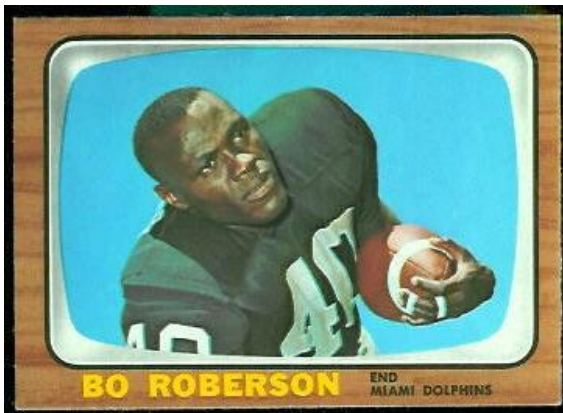


Bo Roberson

This article is by Budd Bailey.

Bo Roberson is in a class by himself.

He's the only man to graduate from an Ivy League university, play professional football, win an Olympic medal, and earn a doctorate. You'll have to search long and hard to find anyone who was more of a personification of a sound mind and a sound body – or who dropped more completely out of public view after he retired from athletics. In essence, Roberson's life could be split into two parts, and they are both fascinating in their own way.



Irvin “Bo” Roberson was born on July 23, 1935. While some sources list Roberson’s birthplace as Philadelphia, his Ancestry.com page lists the location as Blakely, Georgia. That’s in the southwest corner of the state, about 30 miles north from the point where Georgia meets up with Alabama and Florida. It is known as either the “Peanut Capital of the World” or “The Peanut Capital of the Universe,” depending on the website. Blakely is the site of the last Confederate wooden flagpole, having been put in place in the middle of town in 1861. Father Walter was born in Alabama in 1905, while mother Elizabeth was born in Blakely in 1908. Bo was the last of five children. At some point the Robersons moved to Philadelphia, which would not be unusual. Many African Americans moved from the South to the Northeast or Midwest in the first half of the 20th century in a search for a better life.

Roberson attended John Bartram High School in Philadelphia, one of six graduates who eventually played pro football. Erik Williams might be the biggest star to come out of that school, as he was part of the offensive line for the Dallas Cowboys for a decade. The school did even better in basketball – Hall of Famer Earl Monroe played there.



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Roberson apparently was a fabulous all-around athlete at that age. One look at him as a sophomore was enough to convince the area's experts that he was a coming star. Bo started to build up a reputation as a junior, winning the Public League title in the long jump (22 feet, one-half inch). Then Roberson had a year to remember as a senior. In the fall, he was selected as the top football player in Philadelphia. Come winter, he was good enough to be picked with Wilt Chamberlain and Guy Rodgers on the all-city basketball team, leading his team to the semifinals of the postseason tournament. Then in the spring, he earned all-city track honors with victories in the 100-yard dash and long jump – a double that needed 47 years to be duplicated.

Legendary Philadelphia basketball player and expert Sonny Hill saw Roberson in action. Hill said, "Bo Roberson belongs in the conversation with any athlete from the City of Philadelphia because he was so successful in three arenas. Obviously Wilt Chamberlain was a great athlete, but his resume was that of two sports. Add in that Bo Roberson was a standout student and he becomes a story that needs to be told."

Roberson graduated from John Bartram in 1953, and was picked for that school's Hall of Fame in 1974. A reported 50 to 60 colleges, including some from the Big Ten, were recruiting him. However, Bo turned up at Wyoming Seminary Preparatory School in Kingston, Pennsylvania, for an extra year of schooling. That institute is located near Wilkes-Barre in northeast Pennsylvania. He is one of seven to come out of that school to play football in the pros. The prep school also has produced several government officials including members of Congress. Roberson excelled there too, and went into Wyoming's Hall of Fame in 1974.

Bo's next step was to go to college in the fall of 1954, and it was a big one – Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. The buildup for his arrival was immense, at least by 1954 standards. On a visit to the campus, Roberson became friends with Dick Jackson, who was two classes ahead. Their instant relationship helped convince Bo to head north to Cornell. Roberson made the adjustment to college life look almost easy, particularly in the area of athletics. He certainly made an impression on another Cornell student by the name of Dick Schaap, who had a long career in journalism and broadcasting. "My dad always contended that Bo Jackson was the greatest athlete he ever saw," said ESPN's Jeremy Schaap. "But he was convinced that Bo Roberson was the best natural athlete ever in the Ivy League. He could do anything."

