

BILLY RAY BARNES: ONE GOOD PRO

By Rob Jackson

Swinging away through the fairways of one of the many links that dot the Carolina landscape, you may come across a former NFL stalwart who once helped his team to the pinnacle of gridiron success, a world championship. Billy Ray Barnes was a three time Pro Bowler, a world champion, and the second round pick of the Philadelphia Eagles in the 1957 NFL draft.

Born in 1935, Billy Ray grew up in Landis, North Carolina during the depression years. His parents divorced when he was nine years old, leaving the role of dominant male figurehead to his grandfather. "He taught me right and wrong," says Billy. "And if I did anything wrong I got a pretty good whipping. It didn't take more than one or two, then I started doing the right thing."

His father, who played Triple A baseball in Indianapolis before the war, was the early inspiration for Billy Ray's inclination towards sports. But the major influence of his life and his propensity to continually take it to the next level throughout his professional career as both a player and coach, was his high school mentor Dan Hamrich.

"Coach Hamrich was as fine a coach and disciplinarian as I ever had," he says. "And that's through college and pro football."

He was a three sport-star for four years at Landis High School, named All-State in football and baseball and captained the football and basketball teams. Upon graduation he was one of North Carolina's most sought after high school players.

Next up for Billy was the University of Wake Forest, but in a roundabout sort of way. "I had decided to quit football. Football to me was work. Back then all they did was scrimmage during the week, and I mean it was work. Baseball was my best sport, so I was going to go baseball. As a matter of fact I was already accepted into North Carolina State on a baseball scholarship. I had to take a physical and they found out I was blind. I don't know why I was so vain or whatever, but back then a lot of people didn't wear glasses. I played baseball and didn't wear my glasses.

"But I decided I didn't want to play football at NC State after I had made the decision to go football. I guess Duke was probably the number one school and Dan Hamrich called down there and they had already given all the scholarships away. But they said they would get back to us in about a day or so. Maybe somebody else would pay the freight for the first year, then they would put me on scholarship, because they had been calling for the whole year.

"Anyway, we called Wake Forest and they said come on down. And that was probably the greatest decision I ever made."

After starring for the freshman team in 1953, Billy won a starting role on the varsity for coach Tom Rogers. As a junior in 1955, he was the team leader in rushing, punt returns, kickoff returns, pass interceptions, and set a then ACC record with 31 pass receptions for 349 yards out of the backfield.

Billy Ray also played third base on the 1955 National Championship Baseball Team. He batted .319 for the season and led the conference in stolen bases with 17.

In 1956 the Demon Deacons welcomed in new head man Paul Amen who further opened up the offense and allowed Billy Ray more opportunities to exploit his natural abilities. He responded by leading the team in punting, punt returns, kickoff returns, and interceptions. And he was the second leading rusher in the nation with 1,010 yards on 168 carries for a 6.0 average and six touchdowns.

He ended his collegiate football career as Wake Forest's season record holder for rushing yards (1,010), rushing yards per game (101), total offense (1,010) and receptions (31). He was named both All-America and 1956 ACC Player Of The Year.

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Again he was the baseball team's third baseman, batting .310 his senior year and named to the ACC team.

On to Philadelphia

As Philadelphia's second pick in 1957, Billy's entrance onto the NFL scene wasn't mired with much aspiration. "You gotta kind of understand," says Billy Ray. "Pro football wasn't the biggest thing in the world back then. I never even thought about playing pro football. When I left here to go play pro football it was a way to make a living. I didn't know that much about it. The only teams that we really saw were the Redskin's games we used to have here. And to tell you the truth, I wasn't much interested in that either."

Though the Eagles had what would turn out to be a great draft that year, the offensive line, with the exceptions of Buck Lansford, Chuck Bednarik and an aging Abe Gibron was porous. And even with the retirement of Adrian Burk, it wasn't until veteran Bobby Thomason went down with an injury that rookie Sonny Jurgensen got a chance to play. But that opportunity was not to last for long.

"In 1957, we won four football games and Bobby Thomason was our starting quarterback and he got hurt. Then we had Al Dorow who we got from Washington, who came in and played a little bit. But they finally gave Sonny the opportunity to play. We won four ball games, and he won three of them that year and played very good because he was a great quarterback. But then in 1958 we got Norm Van Brocklin. And for the next three years all Sonny did was hold for extra points and sit around and learn from Dutch."

