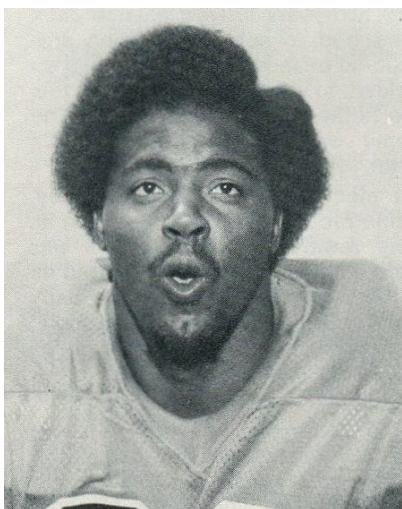


## Willie Spencer

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter.

Willie Spencer, a 6-foot-3-inch, 235-pound fullback, was one of those few players that jumped from high school to professional football and had success. He starred at Massillon (Ohio) High School, playing on a state championship team. As a senior Spencer set school and county records and became one of the greatest running backs in school history. He played two years of minor league football before breaking out with the World Football League's Memphis Southmen and becoming one of that league's best fullbacks. Spencer played three years in the National Football League with the New York Giants and Minnesota Vikings.



Willie Thomas Spencer Sr. was born on January 28, 1953, in the football hotbed of Massillon. His parents were Homer Spencer and Edna Miller, and he had two sisters and four brothers. Willie grew up in Massillon and attended Massillon Washington High School (usually called simply Massillon) where he played football and basketball. As a junior he played tight end for the state champion Tigers. In 1971 he led the county with 116 points on 19 touchdowns and a conversion run. He led the All-American Conference (AAC) in scoring, and his 1,251 rushing yards led the conference and came within 15 yards of the all-time record. The powerful 6-3, 220-pound running back averaged 6.9 yards per carry. He will best be remembered for his 145 yards on 33 carries in a 29-6 win over arch-rival Canton McKinley. The two-year football letterman led Massillon to an 8-2 record as a senior, with both losses by one point.



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Spencer was also an excellent basketball player. He was a letterman for three years and as a senior he led the team in rebounding in helping them to their first district title in 20 years.

“Big Will,” as his teammates called him, was named to *The Evening Independent’s* all-county football first team, was a first-team all-northeast Ohio by the Associated Press and a second team all Ohioan. Spencer also won the Bob Smith Memorial Sportsmanship award given by the Massillon Jaycees.

Spencer signed with the Ottawa Rough Riders of the Canadian Football League before he graduated from high school. By signing with the Rough Riders, he forfeited his opportunity to play in the North-South All-Star game at Fawcett Stadium in Canton, Ohio, on August 11, 1972. Spencer said, referring to his academics, “I didn’t get much out of high school and I didn’t figure I’d get much out of college either.”<sup>i</sup>

A few other high schoolers had jumped directly to the pros, most notably Cookie Gilchrist. “I’m confident Willie can make the team,” Bob Commings, MHS head coach and athletic director, said. “If he does, he’ll have a very comfortable one-year contract. ... Willie is as fast as the backs Ottawa is using, bigger than the backs they’re using and he’s a real competitor.”<sup>ii</sup>

Spencer reported to Ottawa’s training camp in June and was with the team for three weeks before he was released by the Rough Riders. He was assigned to a minor league team in Indianapolis that played in the Midwest Football League. Spencer had impressed during camp. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a better 19-year-old football player in my life,” Jack Gotta, Ottawa’s head coach said. “I can imagine what he was like in high school. He wasn’t intimidated in training camp. In fact, he did quite a bit of intimidating himself. Willie was very competitive for a job, but to be an American and be in the CFL, you have to be a starter. You just can’t be second-string. We just had a couple of good American backs with more experience.”<sup>iii</sup>

“Willie will certainly play pro ball up here or in the NFL. He has the physical prowess to be outstanding. And he’s also an outstanding young man. It’s just a question of maturity. I think it’d be invaluable to Willie if he gets the experience with Indianapolis.”<sup>iv</sup>

Spencer was not happy about being sent to a minor league squad. “I think I made the team,” he said. “I don’t think I need any experience. It was like being back in high school. The competition wasn’t all that tough.”<sup>v</sup> However, he was happy to be in pro football. “It’s nice up in Ottawa and I’ll be glad when I go back, but for now I am just happy to be in football,” he said. Spencer had a three-year contract with the Rough Riders at \$14,000 per season.