Roberson continued to dominate playing fields in Ithaca just like he did in high school. Bo led the team in rushing as a sophomore; he and Jackson were the only African Americans on the roster. "He was one of the greatest all-purpose athletes who ever



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played anywhere. He was special,” Jackson remembered. As a junior he took a kickoff 100 yards for a touchdown and led the team in rushing again.

As a senior, Roberson ran for 100 yards in a game for the fifth time, averaged 15 points and 17 rebounds per game as a 6-foot-1 center (his only season on the basketball team), and broke the school record in the long jump. He even returned home to Philadelphia to help Cornell tie the meet record in the 880-yard relay in the Penn Relays. The school newspaper named him the senior athlete of the year, even though he had some injury problems along the way. Bo even had a sandwich named after him – the “Boburger,” which consists of a hamburger with a fried egg and cheese. It is still consumed in college towns around the Northeast, including Ithaca.

When Bo wasn’t playing something, he was studying Industrial and Labor Relations in the classroom. Roberson also was in the Army Reserve program at Cornell, and that probably was helpful financially as his father had died in 1957. Bo graduated from that university in the spring of 1958. From there, the Army was waiting for him, anxious to welcome him for a post-graduate tour of duty. That might be the reason why he was not drafted by the pro teams, although it’s a puzzle why someone didn’t take a chance by taking him in a 30-round draft.

The Cold War was taking place in that stage of American history. The military powers-that-be decided that there were better things for Roberson to do than to try to spy on the Soviets. They installed the lieutenant as a track coach at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. What’s more, they didn’t mind if he continued to practice the long jump and compete when he could work it into his schedule.

One such meet was the Pan-American Games in Chicago in 1959. Roberson won the long jump at a distance of 26 feet, 2 inches – a foot better than runner-up Greg Bell, who had won the Olympic gold medal in the event in 1956. That clearly put Bo on the world’s radar, and he was ranked third among all long jumpers by the end of the year. In the national AAU championships in February 1960, Roberson flew through the air and landed 25 feet, 9.5 inches later. That broke the world indoor record that had been held by Jesse Owens for 25 years.

But Bo still wasn’t satisfied. “I’m disappointed,” he said to Sports Illustrated. “My tail was dragging. It must have been. They measured from where my rear hit, not where my heels hit. There’s no reason why I shouldn’t be over 26 feet right now.”

Then it was on to Rome for the 1960 Olympics that summer, as the world’s best gathered to see who would win the gold medal. Roberson’s major competition from Team USA figured to be Ralph Boston, the Tennessee State star who won the Olympic trials. Before



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flying to Italy, Roberson spent some time with Dick Schaap (a 1955 Cornell graduate) in New York – and told him about a young boxer that he met at the Pan-American Games and who was on the Olympic team. The fighter’s name was Cassius Clay, later known as Muhammad Ali, and the boxer and reporter soon met. They were friends for more than four decades.

The first order of business in Rome was the staging of the Opening Ceremonies. The American team lined up to enter the stadium when panic set in – no one seemed to know how to march into the facility in proper form. Roberson took charge, relying on his Army background, and the practice drilling helped the group enter in a firm formation.

When the long jump competition began on September 2, the two Americans were challenged by the all-star field. Roberson had been having physical troubles leading up to the Games and wasn’t considered to be in top form.

“Bo was going into the Olympics injured and he gave it his all in the second round and took the lead (8.03 meters),” he told writer Brett Hoover. “I had my winning jump in the third round (8.12), and it seemed like Bo had all but given up. It was like he was gonna settle for silver because of his injury.

"But Manfred Steinbach (8.00) and Igor Ter-Ovanesian (8.04 meters) both had big jumps in the last round and now Bo found himself barely in third. His adrenaline kicked in and he was fired up. He came flying down the runaway and hit a perfect takeoff. When he landed, the measuring judge turned to me and said '21.' I turned to Bo and said, 'You just tied the world record.' But it really was 8.11, a centimeter behind me."

The silver medal capped Roberson’s spectacular career in track and field, as it put him in the history books forever.

Roberson stayed with track for a while longer. But now that he was out of the Army, Bo no doubt was looking for a way for his athletic abilities to be rewarded financially. At 6-foot-1 and 195 pounds, he had a frame that was built for football. Considering that the American Football League was looking for good athletes in 1961, as it prepared to start its second season that fall, Roberson’s odds of receiving a look from a pro team were pretty good.

