



Max Anderson

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Max Anderson, the diminutive 5-foot, 8-inch, 180 pound running back, finished third in the nation in rushing, behind only the incomparable O.J. Simpson and Mercury Morris, in his senior season at Arizona State. As a rookie, with the Buffalo Bills, he also led the team in rushing during their ignominious 1-12-1 season in 1968. He played one more season with the Bills, as a teammate of Simpson's, then injured his knee, and was subsequently released by the Bills to end his NFL career. He played part of one season in the Canadian Football League with the Hamilton Tiger-Cats, before calling it a career.



Photo Credit: Robert L. Smith

Max Arthur Anderson was born June 6, 1945 in Stockton, California. Anderson moved to Smithville, Texas when he was eight years old to live with his grandmother. His grandmother raised him, and he gives her credit for his success. He attended Mary A. Brown High School in Smithville. At the time it was the school for African Americans during segregation.

He went out for the football team as a freshman and at 5-foot-5 and 150 pounds the coach said, "You're too small, son,"ⁱ and would not let him play. He tried out again as a sophomore and this time the coach relented and let him play but only as a defensive safety. He made All-State. Finally, in his junior year the coach let him play running back and after he scored four touchdowns in one game, it was his position. In his senior



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year, though slowed by injury, he scored 29 touchdowns leading Mary A. Brown High School to the state championship. It was the only state championship in school history.

Max also played track and basketball in high school, lettering three times. In his senior year he made All-State in basketball.

Rather than attend a four-year college, he along with two of his friends attended Henderson County Junior College in nearby Athens, Texas. He was one of the first African American players to attend the school. He rewarded them with 14 touchdowns and was named to the Junior College All-American team. Suddenly, he was on the radar of large college football programs and was heavily recruited. He visited Iowa, and thought it was too cold, he went to UCLA, and thought it was too big, and then settled on Arizona State.

He struggled in the transition to big-time college football. Anderson said, “There was a lot of pressure and I found it hard to fit in. I couldn’t do anything right. I even sprained both ankles.”ⁱⁱ He played behind junior Travis Williams during his sophomore season. But Anderson eventually improved, and his best game was the final encounter of the 1965 season. Against rival Arizona, Max scored both touchdowns for the Sun Devils. The first was on a brilliant 80-yard scamper with mere seconds left in the first half, and the second came on a 17-yard touchdown reception from quarterback John Goodman in the team’s 14-6 victory. Max finished the game with 108 yards rushing. For his efforts he was named Western Athletic Conference back of the week.

He finished his first varsity season with 172 yards rushing on 41 carries under head coach Frank Kush. He scored two touchdowns on the season. The Sun Devils finished the season with a 6-4 record.

By his junior year, he was one of the most popular players on the team and they nicknamed him “Midge.” Eventually he acquired the nickname Mini-Max from his teammates that he carried for the remainder of his football career. Throughout his junior season he played right halfback and shared carries with left halfback Williams. Williams led the team in rushing with 551 yards and Anderson was second with 392. Max led the team with five rushing touchdowns and Williams contributed four during the Sun Devils’ disappointing 5-5 season.

Anderson put together the two best games of his junior year in back-to-back weeks in November. He rushed for 84 yards on 22 carries and scored the winning touchdown on a nine-yard run, propelling the Sun Devils to a 14-10 win over Oregon on November 12. In the postgame locker room Kush called it Anderson’s “finest game.”ⁱⁱⁱ



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The next week, Anderson was pivotal in the Sun Devils' 28-7 win over New Mexico. He rushed 21 times for 96 yards and scored touchdowns on runs of 26 yards in the first quarter, and one yard in the fourth quarter to clinch the victory.

Anderson had an outstanding senior football season at Arizona State in the fall of 1967. He scored three touchdowns in the Sun Devils' opening day 27-16 victory over San Jose State on September 16. Two weeks later he exploded in the Sun Devils' 42-16 thrashing of Big Ten opponent Wisconsin. Max rushed for a career-high 220 yards on 21 carries. His big day included a 75-yard touchdown run while also racking up 11 first downs in the game. He was named the Western Athletic Conference back of the week for the second time in his career.

