

ALL-TIME NON PRO BOWL TEAM

by Mike Sparrow

The National Football League's Pro Bowl gets very little respect from fans and writers. Played in Honolulu the Sunday after the Super Bowl, the Pro Bowl is often viewed as a superfluous coda to the exciting campaign just completed. Many players take the game lightly as well; stars chosen for the Pro Bowl often choose to sit the game out to nurse injuries or to get a jump on the off-season. There is not the fan-oriented hoopla associated with baseball's midsummer classic or the National Basketball Association's All-Star Weekend so the game is largely ignored, yet Pro Bowl selection is of crucial importance for players. When writers and historians assess a player's career, the number of Pro Bowls a player is chosen for becomes relevant. This is truer with football than with the other major sports as many of football's best have no easily understood statistical record. When a player's Hall of Fame credentials are enumerated, one of the first, especially for linemen, is number of Pro Bowls played. Given this importance, one can ask the question: Have any great football players been overlooked in Pro Bowl selection?

Probably not; no player in the Hall of Fame in the post-1950 era was shut out in Pro Bowl selection. Ray Nitschke was almost shut out as he was chosen for just one game (1965). The recent encyclopedia Total Football chose the 300 best players of all time, of this group only one, QB Jim Plunkett, played in the Pro Bowl era and never made a squad. To return to the 1965 game for a moment, Johnny Morris of the Bears set an NFL single-season record with 93 catches in 1964 yet was not named to the Pro Bowl team due to a late-season shoulder separation.¹ The other All-NFL end, Frank Clarke of the Dallas Cowboys, was not selected either. Morris was chosen for the game earlier in his career; Clarke was never so honored. Clarke typifies players examined here: those players who had long or outstanding careers and never made it to a Pro Bowl.

In this survey I will consider the NFC-AFC Pro Bowls played from 1971 to date, the NFL Pro Bowls played from 1950 to 1970 and the AFL All-Star games played from 1962 to 1970. I have not looked at the earlier series of All-Star games played in the late thirties and early forties, so all of the players considered played the best part of their careers after 1950. I have not included those players chosen who never played due to injury. Among the names on a long list are Norm Bulaich, Bo Jackson, Joe Kapp, and Ron Shanklin. Not surprisingly, most of the players chosen are from the 1970's and 1980's. With two games every year in the

sixties, not too many outstanding players were overlooked.² Even so, a couple of the very best players in this survey played before 1970. No player who played the majority of his career in the AFL was chosen,³ and no players active in 1997 were considered.

OFFENSE

WR Frank Clarke (1957-67): Actually Clarke never played as a "wide receiver;" his position was "split end" or "flanker." One gets the impression from Peter Golenbock's book that every Dallas regular was a deserving all-pro. Clarke actually fills the bill, winning all-NFL honors in 1964. The Pro Bowl selectors chose two rookies, Paul Warfield and Charley Taylor, to the East squad. Warfield and Taylor had better overall careers than Clarke, and both are deserving Hall of Famers but Clarke was an outstanding receiver. He may have been hurt in the Pro Bowl selection because his best seasons were with Cowboys' teams which were not very good. Clarke was eclipsed in 1965 by his new teammate, The World's Fastest Human, and was through by 1967.

WR Dan Abramowicz (1967-74): Abramowicz was an unlikely hero, a 17th round draft pick out of Xavier for the expansion 1967 New Orleans Saints. Dan was an instant success catching more than 100 passes during his first two seasons and leading the league with 73 catches in 1969. His omission from Pro Bowl squads is even more surprising in that he was the most well-known player on the Saints until Archie Manning was drafted.⁴

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TE Bob Tucker (1970-80): Tucker was even more of a long shot than Abramowicz. Following unsuccessful tryouts with the Patriots and Eagles in the late sixties, Bob spent the 1969 season with the Pottstown Firebirds of the Atlantic Coast Football League and joined the New York Giants as a 25-year-old rookie in 1970. He caught 40 passes that year and led the NFC with 59 receptions in 1971. Despite his late start, Tucker played for eleven seasons with the Giants and Vikings and caught 407 passes in the seventies, the third most of any receiver in that decade.

