

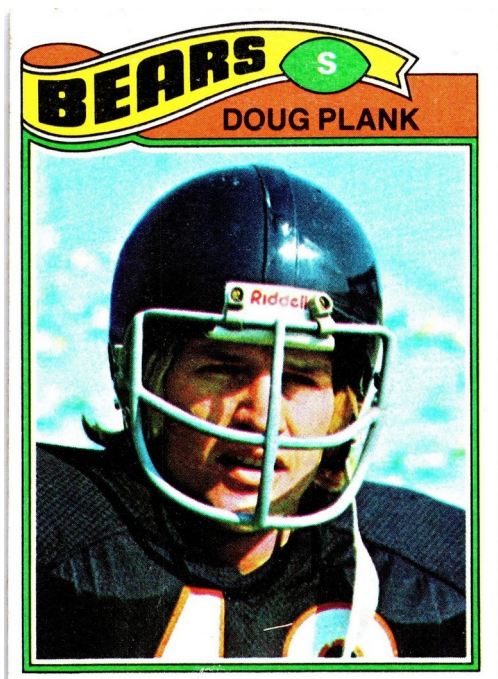
## Doug Plank

This article was written by Jeff Curts.

### ***Doug Plank, Chicago Bears (1975-82), Chicago Blitz (USFL, 1984)***

Unlikely. Long shot. A "Cinderella" story. Any of those descriptors would be appropriate to chronicle Doug Plank's football, and indeed, life story. Yet, based on tenacity, dedication, luck and some talent, he carved out a remarkable athletic, coaching and business career.

Doug Walter Plank — the hard-hitting, blue-collar safety whose No. 46 became the namesake of one of football's most feared defenses — built a memorable career by playing bigger than his size and then turning that intensity into a long, varied life in football and business.



### ***Early Years***

Plank was born March 4, 1953 in western Pennsylvania (Greensburg, PA), the birthplace of many professional football players. At the urging of his mother Dolores, he and his three brothers played football, basketball and baseball growing up, ostensibly to learn the value of teamwork and competition. Doug excelled, especially in football and baseball.



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He starred at quarterback for Norwin High School, winning Most Valuable Player honors.

Though his dream was to play for the home state Penn State Nittany Lions, coach Joe Paterno had already allocated his scholarships and had no room for Plank. Through a combination of circumstances, Plank caught the attention of Ohio State Buckeyes legendary coach Woody Hayes and enrolled at the Big Ten powerhouse.

During the opening practice of his freshman year at OSU, Plank, wearing just a helmet, shorts, and cleats while going through a supposed walk through, was blindsided by a jarring full-speed tackle. The hit injured his knee, tearing his meniscus. Chided by an assistant coach following the incident, Plank remembered a "fire being lit" as he spent time recuperating.

Though he played mostly on special teams and as a reserve defensive back for the Buckeyes, Plank was part of three Big Ten championship teams that resulted in three consecutive Rose Bowl appearances. One of his cherished mementos remains a cracked helmet from his last Rose Bowl game as a Buckeye, a reminder of his fearless and relentless style of play.

"I learned from my mistakes and failures. I did not wait until tomorrow to get better. I never forgot the acronym "YAWYAW" that hung on a banner at the Ohio State football facility - You Are Who You Associate With. Only real-life contenders not pretenders. Football was a lesson for life since you can graduate but you never stop learning. I learned what I did not want to do. Working on my uncle's garbage truck in high school starting at 4 a.m. in the morning six days a week. Emptying garbage cans was my first experience in getting stronger by lifting heavy objects."<sup>i</sup>

While Plank was not on many NFL teams draft radars following his collegiate career, a strong performance against Northwestern caught the eye of a Chicago Bears scout who happened to be in attendance that day. The Bears official admired Plank's aggressiveness and special teams' ability. Chicago, in the midst of a rebuild, and under the leadership of a new head coach in Jack Pardee, took a flyer on the little-known safety.

### ***NFL career (Chicago Bears, 1975–1982)***

Plank was a late pick in the 1975 NFL Draft (12th round, 291st overall--the same Bears draft that produced Plank's best player to play with or against, Walter Payton) and while expectations are usually modest for a late-rounder, he became an instant contributor for the Chicago Bears. Plank earned the starting strong safety job in his first season and led the team in tackles, while earning a reputation as one of the hardest hitters in the league. At just 5-foot-11 and around 190 pounds, he wasn't the biggest defender, but his fearless



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tackling and aggressive play made him a fan favorite and a nightmare for opposing receivers and running backs.

In his book, *Walk the Plank*, Plank describes his thought process in preparing to play against one of the NFL's most-feared running backs of the time, Earl Campbell of the Houston Oilers. "Earl had thighs bigger than most people's waists, 34 inches. He made a career out of running over people. Buddy Ryan, our defensive coordinator, sarcastically challenged our defense that week saying that if anyone didn't want to play, just let him know. I made a business decision. Earl Campbell was not running over Doug Plank."<sup>ii</sup> Indeed, Plank temporarily knocked out Campbell with a tackle, a play that can be viewed on YouTube.

Over his eight-year NFL career, all with the Bears, Plank appeared in 104 games. He was paired with fellow safety and favorite teammate Gary Fencik, their style of play exemplified the toughness of Bears football and resonated deeply with the fans at Soldier Field. In addition to his aggressiveness, Plank totaled 15 career interceptions. One of his favorite games occurred on a Monday night game, October 10, 1977, against the Los Angeles Rams and childhood hero Joe Namath, a fellow native of Western Pennsylvania. Plank collected two picks off Namath during the Bears 24-23 victory.

