



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

Craig Wolfley

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Craig Wolfley was a stalwart on the offensive line for 12 seasons with the Pittsburgh Steelers and Minnesota Vikings. Born Craig Alan Wolfley on May 19, 1958, in Buffalo, New York, he was a multi-sport athlete at Orchard Park High School.¹ He continued athletics at in-state Syracuse University, where he was a highly recruited football player. Wolfley played alongside several coaches and players who later would go on to the NFL in his years there from 1976 to 1979. Some included future professional football Hall of Fame wide receiver Art Monk, three-time Super Bowl winner and former head coach Tom Coughlin, kicker Gary Anderson, and former Miami Dolphins head coach Nick Saban.² At the time, Syracuse fell on hard times after the legendary Ben Schwartzwalder retired as head coach in 1973. Former Michigan assistant coach Frank Maloney was hired to replace him but failed to replicate Schwartzwalder's success.³

Wolfley's Orangemen never won more than seven games in a season and reached only one bowl game. His senior season in 1979, Syracuse vanquished the McNeese State Cowboys, 31-7, in the Independence Bowl. It was the school's first bowl appearance since the 1966 Gator Bowl.⁴ In 1978 and 1979, Wolfley earned third-team All-American honors as selected by the Associated Press, and later in 2002 he was named to the university's All-Century Team. Wolfley joined former teammates Anderson, linebacker James Collins, Monk, and running back Joseph Morris on the team.⁵

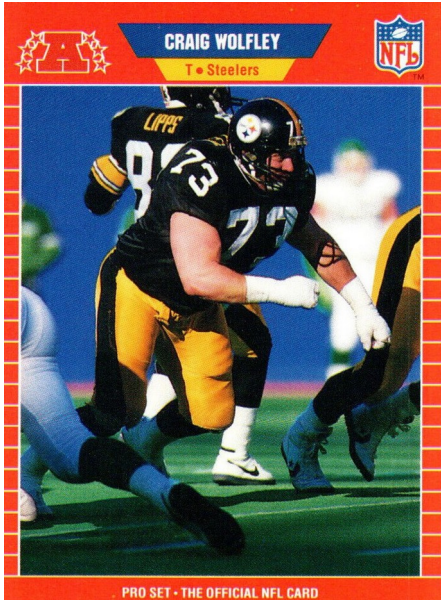
1 "Craig Wolfley," buffalosportshallfame.com, accessed August 5, 2023, [Craig Wolfley – Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame \(buffalosportshallfame.com\)](https://buffalosportshallfame.com).

2 "Syracuse University Football All-Century Team Named," cuse.com, October 28, 2002, accessed August 5, 2023, [Syracuse University Football All-Century Team Named - Syracuse University Athletics](https://cuse.com).

3 Mink, Nate. "Former Syracuse football coach Frank Maloney dies at 79," syracuse.com, March 6, 2023, [Former Syracuse football coach Frank Maloney dies at 79 – syracuse.com](https://syracuse.com).

4 Mink, Nate. "Former Syracuse football coach Frank Maloney dies at 79," syracuse.com, March 6, 2023, [Former Syracuse football coach Frank Maloney dies at 79 – syracuse.com](https://syracuse.com).

5 "Syracuse University Football All-Century Team Named," cuse.com, October 28, 2002, accessed August 5, 2023, [Syracuse University Football All-Century Team Named - Syracuse University Athletics](https://cuse.com).



Wolfley went on to the professional ranks when he was drafted in the fifth round of the 1980 NFL Draft by the Steelers.⁶ Pittsburgh was coming off back-to-back Super Bowl victories and had won four in six years during the 1970s. Head coach Chuck Noll was already legendary and Wolfley relished the opportunity he had to play for him. One of his fondest memories occurred prior to the Steelers drafting him. Wolfley recalls, “When I was a senior at Syracuse, Chuck flew up and he worked me out. We are doing pass rushes and he is teaching me the punch, and I’ve never seen a punch like that in my life, the extension of the hands and everything else. So, he is telling me, ‘When I rush and I throw a swim, arm over or arm under, punch me in the chest.’ So, we do this a few times, and I can see that he is getting a little chagrined. He knows I’m not getting it, I’m not really punching him. He said, ‘I really want you to punch me.’ The next pass rush he comes and throws his arm over and I just drill him and [his fist] ricochets off his arms and I punch him right in the mouth. He’s bleeding from the mouth, and I’m standing there going, ‘OK, this is probably over. He’ll never draft me. I just bloodied his lip.’ And I could see that little flash of anger in his eyes and that bulldog look that I’d come to know in the future years. Then he just kind of slowed up and started to laugh and said, ‘Now that’s a punch.’”⁷

Wolfley not only got it done on the field by making 102 starts in 129 games wearing a Steelers uniform, he also was best known for his devotion as a teammate. His relationship

6 “Craig Wolfley,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 5, 2023, [Craig Wolfley Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

7 Brown, Scott. “Remembering Chuck Noll: Their words,” ESPN.com, June 15, 2014, [Remembering Chuck Noll: Their words - ESPN - Pittsburgh Steelers Blog- ESPN](#).



