

Mini-Bios for Four Hidden Careers

By Bob Gill

Short profiles of four players who spent a significant part of their careers outside the NFL. Some of them are virtually unknown, but all of them could play football – and they did.

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BOB DAVIS (20 Grand)
HB-QB-E
6-0, 180
Kentucky

In 1937, as a senior at Kentucky, Bob Davis led the nation in scoring. Presumably he acquired his nickname, “20 Grand,” at this time in recognition of his status as a “money man.” It sure didn’t reflect his financial status – Davis was passed over in the NFL draft and signed with the Cleveland Rams as a free agent.

He made a good start with the Rams, averaging an excellent 4.5 yards per carry as a part-time player until he was hurt in midseason, the victim of a particularly enthusiastic gang tackle. There was no union in those days to protect an injured player’s rights; and when doctors said Davis would be out for a few weeks, the Rams released him.

Bouncing back rather quickly, Davis caught on with the Cincinnati Bengals, an excellent independent team that went unbeaten that year in three games with NFL clubs. Then, in the offseason, he joined the Columbus Bullies, a new team that was to enter the American Football League. The Bullies led the league most of 1939 before the Los Angeles Bulldogs overtook them in December. But that didn’t detract from Davis’ performance. He led the league with 10 touchdown passes and ranked among the leading rushers too. If the league had named an all-star team, he would have been a unanimous choice.

Columbus moved to a new league in 1940, though it was also called the AFL. The team had a shortage of ends, so Davis, a versatile athlete and one of the fastest players in pro football, played that position for about half the season as the Bullies rolled to the championship. But he still served as backfield coach and also made the second all-league team at quarterback. His season was highlighted by a 94-yard touchdown run he made during one stint in the backfield.

The Bullies repeated in 1941, with Davis back in his accustomed backfield post, where he led the league in rushing TDs and scoring and earned a first-team all-star spot.

World War II closed the AFL in 1942, and Davis returned to the NFL with the Philadelphia Eagles. He turned in a fine season with a lousy team. Maybe the team’s showing discouraged him, because he doesn’t seem to have played anywhere in 1943. But in 1944 he reappeared with the Boston Yanks and did well again, leading the league in punt return yardage and catching 19 passes while continuing his effective ball-carrying.

In 1945 and ‘46 Davis became more of a defensive specialist, finishing second in the NFL in interceptions each season (six in 1945, seven in ‘46). But he still contributed on offense, as in 1945 when he threw three touchdown passes in only ten attempts.

All things considered, he had a pretty good NFL career. But he spent three seasons from his prime, 1939-41, in the two AFLs, where records weren’t kept and outstanding players were easily forgotten.

Bob Davis doesn’t deserve to be.

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			Att	Yds	Avg	TD	XP-A	Pts	TDP
1938	Cle	NFL	22	100	4.5	0	0-1	0	0
	Cin	(ind.)	-	-	-	1	-	6	0
1939	Col	AFL	-	-	-	5	-	30	10
1940	Col	AFL	-	-	-	1	-	12	1
1941	Col	AFL	-	-	-	7	2-2	50	3
1942	Phi	NFL	43	207	4.8	2	-	18	0
1944	Bos	NFL	95	363	3.8	1	-	6	1
1945	Bos	NFL	29	91	3.1	0	-	0	3
1946	Bos	NFL	41	143	3.5	0	-	6	0

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NELSON PETERSON
HB
5-8, 180
West Virginia Wesleyan

Nelson Peterson was a teammate of Bob Davis on those strong Columbus teams of 1939-41, and some people thought he was the Bullies' *real* star. A "scatback" in the mold of the Bears' Bob Swisher and the Redskins' Dick Todd, he signed with Washington as an undrafted free agent and made his NFL debut with the 'Skins in 1937, playing in just one official game.

