

WILLIE WOOD

By Don Smith

Willie Wood thought pro football had passed him by when, following the completion of his three-year tenure at the University of Southern California in 1960, he was overlooked in the annual draft by every team in the National Football League and the emerging American Football League.

Wood finally signed as a free agent with the Green Bay Packers. There he developed into a premier free safety during a 12-year career that saw him excel on the most dominant pro football powerhouse of the 1960s. As one after another of his illustrious teammates from the Packers' dynasty years were elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Wood once again feared he had been left out.

As was the case, almost three decades earlier, Wood was needlessly concerned for, in January 1989, he was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, the 11th Packer of the 1960s to be so honored.

Wood's lifetime statistics are not the kind one would normally associate with a player who had been basically unwanted just a dozen years earlier. He played in all 166 regular-season games and started every contest his last 11 seasons. Wood intercepted 48 passes which he returned for 699 yards and two touchdowns. He returned 187 punts for 1391 yards and two touchdowns. He even served as a kickoff man for a period early in his career.

The 5-10, 190-pounder with good but not great speed and superb desire and tenacity was named all-NFL seven times in an eight-year period from 1964 to 1971. He played in eight Pro Bowls with only one miss in the years between 1962 and 1970. Wood won the NFL individual punt return title in 1961 and the interception championship with nine in 1962.

Most likely, pro football in fact would have passed Willie by had it not been for the help of a trusted coach-counselor- friend from his boyhood days in Washington, D.C., where he was born on December 23, 1936.

Wood's parents -- John was a painter, Amanda a post office worker -- divorced when he was a child and Willie spent most of his formative years with his grandparents. Much of his character was molded in Metropolitan Police Boys Club No. 2 and at the playground across the street from his house.

Willie excelled in baseball and football at Armstrong High School in Washington. Although he had numerous offers from the collegiate ranks, Wood wanted to attend school in California. So his Boys Club coach, Bill Butler, convinced USC coach Don Clark that Willie was a legitimate prospect. After a year of honing up on his studies and earning JC all-America honors at Coalinga Junior College in California, Wood transferred to USC, where he played as a quarterback and defensive back for the next three seasons.

While some suggest that the fact no black quarterback had excelled in the NFL up to that time played a major role in the snubbing of Wood in the college draft, there were other extenuating circumstances. Willie weighed only 160 pounds at USC and he struggled through the last two seasons playing "hurt" with a severe collar bone injury.

Once again, Wood's Boys Club coach was there to help. Butler wrote to the Packers, New York Giants, Cleveland Browns and Los Angeles Rams to seek a tryout for his friend. Only Green Bay responded. Vince Lombardi, starting his second year as the Packers' coach, offered Willie a \$6,500 contract with the understanding he would be trying out as a defensive back.

"We had 24 defensive backs in camp that first year," Wood remembers. "We knew the Packers would keep only six. There was a lot of anxiety, a lot of sleepless nights. I didn't know much about playing defense but I do know that my experience as a quarterback eventually helped me as a safety because I could understand what the quarterback was thinking."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 11, No. 2 (1989)

Lombardi was particularly impressed with Wood's leaping ability. In spite of his small stature, Willie could "dunk" the football over the crossbar of the goal posts, soaring so high he could touch his wrist on the bar. He showed he could and would tackle anyone, regardless of size, and he was clearly willing to play with pain, if necessary. Once he hurt his shoulder so badly he almost had tears in his eyes. When a teammate asked if he wanted to go to the sideline, he responded with determination: "No. I'm all right. I've got another shoulder."

Wood made the 1960 squad but, since the Packers were set in their defensive backfield with four tested veterans, he had to settle for special team duty on the punt-return squad. When regular Jess Whittenton was injured in November, Wood got his first chance to start against Baltimore. It was a bad experience. The Colt's passing ace, Johnny Unitas, picked on Wood right away and rifled two touchdown passes to the superstar receiver, Raymond Berry.

"I was scared just guarding Berry," Wood admitted. "I thought my pro career was at an end. I figured my mistakes cost us the game."

But both Norb Hecker, the Packers' defensive backfield coach, and Whittenton gave Willie a vote of confidence. "Those things happen," Hecker said. "Forget it."

The next summer, the Packers staff decided to move Emlen Tunnell, the 14-year veteran who had spent most of his stellar career with the New York Giants, into a backup role. Wood was tapped to replace him in the regular foursome as the right safety, or roving "centerfielder," as the Packers called it. He was assigned to fill the "interception zone," the area where the NFL's righthanded quarterbacks normally threw.

"Willie has good hands and great reactions," Hecker explained. "He can play a man loose, which tempts the quarterback to throw the ball. But once the ball is in the air, Willie reacts quickly and he goes after the ball. And he will hit as hard as anyone on our team."

In his first year as a regular, Wood intercepted five passes, one of them against Unitas, who had devastated him a year earlier. He also returned two punts for touchdowns, one a 72-yarder in a 42-7 victory over Baltimore and the other a 39-yard jaunt against San Francisco.

Throughout his career, Wood had the knack of making the big plays at the most crucial times. In Green Bay's 16-7 win over the New York Giants in the 1962 NFL championship game, he made a touchdown-saving tackle on a kickoff return. In 1964, when Green Bay defeated the Chicago Bears, 17-3, Wood set up every Packer point on an interception return and punt returns of 64 and 42 yards. His most famous play came in Super Bowl I, when his third-quarter interception and 50-yard return turned a close 14-10 game into a 35-10 rout of the Kansas City Chiefs.

