



Bill Laskey

This article was written by Jay Zahn.

Bill Laskey parlayed a free agent contract into a ten-year NFL career and showed a knack for reaching the playoffs. Born February 10, 1943, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, home of the Big Ten's Michigan Wolverines, William Grant Laskey grew up in Milan, about 15 miles south of Ann Arbor. Milan only had a couple of thousand folks in it at the time; it's about doubled since then.

Bill starred in football and track as a high schooler. He attracted enough attention to get offers from Big Ten schools. Despite dad Durward having played for the Wolverines, Iowa coach Jerry Burns (also a Michigan alum) persuaded Bill to sign a letter of intent. The letter was signed and sealed, but not yet delivered, when Bill had a change of heart. Bill's mother and the Milan postmaster retrieved the now errant letter before it left Milan.¹ Crisis averted, Bill became a Wolverine. Bill followed fellow Milan prep star Joe O'Donnell to Ann Arbor.

Bill retained his high school position of halfback as a freshman, then was switched to end for the varsity. These were down years for the Wolverines, winning just two games in 1962 and three the following year, though the latter featured an upset of Dick Butkus-led Illinois. Bill contributed nine pass receptions and a touchdown for the two seasons. In 1964 the NCAA ended the "iron-man" limited substitution rules. Coach Bump Elliott instituted offensive and defensive platoons, and a third that went both ways. Bill went to defense as a right defensive end. The Wolverines, returning 18 of their 22 top players, and were about to reverse their fortunes.

Playing a loaded regular season schedule (five games against top 10 ranked teams), the Wolverines came within a one-point loss to Purdue of an undefeated season. After that loss, Michigan reeled off five consecutive victories to win the Big Ten title. Bill contributed a couple of sacks against Northwestern, and had an interception and 19-yard return against Iowa. The key game came last, against Ohio State. The Wolverine coaching staff had keyed on Ohio State's direction of their plays based on a stance of one of the offensive backs. Bill and fellow defensive end Jim Conley would yell "kill" and blitz when the play was going the other way.² The defense led a 10-0 Michigan victory and Big Ten title.

Michigan was heading to the Rose Bowl for the first time in 15 years. The unexpected season brought on a celebration with the innocent exuberance of a Cinderella champion to Ann Arbor. The party atmosphere carried on to Pasadena until coach Elliott got the



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team serious for opponent Oregon State. Michigan wound up beating the Beavers easily, 34-7.

The champion team received a bit of national notoriety with a fashion layout in Esquire magazine. Bill, three teammates, and Bill's girlfriend Jane Horsfall were featured in the latest in short pants.³

Bill wound up regarded as one of Michigan's lesser lights, as All Big Ten honors went to four other Michigan defenders, but not Bill. Not a surprise, then, that Bill wasn't chosen in either the 1965 NFL or AFL draft. But he had a connection. Old teammates Joe O'Donnell and Tom Keating already played for the Buffalo Bills, who were owned by Detroit native Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. The Bills drafted two other Wolverines that year, though those players didn't sign. Bill did, as a free agent on July 15th.

Bill would be tried as a linebacker. He already had some pass coverage experience from Michigan. But the Bills' defense was loaded. Starting linebackers John Tracey, Harry Jacobs, and Mike Stratton were healthy and returning, and the lone backup Paul Maguire was the team's punter as well.

Laskey still impressed, despite a twisted knee in training camp. Bill made the team, and draft choice Marty Schottenheimer did too, making for six linebackers. Fellow rookie Chuck Hurston was moved to defensive end, and 3rd round draft choice Al Atkinson, the odd man out, was waived to the Jets.

Bill mainly saw action on the coverage units in 1965. A highlight came against the Patriots on November 8, when Bill was credited with blocking Tom Yewcic's punt. Really, Laskey threw another Pat player into Yewcic and teammate Dudley Meredith recovered.

