

ED FLANAGAN:

All Pro Center for the Detroit Lions

By Jim Sargent

By the time he retired in 1976 after twelve seasons as a starting center in the National Football League, Ed Flanagan had experienced the ups and downs of most unsung heroes. A quick-thinking, hard-working, skilled offensive center, he rose from second-string status as a high school junior to win Pro Bowl and All Pro honors with the Detroit Lions. He also served as the Lions' co-captain from 1969 through the 1974 season.

Listed by the Lions at 6'2" and 250 pounds, the blonde, crew-cut Flanagan entered Purdue University in the fall of 1960 as a lanky 190-pounder. Within a year he tipped the scales at more than 230 pounds. When he walked onto the field as a sophomore for the first football practice, Ed had grown so much the coach didn't recognize him.

"Coach had to ask my name," the former Lion remembered in a 2003 interview. "Someone said, 'That's Flanagan.' I got pretty big in college, but we didn't use steroids. It was all natural growth. I never lifted a weight in my life!"

Using his intelligence, desire, hard work, and perseverance, Ed lettered at center for Purdue as a sophomore and junior. The late bloomer led his team in minutes played as a senior and won postseason election as Purdue's honorary captain. He also earned second team All-Big Ten and honorable mention All-American honors.

In 1987, eleven years after he left football as a player, Flanagan was part of the six-man first class inducted into the Blair County, Pennsylvania, Sports Hall of Fame.

"I never was a star," Flanagan told Jim Lane of the *Altoona Mirror*. "I never started until my senior year of high school. I guess it shows that it's never too late."

Born on February 23, 1944, in Altoona, Flanagan grew up in an Irish-American family with a hard-working father, Edward, Senior, who loved sports. Ed, Junior, also wrestled in high school. As a senior he made it to the state quarterfinals in the 180-pound class.

Ed began playing fullback as a fifth grader with his father as the team's coach. Later, he played fullback at Keith Junior High. But at Roosevelt High, coach Earl Strohm needed a center.

"My dad was our high school's center before me," Flanagan explained in 2002. "He was a single wing center, and he taught me how to snap the ball. I won my letter in my junior year by snapping for all the punts and extra points."

During his senior year, Coach Strohm switched Flanagan to offensive tackle and moved another player, who couldn't block as well, to center. Ed responded with a fine season, winning honorable mention on the All-State Team.

The Altoona athlete received two scholarship offers: from Memphis State and from Purdue. He knew that Purdue offered a quality education, plus his high school friend and teammate, Lou Glasshouser, already played there.

"As a freshman at Purdue," Flanagan said, "I weighed about 190 pounds, because I had just gotten through with high school wrestling. The coaches called for the lineup at each position.

"They asked, 'Who wants to play tackle?'

"Since I played tackle as a senior, I ran over to that line. But all these guys were 6-4, 6-5, and they weighed about 250 or more. I knew that wasn't the line for me.

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"When they yelled for guards, I figured I could play guard, since I had played tackle. I went over to the guard line. But Purdue used to choose a lot of fullbacks and give them scholarships, because fullbacks were usually the best athletes on high school teams. Purdue would move these high school fullbacks to linebacker, or guard, or something like that.

"I looked at the guard line, and those guys were all 5-9, 5-10, and 6-foot, but they weighed about 230. I looked like a string bean among them.

"Then they called for centers. I went over to the center line, and they were all about my size, about 6-2. I figured I could eat my way up to that position."

The Big Ten did not allow freshmen to play varsity ball in 1961, but it would not have mattered to Flanagan. He played second team for three years, and, like at Roosevelt High, lettered as a sophomore and junior by snapping for punts and extra points.

Ed said, "I never made a bad snap in high school, college, or pro ball, so I was fortunate.

"Jack Mollenkopf was Purdue's head coach. Back then, you played both ways. If you played center at Purdue, you automatically played linebacker.

