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Wayne Walker (linebacker)

This article was written by Matthew Keddie.

Wayne Walker was a model of consistency for 15 seasons (1958-72) as a member of the Detroit Lions. Like his peers, Walker played multiple positions, starring at outside linebacker on defense and handling the kicking duties on special teams.¹ He made an immediate impact as a rookie in 1958, returning both a fumble and an interception for touchdowns. On his career Walker said, “I never considered myself a superstar, just a good football player. For a while, I think I was the best outside linebacker in the league.”²



Walker set a franchise record playing in 200 games that stood for approximately 32 years and played on some of the most talented Detroit defenses in franchise history. During the 1960s, he teamed with a number of future Hall of Famers that included defensive tackle Alex Karras, defensive backs Dick LeBeau, Yale Lary, Richard “Night Train” Lane and linebacker Joe Schmidt, among others.³ At the time, the Lions' front four was dubbed, “The Fearsome Foursome” of Roger Brown, Alex Karras, Darris McCord and Sam Williams.⁴ They greatly contributed to why Detroit ranked in the top 3 in scoring defense six times (1960-62, 1964, 1969-70) during his career. Further, the defense as a unit was a significant reason why the team recorded seven, second place finishes in the NFL Western Division.⁵ Unfortunately, the Detroit offense offset the success attained by the



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defense. Over the same span, the Detroit offense ranked in the top 5 in scoring just four times (1958, 1962, 1963, 1970), but ranked in the bottom five seven times, including a stretch of five consecutive seasons, from 1965-69.⁶

Walker's play earned him three consecutive trips to the Pro Bowl (1963-65), two second-team all-pro honors (1963, 1964) and a consensus first-team all-pro selection in 1965.⁷ The Lions were coming off a win in the 1957 NFL Championship Game when he was drafted with the 45th overall pick in the 1958 NFL Draft. Walker made just one start as a rookie, but he made a strong impact on the defensive side of the ball, recording two turnover returns for touchdowns: he ran back an interception 33-yards and took a fumble 34-yards to the end zone.⁸ The next season in 1959 he took over some of the kicking duties, converting on 5 of 6 extra points.

It was not until the 1960 season when Walker became a full-time starter on defense. He joined Joe Schmidt and Carl Brettschneider at the linebacker position.⁹ Walker turned in an unofficial 7.0 sacks, recorded one interception and recovered four fumbles in a solid season. The Lions produced a 7-5 record and a second-place finish in the NFC West Division, their best in three years. In 1962, Walker was the full-time kicker as well, making all 37 of his extra point attempts, in addition to making 9 of 22 field goals.¹⁰

In 1963, Walker earned his first Pro Bowl selection, though the Lions slumped to a 5-8-1 record, despite sporting the fourth ranked scoring defense, allowing 18.9 points per contest. He recorded an unofficial 5.0 sacks.¹¹ The following season he set a career high with 14 field goals made. His 56% conversion rate was also a career best. He earned a

- 1 "Wayne Walker," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Wayne Walker Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 "Former Idaho Great, Wayne Walker, Retires," *Lewiston Morning Tribute*, January 19, 1973, p. 21.
- 3 "Detroit Lions Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Detroit Lions Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 4 Dow, Bill. "Remembering the Detroit Lions' 'Fearsome Foursome'," *vintagedetroit.com*, November 23, 2024, accessed March 14, 2026, [Remembering the Detroit Lions' "Fearsome Foursome" - Vintage Detroit Collection](#).
- 5 "Detroit Lions Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Detroit Lions Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 6 "Detroit Lions Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Detroit Lions Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 7 "Wayne Walker," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Wayne Walker Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 8 "Wayne Walker," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Wayne Walker Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 9 "1960 Detroit Lions Roster & Players," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [1960 Detroit Lions Roster & Players | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 10 "Wayne Walker," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Wayne Walker Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).