T Cas Banaszek (1968-77): It probably hurt Banaszek's Pro Bowl chances to share an offensive line with Len Rohde and Forrest Blue, both Pro Bowl selections, but Banaszek was considered the best pass blocker of that group. The 49ers' offensive line allowed only eight sacks in 1970, the year Banaszek was chosen all-NFC. He played ten productive seasons in San Francisco.

T Jon Kolb (1969-81): If one area of the great Steeler teams was overlooked when it came to Pro Bowl honors, it was their offensive line. Until the emergence of Mike Webster in the late seventies, only one offensive lineman (G Bruce Van Dyke) was chosen for the Pro Bowl. The Steelers' best offensive lineman in the first half of the decade was Jon Kolb. A regular on four championship teams, Kolb was named to at least one all-AFC team in three different seasons.

G Fuzzy Thurston (1958-67): Most of his teammates were Pro Bowl regulars in the sixties. Jim Ringo, Forrest Gregg and Jerry Kramer were annual fixtures and even Bob Skoronski played in the 1967 Pro Bowl, but Thurston just never made it, even in 1961 when he was unanimous All-Pro and the Packers were champions. Thurston was All Pro again the next year and the Packers repeated as champs but Thurston was still the odd man out.

G Reggie McKenzie (1972-84): Did O.J. Simpson act alone? Most of the Pro Bowl selectors of the early 1970's must have thought so as none of the Bills offensive linemen were chosen for the Pro Bowl between Billy Shaw's departure in 1969 and Joe DeLamielleure's emergence in 1976. Buffalo's best blocker during Simpson's best years was Reggie McKenzie who was all-AFC in 1973 when O.J. topped the 2,000 yard mark. McKenzie played thirteen seasons for the Bills and Seahawks. Guards have not been given their proper due in the Hall of Fame, and McKenzie and Thurston are among the half dozen very best players on this list.

C Ray Mansfield (1963-76): With the recent recognition of Mike Webster and Dermontti Dawson, the Steelers' centers have been well-treated by the Pro Bowl. Both are fine players and played for some very good teams, but Webster's predecessor Ray Mansfield played for some very poor Pittsburgh teams and so was overlooked at Pro Bowl time. His most notable achievement was his streak of 196 consecutive games played, but his steadiness never translated into post-season honors.

QB Jim Plunkett (1971-86): Most starting quarterbacks with more than a few seasons will eventually be chosen for a Pro Bowl team. Norm Snead, Archie Manning, Neil Lomax and James Harris have all played in Pro Bowls. Active quarterbacks who have gotten the call despite less than stellar records include Vinny Testaverde and Jeff George. Some quarterbacks are remembered for little more than their Pro Bowl performances; Mike Boryla (1976) and Mike Livingston (1970) fall into this category. Only two Super Bowl-winning quarterbacks have been overlooked for the Pro Bowl, Doug Williams and Jim Plunkett. Plunkett is the only Heisman Trophy winner on this list and the only Rookie of the Year. Jim began in 1971 with the Patriots, but after a fine rookie season his play was inconsistent as Plunkett was beset by a series of injuries. Plunkett spent two unsuccessful years with the 49ers in 1976 and 1977. He joined the Raiders but did not play in 1978 and was Ken Stabler's backup in 1979. Plunkett began the 1980 season on the Oakland bench but stepped in when starter Dan Pastorini broke his leg. Led by Plunkett, the Raiders won a wild card berth and kept winning all the way through Super Bowl XIV. Three years later, the Raiders were in Los Angeles and Plunkett overcame a shaky start to take them to the championship, beating Washington in Super Bowl XVII. The AFC would not win another Super Bowl for fourteen years. Plunkett threw 164 regular season touchdowns and threw eleven more in postseason play.