"In 1964, my senior year, the Big Ten switched to two-platoon football, where you could have an offensive team and a defensive team. We had a line coach, Ernie Zawhlan, who had faith in me and I ended up starting. I also became co-captain along with Jim Garcia, a defensive end."

Flanagan enjoyed a stellar senior year, played in the Blue-Grey Game and the Senior Bowl, and Detroit drafted him in the fifth round. But no American Football League team picked him.

"I signed for 'big money' with Detroit. I talked to the general manager, Russ Thomas. He said, 'What were you thinking of in terms of a bonus?'

"When I played in the Senior Bowl, I couldn't believe all the money these guys signed for. So I told him, 'About \$20,000.'

"Russ Thomas said, 'I'll give you \$2,000.'

"That really deflated me!

"Thomas says, 'What are you thinking of in terms of a contract?'

"I said, 'At least \$25,000.'

"He said, 'I'll give you \$12,000.'

"That was the NFL minimum in 1965. Since the AFL didn't draft me, I figured I had no choice. I signed for a bonus of two and a contract of twelve thousand."

Thinking over his options, Flanagan realized if he planned to make any real money in pro football, he would have to do it through longevity:

"We always worked in the offseason. I started off selling steel in Detroit, calling on General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler. I did that for two years, and then I got into real estate. I sold real estate for two years.

"Vic Wertz, a former Tiger who played for the Indians in the 1954 World Series, owned a beer distributorship in Detroit, and I worked a year with Vic as salesman. That was around 1971. I had a fun year working for Vic Wertz."

After signing with Detroit, Flanagan attended the Lions training camp at the Cranbrook School in Bloomfield Hills in the summer of 1965.

"The Lions used to have what they called a 'rookie camp.' They brought in all the rookies and a couple of veterans that were sort of subpar guys. We actually had two teams.

"I came in weighing about 270. They had two offensive teams. One team would run a play against the defense, then the other team would run a play. Fortunately, I was the only center. I had to run with both teams, and they ran my butt off the first week!

"The veterans came the following week. I played well against the rookies, but this was different. I had to face Roger Brown on one side, and he weighed about 320 pounds. Alex Karras was on the other side. And the middle linebacker was Joe Schmidt.

"You talk about a beating! It seemed like every time they knocked me down, Nick Pietrosante, the fullback from Notre Dame who weighed about 230, would make it a point to run over me. So I had cleat marks up my front, my back, and everywhere.

"I remember calling my father and saying, 'Dad, I don't think I'm going to make it. These guys are pretty tough. I'll be lucky if I make the taxi squad.'

"Detroit had two centers, Bob Whitlow, who was from Arizona, and Bob Scholtz, who was from Notre Dame. Whitlow was coming off a knee injury, but Scholtz seemed in good shape.

"We had a new coach, Harry Gilmer. But I ended up playing in a couple of the exhibition games. Back then, we only played three exhibition games. I got to start the last two.

"The regular season opener was coming up, and I figured the coaches would push Whitlow, because they let Scholtz go. That more or less guaranteed me a spot on the roster. Harry Gilmer stuck with me, I started, and I played ten years for Detroit."

Modest, even-tempered, and forthright, Flanagan did outplay Whitlow, but he was fortunate:

"You know, in pro ball you have to be in the right spot at the right time. Later, I had guys come up who tried to take my position, and some were better athletes than I was. But I was the center, and I was entrenched, and I did a pretty good job for the Lions.

"Pro football is a thinking man's game. The only position where you can get away without thinking and just having raw talent is on the defense. They just point those guys and tell them to get the quarterback or the running back.

"But when you play offense, you've got to be pretty sharp. You have to know the plays and know the blocking patterns."

Bob Kowalkowski, Detroit's offensive guard who began his 12-year NFL career in 1966, called Flanagan the best center he saw during his years in pro ball. "Ed had great blocking technique. Usually when he hit somebody, they went down. But we called him 'Easy Ed.' He was an even-tempered guy. He never let stuff upset him. That helped him handle the NFL."