However, the two rookies, Clarence Peaks and Barnes did start in the backfield. Billy Ray would go on to lead the team in rushing attempts and yards for the next three years. And three of the next four years in rushing touchdowns.

During a 1959 game the Eagles would eventually win 28-24 over the Steelers at Franklin Field, then Commissioner Bert Bell died of a heart attack in the third quarter. Says Billy, "At the time, we didn't know anything about it until after the ball game. Bert would always come to training camp and give us a talk, and was always available. And was respected by me, and I would think by most of the people at that time. It was a deep loss."

Champs

The main reasons for the Eagles' rise to a championship in 1960 were two: the hiring of Buck Shaw as head coach, and the trade that brought Norm Van Brocklin to Philadelphia.

"You've got to respect Coach Shaw. If you saw him on the street you thought he was a banker. He was just a super individual, very knowledgeable football wise. He wasn't the old rah-rah. He told you what to do and expected you to do it. You were getting paid to do a job. Not getting paid a whole hell of a lot, but you were still getting paid.

"But Van Brocklin was the catalyst of the whole thing; there ain't no question about that. I mean if you made a mistake on the field, you sure as heck didn't want to come back to that huddle. The quarterback is like the CEO of any company. He runs the show out there, and the more confidence that he has, the more confidence he's going to instill in everybody else. And he instilled in us that nobody could beat us."

"We opened up with Cleveland with high expectations for the year, and they just beat the heck out of us. But that next week Van Brocklin regrouped us and everything just started falling in line. We won the next nine ball games and we clinched it in St. Louis. Pittsburgh beat us, but most of us didn't even play in that ball game. I think it was just Van Brocklin and the camaraderie that we had. If somebody made a mistake, somebody else would pick him up."

In the 1960 championship game, some have said that Vince Lombardi in his first postseason game -- the only one he would ever lose -- may have underestimated the Eagle defense by not going for two easy field goals in favor of running plays. But the real turning point of the game came on the ensuing kickoff after Max McGee scored to give the Packers a 13-10 lead in the fourth quarter.

Assistant coach Charlie Gauer saw a weakness, of alternating fast and slow men in the front line of the Packer return team. He quickly improvised a return left that Ted Dean took to the Green Bay 38-yard line. Lombardi himself later said, "The kick-off return gave the Eagles a big lift and we couldn't stop them."

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After a holding penalty on the Packers, Van Brocklin flipped the ball to Barnes for thirteen yards. Then Billy Ray ran for another nine. Two plays later he threw the questionable block on Bill Quinlan that sprang Ted Dean into the end zone on a five-yard left-sweep for the winning score.

"I probably had my right arm hooked around his knee, but I didn't think I was holding. Everybody else in the country that ever saw it said I was. So, as long as I didn't get called for it. Even today you can call holding on every darn offensive play. But put a word in there for my college teammate, a guy named Jerry Huth, a Wake Forest man. A right guard, he led Ted into the end zone."

In what would be Van Brocklin's last game as a player, the Philadelphia Eagles closed out the first year of one of the most colorful and innovative decades in the history of the NFL as the champions.

"We were the best," says Billy Ray. "We won the championship and that's what we were striving for the whole year and what we'd been striving for since 1957 when we first came into the league. Of course I don't have my ring, my house was broken into several years ago and my rings were stolen. But even though they stole my ring, they'll never take that championship away from us."

Moving On

After the 1960 season, some dissension spread through the team after Van Brocklin, who was scheduled to take over the head coaching position from Buck Shaw, was ousted in favor of Nick Skorich. "I think a lot of people, I know I was one, were very disappointed Dutch didn't get the job because he was promised it. That was one of the stipulations when he came back there as a quarterback. But yes, there were some people disappointed. I think if Van Brocklin got the job things may have been different. Of course that's hindsight, so you'll never know."

In 1961, the Eagles displayed the most powerful offense in the league, with Sonny Jurgensen now the starter, throwing 32 touchdown passes. But even with a very good record of 10-4, the team fell one game short of the Giants for the Eastern crown.

In 1962 Billy Ray was traded to Washington where he would once again lead his team in rushing attempts, yards, and touchdowns. With the trade that brought Bobby Mitchell to Washington, the Redskins for the first time had a black football player on their roster. "You know its almost amazing that's the way it ran in 1962," he says. "But that didn't bother me at all. Hell, one of my best friends, probably as good a friend as I ever had is Clarence Peaks. And being a Southern boy up there, a lot of people didn't understand that."

