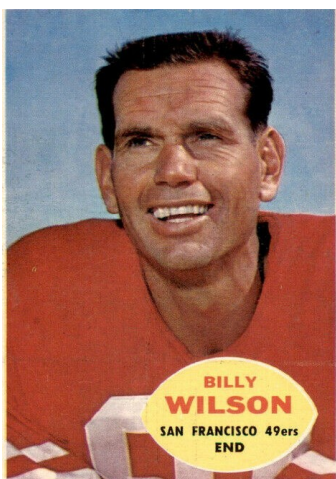


## Billy Wilson

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

The “Million Dollar Backfield” of Y.A. Tittle, Joe Perry, Hugh McElhenny, and John Henry Johnson was one of the most prolific scoring tandems in NFL history. Often lost in the rush is Billy Wilson, arguably the top receiver of the 1950s. Wilson spent his entire ten year career with the San Francisco 49ers.



Due to his exceptional play, he often drew comparisons to Raymond Berry, Tom Fears, and Elroy Hirsch.<sup>1</sup> The difference? Berry, Fears, and Hirsch are Hall of Famers. The legendary Bill Walsh once said of Wilson, “Billy Wilson was the top pass receiver of his time and one of the finest blockers.”<sup>2</sup> A valid statement considering Wilson led the NFL three times in receptions (1954, 1956, 1957), was elected to six consecutive Pro Bowls (1954-1959), and qualified for various all-pro teams throughout his career.<sup>3</sup>

Wilson is also etched into 49ers history and lore. Teammate and Hall of Fame tackle Bob St. Clair said of Wilson, “He was one of the most underrated players on the team. He had great hands and could really go up for the ball. He was a super guy, so congenial.”<sup>4</sup>

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- 1 Fitzgerald, Tom. “Ex-49ers receiver Billy Wilson dies at 81,” Sfgate.com, January 28, 2009, <https://www.sfgate.com/sports/article/Ex-49ers-receiver-Billy-Wilson-dies-at-81-3253263.php>.
  - 2 Fitzgerald, Tom. “Ex-49ers receiver Billy Wilson dies at 81,” Sfgate.com, January 28, 2009, <https://www.sfgate.com/sports/article/Ex-49ers-receiver-Billy-Wilson-dies-at-81-3253263.php>.
  - 3 “Billy Wilson,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WilsBi00.htm>.
  - 4 Fitzgerald, Tom. “Ex-49ers receiver Billy Wilson dies at 81,” Sfgate.com, January 28, 2009, <https://www.sfgate.com/sports/article/Ex-49ers-receiver-Billy-Wilson-dies-at-81-3253263.php>.



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Wilson definitely stood out due to his tall, thin stature. He played at 6'3" and roughly 190 pounds, leveraging his lankiness, long arms to leap and come down with the ball.<sup>5</sup> Gordie Soltau, who played alongside Wilson for his entire nine year career, often noticed, "He knew how to go get the ball. Tittle had a lot of confidence in him."<sup>6</sup> When the game was on the line, the team often went to Wilson. Remarking on Wilson's clutch abilities, quarterback Y.A. Tittle recollected, "Whenever we needed a big catch, I went to him. I knew he would make the play."<sup>7</sup>

Not a flashy player in terms of speed, he had outstanding footwork and hands. Catching nearly every ball thrown his way, the legendary Tom Landry praised him, "Billy Wilson was almost impossible to cover."<sup>8</sup> Bob St. Clair commented that, "Billy had hands like glue. His ability to run after the catch was amazing."<sup>9</sup> Wilson caught 60 passes each in 1954 and 1956.<sup>10</sup> Only three players in 49ers history caught more career touchdown passes than Wilson's 49. He ranks fifth in receiving yards in franchise history with 5,902.<sup>11</sup> The four players ranked ahead of him: Gene Washington, Dwight Clark, Terrell Owens, Jerry Rice – all played under more pass oriented offenses.<sup>12</sup>

Considering Wilson's achievements they are remarkably impressive during an era when the NFL played a 12 game schedule. The other players had the benefit of a longer season, and the rules did not also favor passing during Wilson's time. San Francisco was very competitive during the 1950s.<sup>13</sup>

The team won the NFL Western Division title in 1957, first in franchise history.<sup>14</sup> They squared off against the Lions in the postseason, losing a close 31-27 contest, that saw

5 "Billy Wilson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WilsBi00.htm>.