Flanagan had the ability strength, and size. Even though Detroit listed him at 250, Ed usually had sweat off or cut 5-10 pounds to make the weigh-in every week.

Flanagan, however, explained that, just like every other center in the NFL, he had to learn how to call the blocking assignments when he broke in with the Lions.

"For instance, playing center, I have to make the blocking calls for the line. If the defense jumps from, say, a 4-3 to a one-over [the center], or jumps from an 'over' to an 'under,' or jumps to a 4-4, I may have to make a new call. I have to tell the guards and the tackles who to block.

"My first year we had John Gonzaga at one offensive guard. If it wasn't for John Gonzaga and John Gordy, the other guard, I would never have made it in the NFL. Half the time I wasn't quite sure whether it was an 'over' or an 'under,' because you have to know where the tight end is playing. Lots of times they helped me make the calls that year. Gonzaga really helped.

"Coming out of the huddle, John would basically tell me what it was. 'It's going to be an over,' 'It's going to be an under,' 'The defense looks like a 4-4.'

"I was trying to remember the play and who I was supposed to block. My first year was really a learning experience. I did a good job my first year, or the Lions would have let me go.

"The first game I got into was an exhibition against Philadelphia in the old Vet Stadium. They were honoring Pete Retzlaff, who was nearing the end of his career. But I'll never forget my first pass play. I snapped that ball, and I mean it was just like all *blurs*.

"I couldn't believe it! The *speed* of the game, from college to pro, just amazed me.

"Also, the guys probably averaged 20 pounds heavier. When I played at Purdue, the linemen averaged 230, maybe 235 or 240.

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"When I got to the pros, Alex Karras weighed about 250-255 and Roger Brown weighed 300 or more. You had Merlin Olsen at about 275. You had Roosevelt Grier at over 300. You ran into the 'Purple People Eaters' at Minnesota, and they were all big and quick.

"There was almost a 20-25 pound difference per man, plus the speed. The difference in *speed* in the NFL was just unbelievable!

"But you learn to block a guy like Bob Lilly or Merlin Olsen. You can almost close your eyes and step back and hit 'em, because they were such professionals that you knew exactly where they were going to be.

"I got to play against Sam Huff in 1965, and that was his last year. I got to watch Jim Brown play. I played against Ray Nitschke twice a year for three or four years, before he retired. I played against Dick Butkus twice a year every year, until he retired after the '73 season.

"Butkus was always my biggest challenge. I liked to hit Butkus. You had to hit him in the middle. He would hand-fight you, if you came in too low. The NFL had some great linebackers in those years."

Ed disliked the Bears' linebacker. On October 10, 1973, one Chicago paper quoted Flanagan as calling Butkus "a wild man on defense ... one of the most foul-mouthed guys in the league ... he insults you, your mother, and the team."

Following a Butkus insult, they almost came to blows near the goal posts before the game that Sunday in Chicago.

Reflecting on calling the blocking signals, Flanagan explained, "The center calls signals because he can see both sides of the line. If the defense is even, a 4-3 with the middle linebacker sitting over the center, and if we're running a 'sweep right' play and I figure I can't get the middle linebacker because he's pretty quick, I may make an '*even*' call.

"That means I tell the right tackle on the sweep side to get the middle linebacker, and I'll step back and go over and cut off the defensive tackle.

"Typically, this is the way the 'sweep right' play runs: I make an '*odd*' call and the right guard pulls and goes outside; the fullback would come up and hit the defensive end, who's on the offensive right tackle; the offensive right tackle would come down and seal the defensive tackle; the tight end blocks the defensive end; and the center goes through for the middle linebacker.

"Now if I see the middle linebacker is 'cheating' (moving) over and I can't get him, I'll make an '*even*' call. I'm telling the tackle that we are switching blocking assignments. I'm going to get the defensive lineman, after the guard pulls, and the tackle will go after the middle linebacker.