"But George Preston (Marshall), he was a different story. I had played out my option, and I went in to talk to George Preston about the salary. At that time I was in the construction business. I built service stations in Philadelphia with a friend of mine. George just told me right off, 'You ain't getting no damn raise' and that's exactly the way he said it. He said, 'You're gonna play for what you got right now and I'll help you get into building service stations down here, but that's all the money you're gonna get.' So I got up and walked out and that's the last time I ever talked to George Preston Marshall. And he used to pay us with cash. But you know he was a very controversial person. He let you know how his feelings were and you weren't gonna change him."

After two years in Washington, Billy Ray was hurt in the 1964 pre-season and was subsequently cut by the Redskins. He sat out the entire season. After re-signing with the Eagles in 1965, he was quickly traded to Minnesota and reunited with now head coach Norm Van Brocklin. They said the Dutchman at quarterback was like having a coach on the field. But there was a difference between Van Brocklin the coach with the ball in his hands, and Van Brocklin the coach with the ball in someone else's hands.

"With him on the field, he had all the vision and all the knowledge. I think he was more intense trying to get over his point to the quarterback, than he was when he had the football because he had so much confidence in himself.

"I can remember my last couple of years up there with Tarkenton. Now you know Dutch, he would get back and set up, read the defense and release it. But Tarkenton would start running around, and that would make Dutch so darn mad. Of course it didn't make the offensive line too happy either. They didn't know where the hell Tarkenton was. They said 'Damn, if you stay in one place we'll try to block for you.' Tarkenton became a great quarterback, but that used to just drive Dutch crazy. He couldn't believe anyone would run around like that."

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Billy ended his playing career with the Vikings after the 1966 season with a 3.4 average for 3,421 yards and 29 touchdowns. An all purpose back, he caught 153 passes for 1,786 yards, and nine touchdowns with an 11.7 yard average. On the halfback option he was a 40% passer with a 9.3 average and 4 touchdowns. All told throughout his career, he led his respective team twenty times in various offensive categories and tied Norm Snead for another. He played in three Pro Bowls, but more important, he gained the one elusive prize that is the quest of all players -- a world's championship.

After his playing career, Billy Ray entered the coaching ranks in 1968 as the head coach of the Charleston (W.VA.) Rockets of the Continental Pro Football League. In his one season, he coached the team to an 8-3 record. From there he moved on to the New Orleans Saints under Tom Fears as the receivers coach from 1969-70. Then it was on to the Falcons where he again reunited with Van Brocklin as Atlanta's backfield coach from 1971-74. He rejoined the Saints in 1975 as the special teams coach.

After football he went back into the construction business before retiring to his home town of Landis, NC. During that time, he married his now ex-wife Janice and raised his twin daughters, Billi and Lani. Today Billy Ray Barnes lives with his 78-year-old mother in the ninety-year-old house that his grandfather built, and that he himself was born in.

"All I do is play golf. I read quite a bit, but if the weather's nice I'm going to be out on the golf course. I've got Myrtle Beach (SC) about four hours away with about a hundred golf courses. I like Myrtle Beach. I like their golf courses, I like their night life. You see I'm still single and at sixty years old I feel like I'm still a young kid sometimes. Life couldn't be any better."

BILLY RAY (BULLET) BARNES

HB 5-11 201
 Wake Forest
 Landis High Scholl, NC
 Born: 05/14/35, Landis, NC

		RUSHING				PASS RECEIVING			
		ATT	YDS	AVG	TD	NO	YDS	AVG	TD
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1957	Phi N	143	529	3.7	1	19	212	11.2	1
1958	Phi N	156	551	3.5	7	35	423	12.1	0
1959	Phi N	181	687	3.8	7	32	314	9.8	2
1960	Phi N	117	315	2.7	4	19	132	6.9	2
1961	Phi N	92	309	3.4	1	15	194	12.7	3
1962	Was N	159	492	3.1	3	14	220	15.7	0
1963	Was N	93	374	4.0	5	15	256	17.1	1
1964		Injured - Did not play							
1965	Min N	48	148	3.1	0	3	15	5.0	0
1966	Min N	5	16	3.2	1	1	20	20.0	0
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9 years		994	3421	3.4	29	153	1786	11.7	9