By chance, Al LoCasale had been in high school in Philadelphia at the same time as Roberson. LoCasale was now in the front office of the Chargers, who had just moved from Los Angeles to San Diego. He thought Roberson could help a roster that needed more speed, and passed the word along to his friend, assistant coach Al Davis.



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"What I remembered about him was his tremendous speed and his tremendous ability, and that he was put together like a football player, not a skinny track kid." LoCasale said. "When I remember back, I remember his speed, his acceleration, his takeoff."

Roberson made the Chargers' roster and played in all 14 games in 1961. He finished with 275 yards rushing on 58 carries in his role as a backup running back. That wasn't bad for someone who hadn't seen regular duty as a runner in four years. Bo also caught six passes for 81 yards. However, Roberson's stay in San Diego didn't last long. The Chargers had their eye on a talented wide receiver from Arkansas who was the Raiders' second-round draft pick (ninth overall). They gave up Roberson, Gene Selawski, and Hunter Enis to obtain his rights. You'd have to say it was a good move, because Lance Alworth became one of the greatest receivers in the history of pro football.

Selawski never played for the Raiders, and Enis only played briefly before moving on to Denver in his last pro season. But Roberson was a nice addition. "Bo was the Raiders' first world-class athlete," Oakland center Jim Otto once told Schaap. "He helped create the feeling that we were on our way to greatness. He pioneered the Raider tradition of great speed." Otto also mentioned that Roberson was an excellent speaker and a snappy dresser.

Roberson arrived in Oakland and joined a team that wasn't too good, staggering to a 1-13 record in 1962. The Raiders went through a couple of coaches that year in Marty Feldman and Bill Conkright. Roberson, at least, proved helpful. He was second on the team in rushing at 270 yards on 89 carries. However, his pass receiving numbers must have caught someone's eye. Bo caught 29 passes for 583 yards and three touchdowns. That means he averaged more than 20 yards per catch, and that's a number associated only with elite receivers. Only one player in the entire NFL - Marquez Valdes-Scantling of the Green Bay Packers - reached that number in 2020. Roberson was selected as the team's Most Valuable Player that season.

That brings us to 1963, which is when the Raiders became relevant for the first time. Davis came up from San Diego to coach the team, and he brought a certain offensive philosophy with him: Go deep. Davis expressed his thoughts in an interview with NFL Films. "We were going to stretch the field vertically," he said. "When we came out of the huddle, we weren't looking for first downs, we didn't want to move the chains, we wanted touchdowns. We wanted the big play, the quick strike."

The Raiders signed Art Powell as a free agent, as the New York Titans let him get away to save money after he led the league with 1,130 receiving yards. The Raiders faced a major issue in preseason in 1963, as they were scheduled to play the newly christened New York Jets in Mobile, Alabama. But the seating for the game was segregated by race.



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Powell, Roberson, Clem Daniels and Fred Williamson all told Davis they would not play under such arrangements. Davis moved the game to Oakland.

Powell picked up his game another notch in 1963, catching 73 balls for 1,304 yards and 16 touchdowns. Roberson was second among wide receivers with 25 catches, and also returned most of the team's kickoffs. The new offensive philosophy worked, as the Raiders improved to 10-4 for the season. While in Oakland, Roberson took a step to ensure a good life after football. He enrolled in a training program at Wells Fargo Bank in San Francisco.

Oakland took a step back in terms of record in 1964, falling to 5-7-2. A bad start was the problem, as the team opened the season with a 1-7-1 record and had to go 4-0-1 at the finish to approach mediocrity. Along the way, Roberson became a bigger part of the offense. He started 13 games, and caught 44 passes for 624 yards. Bo also averaged more than 27 yards on his 36 kickoff returns.

Then Roberson's situation changed. The Raiders drafted a wide receiver out of Florida State named Fred Biletnikoff in the second round of the 1965 draft, and outbid the Detroit Lions of the NFL in signing him. It didn't take long for him to make an impact on Davis. Although Roberson was still the starter at the start of the season, Davis became convinced that Biletnikoff could work well with Powell if given the chance.

Meanwhile in Buffalo, the Bills were trying to repeat as the champions of the AFL. As the season went along, they started to run out of wide receivers. Elbert Dubenion suffered a knee injury in a September 26 win over the Jets. A week later, Glenn Bass tore ligaments in his left ankle. Both players were done for the season. Coach Lou Saban inserted Ed Rutkowski and Charley Ferguson into those spots, but the Bills needed help if they intended to use Kemp's ability to throw down the field to stretch defenses.