RB Joe Morrison (1959-72): Morrison played fourteen seasons with the Giants and still holds the team record with 395 receptions and is second to Frank Gifford with almost 5,000 receiving yards. An all-purpose back who played six different positions in his career, Morrison broke in with a good Giants' team and was overshadowed by Gifford and Del Shofner. Morrison scored ten touchdowns in 1963 when the Giants played in the NFL championship game. Joe endured for the next nine seasons with subpar teams

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but continued his steady, versatile play. The emergence of wide receiver Homer Jones as a Pro Bowl player in the late sixties ended Joe's chances at recognition.

RB Rocky Bleier (1968-81): Jim Plunkett notwithstanding, Rocky Bleier is the best known of the players on this squad with a best-selling book and a TV movie about his life. Bleier began his career with Pittsburgh in 1968 but his career was interrupted by service in Vietnam. A severe foot injury there sidetracked his career, but he persevered and rejoined a much better Steelers' team in 1971. Bleier never had the rushing numbers of Franco Harris but was a much better blocking back and was strong in the clutch as proven by his six postseason touchdowns. Bleier did gain 1,036 yards in 1976. **K Don Cockroft (1968-80):** A fine, durable kicker, Cockroft broke in at the wrong time in the wrong place. Don had the very difficult task of replacing Cleveland legend Lou Groza; he proved an able successor and would have gotten Pro Bowl recognition if the Browns hadn't moved to the AFC in 1970. The one kicker on the AFC squad through most of the rest of Don's career was Hall of Famer Jan Stenerud. Cockroft was one of the last of the kicker/punters and led the AFC in 1972 with 3,468 punting yards. In a thirteen-year career, Cockroft scored 1,080 points.

KR Dennis Gentry (1982-92): Not too many players have been regular kick returners for the same team for eleven straight seasons; with free agency, we may never see anyone match Dennis Gentry's mark with the Chicago Bears from 1982 to 1992. Never as flashy as Billy Johnson or Mel Gray, Gentry was steady, averaging 22.7 yards per kickoff return in his career. He led the league with a 28.8 average in 1986.

DEFENSE

DE Aaron Brown (1966-74): It did not help Aaron Brown's Pro Bowl chances in the late sixties and early seventies to share the Chief's front four with Pro Bowl regulars Jerry Mays, Buck Buchanan, and Curly Culp, but Brown was a fine player in his own right. He is best known for his play in the 1969 postseason when he menaced Daryle Lamonica in the AFL title game and Joe Kapp in Kansas City's victory in Super Bowl IV. If Pro Bowl teams were chosen after the playoffs, Brown would have been a sure thing. Injuries drove Brown from football after 1974.

DE Carl Hairston (1976-90): "Big Daddy" played his first eight seasons with the Eagles. He led the NFC in 1979 with 15 sacks and was the defensive standout on the 1980 conference champions. Hairston moved to the Cleveland Browns in 1984 and is fondly remembered for his fine play on some of the good Cleveland teams in the Schottenheimer/Kosar era. He was a team leader throughout his fifteen-year career.

DT Manny Fernandez (1968-75): The lack of respect for the Miami Dolphins' defense of the early seventies is indicated by their collective nickname, "The No-Name Defense." Several of the Dolphins were Pro Bowl regulars during this period (DE Bill Stanfill was chosen five times), but Fernandez was overlooked. He is best remembered for playing nose tackle in Miami's 5-3 defense. Injuries during the 1974 season cut short his career.

DT Jethro Pugh (1965-78): Pugh is one of the more surprising names on the list of non-Pro Bowl players because he played a long time for a good team and was widely regarded as a very good player throughout his career. Jethro is best-known for the (illegal?) block by Jerry Kramer in the 1967 "Ice Bowl," but that's probably not what kept him out of Pro Bowls. As we have seen with other stars, Pugh was surrounded by Cowboys on the defensive line who were Pro Bowl regulars. When Pugh started, he had to compete for attention with teammates Bob Lilly and George Andrie; when they retired, Pugh played in the same defense with Randy White and Ed "Too Tall" Jones. Jethro was just a victim of the numbers game.