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second trip to the Pro Bowl and was named a second-team all-pro selection by the Associated Press, *Newspaper Ent. Association* and the *New York Daily News*.¹² The UPI recognized Walker as a first-team all-pro and the *Sporting News* named him first-team all-conference. Walker earned consensus first-team all-pro honors in 1965 as well as his third trip to the Pro Bowl.¹³

Walker played under three different coaches with Detroit. George Wilson led the team from 1957 through 1964. After winning the 1957 NFL title, Wilson failed to return the team to another championship game.¹⁴ His next best season was in 1962 when the Lions finished 11-3 that included a Playoff Bowl victory over the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Following the 1964 campaign, five of Wilson's assistants were fired. As a result, Wilson resigned, with a 53-45-6 record in Detroit.¹⁵ The Lions turned to former player Harry Gilmer as the next head coach in franchise history. Gilmer lasted just two seasons (1965, 1966) before being fired.¹⁶ Management chose another former Lions player, future Hall of Famer Joe Schmidt, to lead the team. The Lions were in rebuilding mode during Schmidt's first several seasons, posting records of 5-7-2 in 1967 and 4-8-2 in 1968.¹⁷ Schmidt drafted several key players who would propel the team to success over the next two seasons: running back Mel Farr, cornerback and future Hall of Famer Lem Barney, linebacker Paul Naumoff and wide receiver Earl McCullough.¹⁸¹⁹²⁰²¹ As a result of these transactions, the Lions posted four consecutive second-place finishes in the NFC Central Division. Detroit qualified for the playoffs during the 1970 season for the first time since

1 1 “Wayne Walker,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Wayne Walker Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 2 “Wayne Walker,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Wayne Walker Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 3 “Wayne Walker,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Wayne Walker Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 4 “Detroit Lions Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Detroit Lions Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).



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1957.²² However, the Lions fell to the Dallas Cowboys in the NFC Divisional Playoff Game, 5-0, in what was a defensive fight, in front of over 69,000 fans at the Cotton Bowl in Dallas.²³ The loss was deflating for Detroit and the team did not qualify for the playoffs again for over a decade. Schmidt coached the Lions to 7-6-1 and 8-5-1 records in 1971 and 1972, respectively. He resigned following the 1972 season, following Walker's retirement.²⁴ The Lions furnished a 43-34-7 record under Schmidt, a run that was highlighted by those four straight second-place finishes.²⁵

Walker recorded an unofficial total of 38.5 career sacks, 15 fumble recoveries, 14 interceptions on defense. As a kicker, he converted 172 career extra points on 175 attempts and connected on 53 of 131 field goals. At the time of his retirement, his 200 career games played was best in franchise history and his 345 points scored ranked third.²⁶

After his playing days, Walker pursued a career in sports broadcasting. He took a position with KPIX-TV, the local CBS sports station, as sports director in San Francisco, CA.²⁷ Walker called San Francisco 49ers' games for near two decades as well as baseball games for the Oakland Athletics (1976-80, 1985). Walker also served as a color commentator

- 1 5 “George Wilson,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [George Wilson Record, Statistics, and Category Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 1 6 “Harry Gilmer,” encyclopediaofalabama.org, accessed March 14, 2026, [Harry Gilmer - Encyclopedia of Alabama](#).
- 1 7 “Detroit Lions Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Detroit Lions Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 1 8 “Mel Farr,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Mel Farr Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 1 9 “Lem Barney,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Lem Barney Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 0 “Paul Naumoff,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Paul Naumoff Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 1 “Earl McCullough,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Earl McCullough Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 2 “Detroit Lions Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Detroit Lions Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 3 “Divisional Round – Detroit Lions at Dallas Cowboys – December 26th, 1970,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Divisional Round - Detroit Lions at Dallas Cowboys - December 26th, 1970 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 4 “Detroit Lions Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Detroit Lions Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 5 “Joe Schmidt,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Joe Schmidt Record, Statistics, and Category Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 6 “Wayne Walker,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Wayne Walker Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).



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for regional NFL broadcasts on CBS.²⁸ Former 49ers quarterback Joe Montana said of Walker as a broadcaster, “I think one of the things that happens so many times with athletes ... is that somebody has an agenda in most cases, so they're looking for something that fits into their agenda. And I don't think Wayne had an agenda ... He was always on the up and up with it. And if there was something that needed to be talked about that probably he didn't want to talk about, you could feel that in there, because he was on the other side of that a lot. So, I think he had a great understanding of the things that take place that make most athletes a little cautious when you start talking ... And so you get so guarded, immediately. And, you know, you never had that with Wayne.”²⁹

Walker had caught the eye of former Detroit Tigers broadcaster and WJBK sports anchor Ray Lane. Lane said, “I remember interviewing Wayne at training camp and he was so good at adlibbing. I thought this guy could get into broadcasting. When our station general manager Bob McBride asked me if I could find an athlete who could fill in on the air, I suggested Wayne and he hired him. Wayne was a tyrant on the football field, but he was one of the friendliest persons you could ever meet, and was always nice with the public.”³⁰

