

Fred Miller, Defensive Tackle

From the “Iron Men” of Homer, Louisiana, to the Super Bowl

By Jim Sargent

When Fred Miller began his final high school season in Homer, Louisiana, in 1957, he shared the same unspoken dreams of most of his teammates. He and his football buddies hoped Homer High would have a good year. Most of his teammates also hoped they could play college football and earn degrees.

By the time Miller took off his pads for the last time after the 1972 season, football had provided him with a good life. Fred had anchored the line on Homer's championship team, received All-American honors on two Louisiana State University bowl-winning squads, won Pro Bowl recognition three times with the Baltimore Colts in the National Football League, and earned a Super Bowl Ring in 1971.

In other words, Miller had the ability and the good fortune of playing on outstanding teams at the high school, college, and pro levels. He still has good friends who played alongside him on all three teams. Fred says the camaraderie and the fleeting glory he experienced on those gridirons of three or four decades ago made all of the up-and-downs worthwhile.

Born on August 8, 1940, Fred grew up in Homer, a small town in the oil field region of northern Louisiana. Most people in the area loved high school football. The Homer oil field became a boom area in the 1940s after H.L. Hunt drilled his first well within 20 miles. After Hunt's field came in, El Dorado, Haynesville, and Homer became the world's oil capital.

During the boom times the population of Homer grew to about 5,000. The local high school graduated only 35 or 40 seniors each year. But Homer always played football against larger schools. In fact, local businessmen would drive up to the Pennsylvania oil areas and offer jobs in the Homer field to fathers with oil rig experience who also had big, strong, talented sons.

In 2003 Fred Miller talked about football memories dating to his first three-game season as a sixth grader. People in Homer would pitch in money to help the school buy football equipment. With no junior high, the school district placed the eighth grade in the high school. After lettering as a freshman, Fred started at center and tackle his last three years. In his senior year, the Homer Pelicans had 19 boys go out for football. They fielded only a varsity team.

Fred recalled, “Our coach, Glenn Gossett, hired a new assistant coach that year. When the assistant came in and saw the 19 players, he wanted to go back to his job in the oil fields. But they all stayed with us.”

Homer competed at the double-A level, but most of the opponents were triple-A schools. Homer's size made it a class B school. But when they had a great track team two years earlier, the administration moved Homer to Class AA.

A local sportswriter coined the term “Iron Men” after Homer, playing eleven starters and two subs out of 18 dressed for the game, outplayed a supposedly superior Bossier team. The game ended in a 6-6 tie, but only after Homer's winning touchdown was called back on a penalty.

After the tie and the 13-6 loss to Ruston, Homer consistently drubbed larger schools by surprising scores, including 59-0 over Many, 46-0 over unbeaten Plain Dealing, and 33-0 over Springhill. After stopping unbeaten Minden, 19-6, the Pelicans won the District I-AA title by stomping St. John's, 60-0.

Playing in the North Louisiana semifinals, the “Iron Men” dumped Pineville in the rain, 6-0. Homer then won the North Louisiana title by beating Ruston, 21-15. With a few minutes left in the third quarter, Ruston led, 16-0. But after what one writer called “the greatest comeback by a high school football team in modern years,” the Iron Men won, 21-16.

For players like Miller, quarterback Bobby Flurry, halfbacks Ray Wilkins and Sammy Camp, running backs Daryl Ackley and G.W. Zachary, center Ray Weaver, guards Herman Coleman, Buddy Parker, and Kenneth Hood, and tackles John Wayne Odom, Ronnie Terry, and Tommy Owens, ends Charles Lewis, Gladney Davidson, Eugene Pixley, Jimmy Andrews, and Billy Thomas, their great season finally ended on December 20, 1957, when Morgan City won the Louisiana state championship over Homer, 19-7.

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"We would not have lost," Miller remembered, "if we had not lost our halfback, Ray Wilkins, who gained 1700 and some yards for the season and scored over 100 points. He separated a rib cartilage, and couldn't play. And our little fullback separated a shoulder."

Miller added, "Every kid in our starting lineup in 1957, and a couple that started for us in 1958, had the opportunity to go to college on a full or partial scholarship."