On October 28, the Sun Devils played the No. 8-ranked Wyoming Cowboys. Max produced an exhilarating 99-yard touchdown run from scrimmage in the fourth quarter, giving the Sun Devils a 13-12 lead. It was the longest run in Arizona State history. Wyoming kicked a late field goal to win the game 15-13, taking some luster off Anderson's run and overall performance. He finished the day with 161 rushing yards. The defeat by Wyoming ultimately cost Arizona State the conference crown and a bowl invitation.

The following week at Utah, Max rushed for 116 yards helping lead the Sun Devils to a 49-32 victory. In his final game with the Sun Devils against arch-rival Arizona, Max rushed for 109 yards on 17 carries, breaking the single season Western Athletic Conference record for rushing yards in a single season. He broke the record on a 61-yard touchdown dash in the second quarter. Earlier in the game he caught a 15-yard touchdown pass in the 47-7 rout. Late in the third quarter he broke Tony Lorick's all-time ASU career rushing record finishing his career with 1,752 yards. Following the game, as Arizona State finished with an 8-2 record, Kush said, "This has been one of the best clubs I've ever had. And Anderson has been the key to the whole thing. He comes up with clutch play, the big play. He's the team leader."^{iv}

Max finished the season as the conference leader in rushing with 1,188 yards and in scoring with 72 points on 12 touchdowns. He also contributed 151 pass receiving yards, and 211 yards on nine kickoff returns. Arizona State scored 30 or more points in seven of their ten games and set a conference record averaging 414.8 yards per game on offense.

Anderson finished his Arizona State career as the school rushing leader, with the aforementioned 1,752 rushing yards, and a 5.0 yards per carry average along with 19 career touchdowns. In 1967, he was the nation's third leading rusher behind O.J. Simpson with 1,543 yards and Mercury Morris with 1,447. His 6.2 yards per carry average was seventh best in the nation.



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Anderson was named to the first team All-WAC team at fullback. His teammate Curly Culp made first team at middle guard. Max was also selected to play in the North-South College All-Star game at the Orange Bowl in Miami on Christmas Day 1967. Greg Landry, from the University of Massachusetts, led the North to a 24-0 victory over the South. He was assisted by Anderson, who rushed for a game-high 98 yards in the win.

Max was nominated for the Arizona Amateur Athlete of the Year Award in January 1968, following his outstanding season. He was one of 30 nominees. Anderson was one of five finalists, but he lost out on the award to teammate Curly Culp. Anderson graduated from Arizona State in the spring of 1968 with a degree in education.

There was a lot of speculation about how Max would fare in the pros and what kind of opportunity he would get because of his size. Head coach Kush said about Max's pro prospects, "Someone will draft him probably as a kick return specialist, but if they give him the opportunity, they'll find he can do the job as an offensive back."^v He added, "Max has all the assets the pros need, with the exception of size. He has great speed, and quickness and a sense of where the daylight is. And he can do a decent job of blocking."^{vi}

Anderson was selected with 21st selection in the fifth round by the Buffalo Bills in the 1968 NFL Draft. He was the Bills' third pick in the fifth round with Ben Gregory and Mike McBath selected by Buffalo before Anderson.

Max was named to play in the Coaches All-American Football game in Atlanta on June 28, 1968, for the West team. The West won the game 34-20 behind UCLA quarterback Gary Beban. Anderson played in the game and in his one shot at glory he fumbled. With the West trailing 14-7 in the second quarter and the ball at the East's five-yard line, Anderson took a hand-off from Beban. He burst through to the goal line, was hit by an East defender, and fumbled the ball into the end zone. Teammate John Williams, a guard, fell on the ball for the West touchdown. But Anderson missed out on his chance for the TD by fumbling.

