

# The Perfect Tackle: The Career of Hall of Famer Pete Henry

By Chris Willis

*“Tackles will come and tackles will go, but never will professional football enthusiasts of Canton (Ohio) ever see the peer of Wilbur Henry, 247-pounder, resident of Mansfield, graduate of Washington-Jefferson College at Washington, Pa., and a member of Canton Bulldogs teams for the last three campaigns in which he has played every game.*

*Though he never would be able to qualify as a matinee idol, the Richland-co. individual stands out as the greatest tackle in football today- bar none, as the prohibitionists say.”--*

*Canton Repository, 1922.*

In the early years of the National Football League, most newspaper headlines- if they wrote about the NFL- were usually reserved for the exploits of fleet-footed halfbacks or bruising fullbacks scoring touchdowns. But in Canton, Ohio where the Canton Bulldogs were kings, the headlines seemed to be written about a very popular and highly gifted tackle, who was nicknamed “Fats,” who might’ve been the most talented player in the NFL.

Wilbur Francis Henry was born on October 31, 1897 in the small town of Mansfield, Ohio, as the only child to Ulysses and Bertha Henry. While growing up the name Wilbur didn’t stick for very long and the Ohio kid was simply called “Pete,” the name he was called for the rest of his life. Pete gained a big appetite for food while living on the family farm and the rotund boy would use his size to become a great athlete.

As Henry entered Mansfield High School he weighed 215 pounds and attracted the attention of the football coach. Henry was large enough to stop any ball carrier but it was his surprising speed and quickness for a big guy that really separated him from his teammates and opponents. Instead of playing on the line like most big kids of that era Henry was moved to fullback and that is where he played for his entire high school career.

Henry enjoyed a solid high school career, including being named captain of the team during his senior year, when the team finished with an 8-1 record- losing only to Wooster. His best game came against Toledo Waite H.S., one of the toughest teams in Ohio, he crossed the opposing goal line three times to lead his team to a 31-7 victory. Colleges around the country started to notice the big kid from Mansfield.

Because of his size and unique shape, being only 5 feet 11 inches and weighing about 245 pounds, Henry gained another nickname, “Fats.” This nickname was used quite often but it didn’t quite fit his playing style. He was not a slow footed fat guy, he was an athletic football player, who made plays on the football field. His swift feet eventually decided to go to college at Washington & Jefferson College located near Pittsburgh.

In the fall of 1915 Henry enrolled at W & J, where Bob Folwell was the head coach- Folwell would go on to become the first head coach of the New York Giants in 1925. Although Henry played fullback in high school Folwell quickly looked at Henry’s size and moved him to tackle, giving Henry a chance to play on the freshmen team. Folwell left

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after the season and was replaced by Sol Metzger who coached Henry for 2 seasons (1916-1917). He helped Henry make Honorable Mention All-American both season.

In 1918 the W & J football season was interrupted by World War I, as was most of the college football season, and the team played only two games all season. Because of the shorten season Henry was given an extra year of eligibility in 1919. Besides playing football Henry competed in track, baseball and basketball while at W & J. He became the first player at the school to letter in four major sports- earning 11 total letters. But it was the 1919 season that made him a legend at the school.

The 1919 season would be Henry's finest year and maybe his most difficult. After leading the Presidents to a 4-0 start rumors started to swirl about Henry playing professional football. In early October there was a report that Henry played a game with the Massillon Tigers. Henry responded with a quote that was printed in the October 8<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Canton Daily News*, with the headline, "*Big Tackle Denies Massillon Connection.*"

*"Apparently someone has tried to put me in the wrong at Massillon," said Henry. "Not only did I not play with Massillon on Sunday, but I have no intention of playing professional football before I am through my college course. I will admit that flattering offers have been made to me to play on a number of professional teams, but I have rejected all of them and certainly will maintain my amateur standings while I am in college."*

Numerous W & J fans and students vouched for Henry, giving evidence that the only time the star player left campus on the day in question, was to take a short automobile ride of less than ten miles. The Presidents would go on to have a fantastic season finishing with a 6-2 record and Henry being named to Walter Camp's first-team All-American squad. Henry also stuck to his guns even after the football season ended. Several pro football teams made an offer to him when the college football season was over but he turned them all down so he could be eligible to participate in track during the spring.

*"No thanks," said Henry to every offer. "I'm a weight thrower on the track team and they'll need me this spring. I'll stay an amateur until then. It's the least I owe my college."*

Henry stayed at W & J and graduated from the school in June of 1920. As the summer went by Henry was finally ready to sign and play professional football. He decided to play for the best team in pro football, the Canton Bulldogs, and be a teammate with the great Jim Thorpe. On the same day Henry signed his contract it was announced that a new league was being formed for professional football. On September 17, 1920 the American Professional Football Association (APFA) was formed in Canton, Ohio at the automobile showroom of the Bulldogs's owner, Ralph Hay. Two years later the league was re-named the National Football League. Even though the organizational meeting took place late in the day, the main headlines in the Canton sports page the next day, was the signing of Wilbur "Pete" Henry. On page 26 of the *Canton Repository*, the headline and article read:

***"Bulldogs Land Big Wilbur Henry, 235-Pound Tackle, From W-J, All-American.***

*Buck of Wisconsin, Edwards of Notre Dame, Kellison of West Virginia Wesleyan, Smith of the Michigan Aggies and Lowe of Fordham are all good tackles corking good ones, but they haven't a thing on the husky youngster just signed up for the Canton Bulldogs of 1920- Wilbur Henry of Mansfield.*

*The signature of Henry to a Bulldog contract was announced Friday morning after Manager Hay had received a telegram to that effect. He is the most notable addition to Jim Thorpe's crew of professionals and commands a fancy salary, but will be worth it in playing ability and drawing power. Henry plans to come to Canton for the season and practice with the rest of the champions."*

Now that Henry had signed a professional contract he was ready to play, but the first two seasons with the Bulldogs were transition years. After the 1920 season- when the Bulldogs finished 7-4-1- Thorpe left the Bulldogs and a new leader was needed to take

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charge of the team. After a 5-2-3 finish in 1921 the Bulldogs found their leader, by hiring former Nebraska All-American Guy Chamberlin, who had played the previous two seasons with George Halas and the Decatur-Chicago Staleys. He was the perfect man for the job.

The 1922 season started off with a bang, going unbeaten in their first 6 games (4-0-2), including a 7-6 victory over Halas's newly named Chicago Bears. On November 12<sup>th</sup> the Bulldogs won a hard-fought 3-0 victory over the tough Buffalo All-Americans and the Canton papers really praised Pete Henry for his play.

*"(Henry's play) marked the greatest game he ever has played for Canton, and it came close to being the most remarkable performance ever given by a lineman on a local field."*

The Bulldogs finished the season winning the NFL title with a 10-0-2 record and the defense yielded just 15

total points in 12 league games. George Halas voted Henry to his first team All-Pro team. What would the Bulldogs do for an encore in 1923?

The Bulldogs kept the team intact with such stars as Harry Robb, Doc Elliott, Duke Osborn, Link Lyman, Tex Grigg, Lou Smyth, Dutch Speck and Bird Carroll all returning. They did add two players of note with the signing of Larry Conover and Rudy Comstock to play on the line. With the coaching and playing of Guy Chamberlin the Bulldogs looked to have another great season.

After winning their first 6 games of the season by a combined score of 104 to 6 the Bulldogs faced their biggest test yet. With the unbeaten streak at 19 games the Bulldogs played on the road in front of 10,000 fans against the Buffalo All-Americans on November 11<sup>th</sup>. After Buffalo kicked a first quarter field goal the Bulldogs saw themselves trailing 3-0 late into the fourth quarter. With under a minute to go Guy Chamberlin blocked a punt and Henry recovered at the 11-yard line. A play later Henry drop kicked a 25-yard field goal to give the Bulldogs a 3-3 tie and kept the Bulldogs undefeated. Once again Pete Henry claimed the headlines in the local paper.

*"The World Champions can thank their lucky stars that Wilbur Henry was with them Sunday. The big fellow not only turned defeat into victory when the case seemed hopeless, but played a wonderful game from the start until his spectacular climaxing act in the last few seconds of play. Canton deserved a victory."*

After the Buffalo game the Bulldogs would go on to win their last 5 games by a combined score of 139 to 10. They ended the year scoring 246 points to just 19 by their opponents. They also were unbeaten in their last 25 games, a NFL Record that still stands today, as Most Consecutive Games Won Without Defeat (pg. 645 in the NFL Record and Fact Book).

The 1923 NFL season was also the finest year for Pete Henry. He finished 2<sup>nd</sup> in the NFL in scoring with 59 points (behind the Chicago Cardinals' Paddy Driscoll's 78), including 9 field goals and a league high 26 extra points. To show how dominate Henry was, just take the month of October when Henry led the Bulldogs with his stellar play.

*On October 7<sup>th</sup> - Henry caught a rare touchdown pass from his tackle position in a 37-0 victory over the Louisville Brecks.*

*On October 14<sup>th</sup> - Henry kicks 3 field goals and 3 extra points in a 30-0 win over the Dayton Triangles.*

*On October 21<sup>st</sup> - Henry kicked two fields, scoring the only points, in a big 6-0 victory over the Chicago Bears. The Bears would go on to finished in second place behind the Bulldogs with a record of 9-2-1.*

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Henry was the best player in the NFL in 1923. If there was a vote for league MVP that season, Pete Henry would have won the award. 1923 was a great year on the field for Henry but it might've been a better year off the field. A week before their first game on September 23<sup>rd</sup> Pete Henry married Marie Floding- a nurse at Canton Mt. Mercy Hospital. The wedding culminated a romance that started with a football injury two years before. Henry had been clipped in a 1921 game, where the Achilles tendon in his right foot was torn loose. He met Miss Floding of Leetonia, Ohio, when he was getting treatment for the injury at the hospital. (The leg injury would go on to plague Henry for the rest of his life).