The Bills persevered through some offensive injuries to repeat as AFL Champions for 1965. The 23-0 victory over San Diego meant a winners' share of \$5,189 for Laskey. The Bills and Michigan alums hung together on and off the field. During the season, Bill rented a house in Ann Arbor with O'Donnell, Tom Keating, and Tom's brother Bill.⁴

Bill and the other five Buffalo linebackers returned to Buffalo in 1966. Draft choice Paul Guidry also pressed for a job. Now Bill was the odd man out. Laskey was waived in late August. The Oakland Raiders sent the Bills a draft choice for his services.

The Raiders were a coming team, but their linebacking unit had been rated the weakest part of the team by one preseason expert. Bill would backup outside linebackers John



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Robert (J.R.) Williamson and Gus Otto, while Dan Connors moved to the middle to compete with Bill Budness for that job.

After a few weeks spent learning the Raiders' defense, Bill was expected to compete for a starting job. Again, the Raiders' interest in Laskey may have stemmed more from dissatisfaction with current performance than Bill's practice performance. Coach John Rauch's opinion on the matter was well illustrated in a midseason game against the Jets. Bill started at left (strong side) linebacker in place of J.R. Williamson. Williamson replaced Laskey, then right linebacker Gus Otto, in turn until coach Rauch returned to the original combination, all to limited effect.⁵

Bill saw increased opportunity as the season went on. Of note was his November 20 performance against the Broncos, where he sprung Rodger Bird on a 42-yard punt return with a key block, then later followed up middle linebacker Dan Conner's sack of Max Choboian with one of his own. The Raiders finished the season with an 8-5-1 record., good for second place. The defense actually gave up the fewest yards in the AFL, but the performance against the run game was below average.

In 1967 Laskey beat out J.R. Williamson at left linebacker. He and cornerback Willie Brown were the only significant changes to the unit, but the Raiders defense had changed, and it showed in the team's first game. A shutout of the hapless Broncos was one thing, but Denver managed minus 5 yards from scrimmage for the game, an AFL record. Rookie Floyd Little managed just 4 yards in 7 carries in his debut. The Raiders showed it wasn't a fluke the next week. Patriot Jim Nance, the AFL's top rusher for 1966 and 1967, had bulled his way for 208 yards in a 1966 meeting with the Raiders. This time, Nance was held to 68 yards in a 35-7 Raiders victory. A month later, Nance was further held to 51 yards on 19 carries in another Raider win.

For the season, the Raiders now had a top defense across the board. The team shaved 55 points and 616 yards off their 1966 totals. The run defense went from giving up 4.3 yards a carry to 3.2 yards, the league's best, as was the 1,129 rushing yards allowed. Most impressive was the number of sacks, which jumped from 36 to 67. The Daryle Lamonica led offense added a league leading 468 points, en route to a 13-1 record and Western Division championship.

Bill's contributions to the defense ran deeper than statistics. Laskey recovered three fumbles, but that didn't lead the team. He intercepted no passes, and was well down the list of leading sackers. Bill did show marked improvement from sometimes shoddy open field tackling techniques he'd displayed in 1966. He also showed the savvy to work out stunting techniques with left end Ike Lassiter early in the season. All of that paid off in



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Bill earning a second team All-AFL berth on the Newspaper Enterprise Associates Team. Four other defensive teammates joined him on the first or second team.

The Western Division Champion Raiders matched up against the Houston Oilers for the AFL Championship. The New Year's Eve game, in Oakland, provided far more temperate weather, and a far less dramatic result, than the Green Bay "Ice Bowl" game held earlier in the day. Oilers' thousand-yard rusher Hoyle Granger could make no headway against the Raiders, rushing for 19 yards in 14 attempts, while Raiders Hewritt Dixon and Pete Banaszak each topped the century mark. The Raiders defense held the Oilers to 146 total yards and produced three turnovers in a 40-7 rout.