The Bills' media guide touted Anderson this way as the team prepared for the start of training camp, "Could be a fine kickoff and punt returner as well as halfback for the Bills. Runs with controlled speed. Uses blockers very well."^{vii}

Prior to the Anderson reporting to the Bills camp, he was invited to play in the College All-Star game against the Green Bay Packers on August 2. It was truly an honor to be selected to play for the College All-Stars against the defending Super Bowl champions. In the game, he returned kickoffs, and had one rush for minus one yard and caught one pass for 13 yards in the All-Stars' 34-17 loss to the Packers.



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Following the All-Star game, he immediately was on a flight to Buffalo so that he could play in the Bills' opening preseason game the next evening against the Detroit Lions. Anderson played sparingly in the game, primarily returning kicks. He had one kickoff return for 22 yards in the Bills 13-9 victory.

Anderson had a highlight reel touchdown run in the Bills' second preseason game against the Miami Dolphins, at Aquinas Stadium in Rochester, on August 11. In the fourth quarter, with Miami leading 21-14, he ran an end sweep, broke through four Dolphins defenders, and sprinted 78 yards for a touchdown, tying the game. The game ended in a 28-28 deadlock. Max finished with 112 yards on six carries in his first game running the football in the professional ranks.

He rushed for 54 yards in a 10-6 preseason victory over Cincinnati and played little in a 37-7 loss to Houston. In the Bills' final preseason game, Max broke out with an outstanding performance, earning him the opening day start at halfback. He rushed for 103 yards on 23 carries, caught three passes for 33 yards, and had one kickoff return for 14 yards. In total he gained 150 yards in the Bills' 22-12 loss to Cleveland.

Going into his regular season debut, Anderson was convinced that he could play in the NFL, despite his size. "I don't feel my size has anything to do with my performance," he said. "I thought it might before, but I've eliminated that thought from my mind. It might bother the coach, but it doesn't bother me."^{viii}

His NFL debut came on September 8 in an all-rookie backfield, with Dan Darragh at quarterback, Ben Gregory at fullback and Max in the halfback slot. But his first game is one Anderson would probably rather forget. The Bills had trouble moving the football against a tough Boston defense, losing 16-7 to the Patriots. Anderson's numbers were forgettable. He rushed nine times for five yards and caught two screen passes that lost nine yards. He had one kickoff for 14 yards. His total offense on 12 touches was a grand total of 10 yards.

The Bills were routed in week #2 by the Oakland Raiders 48-6, but Anderson had his career high in rushing yards, gaining 88 yards in 11 carries. He also returned five kicks for 121 yards. Following the game, head coach Joe Collier was fired and replaced by Player Personnel Director Harvey Johnson.

Anderson had his only two-touchdown game of his career against the Cincinnati Bengals on September 22. He scored on a nifty 15-yard run in the second quarter and then electrified the crowd with a 100-yard kickoff return touchdown in the fourth quarter. Despite Anderson's heroics the Bills lost 34-23.



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The next week in one of the greatest upsets in Buffalo sports history, the Bills beat the New York Jets 37-35. Anderson had only 17 yards rushing, but also caught one pass for seven yards and returned three kicks for 88 yards. But it was the defense that sparked the upset, intercepting five Joe Namath passes and returning three for touchdowns.

Anderson continued starting at halfback and was the team's primary kickoff returner throughout the season. He had 72 yards rushing in a 14-14 tie with Miami and rushed for 54 yards in the other Miami game, a 21-17 loss. He gained 60 yards rushing in the rematch with Oakland and scored his fourth touchdown of the season, a five-yard run in the fourth quarter, in a game the Bills just missed upsetting the Raiders, losing 13-10.

Anderson finished his rookie campaign as the Bills leading rusher with 525 yards on 147 carries. He also caught 22 passes for 140 yards. He led the entire AFL in kickoff returns and return yardage with 39 returns for 971 yards and his 24.9 average was third best in the league. His 100-yard kickoff return against the Bengals was the league's longest for the season. By all accounts he had an excellent rookie season. Anderson was voted Buffalo's Most Valuable Back for 1968.

