

Ralph Felton

This article is by Budd Bailey

The phrase “There’s no place like home” is part of American culture because of its use as the final line of the classic movie, “The Wizard of Oz.” Ralph “Rass” Felton certainly believed in that principle, based on how he lived his life. The only interruption in his connection to his hometown came because of football. Once that was done, though, Felton went back where he started to live happily ever after.



Ralph Dwain Felton was born on May 21, 1932, in the small town of Midway, Pennsylvania. It had 913 people in it in 2010 and was located west of Pittsburgh. This raises the question, Midway is midway of what? It’s the halfway point of a rail line between Pittsburgh and Steubenville, Ohio. Midway once had its own high school. Ralph has to rank second out of two on the list of famous football graduates from the town. Dick Haley, a player (1959-1964) and a front office executive who is considered one of the great talent scouts in the sport’s history, probably gets top billing for fame. But Felton did quite well for himself too.

Ralph was part of a good-sized family. Father Harry and Mother Mary Anna – both of whom were born in Midway - had seven children in all. Ralph’s grandfather William was born in England in 1862 and arrived in the United States in 1885. Grandmother Ann took a similar route. Perhaps their families headed to Western Pennsylvania to find work, and stayed there for the rest of their lives. Both Harry and Mary Anna are buried in Midway.



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One of the best parts of playing for a relatively small high school is that good athletes are in demand. That's probably why Felton played four years of football, basketball, and baseball through 1950. He apparently was good enough of a baseball player to make it to a regional All-Star Game in 1949 against New York City. Even so, football always has taken center stage in that part of the world. Felton was a fullback, linebacker, and kicker, and was twice named to the all-star team of the Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League. Midway became part of a merger with other schools in the Fort Cherry area in the mid-1950s.

Felton graduated from high school in 1950, and he accepted a scholarship to play football at the University of Maryland. The fullback/linebacker couldn't have turned up at a better time to play for the Terrapins. The coach was Jim Tatum, who had come to the school in 1947 after one season at Oklahoma. Maryland had something of a revolving door when it came to coaches, but Tatum stayed nine years and had a great run of success.

The Terps had a couple of big names precede Tatum. In 1945, Maryland gave Paul "Bear" Bryant his first head coaching position, and he led the team to a 6-2-1 record. However, supposedly he didn't get along with Harry "Curley" Byrd, the school president, and – oh by the way – the former football coach at Maryland. Bryant left for Kentucky in 1946, and Clark Shaughnessy came back for a second tenure at the school to replace him. Shaughnessy was considered one of the great innovators in football history, as some have called him the father of the modern T formation. He also bounced from job to job for a variety of reasons. In this case, he went 3-6 in 1946, and then quit in January 1947. Clark ended up with the Los Angeles Rams in 1948.

Tatum came in for the 1947 season and did quite well. The Terrapins were 7-2-2 overall, 3-2-1 in the Southern Conference, and they played in the Gator Bowl. The next few years were good too – 6-4 in 1948, 9-1 and a Gator Bowl bid in 1949, and 7-2-1 in 1950. The team even had a new playpen in 1950, when Byrd Stadium was built. Felton arrived on campus in the fall of 1950, and he no doubt had a good seat as the team went 7-2-1.

But that was a warm-up for 1951. Tatum decided to move Ed Modzelewski to fullback, opening up a spot at halfback. Felton grabbed it during spring practice even though he was only a sophomore with no varsity experience. Felton and Maryland were about to go through a season to remember.

The Terps went through a 9-0 regular season, as they won the Southern Conference title and were ranked third in the country. Then they played No. 1 Tennessee in the Sugar Bowl, and knocked them off, 28-13, even though Felton was playing hurt that day. The wire services didn't do a poll after the bowl games in those days. However, several



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historians have gone back to declare mythical national champions from that era, and many decided that Maryland was the nation's best team in 1951. Felton picked up the nickname "The Midway Express" that season. He was second on the team in rushing with 485 yards in 83 carries. Against North Carolina State, Ralph ran for 183 yards.