Wayne Harrison Walker was born on September 30, 1936 in Boise, Idaho. Walker was an outstanding athlete growing up, playing in local baseball leagues. He formed a close relationship with future baseball Hall of Famer and legend, Harmon Killebrew.³¹ The duo routinely competed against one another. Walker said, “Harmon and I go way, way back, playing Legion ball as 14-year-olds. He was King Kong then. He was 5-11, 185 when he was 14 and could hit it a mile. I played left field, and we didn't always have fences. I played him so damn deep, he told me he could see only the upper half of my body because of the Earth's curvature.”³² On their relationship Walker noted, “What they're all saying about him is true. He was the kindest, gentlest, best guy you ever knew. Nothing phony or nasty about him. They just don't come any better.”³³

Walker turned down an offer to play minor league baseball to attend college. Speaking on his affinity for the game of baseball he recollected, “Growing up I was a big baseball fan so I knew about the ballpark [Briggs Stadium in Detroit]. I remember getting off the bus

2 7 “Walker, Wayne,” emmysf.tv, accessed March 14, 2026, [Walker, Wayne - NATAS SF/NorCal](#)NATAS SF/NorCal.

2 8 “Walker, Wayne,” emmysf.tv, accessed March 14, 2026, [Walker, Wayne - NATAS SF/NorCal](#)NATAS SF/NorCal.

2 9 “Longtime KPIX Sports Director Wayne Walker Dies At 80,” cbsnews.com, May 19, 2017, accessed March 14, 2026, [Longtime KPIX Sports Director Wayne Walker Dies At 80 - CBS San Francisco](#).

3 0 Dow, Bill. “Linebacker Wayne Walker Bridged Gap in Lions History,” vintagedetroit.com, September 4, 2023, accessed March 14, 2026, [Linebacker Wayne Walker Bridged Gap in Lions History - Vintage Detroit Collection](#).



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and going through the tunnel and onto the field. To a kid from Boise, it was like seeing the seventh wonder of the world. It was just what a ballpark was supposed to look like.”³⁴

Walker stayed in Idaho, attending the University of Idaho to play football. He was a three-year starter (1955-57) at center and linebacker under first-year head coach Skip Stahley.³⁵ Stahley worked as a backfield coach with the Chicago Cardinals (1953) and at the University of Washington (1950-52) prior to coming to Idaho. At the University of Washington, he mentored future NFL stars Don Heinrich and Hugh McElhenny.³⁶ Stahley's first win as head coach was over local rival Washington State University in the “Battle of the Palouse” game, 10-0. It was Idaho's first win over the Cougars since 1925.³⁷ The Vandals finished the season with a 4-5 record.

The Vandals routinely finished at or near the bottom of the Pacific Coast Conference during Walker's time, never winning more than four games in a season.³⁸ However, Idaho amassed a long winning streak against rival the University of Montana Grizzlies, taking the Little Brown Stein trophy. In each of Walker's three seasons as a starter, the Vandals defeated the Grizzlies, and had an 8-game winning streak from 1951 through 1959.³⁹

Walker was one of the team captains as a senior in 1957. He was chosen to participate in the East-West Shrine Game and in the Chicago All-Star Game. His outstanding performance in the Shrine Game earned him game MVP honors, that included 15 total tackles, two interceptions and he even a blocked punt.⁴⁰ At Idaho, Walker played

- 3 1 Shea, John. “Wayne Walker's Idaho link to Harmon Killebrew,” sfgate.com, May 22, 2011, accessed March 14, 2026, [Wayne Walker's Idaho link to Harmon Killebrew](#).
- 3 2 Shea, John. “Wayne Walker's Idaho link to Harmon Killebrew,” sfgate.com, May 22, 2011, accessed March 14, 2026, [Wayne Walker's Idaho link to Harmon Killebrew](#).
- 3 3 Shea, John. “Wayne Walker's Idaho link to Harmon Killebrew,” sfgate.com, May 22, 2011, accessed March 14, 2026, [Wayne Walker's Idaho link to Harmon Killebrew](#).
- 3 4 Dow, Bill. “Linebacker Wayne Walker Bridged Gap in Lions History,” vintagedetroit.com, September 4, 2023, accessed March 14, 2026, [Linebacker Wayne Walker Bridged Gap in Lions History - Vintage Detroit Collection](#).
- 3 5 “Idaho Vandals School History,” sports-reference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Idaho Vandals College Football History, Stats, Records | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).
- 3 6 “Stahley's Departure Conjures Memories,” *The Spokesman-Review*, May 24, 1964, Vol. 10, p. 1.
- 3 7 “1954 Idaho Vandals Schedule and Results,” sports-reference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [1954 Idaho Vandals Schedule and Results | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).
- 3 8 “Idaho Vandals School History,” sports-reference.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Idaho Vandals College Football History, Stats, Records | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).
- 3 9 “Idaho vs. Montana: Little Brown Stein By The Numbers,” govandals.com, September 25, 2025, accessed March 14, 2026, [Idaho vs. Montana: Little Brown Stein By The Numbers - University of Idaho Athletics](#).
- 4 0 “Wayne Walker,” govandals.com, accessed March 14, 2026, [Wayne Walker \(2008\) - Hall of Fame - University of Idaho Athletics](#).