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He spent a short stint with the Indianapolis Caps but the staff there worried about his age and that he was too young. Spencer then played for the Holmes County Gremlins of the Pennsylvania-Ohio Semi-Pro Football League for the 1972 season.

He was back in Ottawa's training camp in 1973 and again was impressive. Spencer scored a touchdown in a preseason game which the Rough Riders won 25-16 over the Edmonton Eskimos. Shortly after that preseason game he was cut on July 25 and sent to the minor leagues.

He joined the Hartford Knights of the Atlantic Coast Football League in early August. In his first game with the Knights on August 18 he scored a touchdown in the third quarter. It gave Hartford a 20-3 lead over the Long Island Chiefs in a game that the Knights went on to win 34-3. Spencer scored two other touchdowns in games against the Chiefs, on September 8 and again on September 29. Both were Hartford victories.

Spencer was cut on October 18 when Hartford head coach Fred Wallner made some roster moves including signing kicker Booth Lusteg, a former NFL kicker. The 20-year-old running back finished his time in Hartford with three rushing touchdowns while the Knights compiled a 6-2 record.

He signed a one-year contract with the Toronto Northmen of the new World Football League on March 27 for the 1974 season. "I'm happy to be able to play for the Northmen and Coach (John) McVay,"<sup>vi</sup> Spencer said. On March 31 Toronto signed Miami Dolphins superstars Larry Csonka, Jim Kiick and Paul Warfield to futures contracts to begin play in 1975. Though the Csonka signing was for the same position that Spencer would play, the fullback had his chance in 1974 to prove himself. A short while later, the Toronto franchise was not allowed to operate in Canada and relocated to Memphis, Tennessee, and became the Southmen.

Spencer scored his first two professional touchdowns on two-yard runs in the first and third quarters on August 2 in a 25-15 win over the Southern California Sun. He rushed for 99 yards on 20 carries. In the postgame locker room, he was questioned about Csonka coming to the team in 1975. "I've got one thing and he's got one thing," Spencer said. "He's got the name and I've got the age and desire. We'll just go head-up and see who wins."<sup>vii</sup> He also was asked about not having played college football. "I feel I have good fundamentals coming from the high school football capital of the world – Massillon, Ohio,"<sup>viii</sup> Spencer said.

Two weeks later, in a 37-7 win over the Detroit Wheels, he scored two more touchdowns and then on September 2 he scored both touchdowns in the Southmen's first game against

the Jacksonville Sharks. In the 16-13 victory, despite being hobbled by a muscle pull before the game, Spencer was instrumental in the win. “I was scared I wouldn’t be able to play, but my leg didn’t hurt going over the goal line,”<sup>ix</sup> Spencer said.

He was geared up for his first time playing the Birmingham Americans on September 11. It was a grudge game for the fullback. The Americans coach was Jack Gotta, the former coach of Ottawa who had cut Spencer twice. “I gotta get even with Gotta,” Spencer said. “The man gave me the same lame excuse both times. He said he was sorry but I didn’t have enough experience to play pro football. That’s bunk. ... That man just didn’t want to take a chance with me and I’m going to show him what a big mistake he made when we get on that field. Wait and see.”<sup>x</sup>

It didn’t take Spencer long to show his old coach. On the Southmen’s first offensive play, Spencer muscled his way for nine yards. He contributed 38 yards rushing on that drive. He carried the ball four times inside the Americans’ 10-yard line before finally hitting paydirt on fourth down from the one for the early lead. Memphis kept tacking on scores on their way to a surprising 46-7 blowout victory. It was Birmingham’s first loss after 10 victories to start the season. “All I was thinking about this week was showing him that I could play,”<sup>xi</sup> Spencer said. He left no doubt about that.