6 "Billy Wilson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WilsBi00.htm>.

7 Brown, Daniel. "49ers salute the great Billy Wilson," MercuryNews.com, January 27, 2009, <https://blogs.mercurynews.com/49ers/2009/01/27/49ers-salute-the-great-billy-wilson-1927-2009/>.

8 Brown, Daniel. "49ers salute the great Billy Wilson," MercuryNews.com, January 27, 2009, <https://blogs.mercurynews.com/49ers/2009/01/27/49ers-salute-the-great-billy-wilson-1927-2009/>.

9 Brown, Daniel. "49ers salute the great Billy Wilson," MercuryNews.com, January 27, 2009, <https://blogs.mercurynews.com/49ers/2009/01/27/49ers-salute-the-great-billy-wilson-1927-2009/>.

1 0 "Billy Wilson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WilsBi00.htm>.

1 1 "San Francisco 49ers Career Receiving Leaders," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 2, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sfo/career-receiving.htm>.

1 2 "San Francisco 49ers Career Receiving Leaders," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 2, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sfo/career-receiving.htm>.

1 3 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 2, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sfo/>.

1 4 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 2, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sfo/>.



Detroit advance to the NFL title. The 49ers racked up second place finishes on three occasions (1951, 1953, 1960). The offense ranked in the top five in scoring four times (1951, 1953, 1954, 1957), boasting the top ranked unit in 1953.<sup>15</sup> The 49ers lost a pair of close contests that year to the eventual champion Detroit Lions, finishing at a strong 9-3.

William Gene Wilson was born in Sayre, Oklahoma, on February 3, 1927.<sup>16</sup> His family was coupled with the stringent effects of dealing with the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl moving through Oklahoma. When Billy was three, the Wilsons moved to California in hopes of a more prosperous life. Wilson attended Campbell High School in the Bay Area, where he focused on basketball and football.<sup>17</sup>

In 1945 he enrolled at nearby San Jose State College (now San Jose State University), where he was known as a prominent local athlete. A brief stint in the US Navy saw him tour the Pacific for 19 months, Wilson returned to star on the football and basketball teams.<sup>18</sup> The duo of Wilson and Spartans' quarterback Gene Menges led the team to record scoring marks, averaging nearly 30 points per game. The Spartans' teams won 24 games with the duo, including two California Collegiate Athletic Association titles, and the 1949 Raisin Bowl over Texas Tech.<sup>19</sup>

On the hardwood, Wilson was a star at center, using his 6'3" height to his advantage. George Clark, who played alongside Wilson said, "Everybody loved him and people loved to be around him. He worked as hard as anybody on the team. He was a good rebounder and Bill had a good hook shot. He made it tough on you, because he was such a good scrambler. He was a very unselfish player."<sup>20</sup> The 1950 and 1951 teams Wilson was a part of were the first in school history to play at Madison Square Garden, and to compete in the postseason. He was a physical education major.<sup>21</sup>

Drafted in the 22<sup>nd</sup> round (283<sup>rd</sup> overall) of the 1950 NFL draft, it appeared Wilson playing in the NFL was a long shot.<sup>22</sup> The 49ers drafted six receivers ahead of him. What

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1 5 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 2, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sfo/>.

1 6 "Billy Wilson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WilsBi00.htm>.

1 7 Brown, Daniel. "49ers salute the great Billy Wilson," MercuryNews.com, January 27, 2009, <https://blogs.mercurynews.com/49ers/2009/01/27/49ers-salute-the-great-billy-wilson-1927-2009/>.