The Bills finished with the worst record in the league at 1-12-1. For their ineptness they were awarded the No. 1 pick in the 1969 NFL Draft. With all-everything O.J. Simpson coming out of college, it was a no-brainer that the Bills would draft Simpson and they did. This put Anderson as a backup halfback and kick returner heading into the 1969 season. He was philosophical about it saying, "I don't think O.J. being drafted by the Bills will cause me any problems personally. I think there's room enough for both of us in Buffalo."^{ix}

Between the 1968 and 1969 football seasons, Max married the former Teresa Carol Franklin.

The highlight of Anderson's 1969 preseason was in handing Hall of Fame coach Vince Lombardi his only loss to an AFL team. Max was the star of the game, rushing for 59 yards on 10 carries and scoring the Bills' second touchdown on a sweep around left end for 11 yards. With the Bills trailing, 17-14, in the fourth quarter, Anderson caught a Tom Flores pass and lugged it to the 1-yard line, setting up Buffalo's game-winning touchdown. The Bills stunned the Redskins 21-17 at a time when the AFL vs. NFL preseason games were as important as regular season games to the combatants since they didn't start playing each other in the regular season until 1970.

Anderson played in 11 games for the Bills in 1969, primarily as a kickoff and punt returner. He started one game at running back, replacing an injured Simpson, against the



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Patriots on October 11. He acquitted himself well, rushing 10 times for 46 yards while adding a kickoff return of 20 yards and a punt return of three yards in the Bills 23-16 win. During the second half of the game, Patriot linebacker John Bramlett hit Max under the chin strap, straight on his jaw and broke it. Max missed the next three games with his jaw wired.

Max returned on November 9 against the New York Jets returning two punts for 17 yards. He played the rest of the season primarily as a returner.

Anderson finished his sophomore season with only 13 rushes for 74 yards and one touchdown. His lone TD came on a six-yard run in a 28-14 loss to the Houston Oilers on October 5. He led the Bills in punt returns with 19 and yardage with 142 while averaging 7.5 per return. His return average was fourth best in the AFL and his yardage was eighth.

Anderson had another excellent preseason in 1970. He starred in the Bills' 35-20 victory over Philadelphia on August 21. Bills quarterback James Harris fired a beautiful 64-yard touchdown pass to Anderson in the second quarter, putting the Bills up 14-6. In the fourth quarter with Buffalo leading 28-20, Anderson dashed 56 yards for the game-clinching touchdown with 6:46 left.

In the Bills' preseason game against the Atlanta Falcons, Anderson scored the Bills' only touchdown on a one-yard dive in the 10-7 loss. He rushed for only 19 yards on 14 carries in the game. The Bills' final preseason game was at Lambeau Field in Green Bay. Anderson was playing well with 20 yards rushing on six carries until he hurt his knee. Following the game, it was determined he tore ligaments and cartilage in his knee and required season-ending surgery. It was a tough break for Anderson. He led the team in pass receiving yardage with 108 in the preseason and was second in rushing yardage with 114. He was prepared to have a good season for the Bills.

Max was back for the 1971 preseason with Buffalo. He played in five of the Bills' six preseason games and scored one touchdown, a three-yard fourth quarter jaunt to clinch a 31-17 win over Detroit on September 4. It would be Anderson's last touchdown in a Bills' jersey. He made the opening day roster but did not play in Buffalo's 49-37 loss to the Dallas Cowboys on September 19. He was cut by the Bills on September 23 to make room for up and coming fullback Jim Braxton from West Virginia. Anderson refused to join the Bills taxi squad and so his Bills' and NFL career came to an end.

He latched on with the Hamilton Tiger-Cats of the Canadian Football League. His first appearance with the Ti-Cats was on October 3 in a 17-1 loss to Calgary. After his first CFL game he said, "It's faster than it is in the National Football League and let me tell



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you the hitting is just as hard as it is in the NFL, too.”^x He played the final six games of the CFL regular season with Hamilton.