"Now in pass protection, say the defense is a 4-3 and the middle linebacker is in front of the center, and the guards are covered with the defensive tackles. When we get up to the line, typically I have to block the middle linebacker. When I get up there and I look and I see him 'cheat,' that's when he's going to come on a blitz.

"The other team may put their defensive tackle on our guard and try to pinch him down to the center, and the middle linebacker will blitz over the guard's position—hoping the guard will come down on his tackle. Then I'm stuck in a wash, trying to step out and get the linebacker.

"In other words, if we're coming up to the line of scrimmage and I see the middle linebacker cheating, or I look over and see the defensive tackle starting to cheat in, I would make a *George* (for guard) call.

"The George call tells the guard that he and I are going to switch assignments. He's going to let that defensive tackle come to me, and he's going to step outside and take the blitzing middle linebacker.

"Also on pass protection, a lot of times you see a safety come up. So I may have to make a '*Lee*' (for left) call, where everybody switches to the left. For instance, the left guard knows he's going to block the middle linebacker. The offensive tackle is going to let his end go—and he's going to come down on the tackle. I'm going to step over and take the defensive tackle (on the left guard's side), and the guard is going to step out and pick up the blitzing safety, or the outside linebacker, whoever is coming.

"So the center has to look and try to figure out what the defenses is doing, and make his call. Otherwise, the quarterback gets killed, and he doesn't like that!

"But those are some of the things you have to think about as an offensive lineman.

"So if you're watching a pro game, when you see the quarterback come up to the line, he's already called a play in the huddle. When we come up to the line, I'm going to make my call, depending on what I think is going to happen. Then while the quarterback is barking signals, the other team may jump their defense from an 'even' to an 'odd.' When they jump, the quarterback makes an audible call. When he calls an audible, I have to think what needs to change about the blocking, and I have to make my call again."

Regarding the blocking, Flanagan says there is no essential difference between blocking in today's NFL and when he played in the 1960s and 1970s.

"The blocking is basically the same. I've coached within the last three years. I've coached in the USFL, in high school, in college, and in arena ball. The blocking is the same. How much can you change?"

"It all comes down to the basics and being mentally prepared and being fundamentally sound in your blocking technique."

"The stance is basically the same. Now you do see a few tackles in a two-point stance instead of a three-point stance. And today you see a lot more passing and a lot more wideout receivers than you used to see, but that's about all that's changed."

Regarding use of the hands, Flanagan explained, "When I first came up, you had to keep your hands in to your chest. Chuck Knox was Detroit's line coach, and he used to raise hell with the officials every week."

"Finally, around 1973, the league said the offensive linemen could put their arms out and extend their hands, as long as they stayed within the framework of the defender's shoulders. In my last few years, you could actually get your hands on the defensive man—as long as your hands were inside his shoulders."

"The guy who really changed pro football was Deacon Jones. When I first came to Detroit, the guard and the tackle were basically in line with each other. We would come up from the huddle and I would take my stance first, a parallel stance with my feet even. The guard would take his stance with his down hand on my foot. The tackle would line up square with the guard."

"Deacon Jones used a big head slap. The tackles were getting their 'bell rung,' because Deacon would come off the line so quick and hit them in the head before they could get their hands up. He was the 'sack master' of that time period—just one hell of a player."

"The tackles soon realized Deacon was so quick that they had to cheat back off the ball a bit. Now you look at the pro offensive line, and it's basically bowed. You see the center, with the guard back a little, and the tackle back a little behind the guard. They're all trying to get off the line of scrimmage before the defensive tackles and defensive ends can hit them."

"The league finally got rid of the head slap around 1969. We had Roger Brown, and he was just awesome. When Roger hit you with that head slap, you talk about an Excedrin headache! I used to have to practice against Roger every day. He gave you the head slap and a big bull rush. Roger's arms looked like someone else's thighs!"

