



Preston Ridlehuber

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Preston Ridlehuber played quarterback for two seasons at the University of Georgia leading them to a Sun Bowl triumph. He played for two AFL clubs and one NFL franchise, the Oakland Raiders, Buffalo Bills, and Atlanta Falcons appearing in 22 games. Despite his limited professional playing career he is remembered for two very memorable plays in AFL history, one that forever impacted pro football on television, and the other that is one of the most improbable plays to win a game in Buffalo Bills history.

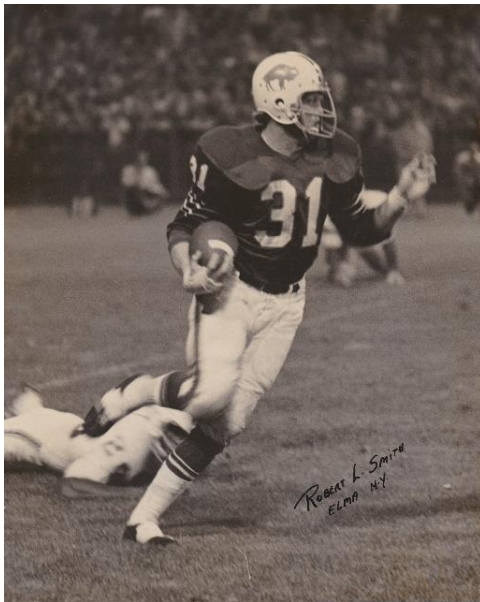


Photo Credit: Robert L. Smith

The New York Jets at Oakland Raiders game on November 17, 1968 changed professional football forever. A little used running back, Preston Ridlehuber, made a huge play in the last minute of the game to clinch the victory for the Raiders, that almost nobody saw.

The Jets led the Raiders 32-29 with 1:01 left to play and the Raiders had the ball on their own 22-yard line following a kickoff return by Charlie Smith. It was an extremely exciting back and forth game between the two rivals, with six different lead changes, a prelude to the AFL Championship game later that season. But what this game will forever be remembered for, is with one minute and one second remaining in the exciting three point game with the time approaching 7pm on the East coast, NBC had a



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commitment to broadcast the movie Heidi at the top of the hour and broke away from the game.

Two plays after cutting away, Raiders quarterback Daryle Lamonica threw a 43-yard touchdown pass to Smith and with the extra point, the Raiders regained the lead 36-32 with 42 seconds left. But the way this game was going, the Jets still had a chance to win it. However, on the ensuing kickoff, Jets return man Earl Christy was hit by Raiders linebacker Bill Budness forcing a fumble, Ridlehuber recovered the football and dove into the end zone, scoring the game clinching touchdown with 33 seconds remaining in the Raiders stunning 43-32 come from behind victory.

NBC was flooded with complaint calls because of the decision to switch from the game. Following the “Heidi game” as it became known, pro football required in their future telecasts of games that the networks not cut away from the game until it was completed. Since then the NFL has become a television behemoth and even the thought of cutting away from a live game near the end seems ridiculous.

For Ridlehuber this was one of the biggest plays of his career as this victory helped propel the Raiders into the AFL playoffs. Ridlehuber played the rest of the season with the Raiders (appearing in 10 regular season games) and participated in their playoff games versus the Kansas City Chiefs and the AFL championship game on December 29 in New York, where the Jets got their revenge defeating the Raiders 27-23, qualifying for Super Bowl III. Ridlehuber did not make another big play or score another touchdown for the Raiders. He was released after the season by the club but was signed by the Buffalo Bills for 1969.

Ridlehuber did not make the Bills in 1969 out of training camp but he was placed on the team’s taxi squad. He was activated off the taxi squad only hours before the team’s October 11, 1969 game versus the Boston Patriots. O.J. Simpson had suffered a head injury the week before and was unable to play. Ridlehuber began his first game as a Bill as the back-up running back to Mini-Max Anderson and was wearing jersey #36. However, during the game his jersey was ripped, and the Bills equipment manager ran to the locker room to find a replacement and grabbed jersey #31. Ridlehuber put on the jersey, with no nameplate on the back, wearing it the rest of the game while making history.

The Bills jersey #31 had never been issued to a player in team history. The jersey appears in the Bills original logo and it carries significance in Bills lore. The jersey was meant to represent the “spirit of the team.” The “spirit of the team,” the Buffalo fans, have always been among the most loyal, dedicated, and passionate fan bases in all pro football, thus jersey #31 has an especially important place in club history.



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The #31 jersey was not officially issued by the Bills to a player until 1990 when it was issued to cornerback J.D. Williams. Williams from Fresno State was the teams' #1 draft pick in the 1990 NFL draft, number 16 overall. At Fresno State he wore jersey #31, and not knowing the Bills history, he asked to wear the number. Denny Lynch, Bills Director of Public and Community Relations, spoke to Bills owner Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. about it and Wilson gave the approval to issue the number. The first official issuance of the #31 jersey happened in the Bills 31st season of pro football. However, back in 1969 the #31 jersey was mistakenly issued for a single game.