The bowl game victory came with a small price. The Southern Conference had banned its teams from postseason play in 1951, and Maryland ignored it. The penalty for its participation was to play no conference opponents in 1952; Clemson suffered the same punishment for playing in the Gator Bowl.

Still, the Terps patched together a good schedule and started out as if they would be a contender for national honors again. Maryland won its first seven games, most by convincing scores. However, the Terps lost games to Mississippi and Alabama at the close of the season to finish 7-2. Felton rushed for 314 yards that season to rank second on the team, even though he had to move from halfback to fullback because of an injury to Ed Fullerton.

No doubt Maryland was angry about the way it was treated by the conference, so it was eager to listen when there was talk of a new conference in that part of the region. The Atlantic Coast Conference was formed in 1953. The original seven schools consisted of Clemson, Duke, Maryland, North Carolina, North Carolina State, South Carolina, and Wake Forest. Virginia joined the conference in December 1953.

Felton was ready for a big senior year, and so was the school's sports information office. In the media guide, Felton was part of a photo page spotlighting the team's "60-Minute Backfield Foursome," that included quarterback Bernie Faloney, halfback Chester Hanulak, and halfback and future pro coach Dick Nolan. Felton's linebacker play impressed Tatum, who said about Felton's work, "Never seen anything like it," according to the media guide.

The Terps lived up to their billing in 1953. They went undefeated in the regular season, going 10-0. An individual highlight for Ralph came on October 23 at Miami. Ralph ran for 97 yards on 15 carries, and had an interception that set up the game's first touchdown. Felton was a big part of a defense that gave up more than 10 points in only one game for the entire season and had six shutouts. Maryland received a bit of a taste of its own medicine, as the Terps were top-ranked entering the Orange Bowl – only to lose to Oklahoma, 7-0. Still, the wire service polls had voted Maryland the national championship before that game.

At 5-foot-11 and 210 pounds, Felton must have been a good fit for the physical play of the times. He played fullback and linebacker for the Terrapins, and also did some



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kicking. Felton carried the ball 100 times as a senior, running for 556 yards. He scored six touchdowns in the process. It earned him an honorable mention position on the All-America team.

Along the way, Felton picked up a friend for life in Leonard “Lynn” Szafranski, Jr., one of his college roommates and a guard on the football team. Szafranski once wrote about Felton, “Rass (a nickname that apparently stuck) was my roommate at Maryland 1951-53. I knew him from Midway and he knew me from St. Luke's (of Carnegie, Pa.). The two schools played each other in the old days. We became great friends at Maryland. I can remember many nights he and I discussing the problems of the world. We were budding philosophers in those days. Though we belonged to different denominations, he had a strong faith and so did I as a Catholic. We used to listen to Billy Graham together in our dorm room late at night and found great solace in his words.”

Felton was invited to the Senior Bowl after the season, a showcase for graduating players who want to display their talents for the pro scouts. Sadly, Ralph broke his ankle in that game, and his speed never came back. His days as a fullback were over; he was at that point a full-time linebacker.

The NFL Draft took place on January 28, 1954 in Philadelphia. It wasn't a great year for talent, as no Hall of Famers (at least as of 2020) were taken in the 30 rounds. However, Felton was picked by the Washington Redskins in the fourth round. Fittingly, one of his teammates from Maryland, Nolan, was picked two positions later by the New York Giants.

The Redskins had switched coaches as they prepared for the 1954 season. Curly Lambeau, one of the game's legends, was out after a 6-5-1 season. He was replaced by Joe Kuharich, who had previously coached the Chicago Cardinals in 1952. Oddly, he replaced Lambeau as coach of that team that time as well. Felton moved right into the starting lineup that season, and had a couple of interceptions and three fumble recoveries as a rookie. Ralph also did some of the kicking that year, going 1 for 2 on field goals and 16 for 17 on extra points. The Redskins slumped to 3-9 that year.