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alongside future NFL star and Hall of Famer, guard Jerry Kramer, who played on five NFL title winning teams with the Green Bay Packers.

Sports columnist Harry Missildine of the *Moscow-Pullman Daily News* praised Walker's career at Idaho when he wrote in 1988, "Large, loose and rapid, Walker's one of those athletes of yesteryear who'd not merely succeed but excel in today's National Football League. Indeed, had the NFL scouting services been as perceptive then as they are now, Walker would not have waited until the fourth round of the NFL's draft of 1958 seniors. He'd be a first-rounder."⁴¹ There was one play that stood out in Missildine's mind that occurred during a spring football game between the Idaho team and the alumni team. Missildine wrote, "Idaho used to play a spring game in Spokane, Varsity against Alumni. Walker, an intensely loyal and active Vandal booster, was there after several years with the Lions to play and to attend parties before and after, some of which were more strenuous than the ballgame. Walker was playing linebacker on the short side of the field when the Idaho Varsity tried a wide-side sweep. An off guard or tackle popped through the line, his mission to cut Walker off from pursuing the sweep to the corner and sought to drive his helmet and shoulder through Walker's No. 53. Wayne put a large, strong hand on that Vandal's helmet and the guy stayed in arm's length contact as Walker sprinted down the line, his eyes on the ball carrier. As the back reached the corner and tried to cut upfield, Walker de-cleated his would-be blocker with one arm and dumped the runner for minus two with the other. On that play Walker reminded me of a big, tough cat playing with an uncommonly truculent mouse."⁴²

Walker relocated back to Idaho in 1994 with his wife, Sylvia. He retired from broadcasting in 1999, then suffered from throat cancer in 2007. Approximately eight years later, he suffered from Parkinson's disease, passing away on May 19, 2017 at the age of 80.⁴³ On his passing, the Detroit Lions organization and chairman Martha Firestone Ford released a statement reading, "On behalf of my family and the Detroit Lions, I would like to extend our sincere condolences to Wayne's wife, Sylvia, and to his children, Steve, Doug and Kathy. Wayne was one of our finest players from the decade of the 60s and will not only be remembered for his career accomplishments as a Lion, but also for his great success as a broadcaster after his playing days were over."⁴⁴ In 2008, Walker was named to the Detroit Lions 75th Anniversary Team. He also had his number 53 retired by the University of Idaho and was named a second-team All-Pacific Coast Conference choice as a senior in 1957.⁴⁵

4 1 Missildine, Harry. "Get ready to welcome Wayne Walker," *Moscow-Pullman Daily News*, January 21, 1988, Vol. 95, No. 18, p. 8A.

4 2 Missildine, Harry. "Get ready to welcome Wayne Walker," *Moscow-Pullman Daily News*, January 21, 1988, Vol. 95, No. 18, p. 8A.



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Reflecting on his career Walker said, “One reason I have retired was that I felt my God-given abilities had taken me as far as they could.”⁴⁷

Notes:

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- 4 3 Kroner, Steve. “Time goes by fast in retirement,” sfgate.com, June 4, 2009, accessed March 14, 2026, [‘Time goes by fast’ in retirement](#).
- 4 4 “Lions Legend Wayne Walker passes away at age 80,” detroitlions.com, May 19, 2017, accessed March 14, 2026, [Lions Legend Wayne Walker passes away at age 80](#).
- 4 5 Dow, Bill. “Linebacker Wayne Walker Bridged Gap in Lions History,” vintagedetroit.com, September 4, 2023, accessed March 14, 2026, [Linebacker Wayne Walker Bridged Gap in Lions History - Vintage Detroit Collection](#).
- 4 7 “Former Idaho Great, Wayne Walker, Retires,” *Lewiston Morning Tribune*, January 19, 1973, p. 21.