He rushed for 267 yards on 72 carries and scored two touchdowns for the 7-7 Tiger-Cats. Hamilton defeated the Ottawa Rough Riders 23-4 in the Eastern Conference semifinals with Anderson contributing 61 rushing yards. The Eastern Conference finals were a home and home series with Toronto. The Argonauts won the opening game of the series 23-8. Hamilton with the help of an Anderson 4-yard touchdown run in the second game earned a 17-17 tie, but lost the series on aggregate score, 40-25. Anderson and Hamilton’s season was over, one game short of the Grey Cup. The Argos lost the Grey Cup to Calgary 14-11.

Anderson was in training camp with Hamilton in 1972 but again was injured and missed the season. He tried a comeback with the Kansas City Chiefs in 1973, signing a contract with the club on April 2. He was with the Chiefs during training camp but was released on August 7. He was claimed on waivers by the New England Patriots, but Max decided against playing, ending his football career.

Anderson was known as “A tasteful mod dresser.”^{xi} Former Arizona State teammate Gene Foster and Anderson ran a clothing store in Tempe, Arizona in the offseason during his last couple years of pro football.

After he retired from the game, he taught school for a year. He then joined Motorola Semi-Conductor Products Division in Phoenix, AZ. In 1973, the company loaned him to be the youth programs director for the Phoenix office of the National Alliance of Businessmen. He was responsible for encouraging Phoenix high school students to continue and finish their education and pursue their dreams. He stayed at Motorola for six years. He then went to Intel as a recruiter, spending 11 years there before spending a few years at National Cash Register in a similar role. He concluded his business career with a 15-year stint at Bashas, a grocery store chain. He retired in 2016 and lives in Arizona with his wife Iris. Max and Iris have four children and six grandchildren.

In the fall of 2019, he was invited back to Smithville High School to be honored and recognized for his accomplishments in football. He is the only player from Smithville to ever play in the NFL. Upon reflecting on his life and career, he told the students, “No matter how great of an athlete you are, if something happens – you get an injury or competition pushes you out of the game – you can always fall back on that education. It may not pay the money you want, but you can get a job. You can’t play sports all your life. And I know that, I’m a living witness.”^{xii}



End Notes:

- ⁱ Boatner, Verne, "Little Max Anderson, Big Sun Devil Asset," *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix, Arizona), September 8, 1966, p6
- ⁱⁱ Boatner, Verne, "Little Max Anderson, Big Sun Devil Asset," *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix, Arizona), September 8, 1966, p6
- ⁱⁱⁱ Lindblom, John, "Long Sought-After Winning Balance," *Tucson Citizen*, November 14, 1966, p33
- ^{iv} Weston, Steve, "Anderson, Culp Get Bowl Bids," *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix, Arizona), November 26, 1967, p30
- ^v Hicks, David, "How'll Pros Use Culp, Anderson," *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix, Arizona), November 29, 1967, p86
- ^{vi} Hicks, David, "How'll Pros Use Culp, Anderson," *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix, Arizona), November 29, 1967, p86
- ^{vii} Buffalo Bills 1968 Media Guide, Buffalo Bills, Inc. c1968, p39
- ^{viii} Weston, Steve, "Li'l Max Confident Of Job With Bills," *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix, Arizona), August 25, 1968, p27
- ^{ix} Hicks, Dave, "Anderson on wagon tooting AFL bugle," *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix, Arizona), January 24, 1969, p78
- ^x Walker, Hal, "Sports Editor Column," *Calgary Herald* (Calgary, Alberta, Canada), October 4, 1971, p24
- ^{xi} Buffalo Bills 1970 Media Guide, Buffalo Bills, Inc., c1970, p12
- ^{xii} <https://www.statesman.com/news/20190917/former-buffalo-bills-player-max-anderson-gets-heros-welcome-in-smithville>, accessed 8/6/2020