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

on-and-off the field with fellow offensive lineman Tunch Ilkin, who was also drafted by the club in the 1980 draft, was described by many as extremely close knit.⁸ Scott Brown of *Steelers Depot* wrote about their relationship, “You can't think of one without the other, the peanut butter and jelly of the Steelers.”⁹ Bill Hillgrove, who watched their entire careers as the radio voice of the team described the relationship, “It's beyond friendship. I don't think anyone in the history of the league has been in that close of a proximity for such a sustained period of time as they have. We're talking 41 years. It's a brotherhood, and it's probably something deeper than that. I can't explain it.”¹⁰ Off the field, Ilkin was there for Wolfley when Craig's first wife left him in the early 1990s. Wolfley recalled, “He was there for me the day that it happened. He was there doing the things that a brother does. He was telling me, 'Be careful about what you are about to do,' because I was very angry. He constantly was calling in on me, making sure I didn't do anything stupid.”¹¹ In 2020, Ilkin was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). Upon learning of the news, it is said that Wolfley cried for nearly a week straight. Ilkin's wife, Karen, said, “Wolf comes over, sometimes a couple times per week, depending on the schedule. He truly is a brother. They have been together since 1980 and they have been through everything men possibly could go through. There's never a time when they aren't there for each other. This time is no exception. This has been extremely hard on Wolf.”¹² Wolfley said, “Tunch is my brother. God put us together 41 years ago. My mother says she has four boys and my sisters call him brother. He battles each and every day. Tunch is a never give up, never quit, kind of guy.”¹³ Sadly enough, Ilkin passed away in September 2021. No question one of the saddest days Wolfley lived, he responded, “He's one of the greatest men I've ever been privileged to lock arms with.”¹⁴

-
- 8 Haring, Bruce. “Tunch Ilkin Dies: Pro Bowl Tackle And Broadcaster With Pittsburgh Steelers Was 63,” Yahoo.com, September 4, 2021, [Tunch Ilkin Dies: Pro Bowl Tackle And Broadcaster With Pittsburgh Steelers Was 63 \(yahoo.com\)](#).
 - 9 Brown, Scott. “Training Camp Tales: Joe Greene Performs His Rendition of Oklahoma! On Craig Wolfley,” *SteelersDepot.com*, July 22, 2023, [Training Camp Tales: Joe Greene Performs His Rendition Of Oklahoma! On Craig Wolfley - Steelers Depot](#).
 - 10 Reed, Tom. “Wolfley adjusts to new radio role with watchful eye over ailing friend Ilkin,” *DKPittsburgh.com*, September 2, 2021, [Wolfley adjusts to new radio role while keeping eye over ailing friend Ilkin \(dkpittsburghsports.com\)](#).
 - 11 Harrop, Joanne Klimovich. “Tunch & Wolf' walk raises money for Light of Life,” *Triblive.com*, June 12, 2021, [Tunch & Wolf' walk raises money for Light of Life | TribLIVE.com](#).
 - 12 Reed, Tom. “Wolfley adjusts to new radio role with watchful eye over ailing friend Ilkin,” *DKPittsburgh.com*, September 2, 2021, [Wolfley adjusts to new radio role while keeping eye over ailing friend Ilkin \(dkpittsburghsports.com\)](#).
 - 13 Harrop, Joanne Klimovich. “Tunch & Wolf' walk raises money for Light of Life,” *Triblive.com*, June 12, 2021, [Tunch & Wolf' walk raises money for Light of Life | TribLIVE.com](#).
 - 14 Haring, Bruce. “Tunch Ilkin Dies: Pro Bowl Tackle And Broadcaster With Pittsburgh Steelers Was 63,” Yahoo.com, September 4, 2021, [Tunch Ilkin Dies: Pro Bowl Tackle And Broadcaster With Pittsburgh Steelers Was 63 \(yahoo.com\)](#).



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

Ilkin rubbed off on Wolfley in more ways than one. Decades ago, the two worked together to assist Pittsburgh's Light of Life Rescue Mission that serves to provide food and shelter to the homeless. Executive director Doug Smith expressed his gratitude saying, "We can't even put into words how grateful we are as an organization for the two of them. The challenge in today's world is how many players actually stick around a city for 39 years. I think what is special is, and Tunch always shares the story, is that he walked into Light of Life as a player. ... I can't tell you how many donors or volunteers who I have talked to and I asked them how they got involved or hear about us, and they say Tunch and Wolf. They have impacted the city, used their platform, led bible study. They have done it all. We are extremely grateful."¹⁵ Volunteering for Light of Life was not just any typical effort according to Wolfley, "There were plenty of parties and galas with fancy dinners I thought we could volunteer at, but Tunch insisted I join him at Light of Life. I will never forget the moment I walked in and saw a mother and father and two young children. Seeing them broke my heart. It just ripped me apart."¹⁶

