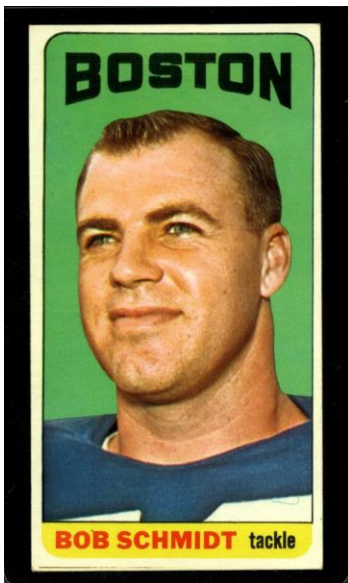




Bob Schmidt

This article was written by Budd Bailey

Bob Schmidt had a very odd career in professional football. When he had an opportunity to play, he took advantage of it and was considered one of the best in the league at his position. The problem was that he never got that opportunity in his other stops in his career. That made him something of a nomad, but he still had the chance to win a title and play with some fine players.



Robert Malcolm Schmidt was born on July 9, 1936, in Rochester, Minnesota – a city mostly known as the home of the Mayo Clinic. It was named for Rochester, New York by founder George Head in 1854. Bob went to Rochester High School, one of two NFL players to go there. The other was Robert Hagberg, who spent five seasons in the 1960s with the Oakland Raiders. The city has grown over the years and now has three public high schools. Some of the athletes to come from Rochester are NFL cornerback Marcel Sherels, NHL defenseman Doug Zmolek, and hockey's Eric Stroebe, a member of the 1980 Olympic hockey team. Bob was a busy athlete during his high school years, participating in football, basketball, and track.

Schmidt headed north for his college education, as he enrolled at the University of Minnesota. He played in 1956 and 1957 for the Golden Gophers under coach Murray Warmath. In his first season, Minnesota had an odd-looking 6-1-2 season. The squad defeated three ranked teams in Michigan, Pittsburgh, and Michigan State. The loss was a



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7-0 decision to Iowa, and the two ties were against Wisconsin and Northwestern. The season gave the Gophers a No. 12 ranking in the final poll by the Associated Press. Schmidt even caught two passes for 39 yards, although he spent most of his time as an offensive tackle or defensive end.

The next season didn't go as well for Minnesota. The squad went 4-5. It was as high as third in the national polls after winning its first three games, but the team closed 1-5. The Gophers were 0-4 against ranked teams that year. Again, Schmidt showed some versatility when he caught one 6-yard pass for a touchdown during that season.

Schmidt, who measured 6-foot-4 and 248 pounds, went in the 14th round to the Chicago Cardinals in the 1958 draft, No. 159 overall. Minnesota had a very impressive showing in the draft, as eight of its players were selected. The first Golden Gopher to be picked was tackle Frank Youso, who went in the second round to the New York Giants.

Schmidt turned up at the Cardinals' training camp in Lake Forest, Illinois, and did his best. However, he was cut by Chicago shortly before the start of the season. Before he had time to make other plans for the rest of his life, Wellington Mara – the owner of the New York Giants – called and told him that the team wanted to sign him for the taxi squad. Schmidt thought about it while duck hunting over a weekend, and then talked to Mara a couple of days later and agreed to join the team for \$700 a week – double the original offer.

“I was there two days and I didn't know Jim Lee Howell was the head coach,” Schmidt told author Jeffrey Miller about joining the Giants. “I thought (assistant coach Vince) Lombardi was (the head coach) because he was running the whole show. They asked me if I had ever played guard or center and I said, ‘No, I mostly played defensive end or tackle in college.’ They said, ‘Report to Mr. (Tom) Landry. He's going to have you work with the centers and learn how to snap the ball.’” That's how Schmidt was introduced to two of the great coaches in football history, Lombardi and Landry.

“Landry was a very good defensive coach,” Schmidt said. “He did a lot of film study at that time. He said (linebacker) Sam Huff's responsibility was to go where Jim Brown went (when the Giants played the Browns). He said, ‘I don't care if he goes to the popcorn stand. You've got him.’”