The Canton Bulldogs were now two-time NFL champions but financially the Bulldogs were in trouble. Ralph Hay wanted to use his money for his automobile business and the city of Canton didn't want to finance the team. So in 1924 the Bulldogs were sold to Sam Deutch who moved the team to Cleveland. Henry couldn't come to an agreement to play for Cleveland so he decided to play for the Pottsville Maroons, a very good non-NFL team, who were playing games in the coal region.

The following year Pete Henry and several former Canton teammates- Link Lyman, Rudy Comstock and Ben Jones- bought back the Bulldogs franchise and returned it to Canton. The Canton Bulldogs were back. But the 1925-1926 Bulldogs teams didn't have the same success as the earlier teams. After a solid 4-4 season in 1925, Henry and co-coach Harry Robb seemed to field an old and slow team in 1926, finishing with a woeful record of 1-9-3. The only win was a 13-0 victory over the Louisville Colonels, when Jim Thorpe, who had returned to play for the Bulldogs as a 38-year old halfback, scored both touchdowns.

On Thanksgiving Day (Nov. 25<sup>th</sup>) at Lakeside Park in Canton, the Bulldogs played their last home game, a 0-0 tie with the Akron Indians. Henry missed an 18-yard field goal as the city of Canton, the place where the NFL was founded, would witness its last NFL game involving the team that defined the city- the Canton Bulldogs. Three days later (Nov. 28<sup>th</sup>) in Chicago, the Canton Bulldogs would play their last ever NFL game, losing 35-0 to the Chicago Bears.

Pete Henry would go down as one of the best ever to play for the Canton Bulldogs. After 6 seasons playing with the Bulldogs he thought about retirement. But Henry decided to play some more. In 1927 in split time with the New York Giants (4 games) and the Pottsville Maroons (9 games). He then finished his career by being the player-coach for the 1928 Maroons. They finished with a 2-8 record in NFL games and after the season Henry was finally done with professional football.

At 31-years of age Henry retired from the sport he loved, most of the football experts would praise the career of Henry.

*George Halas- "Only once, was I able to block him out."*

*Walter Camp- "One of the most remarkable performers I ever saw on the gridiron."*

*Pop Warner- "Henry had no superiors as a tackle."*

Henry had a hard time quitting the game. "Now that football's over, I don't know what to do," he would be quoted as saying. If he felt that way he didn't stay idle for very long. In the fall of 1929 Henry was hired by his alma mater, Washington & Jefferson, to be an assistant coach for both basketball and football. Two years later on August 16, 1931 Henry was named Athletic Director at W & J- a position he would hold for the next 21 years.

The school would become like a second family to Henry and he would eventually need their support. After Henry turned fifty years old his body started to fail him. The leg injury that hampered him all those years and a case of diabetes would eventually take his life. The school publication, The Red and Black (Issue dated Friday October 23, 1953), would go on to detail the last few years of Henry's life as he struggled with his health problems.

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*"In 1949 the diabetes ailment which had been threatening to catch up with Henry for some time laid him low and people, for the first time, began to realize that the splendid Henry physique was susceptible to the ravages of disease. He became critically ill and finally had one leg amputated to prevent the spread of the infection. He was fitted with an artificial leg, but was always reticent to use it because the use of such helps did not seem consistent with the Henry saga.*

*In December of 1951 tragedy came again, and Henry lost in his final scrimmage. He was hospitalized with a diabetic infection setting in his other leg. Just before Christmas, the famous Henry fighting spirit showed itself and he said "I'll be home for Christmas." He was, returning home the day before Christmas, but in the final week in January, he suddenly took another turn for the worse. On Thursday February 7, 1952, the beloved Pete died in his home on East Wheeling Street."*

Wilbur "Pete" Henry was only 54 years old when he passed away. In 1963 the Pro Football Hall of Fame opened its doors for the first time in Canton, Ohio. The Hall of Fame selected 17 charter members to be the first class inducted and the "Perfect Tackle" was included in that first group. Henry would join the likes of Red Grange, George Halas, Bronko Nagurski and his former Bulldogs teammates Jim Thorpe as immortals of the game. Henry's former teammate with the Canton Bulldogs, Harry Robb, accepted the honor for him.

*"I consider it a great honor to have this privilege of receiving this plaque (bust) for Pete Henry from the Hall of Fame. My only regret is that Pete is not here to receive it in person. Pete, in my estimation, is the greatest lineman that ever played football."*

Pete Henry was the "Perfect Tackle."

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## **THE OVER THE HILL GANG**

by Jim Campbell

If you're like me, you probably thought George Allen, the Washington press corps, or some other wag, came up with "The Over the Hill Gang" when the Redskins of the early-1970s were thusly known.

Not so fast, my friend--to borrow a phrase. A film by the same name was released in 1969, starring such geezers as Pat O'Brien, Walter Brennan, Edgar Buchanan, and Andy Devine. Had they been veteran football players instead of veteran actors, surely coach Allen could have found a place for them on the Washington roster.