At Louisiana State, Miller started for three years (freshmen couldn't play varsity ball). The squad had three teams, the White, or first team, which played offense and defense; the Gold was an offensive team—they would come in to return a punt and run one series of downs; and the "Chinese Bandits" were a defensive team. When LSU punted, the Bandits took the punt and played one series of downs.

In his first year Miller played with the Bandits. After that, he captained the Bandit defense but played mostly with the White team both ways. In 1963 LSU finished with a 10-1 record, including a shutout of Texas in the Cotton Bowl:

"We played Colorado in our junior year in the Orange Bowl, and we beat them. After that, our coach, Paul Dietzell, left and went to Army. Charley Mac [McClendon] took over. In our senior year, we went to the Cotton bowl and beat Texas. We shut them out, 13-0. Texas has not been shut out since in a bowl game."

Miller graduated with a Bachelor's in Agriculture on January 29, 1963. Oakland of the American Football League drafted him, but Fred didn't consider it. The Colts had drafted him:

"The Colts signed me for two years. I got ten grand for a bonus. My first year I played for \$14,000 and my second year for \$15,000. I was told if I negotiated with the American League, I would have been better off. But I had no intentions of going. I wanted to play in the NFL."

Fred knew several teammates, because he played in the Senior Bowl, the Coaches' All-American Game, and the College All-Star Game against the previous year's NFL champions.

"My rookie year was Don Shula's first year. Weeb Ewbank drafted us, but before we got here, the Colts had fired Ewbank and hired Shula. Mackey at tight end and Vogel at left tackle started right away. They needed them.

"The first ball game in my rookie year was the only game I didn't start in my whole career with Baltimore, if I was able and not injured. I always had back problems. After the first six or seven games, I wore a back brace for the rest of my career.

"About the third or fourth game, Jerry Logan started at safety. So we had four kids who came up together who became starters before the year was out. And Willie Richardson was getting playing time at wide receiver. He started in 1966.

"Gary Cuozzo was also in our group of rookies. He played behind John Unitas, until he got a shot to play. Later, Gary dislocated his shoulder, and the Colts traded him to Minnesota."

Asked in 2003 about his team's togetherness in Baltimore, Fred recollected, "We walked into a good group. People say a lot of things about Carroll Rosenbloom. But Carroll was a pretty caring guy. He helped a lot with that team feeling, from the top down. Don Kellett, our general manager, insisted that the players become part of the community, and we did. Consequently, a lot of guys from that era stayed in Baltimore.

"When I spent part of a year with the Redskins in 1973, I realized what we had in Baltimore. We all did things together. The wives did things together. New people would come in, and the wives would get rookies' wives hooked up with doctors, that kind of stuff. We used to go out as a group to one or two restaurants, maybe 10 or 15 at one restaurant and another group at another restaurant. Or we'd have parties at one person's house, and everybody came. We looked after one another. We still do."

In 1963, Fred's rookie season, the Colts finished with an 8-6 record and ranked third in the Western Conference. The Chicago Bears (11-1-2) won the West and eventually the NFL Championship over the New York Giants.

The Colts lost five of their first eight games, but Shula's squad kept improving. Johnny Unitas, the modest Hall of Famer, guard Jim Parker, end Ray Berry, halfback-flanker Lenny Moore, and defensive end Gino Marchetti were among the veterans from Baltimore's NFL championship teams of 1958 and 1959. Shula worked in the new talent, including Jerry Hill at fullback, Tom Matte at halfback, end John Mackey, offensive tackle Bob Vogel, defensive back Jerry Logan, and Miller.

In the fourth quarter of the opener against the Giants, a 37-28 loss at Baltimore's Memorial Stadium, Shula subbed Miller for 6'7" 285-pound veteran John Diehl. Faster and quicker at 6'3" and 240, the LSU All-American got the job done.

Miller started the following week as the Colts traveled to the West Coast and beat the San Francisco Forty-Niners, 20-14. Thereafter, Fred was a fixture in the Baltimore defense, until he had surgery on both knees after the 1971 season. The NFL did not keep statistics on the number of tackles made in the 1960s, but Baltimore sportswriters like Seymour Smith said Miller always ranked among Baltimore's leaders.