Bob spent 1958 on the taxi squad, learning how to play center from Ray Wietecha, a four-time Pro Bowler. Bob credits Andy Robustelli and Sam Huff with helping him learn the pro game. Schmidt's “roommate” on train trips to road games that year was Jack Kemp, a quarterback who also was on the taxi squad. They both sat out the 1958 NFL Championship, but at least they probably had good seats for the contest in Yankee



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Stadium. The Baltimore Colts took a 23-17 overtime decision from the Giants in a game that is considered a landmark in the sport's history.

Lombardi left the Giants to be a head coach in Green Bay in 1959, and he was replaced as offensive coordinator by Allie Sherman. Schmidt finally got his pro football career started when he was a substitute in the game against the Los Angeles Rams on Sept. 26. Schmidt played in all 12 games that season, but never started any of them.

"I had to know all five positions on the line," Schmidt told Miller. "The center's job was to call the defenses for the quarterback, whether the defensive line was odd or even. I had to remember where I was, so I didn't pull the wrong way into the guard coming the other way. ... So, I had to study the playbook pretty good and be alert."

Schmidt also spent a little time at tackle, but said later that he was a little light for the position at less than 250 pounds. But Bob was a good fit at center. He stayed in New York until the end of the 1960 season. The Giants won the division again in 1959, but lost to Baltimore again in the title game. It was a similar story for Schmidt in 1960, as he was a reserve on the line for a Giants team that dropped to 6-4-2.

Schmidt's football career took a turn in July, 1961, when he was traded by New York. The lineman went to Minnesota with Bob Schnelker and Mel Triplett for Dave Whitsell, Zeke Smith, and a draft choice. That put Schmidt in the first-ever training camp of the new Vikings expansion franchise. By coincidence, one of the Vikings' picks in the expansion draft from the Giants was Youso, Schmidt's teammate at Minnesota. Schmidt lined up as a center and noticed that his competition was Mick Tinglehoff, a future Hall of Famer. Sure enough, Schmidt found himself unemployed before the season started.

However, he had some options. The American Football League was getting ready for its second year, and someone suggested that he call the two division winners from 1960, Houston and San Diego (which had moved from Los Angeles after the season). Owner Bud Adams personally called Schmidt and offered to double his salary. Deal. Schmidt immediately flew to Houston, and signed a contract.

"They brought in Wally Lemm (as coach early in the season)," Schmidt told Miller. "Wally was with the Chicago Cardinals when I was there. George Blanda was the quarterback – he and I became good friends and rode to work every day." Schmidt added this about Blanda in a video interview: "He was the most positive guy I've ever been around. You couldn't beat him at cribbage. You couldn't beat him at racquetball or handball. He was a 5-handicap golfer. We had a tight end that wasn't a great blocker. George said to him, 'If you get your block, you'll get a touchdown.' He made him work extra hard."



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George Bellotti had been the center for the 1960 team that was the defending champion. Schmidt moved into the starting center's spot, and Bellotti soon was off to San Diego to finish his career. Schmidt's pro debut as a starter was a smashing success. He made the AFL All-Star Game for the 1961 season. The Oilers went 10-3-1 and beat the Chargers again for a second straight championship. Life was good.

Lemm, who had gone 9-0 in the final nine games, jumped to the St. Louis Cardinals after the season. The Oilers hired Pop Ivy, who had coached the Cardinals in 1961 – so it worked out something like a trade. The Oilers were again good, going 11-3 in the regular season. However, they lost to the Dallas Texans in a memorable double-overtime game.

Another star on that team was Billy Cannon, the former Heisman Trophy winner from LSU. “He was a very good athlete,” Schmidt said in a video. “They never knew how fast he was because he'd always beat people by a step in a race. He was very strong and competitive. It was a good experience playing with him. Billy did have a little bit of an ego. One time he was late for curfew ... The coach at the time was Pop Ivy, who gave him a bit of heat, and Billy said to him, ‘I'll be here longer than you will be.’ That's the way he was.”