In 1938 Peterson joined the Cleveland Rams (along with Davis) and began to establish himself as an NFL player. A versatile kicker, receiver and runner, he was leading the team in scoring in mid-November when he inexplicably drew his release. Cleveland president Tom Lipscomb explained the move by saying Peterson was "just too light for this league" – ignoring his decent showing on the field. (By releasing Davis and Peterson, two of their better players, the Rams were setting a Cleveland precedent still followed today by the baseball Indians.)

Peterson moved on to the St. Louis Gunners of the AFL in 1939, and started off with a bang, booting a field goal for the only score in a season-opening win over Columbus. Apparently impressed, the Bullies acquired him shortly thereafter, adding another weapon to their potent attack. He finished third among the league's scorers, doing most of his damage as a receiver.

The next year it was more of the same. The Bullies won the AFL title, and Peterson led all scorers and made the league's all-star team. (There wasn't one in '39.) He came back for an encore in 1941, finishing fourth in scoring and making the all-league second team as the Bullies rolled to their second straight championship.

The advent of World War II shut down the AFL, and also ended Peterson's career. He apparently never played professionally again, but for four seasons he had been a solid pro – even if he was "just too light."

			Att	Yds	TD	Rec	Yds	TD	XP-A	FG	Pts
1937	Was	NFL	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0	0
1938	Cle	NFL	21	70	1	4	43	1	2-2	2	20
1939	Col	AFL	-	-	1	-	-	4	10-11	2	46
1940	Col	AFL	-	-	1	-	-	4	9-10	1	42
1941	Col	AFL	-	-	1	-	-	2	10-11	1	31

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ED MICHAELS (Whitey)
G
(born Mikolajewski; died Jan. 21, 1976)
5-10, 210
Villanova

Ed Michaels had a good, substantial career in the NFL: six years of regular play, all with winning teams. But he really stood out in his hidden nine-year career with minor league teams.

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Michaels was chosen by the Chicago Bears on the second round in the very first NFL draft in 1936. He quickly moved into the starting lineup along with another rookie, Danny Fortmann, arguably the greatest guard who ever played. The Bears finished 9-3. In the offseason Michaels moved to the Washington Redskins (probably in a trade for halfback Pug Rentner). He played in every game in 1937 as the 'Skins rolled to their first championship, beating his former teammates in Chicago in the title game.

In 1938 Michaels changed his address again, hooking on with the independent Wilmington Clippers. The Clippers joined the American Association in 1939; they finished tied for the Southern Division lead with the Newark Bears, but lost 13-6 in a playoff. Michaels, a tower of strength in the Wilmington line (he also doubled as line coach), was named to the AA all-star team for the first of three straight years.

The Clippers made it to the AA title game in 1940 before bowing to the Jersey City Giants. A year later they finally got over the top, earning the championship with a 21-13 verdict over the Long Island Indians. In 1942 the AA closed for the duration of the war, but the Clippers kept playing independently. Michaels again anchored the line as they went undefeated, with the only blot on their record a 21-21 tie with the Philadelphia Eagles.

The Clippers went into hibernation in 1943, and Michaels returned to the NFL with the combined Philadelphia-Pittsburgh entry. He started most of the games as the "Steagles" posted a surprising 5-4-1 record.

The Eagles went out on their own for 1944, taking Michaels with them. The result was a very strong team that finished 7-1-2, a half-game behind the New York Giants. A year later the Eagles' 7-3 mark left them a game behind the Redskins. And in 1946 they placed second again at 6-5. Michaels was a regular starter each season as Greasy Neale's dynasty took shape.

Unfortunately for Michaels, he left the team after that, thus missing out on three straight division titles. *Pro Football: The Early Years* says he was in Canada in 1947, but that's a mistake. Instead, he returned to Wilmington. The Clippers went only 2-5-1 in the AFL (the renamed AA, re-formed after the war), but that didn't prevent Michaels from earning another first-team spot on the all-star squad.

In 1948 he did go to Canada, where he joined Ottawa of the IRFU. At the season's end he found himself in his accustomed place – on the IRFU all-star team. He repeated as a 35-year-old in 1949, but failed to make the honor squad in 1950. It was the first such failure of his career in any league other than the NFL. After that he retired, probably in disgust.