### ***The "46" legacy***

Perhaps Plank's most enduring legacy is the fact that Chicago defensive coordinator Buddy Ryan's famed "46" defense — a pressure-heavy scheme that helped define the Bears' identity — was named for Plank's jersey number and his central, physical role in Ryan's scheme.

The alignment used Plank's physical, in-the-box safety play as its centerpiece, allowing him to attack the line of scrimmage like an extra linebacker. Though Plank retired in 1982, just before the Bears' 1985 Super Bowl run, his influence lived on through the defense that dominated the NFL.

### ***Injury and brief USFL stint***

Plank's NFL career was cut short by a serious, season-ending spinal concussion late in his Bears tenure; he played briefly in the USFL with the Chicago Blitz in 1984 before retiring from pro play. The injury and the cumulative wear of his playing style ended what might have been a longer NFL career.

When recounting his hellbent playing style, Plank described it in a manner typical of his aggressive approach. "Try running into a wall. A normal person will slow down at the

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<sup>i</sup> Jeff Curts interview with Doug Plank, August 2025

<sup>ii</sup> Plank, Doug and Lee Witt, *Walk the Plank*, Published by BookLocker.com, c 2021



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last moment—a hitter will accelerate. While people say I was great in my day, I say, no, I was just able to control my mind for those few seconds before impact. I never slowed down. I sped up. That's what makes a hitter. Not size, not speed. It's the ability to suppress your survival instincts."<sup>iii</sup>

### ***Coaching, broadcasting and business after playing***

After hanging up his cleats Plank moved into business — operating Burger King franchises and working in real estate and other ventures — and later forged a lengthy coaching and broadcasting career. He coached successfully in the Arena Football League (earning AFL Coach of the Year honors in 2005 and 2007 with the Georgia Force), served on NFL staffs (including stints with the Atlanta Falcons and New York Jets), and worked as a college assistant and national radio analyst.

### ***Personal notes & later life***

Plank continued as a recognizable voice in Bears lore: tough, straightforward and proud of the kind of football he played. He earned selection to the "100 Greatest Bears Players" (#99) in 2019 and was inducted into the Gridiron Greats Hall of Fame in 2018 (based on both playing skill and charitable involvement).

Beyond coaching and media work, he's spoken candidly about the physical toll of the game and has been active in business and community endeavors. He's often invited back to Bears events as an honored alumnus of the franchise.

Now in his early 70's, Plank reflects fondly on his gridiron days. "Football was the most powerful course I have taken in my life. I learned how to improve through film study, weight training, practicing at game tempo, injury recovery, as well as learn from mistakes and defeats. It helped me hone leadership skills as a head coach and expand my circle of influence that led to radio and television broadcasting, corporate speaking and numerous business opportunities."<sup>iv</sup>

Plank remains a fan of today's game and regularly follows both the Bears and the NFL. Though he missed out on the Bears "85 Super Bowl run, his football career is filled with terrific memories. Additionally, Plank had the fortune of playing for some of the sport's historic and colorful coaches from Woody Hayes at Ohio State (he preached "love of country, family, and work ethic"<sup>v</sup>) to Mike Ditka/Buddy Ryan with the Bears ("mentors, master motivators and disciplinarians"<sup>vi</sup>) and Marv Levy with the USFL's Blitz ("he was knowledgeable about everything"<sup>vii</sup>).

### ***Car accident***

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<sup>iii</sup> Jeff Curts interview with Doug Plank, August 2025

<sup>iv</sup> Jeff Curts interview with Doug Plank, August 2025



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While returning to his Phoenix area home from Denver in 2018, Plank experienced a hit unlike anything he faced on the football field. A patch of ice on I-17 in the Flagstaff area caused the truck he was driving to lose control and subsequently flip over eight times. He sustained eight broken ribs, a compressed lung and lacerations that required 40 stitches. Plank spent two days in the hospital recovering from his injuries, but felt fortunate to have survived the ordeal. "I thought I was going to die. You start thinking about your life, your family, your kids, all that. I look at what the other possibilities were and I just felt extremely lucky. It was definitely the most frightening experience of my life. It really shook me up, literally and figuratively. It just gives you a different perspective on life."<sup>viii</sup>

### ***Present day***

These days, Plank says he feels fine and says his health is good, though he has had six surgeries to repair/replace knees, shoulders, and hips.

Long-time habits that proved successful in developing him into a successful professional athlete are a staple--he gets up early and goes to bed early ("nothing good happens after midnight"<sup>ix</sup>) and takes care of his body.

The contagious enthusiasm and zest for life resonate when speaking with Plank. His message to anyone interested in reaching the pinnacle in their personal/professional lives is based on simple ideas and habits that take zero talent - punctuality, enthusiasm, communication and attitude.

Plank saw first-hand as a Burger King franchisee the value of clear communication. One day, he asked the dining room hostess if they would check the restrooms. A short time later, a customer came to the front counter and complained about the restroom cleanliness. Plank immediately asked the hostess if she had checked the restrooms. She said, "Yes, I checked the bathrooms and they are filthy."<sup>x</sup> The lesson? Be specific and direct with communication, a lesson learned from many of Plank's former coaches.

Indeed, Doug Plank has used those basic principles to overcome long odds on the football field for a lifetime of success.

### ***Sources:***

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<sup>v</sup> Jeff Curts interview with Doug Plank, August 2025

<sup>vi</sup> Jeff Curts interview with Doug Plank, August 2025

<sup>vii</sup> Jeff Curts interview with Doug Plank, August 2025

<sup>viii</sup> Jeff Curts interview with Doug Plank, August 2025

<sup>ix</sup> Jeff Curts interview with Doug Plank, August 2025

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End Notes: