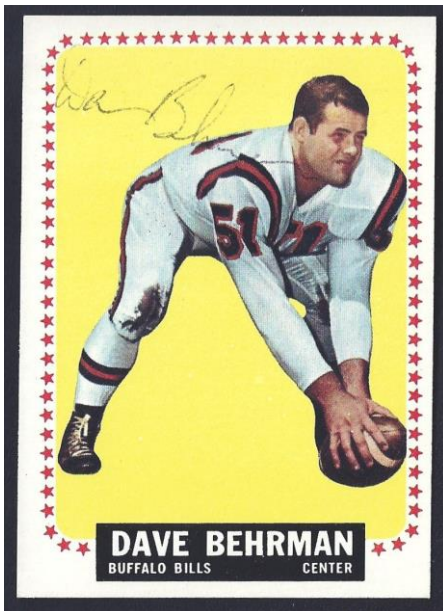


Dave Behrman

This article was written by Budd Bailey.

It's a given that playing football can take a toll on a person. Even so, Dave Behrman was particularly unlucky in this area. Not only was his promising career cut short by physical problems, but Behrman's quality of life also suffered well past the time that the game was just a memory for him.



David Wesley Behrman was born on November 9, 1941, in Dowagiac, Michigan. That's a small town in the southwest corner of the state, located about 25 miles north of South Bend, Indiana, and 25 miles southeast of Benton Harbor, Michigan. Dowagiac's biggest celebrity (literally and figuratively) might be Chris Taylor, the 412-pound wrestler who won a bronze medal for the United States at the 1972 Olympics in Munich. Dave's father was Chauncey Orville Behrman, who was born in Volinia – just east of Dowagiac. Mother Freda was born in Sturgis – about an hour southeast of Volinia near the Indiana state line. Dave was an only child.

Behrman stayed in Dowagiac through his childhood, and attended Dowagiac Union High School. That facility had only one other pro football player among its alumni. Vern Davis played three games at cornerback for the 1971 Philadelphia Eagles. Information about Dave's time with the Chieftains is tough to find. We do know that Behrman was on his way to become something of a giant on the line, since he reportedly checked in at 280



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pounds at that stage of his life. He also became one of the best wrestlers in the country – taking part in the Pan-American Games trials right after high school – and was one of Michigan’s top prep shot putters.

As for the rest of the Dowagiac football team, that group had a great season in Behrman’s junior year of 1957. The Chieftains went 8-0 and outscored their opponents, 184-33. It’s one of two undefeated seasons in history (as of 2020) for that school. Dowagiac took a step back in 1958, but finished with a winning record at 5-3.

It would be interesting to know if anyone from Notre Dame took a look at Behrman for recruiting purposes, since he was just up the road. However, Dave ended up at Michigan State in East Lansing, about 120 miles away from his home. Maybe he thought he could help the Spartans. MSU was coming off a 0-5-1 record in the Big Ten in 1958 under fifth-year coach Duffy Daugherty. Michigan State finished 3-5-1 overall – a comedown from an 8-1 record in 1957. Life was a little better in 1959 during Behrman’s freshman year. The Spartans had a 5-4 record and were ranked 16th in the country by the coaches.

Behrman was handed uniform no. 51 at the start of the 1961 season, and if he looked around, he might have noticed a great deal of talent on the team. Such names as Herb Adderley, Gary Ballman, George Saines, Ed Budde and Fred Arbanas played for Daugherty that season. As you might expect, the Spartans were quite good that season. They finished 6-2-1 and were ranked just outside the top 10. The team’s only losses came against Iowa and Ohio State, both ranked in the top 10.

Michigan State had a similar season in 1961, going 7-2 and was ranked eighth in the country. The team made it up to No. 1 in the country in October, but back-to-back losses in November to Minnesota and Purdue ended any talk of a national title. Meanwhile, Behrman settled in the offensive line and showed he was a big-time talent. Dave was named an All-American by the Associated Press and the Football Writers of America at tackle. He was the only player on the roster to receive first-team A-A honors.

The Spartans took a step back in 1962, finishing 5-4 to wind up in the middle of the Big Ten Conference. Behrman again was the key player on the offensive line, playing center (his main spot), guard and tackle during his career in East Lansing. Dave also spent a little time on the defensive line. Slimmed down to 260 pounds, he still was the heaviest player to be a lineman for Michigan State in Daugherty’s tenure to that point. He had one small slip during his senior year, when Daugherty put him on the third team for a game for a perceived lack of hustle. That got Behrman’s attention, and he returned to top form the rest of the way. Dave was picked as an All-American by CBS Television as a center. That made him the first offensive lineman in Spartans’ history to repeat as an All-American.



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As you'd expect, "The Big Bear" was All-Big Ten for his junior and senior years. Behrman and Budde were part of the "B Boys" on the line, as four of the linemen had names beginning with B. They had an A-plus season, as Michigan State finished second in the nation in rushing honors. (One of the other linemen was Dan Underwood, who played with Behrman at Dowagiac.)

"If there is a college lineman anywhere with his speed, power, quickness and intelligence, he has been well hidden," Daugherty said during Behrman's career as a Spartan. "He's awfully quick for his size and he's agile on offense and rough to move on defense."

From there, it was time to get ready for the pros. The NFL's Chicago Bears took him in the first round with the 11th pick in December 1962, while the AFL's Buffalo Bills took Behrman fourth overall in the first round in that same week. By the way, Budde also was a top draft choice in both leagues. Both players ended up playing with the upstart AFL in 1963; Behrman signed with the Bills almost immediately. Then he was on to play in the North-South Game in Pontiac, Michigan, and the Hula Bowl in Honolulu.

Before arriving at the Bills' training camp the following summer, Behrman had some business first. He played in the Coaches' All-American Game that was held in Buffalo. Then he joined the College All-Stars in their annual game in Chicago with the defending champions of the NFL – in this case, the Green Bay Packers. That was the last time the All-Stars beat the NFL champs in the then-annual series, taking a 20-17 decision that humiliated Green Bay coach Vince Lombardi. "We have no excuses," he said.

Behrman was part of a giant (by the standards of the day) offensive line that dominated the line of scrimmage. "I got really good protection from those (Spartans) up front - (Ed) Budde and (Dave) Behrman," said Ron Vander Kelen, the Wisconsin player who was the All-Stars' quarterback in the win.

The Bills hadn't been too aggressive in signing star players in their first three seasons in the league, but that changed in 1963. Behrman joined defensive tackle Jim Dunaway on the Buffalo roster; Dunaway was the team's second-round pick (ninth overall). Daryle Lamonica of Notre Dame was in the team's draft class. He was picked in the 24th round, one of the great steals in the team's draft history.

The Bills had been less than mediocre in their first two seasons of play in the AFL, leading to the hiring of Lou Saban as coach. It looked as if the situation had gotten worse when 1962 began, as Buffalo dropped its first five games. But Saban figured a few things out, and brought in Jack Kemp to play quarterback when the Chargers tried to sneak the



passer through waivers. Buffalo finished 7-6-1 – its first winning season ever. The rookie class only added to the optimism.

The Bills had some young veterans on the line in 1963. Al Bemiller was the starter at center, and he was flanked by guards Billy Shaw and Tom Day and by tackles Stew Barber and Ken Rice. Behrman couldn't find a regular starting spot at tackle, and so he was forced to sit and watch for much of his rookie year. The team had the same 7-6-1 record as the season before, but thanks to a year of parity that turned out to be good enough to finish in a tie for first in the AFL East. Buffalo's hopes of reaching the league's title game were dashed by a 26-8 loss to the Boston Patriots. Still, better times seemed to be ahead.

They were indeed, as the Bills swept through the regular season to win the division title with a 12-2 record, and then bounced the Chargers, 20-7, to capture the AFL championship. But Behrman had to watch all of it. A knee injury suffered on August 29 in a preseason game against Boston cost him the entire season, forcing the Bills to scramble at guard. Bemiller moved over to that position while Walt Cudzick took over as the center.

Finally, the stars aligned properly in 1965. Behrman came back and moved into the starting lineup. He opened all 14 regular season games at center, as Bemiller stayed at guard. Buffalo went 10-3-1 to win the AFL East again, and then crushed the Chargers, 23-0, in San Diego to make it two titles in a row. Behrman missed the championship game for an odd reason. He supposedly slept in an improper position a few days before the game, and couldn't move well. Dave could not recover in time and had to watch. Still, he certainly had earned his ring.

This is when the story turns a little sad. Behrman apparently didn't think he could come back from an injury in 1966, and retired before the season even began. However, the Bills traded his rights to the Denver Broncos for a conditional fourth-round draft choice on July 11, 1967. The Broncos were coached by Saban at that point, and it's easy to guess that an injury in training camp forced Saban to go looking for help on the offensive line.

Behrman made a comeback, and made the Broncos' team in 1967. He played in 11 games that season, and started in nine of them. Denver finished with a 3-11 season. Dave even recovered a fumble that season – the first time he had recorded something on a pro game's statistical recap. That season was the only one that Behrman spent in Denver. He was traded to the Oakland Raiders for a conditional draft choice on May 28, 1968, but didn't make the team. Behrman's football career was over after three seasons spread over five years and 39 games.

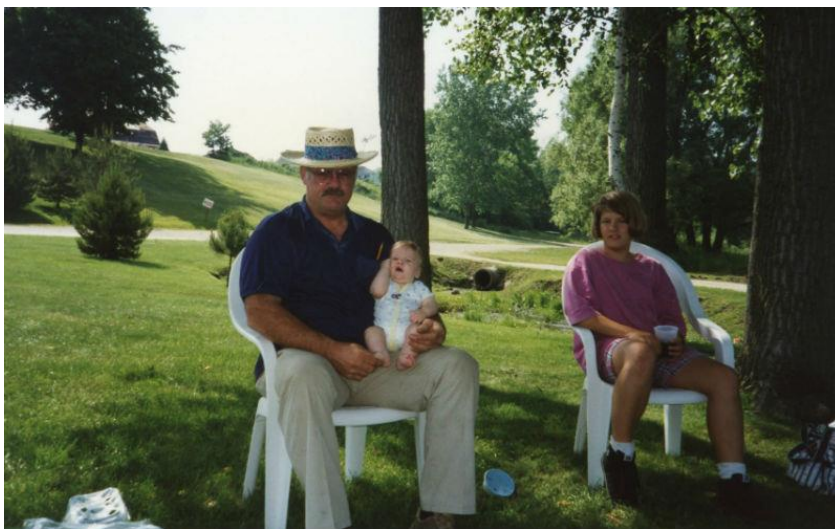


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Dave had been married to Toni Sharron at a chapel on the Michigan State campus on December 14, 1962. He headed back to MSU to earn a business degree, and launched into a secondary career. He worked in manufacturing and production, and also spent some time working in the tool and die shop of the Michigan prison system.

“He was a very intelligent man,” daughter Kim remembered in an interview with the Concussion Legacy Foundation. “At one point in my childhood my sister, Kellie, and I were wondering if he may have been one of those people who actually had a photographic memory, because he appeared to be able to retain everything he had ever read, learned or experienced. He also loved science and the value of scientific research, and I did too. He taught me that anything I ever needed to know could be found by researching it. At the same time, he taught me to pay attention to that pit in my gut, that feeling that you get when something isn’t quite right, and that the first thing that pops up might not be right, but it is the direction you go in seeking the answer.”



Behrman eventually retired, and lived in Albion, Michigan, as of 2004. He spent a great deal of his time working with his children, trying to help develop their skills. Dave would study their homework, and then reteach the lesson. It was an effective way of working with Kim, who later was diagnosed with ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder). Then came the news about three initials that have become associated with too many football players: CTE (Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy). At first Behrman started spending time in such solitary pursuits as fishing as well as taking on projects in his workshop.

“Sadly, the depression, confusion, memory loss, lack of motivation, secretive behavior and balance issues, attributed to CTE, began to take over as he became more and more



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isolated,” Kim recalled. “He lost the ability to maintain interest in friendships as well as being a devoted grandparent. We didn’t understand who he was becoming or what was happening. At times he was clear thinking in making a point and just as quickly he would lose all sense of logic and understanding of the truth.

“We reacted with anger, hurt and resentment and his behavior was hard on family relationships - because we didn’t know. As a result, we started professional medical support for him far too late. It wasn’t until we saw the Frontline Special, ‘League of Denial: The NFL’s Concussion Crisis,’ in October 2013, that we began to understand what was happening to him, but the damage was done.”

Behrman died on December 9, 2014. A newspaper obituary listed the cause of death as pancreatic cancer. He later was diagnosed as having Stage 3 CTE by researchers.



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