The Green Bay Packers would put an end to the Raiders' dream season in Super Bowl II. Packers linebackers cut off the Raiders sweep. Packers runners steadily ground out yardage, and the Packers 160 yards gained rushing was the Raiders defense worst performance of the season. The Raiders defense produced three sacks, but no turnovers, and seemed to serve as anonymous spectators to Vince Lombardi's final Packer triumph. Bill personally had little opportunity to affect the outcome, being most visible in a prone position in the end zone as Donny Anderson skipped past for a third quarter Packers TD. "(Super Bowl MVP) Bart Starr picked up our (red) dogs real well and he controlled the ball. We're young and that's where Green Bay has it on us. We learned an awful lot," Laskey said after the loss.⁶

The AFL-NFL merger not only produced the Super Bowl, but preseason games between the two leagues. Bill got a nice reunion with former Wolverine Rick Volk when the Raiders met the Colts in August. Volk was not only a former teammate but a family member and business partner. Rick had married Bill's sister Charlene, and Bill and Rick shared ownership of a Columbus, Ohio nightclub.

A less happy matchup occurred when the Raiders met the Bay area rival 49ers. After missing a cross body block, 49ers tight end Bob Windsor leg whipped Laskey, catching Bill's Achilles tendon and snapping it. An angry Laskey claimed "It was deliberate."⁷ As the Raiders headed to the regular season to defend their AFL title, Bill headed to the training room for rehab, his season presumptively over.

Laskey was joined in the training room by Tom Keating, who'd suffered his own Achilles injury. Duane Benson took over at left linebacker, but he was later supplanted by rookie Ralph 'Chip' Oliver. Laskey and Keating would be missed. The Raiders actually gave up 233 points in 1968, exactly as many as 1967. However, the defense gave up nearly 800 more yards from scrimmage in 1968. Longer extended drives meant worse field position for the Raiders offense, which score 13 fewer points despite gaining



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more than 500 more yards than 1967. The Raiders rushing defense reverted to a more pedestrian 4.1 yards per carry allowed.

Still, the Raiders tied for the Western Division championship, then defeated the Chiefs 41-6 in a playoff tiebreaker. Bill's rehab went well, so much so that he was activated for the AFL Championship game against the New York Jets, achieving the rare distinction of playing in the playoffs in a season in which he did not play in the regular season. Bill played only a cameo role in a 27-23 Raiders loss.

Laskey reported to camp for 1969 fully recovered. "No pain, no swelling, I feel great. My mobility and quickness seem the same as before," he said.⁸ Bill spent most of the season battling for playing time with his 1968 replacement, hippie linebacker Chip Oliver. Bill started opening day, but Chip took over after Laskey yielded a 39-yard pass play to the Dolphins' Jim Kiick. Bill got back in there in the Raiders' fourth game, again against Miami, and he picked off the first pass of his career, a Bob Griese aerial that Bill returned 25 yards to set up a field goal in a 20-20 tie. Off the interception schneid, Laskey followed with another in each of the next two Raider victories.

Oliver took over again when Laskey suffered a muscle pull, and had to miss games against the Bengals and Broncos. Oliver had his own interception (and return for touchdown) against the Broncos. When Bill came back, the two alternated until dithering head coach John Madden, their former linebacker coach, decided to go with Oliver for the division clinching finale against the Chiefs and subsequent playoff run.

Two days after the Raiders' 17-7 loss in the final AFL Championship Game, Laskey asked to be traded. "I wasn't treated with respect," Bill said. "I don't feel I can play for them again. I'm a good football player and I didn't have a bad season. They're just not playing me."⁹

The Raiders shopped Laskey in February, but no team would meet their asking price. Meanwhile, the enlightened Oliver decided to drop out of football and join a commune in May 1970. Bill didn't immediately relent, but decided to stop worrying and love the Raiders by training camp. "It's true, my attitude has changed..." he said. Hopefully, this Raider team's record will be even better, and I hope I can help be responsible for it."¹⁰

1970 would be the only season of his career that Laskey started all 14 games. The Raiders offensive and defensive performance had slipped a bit from their 1967-69 form, and the team played many close games. Every play would be needed.

