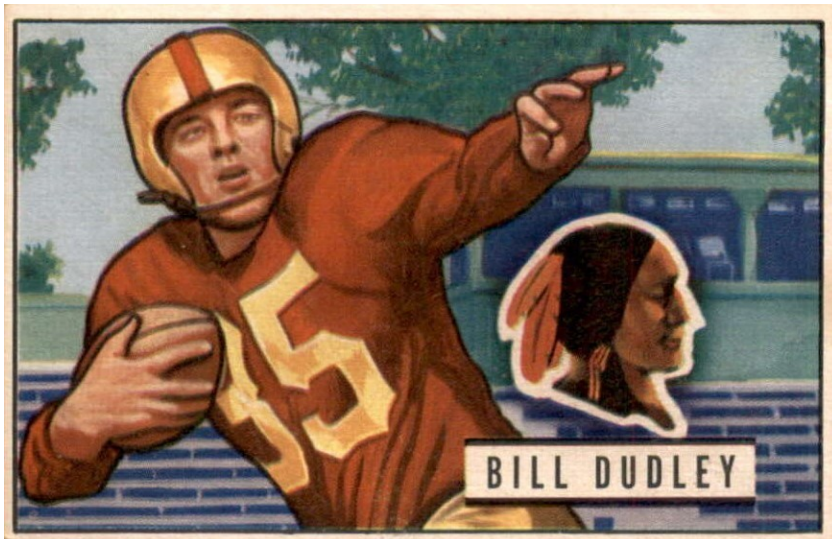


## Bill Dudley

This article was written by Matthew Keddie.

Bill Dudley was extremely talented on the gridiron everywhere he competed, from Graham High School to the University of Virginia, and ultimately in the NFL with the Pittsburgh Steelers (1942, 1945-1946), Detroit Lions (1947-1949), and Washington Redskins (1950-1951, 1953). On his ascent through the football ranks, he overcame the disadvantages of size and speed to earn induction into both the College and Pro Football Halls of Fame. His son, Jim, attributed his father's success to his positive attitude, never giving up no matter when the odds seem the longest. "He lived to a high standard. He was devoted to service and having a positive effect on those people he associated with, and he did. If that's the measure of greatness, he was a great man."<sup>1</sup>



There was little surprise when the Steelers selected him with the first overall pick in the 1942 NFL Draft.<sup>2</sup> At the time, Pittsburgh lacked an identity of winning around the National Football League. From the club's beginning in 1933 through the 1941 season, Pittsburgh never experienced a winning season.<sup>3</sup> On losing, owner Art Rooney remarked, "It's terrible. It's something you hate to think about, even. You hide it and people say, 'That Art Rooney, he's a good loser.' I'm not. We had a house rule no one could mention football until Tuesday after we got beat on a Sunday."<sup>4</sup> That all changed with the arrival of Dudley, who signed a contract worth \$5,500.<sup>5</sup>



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The Steelers were a very young team, featuring a large portion of rookies on its roster. Bill utilized this to earn the starting role heading into the season.<sup>6</sup> He continued his moniker of hard work saying, "I had to prove that I belonged there. Every play, every down."<sup>7</sup> He stated, "I can't stand a ballplayer that doesn't put out. There's no reason for a ballplayer to hang back at any particular time, particularly when they are getting beat. That drives me up a wall!"<sup>8</sup>

In his first ever NFL game against the Philadelphia Eagles, Dudley racked up two touchdowns: a 44-yard run to the end zone and a 24-yard passing score to Don Looney.<sup>9</sup> Despite Dudley's heroics, the Steelers lost, 24-14. Pittsburgh also lost its second game against the Washington Redskins, 28-14, to start 0-2. It looked like the same old Steelers with another long streak of losing ahead. Dudley came to Rooney, voicing optimism of winning in the near future, but Rooney did not believe it, "Our team looked hopeless and I was resigned to another long, bleak season. But Dudley came to me in the dressing room and told me not to take it to heart. 'This club's going to win some games, Mr. Rooney,' he said, and from the tone of his voice I knew he had no doubt about it. As for me, I passed it off. I had heard the same thing from a hundred players before, but it never turned out that way."<sup>10</sup>

Dudley had accounted for one of Pittsburgh's two scores in the Washington game on a kick return that went for a touchdown. Head coach Walt Kiesling noted, "He's the best back we had since I came to Pittsburgh in 1937. ... He has a knack of picking openings almost before they develop. He's a good punter, fair on defense and should develop into a far better passer."<sup>11</sup> The next three games against the New York Giants, Brooklyn Dodgers, and the Eagles looked to add losses to the Steelers' record according to Kiesling, "Frankly I wasn't as sure as Bill appeared to be. ... they all promised to be set to rub it in."<sup>12</sup> The Steelers prevailed in all three contests. Pittsburgh beat the Giants, 13-10, behind touchdowns from Joe Hoague and Curt Sandig's game-winning score in the fourth quarter. The next week in Brooklyn, Dudley scored the game's only points in the second quarter, for a 7-0 Steeler victory. The rematch in Philadelphia with the Eagles turned in favor of the Steelers as they won, 14-0.<sup>13</sup> The press wrote about Dudley's impressive performances, "Thanks to Dudley's inspirational play, the Steelers, instead of playing the doormat role they've played in years past, are second in the Eastern Division standings. For once the Pittsburghers have had something to cheer about and they've cheered themselves hoarse over Dudley and the Steelers."<sup>14</sup>

The winning led to the development of a strong bond between Rooney and Dudley. Bill said, "Other than my own father, I respected Art Rooney more than any man I ever met."<sup>15</sup> The Steelers finished the season at 7-4, good enough for second place in the Eastern Division. Bill remarked on the year, "We had a lot of fun. Pittsburgh in '42 was probably one of the most fun years I ever had. We'd work out from one to three o'clock in



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the afternoon, and it was just overcast all morning long.”<sup>16</sup> Bill led the Steelers in just about every major statistical category: passing (438 yards), rushing (696 yards, 5 TDs), kick (298 yards) and punt (271 yards) returns, and scoring (36 points). As a result, he earned Pro Bowl honors and was a consensus first-team All-Pro selection by media outlets such as the Associated Press, the NFL, and *New York Daily News*.<sup>17</sup>

Astoundingly, Dudley finished runner up in the MVP voting, behind Don Hutson, and ahead of the legendary Sammy Baugh. At season's end Kiesling said on the team's success, “As it turned out, Dudley was right. I think he had a lot to do with it, too. Of course, everybody knows what he has done on the field, but I mean, the players like him and listen to him.”<sup>18</sup>

Dudley enlisted in the armed forces to serve in World War II at the end of 1942. Rooney described it as terrible timing for his club, demonstrating Dudley's value to the team, “I'm sure that if the war hadn't come along, Dudley would have led the Steelers to the championship. He was that good and he made everyone else who played with him that much better.”<sup>19</sup>

Football in the armed forces kept him occupied, but the war took a mental toll on him. He was strongly looking forward to the end of the war saying, “I wasn't doing any missions. I flew a lot of inner island bland stuff for one reason or another. I was just trying to do my job. I still instructed, but I had to struggle to keep my flying time in. I flew my plane. I did my job every day. But inside, I couldn't wait until it was all over. I just wanted it to be over.”<sup>20</sup>

Dudley also took up baseball in his spare time while in the service. He befriended St. Louis Cardinals' legend Enos Slaughter, whom he frequently played pickup games with. Slaughter was a future Baseball Hall of Famer who earned 10 MLB All-Star appearances and won four World Series titles in 19 seasons. On one account of their games Dudley recalled, “Enos Slaughter and I got along fine. He played full steam. He stole second base in a game and came in spikes high. Joe Gordon was playing second. Gordon says, 'Dammit, Enos, what's wrong with you? Coming in here spikes like that?' Enos says, 'Joe, when I steal a base it's mine. ...’”<sup>21</sup> Dudley was discharged from the army in October 1945, allowing him to return for roughly four games of the 1945 NFL season.<sup>22</sup>