In the Southmen’s second game against Jacksonville on October 3, a 47-19 victory, was the highlight of Spencer’s season. He scored five touchdowns on runs of one, one, six, three and 19 yards and finished with 141 yards on 21 carries. The five touchdowns in a single game set the WFL record. “I lost a little weight and I feel a lot quicker,” Spencer said. “I feel way lighter and faster. They see how big I am and they just think I’m a



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power runner. They don't think I'm a shifty runner and I can fool them on that."<sup>xii</sup> The next week, in a 27-23 win over the Charlotte Hornets, Spencer rushed for 109 yards on 17 carries.

He helped spearhead the team to a first-place finish in the Central Division with a 17-3 record. Spencer was third on the team in rushing with 788 yards and was third in the league and second on his team with 15 touchdowns in only 13 games. He added four action points for a total of 109 points scored. He also caught 11 passes for 139 yards.

Spencer took a blow to the knee by Florida Blazers' safety Chuck Beatty with 7:11 to play in the third quarter on October 16. The injury required surgery and ended his season. Spencer was in tears in the dressing room. "I knew it the minute I got hit," Spencer said. "It went pop and I knew it was gone."<sup>xiii</sup> The burly fullback had recently signed a three-year contract with the Southmen and was on his way to a 1,000-yard season. He had been the Southmen's most punishing runner in recent games and had come into his own after his slow start as a pro. Also, at the time Memphis was sporting a 14-2 record and had its sights set on the World Bowl. "His loss puts us short a very, very important man,"<sup>xiv</sup> Bob Gibson, offensive coordinator, said. The Southmen failed to make it to the World Bowl, losing 18-15 in the semifinals to Florida.

Spencer worked hard in the offseason to rehabilitate his knee, spending six days a week lifting weights, running steps, and taking whirlpool baths. "I've never worked out this hard and so intense in my life," Spencer said. "It's been real hard, but knowing I have to do it, I'm doing it. I know a couple of times I thought about calling it quits, but Doc Rose wouldn't have any of that. Doc's been more than a trainer. He's been more of a father and a coach to me."<sup>xv</sup>

As Spencer prepared for the 1975 season, he knew he would take a back seat to Csonka and Kiick and though he was disappointed with that, he understood the reality. He also was coming off a major injury. "I'm almost back at 100 percent; running is fun again," Spencer said on July 12. "But I also feel like I'm having to start over again. I feel just like one of the rookies, but I kinda figured it would be this way after Csonka, Kiick, and Warfield signed to play. It's almost like last year didn't count for much, but how in the world can you forget what we did last year, huh? But my time's comin.' Somebody is going to remember Willie Spencer. I'm just gonna have to take advantage of the playin' time I get, that's all."<sup>xvi</sup>

Spencer was not resentful of the former Dolphins running backs, knowing that they would help the team be among the best in the WFL. "They're good guys," Spencer said. "I met them both the first day of camp and we've been friends since then. They aren't





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cocky or anything like that. They're just two down-to-earth guys here trying to do what everybody is trying to do. Win ball games."<sup>xvii</sup>

In the opening game against the Jacksonville Sharks on August 2, the Southmen won 27-26 and it was Spencer's action point that was the difference in the game. Memphis held on for the victory after surrendering a touchdown in the final seconds. But the Southmen defense denied the Shark's action point attempt and Spencer's point that was scored only 38 seconds earlier was the deciding point.

Despite those heroics, the highlight of Spencer's season came on September 7. Csonka was sidelined with a groin injury and Spencer received his first significant playing time of the season. He rushed 15 times for a team record 142 yards in the Southmen's 37-17 win over the Hawaiians. In the postgame locker room coach John McVay said it was Spencer's best game since he joined the team. The week before Spencer was the team's leading ball-carrier with 65 yards on 13 carries in a win over the Chicago Fire.

Spencer scored touchdowns in games on September 14 against the Shreveport Steamer on an eight-yard run in a 34-23 win, and on October 5 against the Southern California Sun on a one-yard plunge in a 37-33 win. Spencer was also the leading ground-gainer against the Sun with 89 yards on 15 carries.

