

BILL WILLIS: DOMINANT DEFENDER

By Bob Carroll

Bill Willis was one of the most dominant defensive linemen to play pro football after World War II. His success helped open the doors of the pro game for other Afro-Americans.

William K. Willis was born October 5, 1921 in Columbus, Ohio, the son of Clement and Willana Willis. His father died when he was four, and he was raised by his grandfather and mother. He attended Columbus East High School and at first was more interested in track than football.

"I had a brother, Claude, who was about six years older than me," Willis says. "He was an outstanding football player, a fullback in high school and I was afraid I would be compared with him."

When he finally went out for football, he chose to play in the line despite the great speed that seemingly destined him for the backfield. He was a three-year regular at Columbus East, winning Honorable Mention All-State honors in his senior year.

After working a year, Willis entered Ohio State University in 1941 and quickly caught the eye of Coach Paul Brown. At 6-2 but only 202 pounds, he was small for a tackle on a major college team, but his quickness made him a regular as a sophomore. At season's end, the 9-1 Buckeyes won the 1942 Western Conference (Big 10) championship and were voted the number one college team in the country by the Associated Press.

Wartime call-ups hurt the team in Willis' final two years as most of OSU's experienced players as well as Coach Brown went into the service, but his own reputation continued to grow. Twice he was chosen All-Big Ten, and in 1944 he was named to the United Press and Look Magazine All-American teams. He was also a standout sprinter on the track team, excelling in the 60-yard and 100-yard events.

Willis played in the 1944 College All-Star Game at Chicago against the National Football League champions and was chosen for the honor again in 1945 after his graduation from Ohio State. Yet the door to the NFL was closed to him. No Afro-American had played in the league since 1933 when a gentleman's agreement restricted rosters to whites only.

Willis took a job at Kentucky State College, a black school, as head football coach and athletic director. His team lost only two of ten games, but he still felt a restless longing to play himself.

He read a new professional league, the All-America Football Conference, was being formed and that Paul Brown was in charge of the Cleveland team, called the Browns in his honor. He wrote to Brown asking for a tryout, but when he didn't receive an answer, he decided to accept an offer to play for Montreal of the Canadian Football League.

Actually Brown was very interested but for public relations purposes did not want to appear to the rest of the league to be inviting an Afro-American to join his team. He had a newspaper friend telephone Willis and strongly urge him to stop by Cleveland's training camp at Bowling Green as an apparent "walk-on." Willis had doubts, some caused by continuing pain in a knee that had been operated on for cartilage repair only a few months before.

When Willis arrived in camp, he found himself in an immediate scrimmage. Brown lined him up at defensive guard in front of center Mike Scarry, an NFL veteran who had jumped to the new league. On the first four plays, Willis exploded into Scarry, flattened or eluded him, and dropped quarterback Otto Graham before a play could begin. Scarry insisted Willis must be offsides.

"What I had been doing was concentrating on the ball," Willis recalled. "The split second the ball moved, or the center's hands tightened, I charged." After three more plays with the same result, Willis had become a Cleveland Browns regular. A week later, a second Afro-American, fullback Marion Motley, joined the team.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 16, No. 5 (1994)

Ironically, the Los Angeles Rams of the NFL had signed two Afro-Americans, Kenny Washington and Woody Strode, only weeks before Willis joined the Browns. But Washington and Strode were both past their primes and played only sparingly for the Rams over the next few years; Willis and Motley both became all-league performers in their season, and as such probably were more responsible for other pro teams hiring Afro-Americans.

Although Willis began with the Browns playing both offense and defense, changes in substitution rules soon allowed him to concentrate on the defensive middle guard position. As a pro, Willis weighed between 210 and 215 pounds -- tiny for a pro lineman. The Detroit Lions' middle guard Les Bingaman, for example, tipped the scales at well over 300 pounds. But anything Willis lacked in heft was more than made up by his strength and speed. His sudden explosive charge disrupted enemy plays and elicited comparisons with panthers and other large cats. When defenses double- and triple-teamed him, they left other Browns' defenders free to do their damage.

For four seasons, as the Browns won consecutive AAFC championship, Willis was named all-league. In 1950, Cleveland moved to the NFL and won that league's title. The team named him its Most Valuable Player. During the 1950 playoff for the Eastern Division championship Willis made his most celebrated play -- a game-saving tackle by out-running speedy New York Giants halfback Gene "Choo-Choo" Roberts who had broken into the clear.

After winning All-NFL honors in three of his four NFL seasons and being named to the first three Pro Bowls, Willis retired to become assistant commissioner of recreation for the City of Cleveland and a much sought-after speaker at various functions. Ten years later, Ohio Governor James Rhodes appointed him deputy director of correctional services. In 1975, he was promoted to Director of the Department of Youth Services. He retired in 1983.

Willis, who married Odessa Porter in 1947, has three sons, William, Jr., Clement and Dan. He was inducted into the NFF College Football Hall of Fame in 1971 and the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1977.

WILLIAM K. WILLIS

Defensive Guard

6-2 210 Ohio State (1942-44)

Born: October 5, 1921 - Columbus, OH

All-America 1944

College All Star Game 1944-45

ALL-LEAGUE: 1946,47,48,50,51,52,53

Pro Bowl: 1950, 1951, 1952

NFF College Football Hall of Fame 1971

Pro Football Hall of Fame 1977

YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM
1946	Cle	AA	13	1951	Cle	N	12
1947	Cle	AA	14	1952	Cle	N	12
1948	Cle	AA	14	1953	Cle	N	11
1949	Cle	AA	12				--
1950	Cle	N	12	8 yrs			100

The cat-quick Willis earned All-American honors at Ohio State as a two-way tackle on the National Championship team of 1942 and the high- ranked '44 squad. But pro football seemed closed because of an unwritten ban on black players in the NFL. A friend suggested he try out for the Cleveland Browns of the newly formed All-America Football Conference, scheduled to start play in the fall of 1946. He earned a starting job in his first practice scrimmage. A few days later, when fullback Marion Motley joined the team, the AAFC had its first two black players.

Willis' power and quickness on defense brought him inevitable "panther" metaphors and continuous all-pro recognition. Because his sudden, explosive charge on the snap catapulted him into the enemy's backfield before a play could get started, frustrated opponents often insisted he was off-sides. The Browns won four straight AAFC titles, with Willis' a key performer at first at both offensive and defensive guard, and after two years as a defensive specialist at middle guard. Although he anchored one of the most effective defenses in pro football, Willis at 210 was considered tiny for position. "They listed me on

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the program at 225 pounds," Willis said. "It was a psychological thing. (Coach) Paul Brown didn't want the other teams to know I was really that small."

In 1950, Cleveland entered the National Football League and continued their success with an NFL championship. Willis' game-saving tackle against the New York Giants saved a playoff victory. Besides annual all-pro selections, the soft-spoken Willis was named to the first three Pro Bowls.