Following the conclusion of the 1945 season, after a 2-8 campaign, Rooney fired head coach Jim Leonard. He brought in Jock Sutherland to replace Leonard, who was a local icon. Sutherland had experienced tremendous success at the University of Pittsburgh, winning five national championships and accruing a record of 111-20-12. He previously worked as the head coach of the NFL's Brooklyn Dodgers for two seasons prior to World War II.<sup>23</sup> However, Sutherland and Dudley never found a common ground on which to



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work together. On offense, Bill turned in another stellar season in 1946, leading the NFL in rushing attempts (146), yards (604) and total touches (150). He was also the league's premier special teams' player, ranking first with 27 punt returns for 385 yards and an average of 14.3 yards per return.<sup>24</sup> Defensively, Dudley was a ball hawk. He hauled in 10 interceptions and recovered seven fumbles, both tops in the NFL. That earned him the reputation as the league's best defensive back. Dudley explained, "I had pretty much a free hand back on defense most of the time. I could release and play the ball. I knew what was going on in the game. I just had to ask myself 'what would I do in this situation?' And I was a damn good tackler."<sup>25</sup> As a result, he received the Joe F. Carr Trophy, given to the NFL's Most Valuable Player.

The Steelers finished at 5-5-1, in third place in the NFL East Division.<sup>26</sup> The offense struggled over the course of the year, ranking worst in the league. In four of 11 games they scored seven points or less. Sutherland's style wore down the players over the course of the season due to the grueling practice schedule. Dudley said of it, "In 1946, I figure I played about three years of football in one year."<sup>27</sup> He played and started in 11 of the 14 games, suffering a knee injury near season's end.<sup>28</sup> Dudley felt Pittsburgh was a special place, but Rooney traded him to the Detroit Lions prior to the 1947 season. Pittsburgh received Bob Cifers, Paul White, Bob Chappius, and a first-round draft choice in 1948 from the Lions for Dudley and tackle Jack Dugger.<sup>29</sup> On his career in Pittsburgh Dudley recollected, "People ask me which team was my favorite and I have to say Pittsburgh. It's where I played first, and where I made my reputation. People remember me better here."<sup>30</sup>

Ironically, Bill's first game as a member of the Lions in 1947 was at Forbes Field against the Steelers. There was no element of revenge from his perspective, but the Steelers won, 17-10.<sup>31</sup> The Lions started off 0-2 before a win over the Boston Yanks on the road. Then, the team embarked on a three-game losing streak, falling to 1-5. The Lions won two more games, but finished at 3-9 under head coach Gus Dorais, who was fired at the end of the season.<sup>32</sup>

Detroit brought in the highly heralded college coach, Bo McMillin as its next head coach. Dudley was not a fan of the hire saying, "He knew football, but he could not communicate with the pros very well even though he had played pro ball. I think it boils down to personality. McMillin could not make the transfer – I don't know why, but it just wasn't there."<sup>33</sup> Internal conflict developed between McMillin and the players, leading to struggles on the field. The Lions stumbled to the worst record in the NFL at 2-10. Dudley still performed at a high level, despite missing five games due to injury.<sup>34</sup> The next season in 1949 was more of the same. Bill led the team in rushing with 402 yards and three rushing touchdowns. He also turned in a team high 18.1 yards per punt return, and punted



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34 times for 1,278 yards.<sup>35</sup> Following the season, the Lions traded him to the Washington Redskins for Dan Sandifer.<sup>36</sup>

Dudley signed a two-year contract with Washington for \$12,500 per season.<sup>37</sup> He was excited to play alongside Sammy Baugh, who he raved about, “Sam Baugh was the best football player I ever saw. I know people will differ with me on this, but I watched him play and I played against him and I played with him. I learned from him. Modern quarterbacks, I don't think there is any comparison. They might throw the football better, but Sam did everything. He had a rifle for an arm. He was a good punter and an excellent safetyman. He was a better runner than most people gave him credit for.”<sup>38</sup>