The World Football League came to an abrupt end when it folded on October 22. Memphis was in second place in the Eastern Division with a 7-4 record when the league ceased operations.

Spencer finished the 1975 season with 581 rushing yards on 100 carries, an impressive 5.8 yards per carry. He scored two touchdowns and two action points for 16 total points. He was the Southmen's leading rusher and he also caught 18 passes for 136 yards.

In his two seasons in the WFL he compiled 1,369 rushing yards, scored 17 touchdowns, and averaged 4.9 yards per carry. He also set the record for touchdowns in a single game with the five he scored against Jacksonville.

Shortly after the WFL ceased operations, he was approached by some NFL teams to sign with them, but was restricted from doing so by Southmen's owner John Bassett who said that he had a letter signed by Spencer reaffirming his contract. The fullback filed a Chancery Court lawsuit challenging that letter of agreement. His suit said "that the agreement does not provide for continuation of (his) services as a professional football player in the event the defendant or the World Football League discontinued its operations."<sup>xviii</sup> Spencer was requesting a temporary restraining order to allow him to



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negotiate with NFL teams. The Eagles, Redskins, Vikings and Cowboys had all expressed interest.

On November 25, the judge ruled in favor of Bassett and the Southmen. The letter that Spencer's agent had signed on his client's behalf said that Spencer would continue to fulfill his obligations on the \$50,000 per year no-cut contract until it expired in February as long as Bassett continued to pay Spencer. And he did. Bassett also claimed that though the WFL was defunct, the Southmen were not. This ruling kept Spencer from negotiating with the NFL until the spring of 1976 while Bassett was trying to get the Southmen admitted to the NFL, which never came about.

Spencer signed with the Minnesota Vikings on March 24, 1976, but not before he had to go to court to get free from his agreement with the Southmen. This time Memphis did not contest his wishes to free himself from the team. The Vikings outbid several other interested NFL teams. Spencer was one of the more sought-after players from the defunct WFL. The Vikings thought Spencer could fill their need for a back with punch to get those short-yardage first downs. "To me, the Vikings seemed to need a big back," Spencer said. "I feel Csonka has helped me a lot. He showed me a lot of things. ... I go up the middle like Csonka and can also run around the end like Franco Harris."<sup>xix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Lapidès, George, "The Bad Dude Down and Out," *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 17, 1974, 22.

<sup>ii</sup> Hess, Chuck, Jr., "Spencer to try Canadian play," *The Evening Independent*, May 5, 1972, 11.

<sup>iii</sup> Zitrin, Rich, "Spencer Irked by Demotion," *The Akron Beacon Journal*, July 14, 1972, 37.

<sup>iv</sup> Zitrin, Rich, "Spencer Irked by Demotion," *The Akron Beacon Journal*, July 14, 1972, 37.

<sup>v</sup> Zitrin, Rich, "Spencer Irked by Demotion," *The Akron Beacon Journal*, July 14, 1972, 37.

<sup>vi</sup> "McVay Inks Spencer to Pact," *The Evening Independent*, March 28, 1974, 15.

<sup>vii</sup> Associated Press, "Spencer scores two TDs for Memphis," *The Evening Independent*, August 2, 1974, 13.

<sup>viii</sup> Associated Press, "Spencer scores two TDs for Memphis," *The Evening Independent*, August 2, 1974, 13.

<sup>ix</sup> Covitz, Randy, "Grizzlies Take Look Back," *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, December 3, 1974, 18.

<sup>x</sup> Carfield, Jim, "Spencer Hoping to Settle Old Score," *The Orlando Sentinel*, September 10, 1974, 89.

<sup>xi</sup> Cargile, John, "Ams still proud after loss," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, September 12, 1974, A10.

<sup>xii</sup> Moore, Gary, "Jenning Doesn't 'Duck' Giving Credit to Southmen," *The Commercial Appeal*, October 4, 1974, 35.

<sup>xiii</sup> Lapidès, George, "The Bad Dude Down and Out," *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 17, 1974, 22.

<sup>xiv</sup> Lapidès, George, "The Bad Dude Down and Out," *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 17, 1974, 22.