Ridlehuber in his first game as a Bill vs the Patriots carried the ball twice near the end of the first half gaining 11 yards on his first carry, and five yards on his second carry. When his jersey #36 was torn, he donned the #31 jersey.

Midway through the fourth quarter the Bills and Patriots were tied 16-16 when Anderson was hit in the face by linebacker John Bramlett, losing two teeth and having six others broken. With blood pouring out of his mouth, Ridlehuber came into replace Anderson with the Bills facing a first and fifteen from the Patriots 46-yard line and 5:08 remaining in the game. Quarterback James Harris handed the ball to Ridlehuber who ran to his left suddenly stopping, pivoted and spotted a streaking Haven Moses. Ridlehuber fired a pass, as far as he could throw the ball and Moses hauled it in, sprinting into the end zone for the touchdown giving the Bills a surprising 23-16 lead.

After his great halfback option play, he made the tackle on the ensuing kick-off returned by Carl Garrett, tackling him at the 30. After the Bills stopped the Patriots on the ensuing possession, Ridlehuber carried the ball twice more for nine yards helping to run out the clock for the Bills. The Bills held on to win with Ridlehuber's TD pass as the winning score, the only time in Bills history a halfback option pass for a touchdown were the winning points. He finished the game with four carries for 25 yards, one special teams' tackle and the 45-yard game winning TD pass, his only career pass in the pros.

The 46,201 fans at War Memorial Stadium for the Patriots game that day broke the stadium attendance record for a Bills game at that time.

The Bills had worked on the halfback option pass during that week in practice, but only with Anderson and Simpson, not Ridlehuber. It was a bold call by head coach John Rauch completely fooling the Patriots. The next week Ridlehuber was back wearing #36 and #31 would be dormant for 21 years until 1990 and J.D. Williams. Ridlehuber finished the season with the Bills, playing eight more games for the club. Following the conclusion of the 1969 season Ridlehuber retired from pro football.

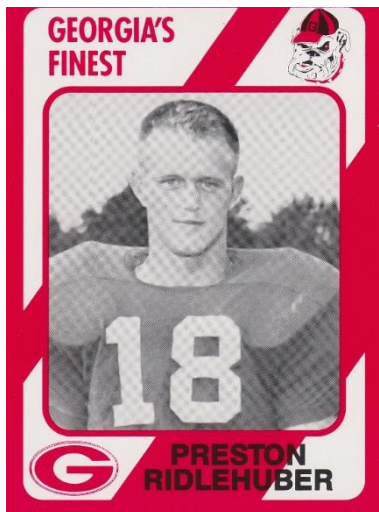


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Howard Preston Ridlehuber, Jr. was born on November 2, 1943 in Greenwood, South Carolina. He was a multi-sport star in high school in Gainesville, GA garnering All-State honors as both a quarterback and baseball pitcher. He passed up a contract offer from major league baseballs' Pittsburgh Pirates to pitch and instead attended Georgia where he could play quarterback for the Bulldogs.

At Georgia, the 6'2" 217-pound Ridlehuber was an option quarterback. He led the Bulldogs to a 7-3-1 record in 1964 and a victory in the Sun Bowl and a 6-4 record in 1965, both under head coach Vince Dooley. The highlight of his college career was being named the 1964 Sun Bowl MVP in the Bulldogs 7-0 victory over Texas Tech.



Ridlehuber was drafted out of the University of Georgia by the New York Jets in the 19th round, pick #168 overall in the 1966 AFL Draft, and was selected by the San Francisco 49ers in the 11th round, pick #166 overall, in the 1966 NFL Draft. He signed with the 49ers but was cut in training camp. He then signed with the expansion Atlanta Falcons.

He played three games for the Falcons in their inaugural 1966 season, scoring two pass receiving touchdowns in a 57-33 loss to the Pittsburgh Steelers on December 18. He was out of football after being cut in training camp by the Falcons in 1967, until he signed with the Raiders for the 1968 season.

His pro football career statistics include 55 rushing yards on 12 carries, four pass receptions for 84 yards, all in the same game he caught the two TD passes, one punt return for three yards and his two yard fumble return for the game clinching TD in the "Heidi game." In all he scored three TDs in his pro football career.



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In all Ridlehuber played in 22 regular season pro football games and two playoff games with the Raiders. But he was instrumental in two very memorable plays in AFL history, one that changed pro football, the “Heidi game” and the other that goes down in Buffalo Bills history as one of the most improbable plays to win a game in team history. He also was the first player in Falcons history to catch two touchdown passes in a single game. For a player with so few games, he sure left his mark on pro football and on AFL history.

* This biography first appeared in Gridiron Greats Magazine in their Fall 2019 edition. It is reprinted here with their permission.