Back on the gridiron, the Steelers took a step back during the 1980s from their league dominance in the decade prior. In 1980, the team missed the playoffs for the first time since 1971.¹⁷ Many of their stars from the Super Bowl runs had aged including quarterback Terry Bradshaw and defensive studs Joe Greene and Jack Ham. Pittsburgh missed the playoffs again in 1981, despite an 8-5 record heading down the stretch; however, they lost their final three games by a combined 11 points to miss the postseason for consecutive years.¹⁸ In the meantime, Wolfley stepped into the starting left guard role, beginning in 1981, a role he would not relinquish for the next seven seasons. The Steelers rebounded to make the playoffs in the strike-shortened 1982 season but fell to the San Diego Chargers in the postseason. Pittsburgh then won consecutive AFC Central Division titles in 1983 and 1984 with 10-6 and 9-7 records, respectively, but fell to the rival Los Angeles Raiders, and the Dan Marino led Miami Dolphins in the AFC Championship Game.¹⁹

The 1984 season was viewed by many as a transition year for Pittsburgh. With the retirement of Terry Bradshaw, Pittsburgh had a new permanent starting quarterback

1 5 Harrop, Joanne Klimovich. "Tunch & Wolf' walk raises money for Light of Life," Triblive.com, June 12, 2021, [Tunch & Wolf' walk raises money for Light of Life | TribLIVE.com](https://www.triblive.com/story/news/local/2021/06/12/tunch-wolf-walk-raises-money-for-light-of-life-triblive-com/).

1 6 Harrop, Joanne Klimovich. "Tunch & Wolf' walk raises money for Light of Life," Triblive.com, June 12, 2021, [Tunch & Wolf' walk raises money for Light of Life | TribLIVE.com](https://www.triblive.com/story/news/local/2021/06/12/tunch-wolf-walk-raises-money-for-light-of-life-triblive-com/).

1 7 "Pittsburgh Steelers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 5, 2023, [Pittsburgh Steelers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/teams/steelers/).

1 8 "1981 Pittsburgh Steelers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 5, 2023, [1981 Pittsburgh Steelers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/teams/steelers/1981-rosters/).

1 9 "Pittsburgh Steelers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 5, 2023, [Pittsburgh Steelers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/teams/steelers/).



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

under center for the first time since 1969. Mark Malone and David Woodley shared the starting role for the next two seasons. Running back Franco Harris also left due to a contract dispute, joining the Seattle Seahawks. Wolfley played in nine of 16 contests in both 1984 and 1986 due to injury.²⁰ He started 13 games in 1985 and made 12 starts in 1987, followed by starting all 16 contests in 1988. By 1989 he lost the starting left tackle role to the younger John Jackson, who was in just his second year. Following the 1990 season, Wolfley became an unrestricted free agent, and he signed with the Minnesota Vikings, where he finished his career.²¹ He started just two games, playing in eight on Jerry Burns' 6-10 club. Minnesota waived him following the season, then re-signed him for 1991. Wolfley appeared in all 16 games, then retired following the season. He made just the two starts in 24 appearances for Minnesota.²²

Outside of football, Wolfley immersed himself in a variety of interests. He trained for the World's Strongest Man competition, placing fifth in 1981. He was also a black belt in Ju Jitsu and forayed into boxing as well as sumo wrestling.²³ He boxed Eric Esch, better known as “Butterbean” in a four-round defeat. Wolfley also participated in the first ever sumo wrestling competition in North America. For nearly two decades, Wolfley worked as a sideline reporter for the Steelers, prior to moving into the broadcast booth in 2021.²⁴ He replaced Ilkin, saying, “This is an incredible honor knowing the people who proceeded me in this seat and a lineage I hope I do justice to. I'm looking forward to working with an incredible team on Steelers broadcasts.”²⁵

2 0 “Craig Wolfley,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 5, 2023, [Craig Wolfley Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 1 “Craig Wolfley,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 5, 2023, [Craig Wolfley Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 2 “Craig Wolfley,” ProSportsTransactions.com, accessed August 5, 2023, [Football Transactions Search Results \(prosportstransactions.com\)](#).

2 3 “Craig Wolfley,” Buffalosportshalloffame.com, accessed August 5, 2023, [Craig Wolfley – Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame \(buffalosportshallfame.com\)](#).

2 4 “Craig Wolfley,” Buffalosportshalloffame.com, accessed August 5, 2023, [Craig Wolfley – Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame \(buffalosportshallfame.com\)](#).

2 5 Bryan, Dave. “Craig Wolfley To Replace Tunch Ilkin As Steelers' Radio Color Analyst; Max Starks Added To Broadcast Team,” SteelersDepot.com, August 3, 2021, [Craig Wolfley To Replace Tunch Ilkin As Steelers' Radio Color Analyst; Max Starks Added To Broadcast Team - Steelers Depot](#).