The Bills and Raiders got together, and completed a trade on October 18. Roberson went to the Bills for two players to be named later. Those future considerations were announced on January 30, 1966, when George Flint and Tom Keating went to Oakland. While Flint never played for the Raiders, Keating went on to become an all-AFL selection (1967) during his four seasons as a regular there.

Roberson went straight into action on October 24, catching three passes for 35 yards in a 31-13 win over the Broncos. He was even better a week later, grabbing six balls for 94 yards. On December 5, the wide receiver caught a 74-yard pass from Daryle Lamonica in a game against Houston. Roberson's first touchdown as a Bill came on Dec. 12 against the Chiefs; a 66-yard pass from Kemp that opened the scoring in a 34-25 win. "The team plays as hard as it has to do to win," Roberson said after the game, which came after the



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Bills had clinched the AFL East title. The veteran finished the regular season with 31 receptions for 483 yards and three touchdowns for Buffalo.

The last step came on December 26, 1965, and the Bills saved their best for last. The Chargers were known for their explosive offense, thanks to players like Alworth, Paul Lowe, Keith Lincoln and John Hadl. Buffalo had an answer for all of them, winning by a score of 23-0 in San Diego. Roberson helped by catching a 49-yard pass on the Bills' first play from scrimmage in the second half. That set up a field goal. Roberson finished with three catches for 88 yards. The Bills had successfully defended their championship, and they might not have been able to do it without the contributions of their new wide receiver.

To this day, Roberson is fondly remembered in Buffalo for his work on that title-winning team. However, the football business usually doesn't have much sentiment attached to it. Bo had about three weeks to enjoy the good feelings of playing for a championship team. On January 15, 1966, the Miami Dolphins selected 32 players as part of the expansion draft. One of them was Roberson. Dubenion and Bass were scheduled to return in 1966, and Roberson was considered expendable.

The new Dolphins were predictably bad in their first season, going 3-11. They used four quarterbacks in a long season, and none of them were effective in getting the ball to their wide receivers. Roberson did catch 26 passes for 519 yards and two touchdowns. That was second on the team in receptions and first in yardage. He had the first 100-yard passing receiving game in Dolphins' history during a loss to the Bills on September 18. Bo later went for 161 yards on six receptions against Denver, setting a team record that lasted for 13 seasons.

But that proved to be it for his career. Roberson was 32, and the Dolphins wanted to make room for young players such as Howard Twilley. He was released on August 23, and his career was over. Roberson finished with 81 career games (51 starts). Bo caught 176 passes for 2,917 yards and 12 touchdowns. He ran 168 times for 584 yards and six touchdowns. Roberson had 130 kickoff returns for 3,057 yards and a touchdown (Sept. 30, 1962 against the Chargers). For an undrafted free agent from an Ivy League school, it was a worthwhile career that included a championship ring.

At that point, Bo had the rest of his life in front of him. What would he do with it? This is where the story becomes murky.

We only know about what Roberson's actions when he left a "footprint" somewhere. Bo attended Stanford Law School (no sign of a degree). He worked as an assistant football coach at Whitworth College in Spokane, Wash., in 1969, and earned a master's degree



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there in 1971. Roberson left a job as a track coach at the University of California-Irvine in 1973, and then vanished for 15 years. Bo turned up as a member of the National Honor Society at United States International University (later Alliant International University) in San Diego in 1988. He earned his doctorate there at the age of 58 around 1993 or 1994, and then may have taken a job as a school psychologist.

Otherwise, there are only questions. A family tree on Ancestry.com indicates that Roberson was married and had two children, but the details are hidden from public view because the other members of the family are still alive. Bo's mother couldn't reach him to tell him he had been inducted into Cornell's Hall of Fame in 1978. As of 1986, she had gone 17 years without speaking to him. Her letters to him came back unanswered. Schaap somehow found a phone number for Roberson in the early 1990s, and gave it to Roberson's old friend Dick Jackson. They had a nice call and exchanged letters afterwards, even talking about a trip to Cornell together. But the reunion never happened.

What we do know is Roberson died on April 19, 2001 in Pasadena, California. And we know that he made quite an impression on those who knew him. Hoover chose to end a long profile of Bo with this quote from his greatest track rival.

"He was a super all-around person, athlete or otherwise," Ralph Boston said. "He was one of the heaviest - brainiest - guys I ever met, and he used to wear those dress whites. Bo Roberson from Cornell - I'll never forget him."



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