moment-falcon/Bm6wmq5FnPxEFqg43Qs21O/>.
- 8 "Atlanta Falcons Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 18, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/atf/>.
- 9 "Tommy Nobis," ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 18, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/N/NobiTo00.htm>.
- 9 Hummer, Steve. "RIP, Tommy Nobis: A funeral for a Falcons icon," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.ajc.com/blog/further-review/rip-tommy-nobis-funeral-for-falcons-icon/9PgbXhzo5jKEXH4DBzNyMP/>.
- 10 Judge, Clark. "Why it 'bothers' Falcons' McKay that former LB Tommy Nobis not in Canton," *Sports Illustrated.com*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/nfl/mckay-tommy-nobis-pro-football-hall>.
- 11 McKay, Rich. "It's Time: The Hall of Fame case for Tommy Nobis," AtlantaFalcons.com, January 7, 2020, <https://www.atlantafalcons.com/news/it-s-time>.
- 12 "Tommy Nobis," ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 18, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/N/NobiTo00.htm>.
- 13 McKay, Rich. "It's Time: The Hall of Fame case for Tommy Nobis," AtlantaFalcons.com, January 7, 2020, <https://www.atlantafalcons.com/news/it-s-time>.
- 14 Maisel, Ivan. "Darrell Royal meant more than wins," ESPN.com, November 7, 2012, [https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/\\_/id/8602432/darrell-k-royal-won-three-national-titles-texas-coach-dies-88-college-football](https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/8602432/darrell-k-royal-won-three-national-titles-texas-coach-dies-88-college-football).
- 15 "1963 Texas Longhorns Schedule and Results," SportsReference.com, accessed January 20, 2022, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/texas/1963-schedule.html>.



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came to within 21-17, then, with the Tide driving to the Texas 6-yard line, three consecutive fullback runs brought the ball to the one. Namath ran a quarterback sneak up the middle on fourth down, but Nobis made an epic play, walling him inches short that sealed the win.<sup>17</sup> Nobis teamed with defensive tackle Diron Talbert to stop Namath short.<sup>18</sup>

Nobis' senior season in 1965 was slowed by a knee injury, but it did not stop him from playing in every game throughout his collegiate career, on both sides of the ball. The team finished at 6-4, missing the postseason for the first time since 1958, but he hauled in a variety of individual awards. Not only did Nobis persevere from injury to earn consensus first-team All-American status, he also took home the Outland Trophy (best interior lineman), Maxwell Award (best player), and Knute Rockne Memorial Trophy (best lineman).<sup>19</sup> He finished seventh in the Heisman voting, and appeared on the covers of *Life*, *Time*, and *Sports Illustrated* publications.<sup>20</sup>

Nobis went out in style when the Longhorns retired his number 60. Only six former Longhorns players have had their numbers retired. Royal gave Nobis the ultimate praise when he called him, "the finest two-way player I have ever seen."<sup>21</sup> Nobis' number 60, which he wore for his entire Falcons' career, is also a part of the team's Ring of Honor. Nobis is just one of 11 Falcons Ring of Honor members, earning induction in 2004 as part of the inaugural class.<sup>22</sup>

Nobis finished his NFL career playing in 133 games, starting in all but one. He also nabbed 12 career interceptions, in addition to recovering 13 fumbles.<sup>23</sup> He was inducted into several hall of fames as a result of his contributions and achievements: the College Football Hall of Fame (1981), Georgia Sports Hall of Fame, Atlanta Sports Hall of Fame,

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1 6 Underwood, John. "Fabulous in Defeat," *Sports Illustrated*, January 11, 1965, <https://vault.si.com/vault/1965/01/11/fabulous-in-defeat>.

1 7 Ketchum, Geoff. "Longhorn Classics: 1965 Orange Bowl vs Bama," Orangebloods.com, accessed January 20, 2022, <https://texas.rivals.com/news/longhorn-classics-1965-orange-bowl-vs-bama>.

1 8 Ketchum, Geoff. "Longhorn Classics: 1965 Orange Bowl vs Bama," Orangebloods.com, accessed January 20, 2022, <https://texas.rivals.com/news/longhorn-classics-1965-orange-bowl-vs-bama>.

1 9 McKay, Rich. "It's Time: The Hall of Fame case for Tommy Nobis," AtlantaFalcons.com, January 7, 2020, <https://www.atlantafalcons.com/news/it-s-time>.

2 0 McKay, Rich. "It's Time: The Hall of Fame case for Tommy Nobis," AtlantaFalcons.com, January 7, 2020, <https://www.atlantafalcons.com/news/it-s-time>.

2 1 Conn, Patrick. "Countdown to Texas football: Best to wear No. 60," Longhornswire.com, July 7, 2020, <https://longhornswire.usatoday.com/2020/07/07/countdown-to-texas-football-best-to-wear-no-60-tommy-nobis/>.

2 2 McKay, Rich. "It's Time: The Hall of Fame case for Tommy Nobis," AtlantaFalcons.com, January 7, 2020, <https://www.atlantafalcons.com/news/it-s-time>.

2 3 "Tommy Nobis," ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 18, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/N/NobiTo00.htm>.



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Thomas Jefferson High School Alumni Hall of Fame (charter member; 2007), San Antonio Sports Hall of Fame, and State of Texas Hall of Fame. He was also inducted to the Texas Longhorns Hall of Honor in 1976, and named to *Sports Illustrated's* All-Century Team (1869-1969).<sup>24</sup> A player that successful earned quite a fearsome reputation. Miami Dolphins running back Larry Csonka once stated, "I'd rather play against Dick Butkus than Nobis."<sup>25</sup>

After football, Nobis collaborated with Bobbie Knopf, a special education teacher located in the Atlanta metro area, to create the Tommy Nobis Center.<sup>26</sup> Its mission is to work with disabled children and adults by providing them with resources, such as job training, employment opportunities, and vocational support. Founded in 1976, it has provided such support for over 40 years, and illustrates Nobis' passion to give back to the community.<sup>27</sup> The organization has been recognized as one of Atlanta's Best & Brightest Companies to Work for® in 2017-2021, among other praise.<sup>28</sup> Nobis also stayed in the Falcons organization for a time, working in the front office in various roles such as scouting, marketing, player development, etc.

End Notes:

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2 4 McKay, Rich. "It's Time: The Hall of Fame case for Tommy Nobis," AtlantaFalcons.com, January 7, 2020, <https://www.atlantafalcons.com/news/it-s-time>.

2 5 McKay, Rich. "It's Time: The Hall of Fame case for Tommy Nobis," AtlantaFalcons.com, January 7, 2020, <https://www.atlantafalcons.com/news/it-s-time>.

2 6 "Mission & History," TommyNobisCenter.org, accessed January 20, 2022, <https://tommynobiscenter.org/about-us/mission-history/>.

2 7 "Mission & History," TommyNobisCenter.org, accessed January 20, 2022, <https://tommynobiscenter.org/about-us/mission-history/>.

2 8 "Mission & History," TommyNobisCenter.org, accessed January 20, 2022, <https://tommynobiscenter.org/about-us/mission-history/>.