The 1950 season adversely affected Dudley because the NFL adopted unlimited substitution. He said, “When the game went one way, coaches didn't know what to do with me,” because he was used to playing the entire game. ... You don't get to know the opponent. If you're playing just one way, you don't get to know them. If I'm just playing offense, then I don't get to know any of the offense players we play against.”<sup>39</sup> On the year, Washington was a dismal 3-9. Seven of its nine defeats were by double-digits, marred by an eight-game losing streak. Dudley was Washington's top punt returner, averaging 15.4 yards per return while recording 185 return yards.<sup>40</sup> He also converted all 31 extra points and made five of 10 field goals in the kicking game. He was named a second-team All-Pro by the *New York Daily News*, and earned Pro Bowl honors for the second time in his career.<sup>41</sup>

Redskins head coach Herman Ball was fired to start the 1951 season and replaced by Dick Todd. He led the team to a 5-4 record.<sup>42</sup> Bill totaled over 700 combined rushing and receiving yards, and successfully converted 10 of 13 field goals, en route to leading the Redskins in scoring. He was once again named to the second-team All-Pro team by the *New York Daily News*.<sup>43</sup>

Dudley finished his NFL career in 1953, returning from a one-year hiatus in the college coaching ranks at Yale University, where he worked as an offensive backfield coach. He appeared in five games with Washington, mostly taking on the kicking duties.<sup>44</sup> He converted all 25 extra point attempts and made 11 of 22 field goals to lead the team in scoring with 58 points.

He finished his career having played in 90 career games, starting in 71.<sup>45</sup> His hero, Sam Baugh said of his abilities, “We always wondered how he (Dudley) gained as much yardage as he did. But he had that instinct. He would do things that always amazed me, how he could get out of trouble. I admired him when we played against him. I was happy as hell when we got him.”<sup>46</sup> At the time of his retirement, Dudley ranked fourth all-time with over 8,000 all-purpose yards. He earned three trips to the NFL's All-Star Game





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(1942, 1950, 1951) and earned consensus first-team All-Pro honors twice (1942, 1946).<sup>47</sup> He was inducted to a number of Halls of Fame following his career including: the College Football Hall of Fame (1956), Pro Football Hall of Fame (1966), and the Virginia Sports Hall of Fame (1972). He ventured into the insurance business after his football career and spent four terms in the Virginia state House of Representatives.

In his enshrinement speech during his induction to the Pro Football Hall of Fame he said, “There's not much that one who the game of football has meant so much to as yours truly can say at this moment. Football has been a part of my life for the past 35 or 40 well the past 45 years, and I hope it's a part of my life for as long as I live and particularly this Football Hall of Fame. ...”<sup>48</sup> Dudley passed away on February 4, 2010 after suffering a stroke. He was survived by his son, Jim, his wife Libba, who he had been married to for over 62 years, and daughters Jarrett Millard and Rebecca Stinson.<sup>49</sup>

Art Rooney II said of Dudley, “Bill was truly an NFL and Steeler legend as one of the great players to wear a Steelers uniform. Bill's dedication to the game of football and to the game he loved will never be forgotten. We will miss Bill, but knowing Bill, he would want us to focus on the positives of the great career he had and the great life he lived.”<sup>50</sup>

Bill was born on December 24, 1921 in Graham (now Bluefield), Virginia, a town of roughly 4,500 to 5,000 inhabitants, to Shelby Dudley and Jewell Jarrett.<sup>51</sup> Shelby, known as Sheb, was a blue-collar, meat salesman. He started a business known as the Dudley Provision Company, that became successful in meat distribution.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, Jewell kept the home, raising the four Dudley children. Bill was the third of the four, to older brother Jim, older sister Margaret, and younger brother Tom.<sup>53</sup>

Bill spent a majority of his free time playing backyard football. His brother Jim stated, “When he [Bill] was the age of eight, we were into sandlot football.”<sup>54</sup> At Graham High School, he went out for the football team, but received little to no playing time as a result of his lack of size. Instead, he played basketball where he became an outstanding passer and ball handler. That did not deter him from continuing to voice his desire for football.<sup>55</sup>