In 1964 the Colts improved to 12-2 and won the Western Conference Title. After two injury-plagued seasons, Lenny Moore returned to form and set a new league record with 20 touchdown catches. Fullback Tony Lorick and Jerry Hill bolstered Baltimore's running attack, and Unitas handled the passing game. With veterans like Gino Marchetti, linebacker Bill Pellington, and cornerback Bobby Boyd enjoying great seasons, the Colts' defense improved.

But when Baltimore played the Browns at Cleveland Stadium for the NFL crown on December 27, 1964, Cleveland won, 34-0. Both teams played scoreless ball in the first half, but the Browns scored 17 points in the third quarter. Behind the passing of Frank Ryan, who threw three TD passes to end Gary Collins, and the rushing of powerful Jim Brown, who ground out 114 yards, Cleveland dominated the second half.

Despite the loss, Baltimore had a fine team. In 1965 the Colts came back with an 8-3-1 season—tying the Lions, losing to the Bears, and losing twice to the Green Bay Packers.

The major defensive improvement came when the Colts traded halfback Joe Don Looney to the Lions for 6'2" 220-pound Dennis Gaubatz, who took over at middle linebacker and called defensive signals. Dennis and Fred Miller were teammates at LSU, and they renewed their friendship in Baltimore.

"Fred was a good friend and everybody respected him," Gaubatz said in 2003. "When he spoke, everyone listened."

But under Shula's leadership, the Colts could not seem to get the big break. Johnny Unitas injured his knee in game twelve, a 13-0 loss at home to the Bears. One week later, in a 42-27 loss in Green Bay, backup Gary Cuozzo separated his shoulder.

Shula was forced to use halfback Tom Matte, a quarterback at Ohio State who had not played that position in the NFL. Relying on roll-out passes, quarterback runs, and pitchouts, and, above all, a tough defense, the Colts stopped the Rams, 20-17, and forced a playoff with the Packers for the Western Conference title.

In Green Bay on December 26, 1965, after Packers' great Bart Starr was injured in the first quarter, neither team had a first-string quarterback. Baltimore jumped to a 7-0 lead when Don Shinnick picked up Bill Anderson's fumble and ran 25 yards to score. Matte rushed for 57 yards and passed for 40, while Zeke Bratkowski led Green Bay's offense to one touchdown.

With Baltimore ahead 10-7 and 1:58 remaining, Don Chandler kicked a 37-yard field goal for the Packers. Even though the ball flew inches outside of the goal post according to the Colts, official Jim Tunney signaled the kick was good—tying the score at 10-10. In the NFL's first "sudden-death" championship game, the Packers won, 13-10, when Chandler kicked a legitimate 35-yarder.

In his excellent book *From Colts to Ravens* (1997), Baltimore sportswriter John Steadman reported that contemporary film clips of the tying kick showed the ball sailing wide to the right. As a belated result, the NFL in 1966 raised the goal posts 10 feet higher and ruled that one official would be stationed under each upright on field goal attempts.

Steadman wrote, "In the locker room, Miller, a strong, mobile tackle and never one to pollute the atmosphere with unnecessary verbiage, said with strong conviction, 'If that kick was good I'm ready to start eating the football.'"

Instead of playing for the NFL championship, which Green Bay won over Cleveland, 23-12, Baltimore traveled to the Orange Bowl in Miami and crushed the Dallas Cowboys, 35-3, in the league's Playoff Bowl—a game held in the 1960s for conference runner-ups.

Reflecting on Chandler's disputed field goal, Miller commented, "Our emotions were just supercharged. Everybody was so disappointed, because we knew the field goal was bad.

"That was the only time, if I had passed by an official, I probably would have slugged him. In those days, that would have been the end of my career. But that was the emotion we had, and that's the way I felt. Fortunately, I didn't see any officials leaving the field!"

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In 1966, the season followed by the first "Super Bowl" between the top teams of the NFL and the AFL, the Colts finished 9-5. After a 24-3 opening day loss in Green Bay (the Packers won the second game against the Colts, 14-10), Baltimore trailed the Packers (12-2) all year long.

Still, Don Shula switched Mike Curtis from fullback to linebacker, where he joined Dennis Gaubatz and Don Shinnick, making the Colts' run defense even better. Unitas injured his arm against the Atlanta Falcons in a 19-6 win on November 13, meaning that Cuozzo stepped in to move the Colts' offense, but with defensive backs Bobby Boyd, Lenny Lyles, Alvin Haymond, Jerry Logan, and Jim Welch playing well against the pass, Baltimore remained one of the league's best teams.

Regardless, instead of playing for the championship, the Colts traveled to Miami and the Playoff Bowl for the second straight year—this time beating the Philadelphia Eagles, 20-14.

The NFL split the league into four divisions in 1967, placing the Rams, the Colts, the Forty-Niners, and the Atlanta Falcons in the Coastal Division. Baltimore may have been the league's best team at 11-1-2. The Colts led the league in offense with 5,008 yards and set a club record for fewest points allowed. But the Rams also had an 11-1-2 record.

Baltimore's only loss came to Los Angeles in the season's finale, 34-10. Due to the NFL's new rule to cover a tie, the team with the most points scored in games against the other team would be the division champion.

Having tied the Rams and the Minnesota Vikings on consecutive weekends in October, Baltimore placed second to Los Angeles in total points, 58-34. In fact, the Rams *tied* the Colts in their first game, 24-24, when LA's Bruce Gossett kicked a field goal from the 47-yard line that hit the upright—and bounced inside.

Reflecting on 1967, Dennis Gaubatz, who called defensive signals, said, "Once late in a game when we were behind against Dallas, Rick Volk (a rookie at that time), came into the huddle and said we should 'gang the quarterback.' Sweat dripping off him and tired, Fred looked up and asked, 'What the hell do you think we've been trying to do all day?' Needless to say, it broke the huddle up!"

Even though he was named to his first of three straight Pro Bowls, Miller was disappointed again. As John Steadman wrote about the Colts in the mid-1960s, each year they seemed to find a new way to sidetrack their championship expectations.

But the Colts dominated the NFL in 1968. When Unitas suffered torn ligaments in his arm during an exhibition against Dallas, Earl Morrall, acquired two weeks earlier in a trade with the Giants, took over and became the league's MVP.

Near the season's end, Unitas proclaimed himself ready to go, although his arm was not 100% healed. But behind Morrall, Baltimore beat Minnesota to win the Coastal Division Title and then drubbed Cleveland, 34-0, to win the NFL Championship. Sportswriters hailed the Colts as one of the best teams in NFL history.

Favored by 16 to 20 points, or more, the Colts met the AFL Champion New York Jets in Super Bowl III. The Packers had won the first two Super Bowls, beating the Kansas City Chiefs in 1967, 35-10, and the Oakland Raiders in 1968, 33-14.

Super Bowl III held in Miami on January 12, 1969, turned out to be a dark day in the history of the Colts. Earl Morrall suffered his worst game of the season, completing six of 17 passes and throwing three interceptions. The Colts did everything but score in the first half—missing on four scoring opportunities.

On the other hand, Joe Namath completed 17 of 28 passes, including four for 43 yards on New York's 80-yard TD drive in the second quarter. Fullback Matt Snell rushed for 121 yards, scored the game's only touchdown, and caught four passes. Still, the Jets led only 7-0 at the half.

In the second half Namath led the Jets' offense to three field goals, with Jim Turner's 9-yarder early in the fourth quarter making the score 16-0. Late in the third quarter, after Morrall's third interception, Shula inserted Unitas. With his elbow sore, the longtime Baltimore hero threw an interception in the end zone from the 25-yard line.

Late in the final period Unitas led the Colts on a drive capped by Jerry Hill's one-yard touchdown run, making the score 16-7. After recovering the onside kick with 3:19 left, the Colts began another drive. But the club's last hope ended when linebacker Larry Grantham batted away Unitas' fourth down pass in the end zone.

Reflecting on the heart-breaking loss, Miller recollected, "When we played the Jets, that was without a doubt the best defensive team I've ever played on. We shut out four teams in 1968. To this day, all of us that played are still trying to figure out what the heck happened. Whatever it was, it didn't happen. Our offense didn't jell.

"Don Shula screwed around and didn't put John Unitas in until the end of the game, and Earl Morrall just didn't have it that day. That was pretty much the size of it.

"Shula was going to give Earl the first half, and John was supposed to take the second half. We came in at halftime, and Shula told John, 'I'm going to let Earl start the third quarter and see if he does better.' Shula didn't keep his word, and he let Earl go the almost the whole third quarter. John just didn't have time to work with the ball.

"John never forgave Shula. John pretty much lost all respect for Shula after that incident."

The Colts slipped to 8-5-1 in 1969, finishing second the Rams in the Coastal Division. Three veteran starters retired: defensive end Ordell Braase, linebacker Don Shinnick, and cornerback Bobby Boyd. Several Colts endured subpar seasons, including Dennis Gaubatz, Jerry Hill, Willie Richardson, John Mackey, and Lenny Lyles. Unitas regained his starting job, but he was not the Unitas of old. Shula moved Mike Curtis to middle linebacker in place of Gaubatz against the Redskins on November 2. Traded to the Redskins in 1970, Gaubatz decided to retire.

Sportswriter Merrill Swanson described Miller—now in his third Pro Bowl season—as a "player's player." Fred was quiet and folksy, where tackle Billy Ray Smith was full of talk and bravado. At 6'3" and 250 pounds, Miller was not huge—not like Bubba Smith at 6'7" and 295.

"Nonetheless," wrote Swanson, "some persons in Baltimore say part of the reason for the big-play effectiveness of Billy Ray and Bubba is because of Fred Miller.

"Miller's initial charge frequently forces two men to block him. And that frees someone else to get to the quarterback. Especially Billy Ray and Bubba."

In 1970 the NFL merged with the AFL and created the National Football Conference and the American Football Conference. Three former NFL teams, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland, moved to the AFC. Now coached by former assistant Don McCafferty, the Colts won the AFC's Eastern Division with an 11-2-1 record.

Unitas and Morrall relieved each other as the season progressed, and the Colts outscored all AFC teams. Baltimore's first-rate defense featured Miller and Billy Ray Smith at tackle, Bubba Smith and Roy Hilton at end, Mike Curtis, Ted Hendricks, and Bob Grant at linebacker, Jim Duncan and Charley Stukes at cornerback, and safeties Rick Volk and Jerry Logan.

After defeating the Cincinnati Bengals in a playoff at Baltimore, 17-0, the Colts won the AFC Title by stopping the Oakland Raiders, also at Memorial Stadium, 27-17.

Recalling Baltimore's 16-13 victory over Dallas in Super Bowl V, Miller said, "It was one of the hardest-fought, most physical ball games I ever played. It was pretty much a defensive game. Both teams had good offenses and good defenses. We beat the hell out of one another.

"I was having knee problems, and I was headed for surgery when the season was over. In practice, I'd do something to my knees, and it would be so painful I'd have to go out and sit down. I made up my mind during the Super Bowl if I had problems, I would come out and let someone else to take over—not stay out there like I normally would.

"Fortunately, I didn't have any problems during the game, but I know it was the most *physical* ball game I ever played. As a club, we left it all out on the field.

"Late in the game I was scared to death they would take quarterback Craig Morton out and put Roger Staubach in, and Staubach would start running all over the place. I wasn't sure we could keep up with Staubach. But Dallas stayed with Morton, and we pretty much had his number."

"Fred Miller was a stalwart on our defensive line," fullback Tom Nowatzke commented. "Fred was tough to block. They often had to double-team him. Fred was strong and steady."

The game seesawed for four quarters, thanks to 11 turnovers. Baltimore lost three fumbles but made three interceptions, all in the fourth quarter. Dallas lost one fumble but made three interceptions. Cowboy Mike Clark kicked two field goals in the first half.

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The Colts scored on a broken pass play when John Mackey, at mid-field, grabbed a long Unitas aerial that bounced off the hands of intended receiver Eddie Hinton, and off the fingertips of Dallas cornerback Mel Renfro. Mackey grabbed the ball and rambled for a touchdown.

The Cowboys blocked rookie Jim O'Brien's extra point try, leaving the score tied, 6-6. A few minutes later Morton hit Duane Thomas for a 7-yard TD, and Dallas led at the half, 13-6.