<sup>xv</sup> Covitz, Randy, "It's Full Speed Ahead on Road to Recovery," *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, February 15, 1975, 11.

<sup>xvi</sup> Fleming, Mike, "Spencer Isn't Attuned To Second-Fiddle Role," *The Commercial Appeal*, July 13, 1975, 27.

<sup>xvii</sup> Lapidès, George, "It's Not Funny to Spencer," *The Memphis Press Scimitar*, August 1, 1975, 18.

<sup>xviii</sup> "Willie Spencer Files Lawsuit," *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 15, 1975, 9.

<sup>xix</sup> Associated Press, "Spencer Expected to Fill Viking Backfield," *The Bismarck Tribune*, March 31, 1976, 40.



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Minnesota head coach Bud Grant was happy to have the big-bodied fullback with the Vikings, saying, “Based on the World Football League, Spencer’s credentials are even better than Csonka’s. I’m happy he’s with us.”<sup>xx</sup>

Spencer broke his leg in a motorcycle accident in May that severely set him back. He reported to training camp overweight, and not in the shape he wanted to be in to start his NFL career. Then early in training camp he pulled a muscle in his leg, that kept him off the field for a period.

He finally made his Vikings’ regular season debut on October 4 in Minnesota’s 17-6 win over the Pittsburgh Steelers. He carried the ball for the first time in an NFL game against the New York Giants on October 17. For the game he carried the ball four times for two yards in the Vikings’ 24-7 victory. It was his final game in a Minnesota uniform after only three games.

Spencer was released on October 28. “Willie just didn’t fit into our situation,” Grant said. “He was a good prospect and he still is, but he ran out of time here.” Grant thought he could play for another team: “Spencer was a good football player, but he doesn’t fit in here.”<sup>xxi</sup> Spencer felt he never got a legitimate chance, saying, “It was a lack of playing time. I got to play two halves in the exhibition season and a couple of minutes in the regular season. I didn’t get a chance to show what I could do.”<sup>xxii</sup>

Both the player and the team were disappointed that Spencer did not show better. But Vikings quarterback Fran Tarkenton thought he could still be an NFL player. “Everybody liked Willie and still does,” Tarkenton said. “He’s a really sunny guy, who does want to make it, and has a tremendous physique to do it. He can run and he can catch the ball and he can block, and I wouldn’t be amazed if he had another training camp with the Vikings that he would come back and be a ball player with us.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

That was not in the cards. Instead, Spencer signed with the Washington Redskins on January 12, 1977. “He is an outstanding prospect,”<sup>xxiv</sup> George Allen, Redskins head coach, said. Spencer was in Washington’s training camp until mid-August when he was released.

The following week he signed with the New York Giants on August 18. The head coach of the Giants was his coach in the WFL, John McVay. “If things don’t work out with the

<sup>xx</sup> Associated Press, “Spencer Expected to Fill Viking Backfield,” *The Bismarck Tribune*, March 31, 1976, 40.

<sup>xxi</sup> Associated Press, “Vikings cut Willie Spencer,” *Grand Forks Herald*, October 29, 1976, 9.

<sup>xxii</sup> Associated Press, “Vikings cut Willie Spencer,” *Grand Forks Herald*, October 29, 1976, 9.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Klobuchar, Jim, “The End of a Brief Legend,” *The Minneapolis Star*, October 29, 1976, 11.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Associated Press, “Redskins Sigh Willie Spencer,” *The Daily Advance*, January 13, 1977, 17.





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Giants, I'm really lost," Spencer said. "I only got a little bit of money. If it don't happen here, I'm through. I can't take it anymore."<sup>xxv</sup> He was optimistic about this opportunity. "My chances here look better than any time in the last two years," he said. "The coach knows what I can do. When a coach knows you, you have the edge."<sup>xxvi</sup>

Spencer had an impressive training camp and made the team. He played in all but one of the Giants' 14 regular season games. He scored his first career NFL touchdown on a one-yard run against the Dallas Cowboys on September 25 in a 41-21 loss. His second NFL touchdown came against the San Francisco 49ers on October 16. His one-yard touchdown put the Giants in the lead 17-7 on their way to a 20-17 win. His third and final touchdown of the season came on December 4 in a 27-7 win over St. Louis. His two-yard scoring run clinched the game in the fourth quarter. It was his best game of the season as he rushed for 46 yards on 12 carries, which were his NFL career highs.