In 1937, newly hired head coach Marshall Shearer saw a unique talent in Bill that caused him to utilize Bill as a kicking specialist, hitting kicks beyond 30 yards, which was nearly unheard of at the time.<sup>56</sup> In his senior year, Graham matched up against Princeton, West Virginia, a vastly more talented and physical opponent. Shearer's schemes held Princeton in check, with the game tied at seven late in the game. On the game's final possession, with Graham at the Princeton 27-yard line and little time remaining, Dudley told Shearer, “I'm gonna kick a field goal.”<sup>57</sup> Steve Stinson wrote of the play, “At the snap, Bill kicked using an approach step. When the ball cleared the crossbar, it was game over.”<sup>58</sup> The next day in the press, a write up consisted of, “... Bill Dudley In Hero Role As Kick Wins...”<sup>59</sup>



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That moment launched interest from schools such as Southern Methodist University, the University of Kentucky, and Virginia Tech. However, it was the University of Virginia that offered him a \$500 scholarship that covered his basic costs.<sup>60</sup>

Dudley, years later, reflected upon his arrival at Virginia saying, "It's hard to put into words my feelings about UVA. I was so young when I went there. There was an air about Charlottesville, the University, Thomas Jefferson and the way athletics have been taken along with an education. There's nothing wrong with being the best in medicine, the best in law, and having the best football and basketball teams. There's something about playing at the University of Virginia that's not like playing at any other school."<sup>61</sup>

Frank Murray took over the team in 1937, after coaching at Marquette University, where he was coming off consecutive seven-win campaigns. At the time, Virginia was by no means a college football powerhouse. Upon Murray's arrival, the team had experienced one winning season (1932) over the previous nine years. Dudley's arrival helped the Cavaliers be competitive, winning four or more games each season from 1938 through 1941.<sup>62</sup> The Cavaliers routinely beat local foes such as William & Mary, Washington and Lee, and the University of Maryland. They struggled against eastern powers such as Harvard, Columbia, and Yale, and then archrival North Carolina.<sup>63</sup>

The series between North Carolina and Virginia, dubbed the 'South's Oldest Rivalry', began in 1892. The 1941 contest, which was Bill's final collegiate regular season game, was special. Virginia had never won in Chapel Hill, going 0-9-2 in the first 11 meetings.<sup>64</sup> On November 20, that all changed as Dudley led the charge in a 28-7 romp over the Tar Heels. On the performance, Frank B. Gilbeth of the Associated Press wrote, "Wild Bill Dudley, the touchdown tabulator, today turned in one of the most amazing performances ever witnessed in Kenan stadium, as he led Virginia to a crushing 28-7 victory over North Carolina in a traditional-packed Turkey Day game, witnessed by 22,000 spectators."<sup>65</sup> UVA rolled up 254 yards on the ground, while Dudley added 22 points on the day (three touchdowns and four extra points). With the victory, the Cavaliers finished the year at 8-1, its only defeat coming in a 21-19 defeat to the Yale Bulldogs.<sup>66</sup>

The eight victories were the most since 1915 when the school also posted an 8-1 record.<sup>67</sup> Dudley himself earned first-team All-American status, leading the nation in scoring, total touchdowns, and yards per rush. He earned the Maxwell Award, given to the nation's most outstanding player.<sup>68</sup> To date, he is the only UVA player ever to win the award. Dudley also finished fifth in the Heisman trophy voting. Prior to entering the NFL Draft, he played in the East-West Shrine Game as well as the College All-Star Game.<sup>69</sup> Writer Robert Smith summed up Dudley saying, "Despite his lack of breakaway speed, Bill was the most feared kickoff returner in the game ... He passed sidearm, like a kid, yet he had a fine completion average. He was 'too small,' but he was hardly ever hurt too badly to



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play. He was the league's top ground gainer, yet he was also one of the fiercest defensive tacklers and the best in the game at interceptions. As one of the men who faced him ruefully admitted, Bill could not throw a pass correctly and 'ran as if he was staggering,' yet he could always find a way to beat you."<sup>70</sup>

Among other accolades, Dudley's number 35 was retired by the University of Virginia athletic department. The number will never again be issued by UVA athletics.<sup>71</sup> He was also named to the Washington Commanders Ring of Fame and is listed as one of the 80 Greatest Redskins.<sup>72</sup> Dudley is also a member of the NFL 1940s All-Decade Team. The Steelers inducted him to the team's Hall of Honor in 2017, and he was named to their Legends Team in 2007.<sup>73</sup>

End Notes:





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