LB Mike Douglass (1978-86): One sibilant away from being a talk show host, Douglass played for the Packers from 1978 to 1985 and never received the recognition he deserved despite favorable comparisons to Lawrence Taylor and Pro Bowl regular, Hugh Green. His anonymity was assured by playing on Packers' teams that were at best mediocre.

LB Eugene Lockhart (1984-92): Lockhart was named to the AP All-Pro team in 1989 leading the league with 222 tackles. The Cowboys defense was on the field a lot in those years and this led to Lockhart

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ringing up over 750 tackles in his first six seasons. Lockhart went to the Patriots in 1991 and finished his career in New England in 1992. He played alongside Vincent Brown in his last two seasons.

LB Vincent Brown (1988-95): Vincent Brown played for the New England Patriots between 1988 and 1995 and despite solid credentials was overlooked for Pro Bowl honors. Brown made more than 100 tackles in each season from 1991 to 1994 and was called, "one of the best players never to make the Pro Bowl" after the 1993 season. Surgery on both knees following the 1995 season ended his career. If he had played a bit longer he would have likely been selected.

CB Ken Riley (1969-83): Ken Riley is the NFL's fourth-leading all-time interceptor taking 65 passes in his 15 years with the Bengals. His best season may have been in 1976 when he intercepted nine passes. The 1983 Complete Handbook of Pro Football mentioned that he has "been a Pro Bowler a number of times." They may have confused him with teammates Tommy Casanova and Lemar Parrish who were Pro Bowl fixtures. The same volume called Riley "the Chateau Lafitte of cornerbacks."

CB Nate Wright (1969-80): Wright played for three Vikings' Super Bowl teams in the 1970's and intercepted six passes for the 1974 NFC champions. The Minnesota backfield allowed only eight touchdown passes that year. Nate was overshadowed by Hall of Fame teammate Paul Krause, an automatic Pro Bowl choice.

S Johnny Sample (1958-68): In his rookie season, Sample played for the 1958 Baltimore Colts which won the championship in one of the two most famous games ever played. In his final season, he played for the 1968 New York Jets team which upset the Colts in Super Bowl III, the other one. In between, Sample was regarded as one of the smartest defensive backs in football, winning All-NFL honors with the Steeters in 1961. He intercepted seven passes in 1968.

S Johnnie Johnson (1980-89): Johnson certainly got the goat of some of his Rams' teammates with his large contract as a first-round pick of Texas in 1980. It took him a couple of seasons to find his way, and by the middle of the decade he was among the league's elite safeties. He played alongside Nolan Cromwell, a Pro Bowl regular, which hurt Johnson's chances for selection.

P David Lee (1966-78): Lee was the regular punter for the Baltimore Colts from 1966 to 1978 and was a victim of bad timing. He led the league in punting in his rookie season and again in 1969, years when a regular punter was not chosen for the Pro Bowl. The Colts moved to the AFC in 1970 and the one punter chosen for the squad was Jerrel Wilson and then Ray Guy.

There is no one common thread which binds all of these players. Some were overlooked because their teams were not very good, some were overlooked on very good teams because their teammates' stars shone just a little brighter. Some played a long time, and some had their careers shortened by injuries. Some omissions just cannot be explained. Even if these stars were overlooked by the Pro Bowl, they have not been forgotten by their fans who say without doubt that not every outstanding player won Pro Bowl recognition.

¹The two all-star games played after the 1964 season deserve an article of their own for several reasons: the large number of rookies chosen, Gino Marchetti's revenge on Frank Ryan, and the racial segregation of the time that caused the AFL game to be moved from New Orleans to Houston.

²Prior to the combined Pro Bowl in 1971, every team had at least one representative on the Pro Bowl/All-Star team in every game, since 1971 there has not been a game in which every NFL team has had a player chosen.

³One AFL player who was considered was split end Bill Groman who led the league in receptions in 1960 and was among the league leaders in 1961. Sadly, the AFL did not play an all-star game following their first season, and Groman was not chosen the following year. Injuries cut short his career and 1965 was his last season.

⁴Since 1967 only one Saints' wide receiver has been chosen for a Pro Bowl team, Wes Chandler in 1980.