What was the difference between playing for coach Harry Gilmer and coach Joe Schmidt?

"Harry got a raw deal. The Lions weren't very good when I first got there, and he had to put up with Alex Karras, who had a lot of pull with the owner. I never cared for Karras. He was a tough player, but not much of a person. He could have been a team leader, but he didn't care about that. I disliked him even more than Dick Butkus."

"Of all the guys that I played against, I'd rank Joe Schmidt the best. For example, on a reverse Joe would take about one step, recognize the play, and go to the ball. And Karras was one of the better defensive tackles I ever played against. He'd never do the same thing. He'd line up on the ball, off the ball, never the same. These guys were *good*."

"In my rookie year, we had a great defense—with Brown, Karras, Sam Williams, Darris McCord, Wayne Walker, Dick LeBeau, guys like that. But our offense that wasn't as good as our defense. We had Milt Plum at quarterback, and Karras would berate Milt, especially if he threw an interception."

"Everyone liked Harry Gilmer, but our offense was not good enough. Finally, the offensive line started coming together, especially after we got Chuck Knox as line coach. He helped us develop one of the best offensive lines in the league."

"Joe Schmidt was a good coach. He was an understanding guy. He brought in a great staff. But he had the same problem as Gilmer. Detroit never won a championship because they wouldn't pay the big bucks to get the really good players."

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"In 1970, the one year we went to the NFC playoffs, we got beat by Dallas, 5-0. That season all we needed was a defensive tackle. But the Lions wouldn't spend the money."

Harry Gilmer coached the Lions in 1965 and 1966, and both years Detroit had losing records. Schmidt began in 1967, the year the NFL split the Western Conference into divisions and placed Detroit in the Central Division. During Schmidt's six seasons, Detroit started with third and fourth place finishes in 1967-68.

But from 1969 through 1974, the Lions finished second in the Central Division. Also, during Schmidt's last four seasons, Detroit had winning records of 9-4-1 in 1969, 10-4 in 1970, 7-6-1 in 1971, and 8-5-1 in 1972.

"In my first three years," Flanagan recollected, "Green Bay won everything, including the first two Super Bowls. The Colts played in the third Super Bowl in 1969, and after that, Minnesota took over. We finished second in the Central Division behind the Vikings in 1969, 1970, and 1971. The Lions were second behind Green Bay in 1972 and second behind Minnesota in 1973 and 1974, which was my last season with Detroit.

"But if you look at our games with Minnesota, they seldom every beat us by more than a touchdown. It would be close, but the Lions would lose by a few points. We'd beat the Vikings up and down the field. But then we'd be going in for a final field goal, and they'd block it, or they'd intercept a pass on a late drive, or a guy would fumble and they'd pick it up and run it in for a touchdown, or something."

For example, on November 12, 1972, when Errol Mann's 33-yard field goal was blocked on the last play of the game, the Vikings won, 16-14, making the tenth straight Minnesota victory over Detroit.

Don McCafferty followed Schmidt as the Lions' head coach in 1973, but he died of a heart attack on July 28, 1974. Assistant coach Rick Forzano finished the 1974 season and coached Detroit until resigning on October 4, 1976, after his club started with a 1-3 record.

Flanagan signed with the Honolulu Hawaiians of the World Football League in 1973. When he showed the contract to Russ Thomas, the general manager refused to come close. As a result, Ed, the co-captain, played out his option in 1974.

But with the WFL in financial trouble in 1975, the Hawaiian club wanted to restructure Flanagan's contract. Both parties finally agreed to rescind it and give Flanagan the choice to sign with the World League or with the NFL. When he returned to Detroit, Rick Forzano refused to re-sign the four-time Pro Bowler.

"Forzano basically told me he didn't want me back," Flanagan said, "because the previous year we had a mini-strike and he didn't like the fact that I was the team's player rep.