Kicker/quarterback George Blanda parlayed his knack for late game heroics into an MVP award. Laskey made his own contributions. In a November game against the Chargers,



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Bill shadowed Brad Hubbert on an end zone pattern and intercepted a John Hadl pass, making a nice catch that brought memories of his days as a Michigan end. The Raiders won that one, 20-17. Two weeks later, Laskey made several key tackles in a narrow 14-13 win over the Jets.

Off the field, 1970 would be a family affair for Laskey. He'd welcome his second son into the world, as Lance joined Beau and wife Jane. Bill also returned to Michigan for the first time as a pro, as interconference game matched the Lions against the Raiders. Sixty-six Laskey fans (courtesy of Bill's tickets) couldn't bring the Raiders a victory, as the Lions prevailed 28-14.

An 8-4-2 record proved good enough for a Western Division title. The Raiders hosted the wild card upstart Miami Dolphins in the first round of the playoffs. The Dolphins featured running back Jim Kiick, a good runner and receiver who'd caught passes for more yards than any other NFL running back. In this game, Laskey was tested four times with passes to Kiick and backup Mercury Morris. Miami completed two for 14 yards, a pretty good outcome for Bill. A Lamonica bomb and a Willie Brown pick six were enough for a 21-14 win, and another appearance in the championship game.

The AFC championship game was a reunion with Rick Volk's team, the Colts. The Raiders just did not have enough defense to win. Johnny Unitas preferred bombs to dump offs to running backs, and hit enough of them for 245 yards in 11 completions. Norm Bulaich and company ground out enough yards on the ground for 363 total yards, 27 points, and no turnovers.

The loss marked the swan song for this Raiders' defense and Laskey's tenure as a Raider. Al Davis traded away defensive backs Kent McCloughan and Dave Grayson, and Bill was the next to go. The Raiders traded him to the Colts for safety Tommy Maxwell, with draft choices going both ways. The Raiders felt they had enough depth that Laskey was expendable with rookie Phil Villapiano eventually getting the job. The trade also allowed the Colts to deal away linebacker Bob Grant, unhappy because he'd been beaten out by Ray May.

Bill enjoyed the veteran atmosphere of the Colts, in contrast to the Raiders. "There are a bunch of self-centered people playing for Oakland. Here in Baltimore, the players can talk about things other than themselves... In Oakland, a second-stringer wouldn't go out of his way to help the guy ahead of him, but that's what's done here. It's amazing."¹¹ On the field, he'd back up outside linebackers May and Ted Hendricks. Laskey's progress was slowed due to the Colts playing zone defense nearly exclusively, as compared to the Raiders' man-to-man. He struggled in an early loss to the Browns when



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inserted due to Mike Curtis' injury. Bill fared better the next week in a start against the Patriots; he blocked a Charlie Gogolak field goal, and the Baltimore won 23-3.

Laskey's contributions were not needed much on the 1971 Colts, as their defense gave up a franchise low 140 points, and led the league in fewest yards allowed. Baltimore secured a wild card berth, and made it to the AFC Championship game before losing 21-0 to the Miami Dolphins. It was Laskey's fifth consecutive championship game appearance, and sixth in seven years as a pro.

By 1972, Bill had adjusted to the Colts' system. "I just had to get used to a system of thinking instead of reacting", he said.¹² He'd be deployed on occasion when the Colts shifted to a four linebacker defense, and he also replaced Ted Hendricks when the slender linebacker took a turn at defensive end. Laskey would also take the field more frequently in bench clearing efforts as the Colts began a new tradition of losing football in 1972. The team's 5-9 record being the worst in 18 years.

The Baltimore organization was changing. Robert Irsay obtained the team from owner Carroll Rosenbloom, and Joe Thomas was installed as general manager. Thomas fired coach Don McCaffery and many of the vets that had played in Super Bowls for the Colts were traded or nudged into retirement. By May 1973, Laskey was the oldest player on the team. Bill's senior status proved short-lived when Thomas dealt him to the Denver Broncos for a draft choice in August 1973.

The Broncos featured a diversified offense starring QB Charlie Johnson and RB Floyd Little, and a stout pass rush, but the back seven of the defense was below par. Laskey was expected to contend with incumbent Chip Myrtle, rookie Tom Jackson, and veterans Don Parish, Mike Simone, and Fred Forsberg for playing time. Bill won the job when Myrtle went out for the year with an injury, Jackson suffered his own shoulder injury, and Parish and Simone were moved to the right side to compete with Forsberg.

Laskey and the Broncos got off to a shaky start to the season. Against the 49ers, Bill gave up a 66-yard catch and run to back Jimmy Thomas, but helped hold that drive to a Bruce Gossett field goal. Laskey later intercepted a John Brodie pass, but fumbled the ball right back, setting up another field goal in a 36-34 loss.

The trade to the Broncos meant that Laskey would match up twice a year against his old mates, the Oakland Raiders, an opportunity that Bill relished. "Sure, I get a kick out of playing against the Raiders. It's a very competitive feeling to play against them. A lot of the guys I used to play with are still there... We're still friends, but you want to play your best against friends," he said.



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“I enjoyed the players on the Raiders, but I didn’t particularly get on with Al Davis because he didn’t want to pay very much... That’s the difference in the Denver organization, as compared to Oakland and Baltimore when I left there last season. Here they treat you like a human being.”¹³ For what it’s worth, Laskey’s comments disparaging the Raiders as a Baltimore Colt had become bulletin board fodder for Oakland back in 1971.

Everything came together in Week six of the 1973 season, when Denver hosted Oakland on Monday Night Football. It would be the Broncos’ first appearance in the four-year history of the show, and an excited sellout crowd produced a college type atmosphere for the 2-3 Broncos. On an early play, the Raiders’ Clarence Davis swept right. Laskey, blocked by tight end Bob Moore, strung Moore along the line of scrimmage while end Barney Chavous pursued. As Davis crossed the line of scrimmage, he, Moore, Laskey, and Chavous all met. Davis fumbled, and the ball popped free to waiting safety Bill Thompson. Thompson raced 80 yards for a touchdown, thrilling the Mile High Stadium crowd.

A late Jim Turner field goal led to a 23-23 tie, but the Broncos had arrived as a force. Denver ripped off four wins and a tie in their next five games and were in first place with three games to go. Laskey, unfortunately, suffered a season ending injury in the last of those wins against the Chiefs. Bronco losses to Dallas and Oakland knocked them out of the playoffs, but a 7-5-2 record made for the first winning Bronco team ever.

The 1974 offseason was tumultuous. The new World Football League courted many NFL veterans, and Laskey dickered with his home state Detroit Wheels before re-signing a multiyear contract with Denver. Then the NFL players staged a preseason strike. Bill led the linebackers in informal, noncontact workouts, while training camps were filled with rookies.

The 1974 Broncos season was one of consolidation of gains, rather than contention. The defense continued to give up too many pass yards (24th in the league); running back Otis Armstrong emerged, but the end result was exciting football with mediocre results (a 7-6-1 record.) The Raiders raced to a 12-2 record and clinched the division title early. Laskey had the satisfaction of intercepting a late Ken Stabler pass to preserve a 20-17 upset victory in Oakland. A Broncos 31-27 victory over the Lions on Thanksgiving also gave Bill his first pro victory in his home state.

Laskey’s playing time dwindled late in 1974 in favor of Jim O’Malley. He requested a trade to be closer to his Michigan home, and in February 1975, the Broncos traded Bill to the Detroit Lions for guard Chuck Walton. Angling for a reserve role, Laskey couldn’t



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beat out incumbents Mike Hennigan and Ed O'Neill, and was released on September 2, ending his NFL career.

Laskey settled back in Michigan, where he worked in the auto sales and insurance industries, and lives there today with his wife Dona, whom he married after his wife Jane died.

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