

# WAYNE MILLNER

*By Michael Richman  
Redskins Weekly Correspondent*

He was known as "The Money Player." When the stakes were highest and the pressure greatest, Wayne Millner was at his best.

Consider his two touchdown catches for Notre Dame, including the game-winner, in its come-from-behind, 18-13, victory over Ohio State in 1935, a "Game of the Century." Or his nine catches for 179 yards and two touchdowns in the Redskins 28-21 win over Chicago in the 1937 championship, then the finest single-game receiving performance in NFL post-season history.

"Millner could be counted on for delivering in the clutch," Bob Curran wrote in his 1969 book, "Pro Football's Rag Days."

Millner was one of the NFL's first great receivers. He played end for the Redskins from 1936 to 1941 and again in 1945, catching 124 passes for 1,578 yards and 12 touchdowns. Those were meager numbers for a seven-year NFL career compared with today. But the forward pass was an evolving weapon, and teams relied mainly on the run.

He was far from the top receiver of his era. That distinction went to Packers Hall of Famer Don Hutson, who played from 1935 to 1945 and led the NFL in receiving year after year.

But Millner not only caught passes. The 6-foot, 190-pounder was a punishing blocker and tackler in an era when players went both ways. His diverse talents and feats earned him induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1968.

"Wayne Millner was a great two-way player, a rock-em, sock-em performer on defense and a smooth, sure-fingered receiver when the Washington Redskins had the ball," according to the Hall of Fame.

Redskins Hall of Fame halfback Cliff Battles, who played with Millner in 1936 and 1937, once said: "I always knew if I could get out into the open, Wayne would be there to throw a block for me. He would swing over from the weak side after making his initial block and hit a defensive back. Wayne's blocks determined whether or not I would get away for a long run."

Millner, a native of Roxbury, Mass., was an end from the time he attended Salem (Mass.) High. He later played for three prep schools until Notre Dame recruited the 20-year-old in 1933. He showed big-play instincts, blocking a kick in the Fighting Irish's dramatic 13-12 comeback victory over Army at Yankee Stadium.

After a 6-3 mark in 1934 under first-year coach Elmer Layden, one of Notre Dame's famed "Four Horsemen," the Irish opened the 1935 season 5-0, outscoring opponents 92-16. But they were heavy underdogs against unbeaten Ohio State on Nov. 2 in Columbus, Ohio.

The Buckeyes led, 13-6, with less than two minutes left. Irish halfback Andy Pilney hit Millner for a touchdown to create a 13-12 game. Notre Dame immediately recovered an Ohio State fumble, and Irish halfback Bill Shakespeare found Millner in the end zone with less than 30 seconds to play. The win helped build the Notre Dame mystique.

Millner finished as a two-time All-American. In 1936, the Redskins chose him in the eighth round in the first year of the NFL draft, which was adopted to give all teams a fair shot at competing. The selection allowed him to play for a team close to home, for the Redskins were about to begin their fifth season in Boston.

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Thrilled about acquiring Millner, Redskins coach Ray Flaherty sent a note to team owner George Preston Marshall: "With that Yankee playing end, please accept my resignation if the Redskins do not win the championship this year."

The Redskins nearly did, falling to Green Bay, 21-6, in the 1936 title game. But the only place Flaherty went was to Washington, where the Redskins relocated starting in the 1937 season. With four future Hall of Famers – Millner, Battles, tackle Turk Edwards and a rifle-armed rookie passer, Sammy Baugh – they were primed for greatness.

The Redskins romped through the regular season, which ended when they destroyed the New York Giants, 49-14, for the Eastern Division title. Millner caught two touchdown passes in that game.

Next, in the championship game against the Bears, the Redskins trailed 14-7 in the third period. Welcome Millner time.

He caught a pass from Baugh in the flat and outraced defenders on a 55-yard touchdown play. Chicago regained the lead, 21-14. But Baugh connected with Millner on a similar play, and he again outran the defense on a 77-yard scoring pass to tie the game.

The Bears defense began double- and triple-teaming Millner. So Baugh used him as a decoy and passed to fullback Ed Justice for the winning score in the fourth quarter.

Afterward, a sportswriter asked Millner how he ran so fast on his two scoring catches. "You'd run fast, too, if you had those big devils chasing you," he said, referring to the Bears considerable size advantage. Baugh once said: "He was not what you called a big end. "[But] he was so quick, while he always was blocking his man. I always thought he did the best job of all the two-way ends of our time."

The game was played in brutal conditions. The temperature was a bitter-cold 15-degrees, and Chicago's frozen Wrigley Field was draped with ice and snow. The hard, slippery surface left one player after another cut, bloodied, dazed and staggered. Millner was in that group.

Francis Stan of *The Evening Star* wrote of the Redskins determination to maintain the 28-21 lead until the final gun: "Ahead for the second time, they doggedly held this lead; tackles stepped into the breeches left by two injured guards, bruised and battered. Baugh was gone at the end, so was [fullback] Erny Pinckert; Wayne Millner and [end] Charley Malone were staggering as the final whistle sounded. But it was a case of they shall not pass."

Millner continued to be a prime target for Baugh, and other Redskins passers, in the coming seasons. (The team then used the single-wing formation, and multiple players in the backfield threw the ball.) He posted career-highs of 294 receiving yards in 1939 and 22 catches in 1940. After the Redskins beat the Chicago Cardinals, 28-21, on Oct. 13, 1940, one sports reporter wrote:

"Wayne Millner, all-professional end, played a marvelous game. His catching of Baugh's pass to tie the count was a masterful piece of work. Wayne cut to the far side of the gridiron, and then zig-zagged his course behind the Cardinals defense to catch the ball in the 'money-zone.' But on receiving the leather, Wayne did the 'Thurston the Magician juggling act,' and the spectators' hearts leaped every time the ball bounced, until he finally made the pay-off stab that tied the score."

After the 1941 season, Millner began serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II. He missed the 1942 Redskins team that beat the Bears, 14-6 in the championship game, along with the 1943 and 1944 teams. He returned for the 1945 season before retiring.

Millner was a Redskins assistant coach in 1946 and 1948 and served as the Eagles head coach for parts of the 1952 and 1953 seasons. He later served as an Eagles and Baltimore Colts scout. He entered the Hall of Fame in 1968 with Battles, Rams halfback-end Elroy "Crazy Legs" Hirsh, Colts defensive tackle Art Donovan, and Browns fullback Marion Motley.

He died in 1976 at age 63.

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“He was one of the best,” said Ace Parker, a Hall of Fame quarterback who played for the Brooklyn Dodgers during Millner’s era. “He played offense and defense and could do everything. He was a good all-around athlete and a good receiver.”

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