The Giants finished with a 5-9 record and Spencer contributed 184 yards on 62 carries with the three touchdowns. He also caught four passes for 20 yards and he returned three kickoffs for 44 yards.

Spencer was back with the Giants in 1978 and became almost solely a third down short-yardage back. He played in 15 of the Giants' 16 games. Spencer scored two touchdowns during the season. The first came on September 24 on a one-yard run that put the Giants ahead of the 49ers 24-3 on the way to a 27-10 victory.

On October 22 in a 17-6 win over the Redskins, Spencer caught the longest pass of his career, a 22-yarder from quarterback Joe Piscarcik.

Spencer's second touchdown of the season came on December 3 in a 20-17 loss to the Los Angeles Rams. He scored on a one-yard plunge in the fourth quarter to cut the Rams lead to what the final score turned out to be.

The Giants finished with a 6-10 record and Spencer contributed 61 yards on 38 carries, almost all third down and short yardage plays. He had the two touchdowns, caught two passes for 25 yards, and returned one kickoff for 14 yards. His best rushing output game of the season was 20 yards on five carries versus St. Louis on December 10.

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<sup>xxv</sup> Marcus, Steve, "Willie Spencer: A Final Chance at 24," *Newsday (Nassau Edition)*, August 20, 1977, 23.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Marcus, Steve, "Willie Spencer: A Final Chance at 24," *Newsday (Nassau Edition)*, August 20, 1977, 23.



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He expressed some frustration late in the season, saying, “I can’t understand why I’m not running the ball more. Look at my averages the last few years, and it’s been about 4.6 or 4.8. I guess I just have to be patient the way I was when I came out of high school.”

While with the Giants he had picked up a nickname. “They call me High School Boy, and they ask when I’m going to get my education,” Spencer said, “But that kind of talk doesn’t bother me anymore. I just say I’m doing the same thing you’re doing and you spent four years in college.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

Following the conclusion of the season McVay was fired as the Giants coach and with it, Spencer’s days were numbered.

New Giants head coach Ray Perkins did not invite Spencer to the Giants minicamp on May 10 and he was released a short time later. The big fullback did not give up on pro football just yet. “I’m just waiting, in case somebody gets hurt,” Spencer said in October 1979. “I haven’t really had the chance. At Minnesota, I played behind Chuck Foreman and, with the Giants, I was behind Larry Csonka.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

No NFL team came calling. In 1980 and ’81 he played for the minor league Canton Bulldogs of the Ohio Football League, hoping for one more chance at the NFL. But it never came and he finally called it quits from the game he loved.

Spencer lived the rest of his life in Massillon. Little is known of his occupations following his football career. Willie was known for calling everyone “Junior” and if you were near and dear to him, he had a unique nickname for you.

He had six children – three daughters - Latia Spencer, Kimberly Tavares, Tiana Spencer - and three sons - Willie Spencer Jr., Damien King and Dominique Spencer.

Spencer was enshrined into the Massillon High School Football Hall of Fame in 2020. In 2022 his son Willie Spencer Jr. was also enshrined.

Willie Spencer died on September 19, 2021 at 68-years old in Massillon.

As his obituary said, “Willie lived life to the fullest and had a very contagious smile. Willie created an amazing legacy and lived a wonderful life!”<sup>xxix</sup>

<sup>xxvii</sup> Caulk, Steve, “Spencer Skips School, Joins Huddle,” *Daily Record*, November 26, 1978, 29.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Braham, Jim, “The very lonesome vigil of former NFL players,” *The Cleveland Press*, October 5, 1979, 17.

<sup>xxix</sup> Willie Thomas Spencer, Sr., Obituary, <https://www.paquet.com/obituaries/Willie-Thomas-Spencer-Sr?obId=22443019>



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