"After I ended up signing with San Diego, Forzano told me, 'Well, I was wrong. I wish you'd stayed with the Lions. That was crap.

"But I hated to leave Detroit. I played ten years there. But I played for two years in San Diego. After I got there, moving from Tiger Stadium to San Diego, I felt like I died and went to heaven! The weather was nice all year. Dan Foutz was quarterback, and I really enjoyed the Chargers. And I went into business in California, too."

Flanagan started his football career making \$12,000 with the Lions and ended it earning \$37,000 for the Chargers. While he became Detroit's highest paid offensive lineman by the early 1970s, Ed recalled learning that most other players at his position earned much more.

Looking back on his career, Flanagan says the friendships he developed among players, the opportunities to see different cities, and meeting different people were most important to him.

"The camaraderie was a big thing," Ed says. "You look at the championship teams, and those guys are together. In Detroit, our 'O Line' always stuck together. We'd go out after a game, that sort of thing. In my years of coaching, I prefer working with the O Line. Those are the smarter guys. You can't be hot-headed. You have to play on an even keel.

"But the only thing you'll get at the end of the game is a comment, 'Good job,' or maybe your picture in the paper as one of several bodies in there blocking.

"In a typical game, we would run 40 to 60 plays. When I went into the team room for films on Monday, I would remember every play coming up and what I did on that play. If I made the wrong call, I knew that. But now, I don't remember any individual games. I don't even remember our team records for each season—except San Diego went 2-12 my first year there!

"There's not much glory in being an O lineman, but I wouldn't trade my experiences.

"In fact, I played the 1971 season with a ruptured fourth lumbar. I didn't practice for the second half of the season. When I couldn't play the Pro Bowl, I got an examination and the trainer said you have a ruptured disc. I had surgery after the season.

"But I was lucky to avoid serious injury. At times I had both knees taped, my knuckles were messed up most of the time, my shoulders were beaten up. I was always beat up, but I only missed one game with the Lions. I started 139 out of 140 games.

"Let's face it. If you're going to play pro ball, first, you have to be in the right place at the right time, and I was. Second, you have to be intelligent enough to pay the game. You can't afford to make many mental mistakes. Third, you have to be lucky with injuries, because they always have other guys wanting to take your place."

Ed and his wife Tina live in Colorado. Previously the owner of a printing business and then a construction company, Ed spent several years coaching football in the later 1990s.

Flanagan won several honors, including being selected co-captain for his last six years as a Lion. Besides being picked for the Pro Bowls after the 1969, 1970, 1971, and 1973 seasons, Ed was named second team All NFL in 1968 and 1969 and first team All-NFC in 1970 and 1971.

When naming the All-Modern Era Lions Team for the years 1964-1993, the Detroit media chose Flanagan as first team center. Two of his best friends were also first team choices: Larry Hand (1964-77) as a defensive lineman and Bob Kowalkowski (1966-76) as an offensive guard.

Larry Hand observed, "As long as Ed Flanagan stayed healthy, nobody could challenge him. With Ed at center, we developed one of the best offensive lines in the NFL for years."

A hard worker, a dedicated team player, an excellent center, and a positive influence on his teammates, Ed Flanagan bloomed into a first-class offensive lineman who helped make the NFL into the prime time sport that it is today.

Flanagan, Edward Joseph (Bull) Center

6-3, 245 Purdue HS: Altoona [PA]
B: 2 / 23 / 1944, San Bernardino, PA
Drafted: 1965 Round 5 Det

<u>Year</u>	<u>Tm</u>	<u>Gm</u>			
1965	Det	14		1969	Det 14
1966	Det	14		1970	Det 14
1967	Det	14		1971	Det 14
1968	Det	14		1972	Det 14
				1973	Det 14
				1974	Det 13
				1975	SD 14
				1976	SD 12

Pro Bowls (4) 1970-72, 1974
All-NFC 1970 (UPI, TSN); 1971 (TSN)