Still, no one play or a single game, in Wood's mind, ranks as his most thrilling experience in pro football. Just earning a pro football job with the Packers in 1960 was in itself his biggest thrill. "My first NFL experience came in a preseason game against Bobby Layne and the Pittsburgh Steelers," he recalls. "I was able to intercept one of Layne's passes and that gave me a little confidence and the realization I might have a chance to stick around."

Once he made the team, Willie adopted a simple credo: "The harder they come, the harder they fall."

"Down inside, I'm a peaceful man. I like people. It may be a natural reaction for a big guy to think he can run over a smaller guy. But I can't recall one incident when that happened to me," Wood said. "I've always enjoyed tackling. You've got to accept the punishment. That's the name of the game."

Almost every player will cite one or more opponents who were particularly tough for him to handle. In Wood's case, that distinction went to Mike Ditka, who was a rookie tight end with the Chicago Bears in 1961. "Mike had a big year," Willie said. "He gave me the most trouble. He had so much ability and he became my biggest challenge."

Wood made his won impression on Ditka, who later admitted that the Packers' safety hit him as hard as any of his much bigger opponents.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 11, No. 2 (1989)

Originally, the Packers ticketed Wood for defense because they thought he was too small for offense. Willie had no regrets that his football career turned that way: "Although I get a chance to run on punt returns, I have no desire to run as a halfback. When you join a pro club, the more things you can do for your team the better your chances are for sticking around. Interceptions and punt returns both give me a thrill. We call them big plays which pep up the team."

Still, for all his versatility, it was his sterling defensive play over a long period of time that placed Wood in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

"Wood sets the style for the Packer type of defense," the Colts' Berry insisted. "Willie gives them the ability to call one defense and get many interpretations of it. He smells a play and takes off, strictly on his own, to break up a play he should never even have been near."

Lombardi put it another way: "He is the most natural defensive back we have."

The Packers dynasty ended after Super Bowl II, which also proved to be Lombardi's final game as the Green Bay coach. Under new coach Phil Bengston, the Packers slipped to third place in their division the next three seasons. Wood, however, continued to excel. After defensive end Willie Davis retired in 1969, Willie Wood took over as defensive captain.

But even though he had seven interceptions and was named all-NFC in 1970, Wood knew his grades on the film reviews were slipping and he felt it was time to retire. Bengston, who will serve as Willie's presenter at his August 5 enshrinement, thought otherwise and convinced Wood that he should play at least one more season. Wood was named to one all-NFC team again in 1971 but he retired after the season to accept an assistant coaching job with the San Diego Chargers.

In 1975, he became the head coach of the Philadelphia Bell of the ill-fated World Football League. Later, he served as the head coach of the Toronto Argonauts of the Canadian Football League in 1980 and 1981. As the first black to hold a head coaching job at that level, Wood proved to be a favorite among his players. Always hard-working and fair-minded, he demanded many of the traits he exhibited so consistently as a player -- determination, courage, an overwhelming desire to win. All were attributes firmly entrenched in Wood's mind by Lombardi. "I often think of how lucky I was to play for him," said Wood, who today operates his own mechanical construction company in his home town. "Those of us who did had a distinct edge. He taught life like he taught football, basic stuff -- loyalty, integrity, dedication, plus, of course, blocking and tackling." Wood also marveled at the outstanding job Lombardi did in finding the right people to fit into his system. "He had to make the choice between Bart Starr and Lamar McHan when he took over the team," Wood noted. "He picked Starr and made him into a winner. He found Paul Hornung and Jim Taylor on the bench and built a backfield around them."

Willie could have added his own name to the list of right people fitting into the Vince Lombardi system. In his case, however, there was a significant difference --it was Willie Wood who found the Packers and forced Lombardi to fit him into the Green Bay system!

WILLIAM VERNAL (Willie) WOOD

Hgt: 5-10 Wgt: 190

School: USC

Born: December 23, 1936, Washington, DC

INTERCEPTIONS			PUNT RETURNS			YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	IN	YDS	AVG	TD			
NO	YDS	AVG TD	----	-----	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---			
		1960	Green Bay N	12	-	-	-	16	106	6.6	0					
		1961	Green Bay N	14	5	52	10.4	0	14	225	*16.1	2				
		1962	Green Bay N	14	*9	132	14.7	0	23	273	11.9	0	1963 Green			
		Bay N	14	5	67	13.4	0	19	169	8.9	0	1964 Green	Bay N			
		73	24.3	1	19	252	13.3	0	1965 Green	Bay N	14	6	65	10.8	0	13
		38	2.9	0	1966 Green	Bay N	14	3	38	12.7	1	22	82	3.7	0	
		1967 Green	Bay N	14	4	60	15.0	0	12	3	0.3	0	1968 Green	Bay		
		N	14	2	54	27.0	0	26	126	4.8	0	1969 Green	Bay N	14	3	40
		13.3	0	8	38	4.8	0	1970 Green	Bay N	14	7	110	15.7	0	11	
		58	5.3	0												
		1971 Green	Bay N	14	1	8	8.0	0	4	21	5.3	0				

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 11, No. 2 (1989)

166 48 699 14.6 2 187 1391 7.4 2 12 years