But Michaels had nothing to be ashamed of. In the NFL he was never on a losing team, always a starter. And in any other league, he was always the best.

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STEVE BAGARUS
HB
6-0, 175
Notre Dame

After only a year or two at Notre Dame, Steve Bagarus left school to join the Navy. Stationed in San Diego, he caught on with the Bombers of the Pacific Coast Football League in 1941. Though his team won only one game that year, Bagarus quickly established himself as an exciting breakaway runner and receiver, missing the league scoring title by a single point.

San Diego won the PCFL title for the next three years running, and each time Bagarus was their main man. He led the league in scoring twice, in receiving touchdowns three times. In 1944 he was limited to playing only home games, but still finished second in scoring – and found time to throw four touchdown passes as well.

The PCFL didn't name an all-star team in 1942 or '43, but in 1941 and '44 it did, and Bagarus made the first team each time. If there had been an MVP award, he probably would have won it from 1942 to '44.

In those days the Washington Redskins held their training camp on the West Coast, and as a result they learned of Bagarus' exploits. After the 1943 season they signed him to a contract that was to take effect

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when he finally left the service, and in 1944 he played with the 'Skins in a few exhibition games before they headed east.

A year later Bagarus made it to Washington, where he teamed up with Sammy Baugh and established himself, as he had four years earlier in San Diego, as one of the league's most exciting performers. Besides his rushing and receiving he was an outstanding kick returner, with the result that he amassed 1,247 all-purpose yards, a very high total for that period. The Redskins won the Eastern Division title before losing that bizarre 15-14 championship game in Cleveland.

For his part in the team's success, Bagarus was named a first-team all-pro by the Associated Press, and a second-teamer by the New York *Daily News*. In 1946 he fell off a bit to "only" 1,130 all-purpose yards and made only the *Daily News* second all-pro team. The Redskins slipped to third place too, and in 1947 they let Bagarus go to Los Angeles (whether by his choice or theirs, I don't know).

But the return to the Pacific Coast wasn't a happy one: Very early in the season Bagarus suffered a badly broken leg. The doctors said he would never play again.

Bagarus didn't give up, though, and after more than a year of rehabilitation he was signed by the Redskins in November 1948. When he finally made it all the way back by playing in his first game, it attracted the notice of the wire services.

Unfortunately, that was his last hurrah. Though he was still one of the fastest players in the NFL, the leg injury had taken away his elusive broken-field running style and left him no more than an ordinary player – and an old one at that. After giving him his chance to beat the odds, the Redskins were forced to face reality, and cut him at the end of training camp in 1949.

Despite this setback, Bagarus still wasn't ready to throw in the towel. He caught on with the Wilmington Clippers of the AFL (formerly the American Association); but he lasted just four games, despite catching 12 passes, averaging 18 yards on five punt returns, and running back one kickoff 62 yards. He moved on to the Richmond Rebels in the same league, but played only sparingly in three games before drawing his final release.

Still, for two years Bagarus was among the NFL's best and most entertaining players; and it seems pretty clear that he was just as good from 1941 to '44. He made his mark on the field as a flashy runner and outstanding receiver; the broken leg took that away, but gave him a chance to demonstrate a different kind of strength.

Either way, Steve Bagarus was a winner.

			Att	Yds	Avg	TD	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD	Pts
1941	SD	PCFL	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	3	42
1942	SD	PCFL	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	3	54
1943	SD	PCFL	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	8	72
1944	SD	PCFL	-	-	-	5	-	-	-	3	54
1945	Was	NFL	39	154	3.9	1	35	517	14.8	5	36
1946	Was	NFL	53	168	3.1	0	31	438	14.1	3	18
1947	LA	NFL	3	15	5.0	0	0	0	-	0	0
1948	Was	NFL	3	6	2.0	0	15	100	6.7	1	6
1949	Wil	AFL	-	-	-	0	12	134	11.2	0	0
		Ric	AFL	-	-	-	0	-	-	0	0