Schmidt was back in the All-Star Game after the 1962 season. There were only a few opposing defensive linemen who were difficult to contain. “Ernie Ladd would have been one of them,” Bob said in a video. “We didn't go to the shotgun until George had a bad leg for some reason. I hadn't been adept at that. I hadn't played that much. The first snap was OK, but Ernie hit me in the nose. I thought, I would have to get rid of the ball a little faster. The next one was quicker but higher, and I still got zinged. The third one went over George's head. I was reaching for my facemask because I was looking out the earhole. But after that I learned how to block him. He wasn't in as good shape as some of the others.”

The Oilers took a step back in 1963, falling to 6-8. That was third in the tightly-bunched AFL East behind Boston and Buffalo. Still, Schmidt was back in the All-Star Game for a third straight season. A losing record didn't agree with Adams, so he fired Ivy and brought in a Texas football legend, Sammy Baugh. That, in turn, didn't agree with Schmidt. “He was a wonderful athlete, but he wasn't a coach,” Schmidt told author Miller. “Before I even got there, he had me on the trading block for some reason. I think he just wanted something different. “

Schmidt was shipped to the Boston Patriots. The Oilers received a second-round pick in 1965, and used it on offensive tackle Ralph Neely. It would have been a spectacular deal for Houston had the team signed Neely, but he went to Dallas of the NFL instead. Patriots



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coach Mike Holovak quickly moved Schmidt to right tackle, since rookie Jon Morris was about to start an 11-year run as the team's center. Bob split the time there with Bob Yates. The Patriots went 10-3-1 but finished second in the AFL East behind Buffalo.

In 1965, Schmidt didn't have much of a chance, as he tore his ACL early in the season and never dressed for a game. "In those days they didn't like to take care of injuries the way they do now. They actually sent me home with about a half a year's pay," Schmidt told Miller. By 1966, Bob was ready to think about coaching, and was surprised to receive a couple of offers to play again. Buffalo was looking for a backup center to Al Bemiller, and Schmidt believed that team would be a good landing spot. After all, the Bills were coming off two consecutive championships as they entered the 1966 season.

Schmidt was a faithful backup in his first year in Buffalo, playing in all 14 games. He rekindled his friendship with Kemp. The Bills had another good year, but lost to the Kansas City Chiefs in the AFL championship game. One of the game's big moments came right at the start, and Schmidt had a good view on the opening kickoff. "I was on the wedge with Dudley (Meredith)," he told author Miller. "There were always four guys on the wedge. I was on the outside. Dudley was one of the inside guys, and it just came right to him." Meredith was hit and fumbled, the Chiefs recovered, and three plays later Kansas City led, 7-0. Buffalo tied the game but couldn't stop the Chiefs' offense in a 31-7 finish.

Schmidt liked the Buffalo area enough to move wife Carol and daughters Lisa, Lori, and Lynn there. The 1967 season didn't go quite as well, as he was limited to seven games (one as a starter).

"The coaches asked what my situation was, and I told them that I was probably going to retire," Schmidt told Miller. "I had had multiple injuries and had moved my family many times during the course of different seasons. ... That was the year the Cincinnati Bengals were going to be added to the league, so they put me on the expansion draft list. Then Cincinnati drafted a guy named Bob Johnson that was their number one draft pick as a center, so there was not much of a shot going there. And I was kind of anxious to get into the work field at that time."

Schmidt worked in sales for 32 years, and then eventually he and his wife got their real estate licenses and stayed in that business. Along the way, he was inducted into the Rochester (Minn.) Sports Hall of Fame in 1993. Bob was a regular participant in Bills' alumni functions for many years in the Buffalo area. That way, he's not forgotten.



“I get letters once or twice a week from kids seeking an autograph,” Schmidt said in 2016. “It still makes me think I’m part of the picture, even if there’s not enough tape to get me into a uniform. It was a great experience.”

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