1 8 "Billy Wilson," SJSUSpartans.com, January 28, 2009, accessed February 10, 2022, [https://sjsuspartans.com/news/2009/1/28/Billy\\_Wilson\\_1927\\_2009.aspx](https://sjsuspartans.com/news/2009/1/28/Billy_Wilson_1927_2009.aspx).

1 9 "Billy Wilson," SJSUSpartans.com, January 28, 2009, accessed February 10, 2022, [https://sjsuspartans.com/news/2009/1/28/Billy\\_Wilson\\_1927\\_2009.aspx](https://sjsuspartans.com/news/2009/1/28/Billy_Wilson_1927_2009.aspx).

2 0 "Billy Wilson," SJSUSpartans.com, January 28, 2009, accessed February 10, 2022, [https://sjsuspartans.com/news/2009/1/28/Billy\\_Wilson\\_1927\\_2009.aspx](https://sjsuspartans.com/news/2009/1/28/Billy_Wilson_1927_2009.aspx).

2 1 "Billy Wilson," SJSUSpartans.com, January 28, 2009, accessed February 10, 2022, [https://sjsuspartans.com/news/2009/1/28/Billy\\_Wilson\\_1927\\_2009.aspx](https://sjsuspartans.com/news/2009/1/28/Billy_Wilson_1927_2009.aspx).



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was the difference? Wilson wanted to succeed and worked extremely hard. One of his competitors, Don Shula, who played defensive back during the 1950s, routinely matched up against Wilson. Shula stated, “He's one of the few players of another era that would excel today.”<sup>23</sup>

One of Wilson's iconic catches occurred against Shula, when he leapt for a pass beating three defenders, then racing downfield for a touchdown. His best season was in 1957 when he earned Pro Bowl honors, was named first-team all-pro, and finished fifth in the MVP race.<sup>24</sup> His average of 68.8 yards receiving per game was tops in the league.

Wilson retired following the 1960 season, when he saw action in just four games.<sup>25</sup> At the time of his retirement, he was the third player to amass over 400 career receptions, to place him second all-time.<sup>26</sup> Wilson spent nearly three decades with the 49ers organization following retirement.

He was inducted into the Bay Area Sports Hall of Fame in 2000, and is a member of the San Jose State Sports Hall of Fame.<sup>27</sup> He was also elected to the PFRA's Hall of Very Good in 2008.

Wilson tragically passed away on January 27, 2009 after a battle with bone cancer. He was survived by his wife, Shirley, two sons Wynn and Greg, daughter Holly, and seven grandchildren.<sup>28</sup>

End Notes:

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- 2 2 “Billy Wilson,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WilsBi00.htm>.
  - 2 3 Fitzgerald, Tom. “Ex-49ers receiver Billy Wilson dies at 81,” Sfgate.com, January 28, 2009, <https://www.sfgate.com/sports/article/Ex-49ers-receiver-Billy-Wilson-dies-at-81-3253263.php>.
  - 2 4 “Billy Wilson,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WilsBi00.htm>.
  - 2 5 “Billy Wilson,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WilsBi00.htm>.
  - 2 6 “NFL Career Receptions Leaders Through 1960,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 14, 2022, [https://www.pro-football-reference.com/leaders/rec\\_career\\_1960.htm](https://www.pro-football-reference.com/leaders/rec_career_1960.htm).
  - 2 7 “Billy Wilson,” SJSUSpartans.com, January 28, 2009, accessed February 10, 2022, [https://sjsuspartans.com/news/2009/1/28/Billy\\_Wilson\\_1927\\_2009.aspx](https://sjsuspartans.com/news/2009/1/28/Billy_Wilson_1927_2009.aspx).
  - 2 8 Fitzgerald, Tom. “Ex-49ers receiver Billy Wilson dies at 81,” Sfgate.com, January 28, 2009, <https://www.sfgate.com/sports/article/Ex-49ers-receiver-Billy-Wilson-dies-at-81-3253263.php>.