In the fourth quarter Baltimore tied the score after Rick Volk intercepted a Morton pass at the Dallas 33 and returned it to the 3-yard line. Three plays later, Tom Nowatzke, the former Lion who recovered from back surgery in 1969, bulled into the end zone. O'Brien's kick tied it.

With 1:52 to play, the Cowboys fielded a punt at the Colt 48-yard line. On second down Miller made the biggest sack of his career, nailing Morton. But a Cowboy penalty was also stepped off from the point of the foul, moving the ball back to the Dallas 27. On the next play Mike Curtis intercepted a Morton pass at the 41 and returned the ball to the Dallas 28. Three plays later, O'Brien kicked the game-winning field goal with 9 seconds remaining. The battle ended when Jerry Logan intercepted Morton's final pass.

Miller played two more seasons, after successful surgery on both knees. In 1971 Baltimore went 10-4 and finished second in the AFC East. The Colts won a playoff game over Cleveland, 20-3, but lost the AFC title game to the Shula-coached Miami Dolphins, 21-0.

Miller believes the Colts needed one receiver to make it to the Super Bowl again:

"We had Roy Jefferson as one of our wide receivers, and Roy got into a contract dispute with Carroll Rosenbloom. Mr. Rosenbloom supposedly promised Roy lots of stuff, but he wouldn't uphold his word. When Roy said he didn't want to play for him, they traded Roy to the Redskins for 'Cotton' Speyrer, a draft pick out of Texas. Cotton came in here injured, and he didn't play.

"But if we had Roy Jefferson, we'd have gone back to the Super Bowl in 1971. We were just lacking that one good receiver." In 1972, Miller's final season, he suffered knee problems for most of the year, but he still played tough.

"Fred Miller has got to be one of the finest defensive tackles in the league," Baltimore assistant John Sandusky stated in 1972. "He never has a bad game although you know he's playing with pain, although he'll never tell you."

New owner Bob Irsay—who took over during the exhibition season—brought in general manager Joe Thomas. After the Colts lost four of their first five games, Thomas fired Don McCafferty. John Sandusky, made interim coach, was told to play Marty Domres at quarterback. By the time the 1973 preseason began, Miller had been traded to the Redskins, Bob Vogel had retired, and Thomas had disposed of many veterans, including Unitas, Tom Matte, Dan Sullivan, Bubba Smith, Jerry Logan, and Tom Nowatzke.

Rather than play on sore knees for Washington, Miller retired. He has worked at a number of business ventures in the Baltimore area since the late 1960s. He worked for W.R. Grace for three years, for Honeywell in computer sales for three years, and in the material handling business for several more years. He also worked in sales for Ward Machinery at several positions, and recently he has handled marketing work, all in the Baltimore area.

Reflecting on his football experiences, Fred values the camaraderie he enjoyed on his three great teams:

"I enjoyed playing football, even the aches and pains and the heartaches. Most of all, I'm a kid from north Louisiana. My dad was a sharecropper and my mom was a nurse. They loved my sister and myself very much, and they did everything they could to help us.

"Football is the reason I got an education. It's the reason I met many, many people. I've had lunch at the White House. I've met a lot of folks in politics, and movies, and everything else. It's been a good life. We've got four wonderful boys and seven wonderful grandchildren. My wife Charlene and I were married 40 years on February 2, 2003.

"When I get together with the guys from Homer, like in 1997, or the guys from LSU, or the guys from Baltimore, well, you just don't make friends like that anywhere else."

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When you remember the Homer Iron Man, think about the quiet defensive stalwarts who help make good football teams into championship teams. Especially with the Baltimore Colts, Fred Miller was an important but unsung hero who finally earned his Super Bowl Ring.

FRED MILLER

Miller, Frederick David

LSU

B: 8 / 8 / 1940, Homer, LA

Drafted: 1962 Round 7 Bal

DT

6-3, 250

HS: Homer [LA]

Year Tm Gm

1963 Bal 13

1967 Bal 14

1970 Bal 12

1964 Bal 14

1968 Bal 14

1971 Bal 14

1965 Bal 12

1969 Bal 14

1972 Bal 12

1966 Bal 14