

Willie Davis:

Speed, Agility, and Size

By Don Smith
for The Pro Football Hall of Fame

Willie Davis was blessed with the three attributes – speed, agility and size – that Vince Lombardi considered most important for a successful football lineman. "Give a man any two of those dimensions and he'll do OK," the Green Bay Packers' coaching legend summarized. "Give him all three and he'll be a great football player."

Davis, a dynamic 6-3, 245 pound player, also had the intangible assets -- dedication, intelligence, leadership – that enabled him to climb a cut above almost everyone else. In his 10 seasons with the powerful Green Bay elevens of the 1960s, he became widely recognized as a superior defensive end, one of the very best ever to play in the National Football League.

By the nature of their assignments, linemen, both offensive and defensive, aren't expected to capture many headlines.

Davis, with his big-play performances year after year, was an obvious exception to this rule. The Grambling graduate was an all-NFL selection five times in a six-year span from 1962 through 1967. He played in six NFL championship games and the first two Super Bowls. He was a Pro Bowl choice five years in a row. He played 12 seasons – the first two with the 1958 and 1959 Cleveland Browns – and didn't miss even one of 162 games in that period. At the time of his retirement in 1969, Willie had recovered 21 opponents' fumbles, just one shy of the all-time record.

Throughout his Green Bay tenure, Davis basked in the universal respect and admiration of his contemporaries, friend and foe alike. "Willie is the quickest defensive end in the business," Chicago Bears quarterback Bill Wade insisted. "He's not the strongest or the biggest but he's always in there, always managing to get at least his arm in the way."

Y.A. Tittle of the New York Giants agreed: "Davis is a great pass rusher. He's strong and aggressive. He's always towering over you, coming, coming, all the time!"

"He is a wonderful example of dedication, concentration and application and what it can do for an individual," Phil Bengston, who replaced Lombardi as the Green Bay coach in 1968, said. "He is a fine example for our younger players and an excellent team leader. He has developed himself into one of the truly outstanding players in this league."

Off the field, Willie was also in the limelight as a gregarious, affable, cooperative individual. A solid citizen in every way, Davis was an early winner of the prestigious Justice Byron (Whizzer) White award, given by NFL Players Association in recognition of civic contributions. Yet, he was not afraid to speak up for what he felt was right, if the occasion demanded.

In 1961, when Green Bay won its first NFL title since 1944, Willie was one of the few Packers ignored on the various all-pro listings. He openly expressed his displeasure following an exceptional defensive performance in Green Bay's 37-0 win over the New York Giants in the championship game. Half a year later, Willie still stressed the point. "I still feel that I deserved all-league recognition," he repeated. "I want to be recognized as the best and that will always be in my thinking."

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In spite of Willie's concerns about a personal honor in this instance, it would be incorrect to picture him as anything short of a perfect team player who still looks on the Packers group success with a greater zest than any personal acclaim, including his Pro Football Hall of Fame selection.

"Nothing will surpass the high points of the first championship, the first Super Bowl and things like that," Davis relates. "And the leadership role I was fortunate to be able to play surely gave me great pleasure."

He has particularly strong feelings about the first Super Bowl game which saw the Packers defeat the Kansas City Chiefs, 35-10. "We were really keyed up for the Chiefs," Willie remembers. "By the time we took the field, we weren't playing just for the Packers but for the entire NFL and a great tradition. If there was ever a game we felt we simply had to win, this was it!"

Willie readily admits that football completely turned around his entire life. Born in Lisbon, La., on July 24, 1934, Willie was one of three children whose mother, Nodie, shouldered the entire responsibility of raising. Had not Willie ignored his mother's fervent plea that he not play, football probably wouldn't have been in the picture, either.

"My mother was afraid I would get hurt so I played my first two high school games without her knowing I was on the varsity," he remembers.

"The only reason she found out was that our third game was on the road and there was no way I could stay out that late without her knowing what was going on."

Willie grew up in Texarkana, Ark., where he starred in football, basketball and baseball at Booker T. Washington High School. His play earned him a scholarship to Grambling where he was a two-year team captain and an NAIA all-America.

An all-over-the-field performer in Grambling's 28-21 upset of Florida A&M at the end of his senior season, helped pave the way for Willie's pro career. Davis made 19 tackles and assisted on 16 others as a horde of pro scouts, on hand to view some of Florida A&M's more heralded stars, quickly took note.

Willie was a 17th-round draft pick of the 1956 Browns but an Army call cut short his first Cleveland training camp. He did play service football, winning all-Army and all-service acclaim. After his return to the 1958 Browns, Willie was shifted from position to position on both offense and defense for a couple of years. Coach Paul Brown, however, had ticketed him for a regular offensive tackle job in 1960. But in mid-spring, he was traded to Green Bay for an offensive end, A. D. Williams. Since Brown had often used the threat of a trade to Green Bay, then considered the Siberia of pro sports, to spur on his players, Willie not only was upset but briefly considered quitting.

Once Davis arrived in Green Bay, Lombardi quickly assured him that he had engineered the trade because he needed a top-flight defensive end and he thought Davis could fill the bill. "Willie, we have seen some films of you where your reactions are just incredible," Vince explained. "We feel with your quickness you can be a great pass rusher."

Lombardi not only stamped himself as a great prophet but as a great trader, as well. While Davis accepted the challenge and became an outstanding asset to the Packers for a full decade, Williams caught only one pass in Cleveland and finished his short career the next year in Minnesota.

The trade from Cleveland to Green Bay not only proved to be the turning point of Davis' playing career but, in a greater sense, it became a pivotal point in his entire life. "I had been working my way up in Cleveland and suddenly I was gone," Willie remembers. "I realized how frustrating it would be when I couldn't play football and would have to face the world with a reduced salary and no talents."

So he went to work to provide himself with those talents he would need outside the football world. An industrial arts major at Grambling, Willie embarked on his master's degree in business at the University of Chicago. When he received that degree in 1968, he was bombarded with dozens of job offers, including several NFL assistant coaching jobs. A few years later, he was a leading candidate for the Harvard head coaching job.

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Willie, however, felt it was more important for other black kids to "remember me as a player who moved on to success in business." He entered the Schlitz Brewing Co. management training program two years before his football retirement and took over the Los Angeles distributorship in 1970. His business interests have expanded greatly and he has attained a lofty business world status based on a solid foundation that Willie himself has been structuring for a long time.

"I think back on Coach Lombardi's comments about 'earned success,'" Davis said when he heard of his Pro Football Hall of Fame election in 1981. "I feel this culminates something for me like 'Hey, you did your job well.' But it is an honor that I also feel I earned."

No one could disagree that whatever success Willie Davis attained on or off the field – he earned it!

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DAVIS, WILLIE

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b: 07/24/34, Lisbon. LA

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