Washington moved up to second in the Eastern Division in 1955 with an 8-4 record, earning Kuharich the Coach of the Year honors. The team featured Eddie LeBaron at quarterback and four different running backs who ran for at least 300 yards – although none of them reached a total of 400 yards. Felton was the youngest regular on the defense that season at 23, and had two fumble recoveries. Ralph played right behind defensive end Gene Brito, who probably was the best player at his position in the league that season. Washington that year was the first defense in NFL history to use a 4-3 alignment for virtually every down of an entire season. Kuharich had three good linebackers and



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was weak at middle guard, and he used Chuck Drazenovich as a middle linebacker. Drazenovich wound up in the Pro Bowl that year.

The 1956 edition of the Redskins had a schizophrenic season. Washington lost its first three games, but won its next five to have a chance at a division title. But the team lost three of its last four to finish a mediocre 6-6. Injuries must have kept Felton off the field for half of the season, as he only started six games and had one fumble recovery. Felton started the 1957 season well enough, as he earned a trophy as the Redskins' top defensive player in preseason games. He missed three games that season, and had one interception. The mediocrity continued for the Redskins, who had to win their final three games just to get to 5-6-1 on the season.

Felton came very close to playing before family and friends in Western Pennsylvania as a member of the Pittsburgh Steelers in 1958. On July 10, he was traded to the Steelers by the Redskins for a seventh-round draft choice. Midway must have had a good-sized party that day. However, Pittsburgh apparently wasn't impressed, and the team waived him on September 23. He re-signed as a free agent with Washington on October 8, and eventually played six games for his old/new team. The 1958 season was another small step backwards for Washington, which fell to 4-9-1.

Kuharich always had wanted to coach at his alma mater, Notre Dame. An opportunity to do that arrived after the 1958 season. Joe had signed a new five-year contract with Washington before that campaign, but asked for permission to go to South Bend when the Fighting Irish expressed interest. Owner George Preston Marshall let Kuharich go to Notre Dame, where he is remembered as the only coach in school history to have a career losing record. Meanwhile, Marshall turned to Mike Nixon to coach the team. Nixon had been the team's backfield coach since 1954, but he didn't have much luck with the team as a head coach either. The Redskins were 3-9. Felton didn't miss a game in 1959, and had two interceptions for a defense that was the worst in the league in points allowed.

Nixon was back in 1960, but everything went wrong for him and the team. Washington stumbled to a 1-9-2 record. The Redskins' only win came against Dallas, which was in its first year in the league and on its way to an 0-11-1 record. The Washington-Dallas game therefore became memorable because it's the only time in NFL history when the two teams played and went on to combine to win one game for the entire season. Felton was a fixture on the defense with 11 starts.

Marshall moved on from Nixon after the 1960 season. Mike got another chance to coach a bad team in Pittsburgh in 1965, going 2-12. He finished with a 6-30-2 record and .167 winning percentage. Of coaches who have 30 games to their credit, only Marty Mornhinweg, Chris Palmer, Norm Hecker, and Phil Handler have a worse winning



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percentage. The replacement in Washington was Bill MacPeak, who was an assistant under Nixon. He cut Felton in training camp in 1961.

Rass soon received a call from the Buffalo Bills of the American Football League. Coach Buster Ramsey had been a defensive assistant with the Detroit Lions in the 1950s, and therefore no doubt was familiar with Felton's work. "I knew somebody up there, a guy by the name of Richie McCabe," Ralph told author Jeffrey J. Miller. "He played with Washington, and then he went to Buffalo. That's what dragged me up there. I contacted them, and they said come on up." Felton joined the team on September 8.

Ramsey plugged him right into the starting lineup, and Felton stayed there for all 14 games in 1961. "Buster was sort of rough," Felton told Miller. "But I tell you, I liked Buster. I thought he was a great guy. I thought he was a great coach too."



Ralph had two interceptions during the season – one against Dallas on Nov. 12, and the other against Denver on Nov. 19. He served as something of an assistant coach to Ramsey along the way. The November 12 game was noteworthy because of the contributions of defensive back Jim Crotty, just signed by the Bills after his release by the Redskins. Crotty hadn't even practiced with Buffalo, but played well – and was involved in his first win after 16 straight losses. "We should get a player a week from Washington and we'd never lose," said Felton, who knew something about the woes of Washington. "A player coming from the Redskins hasn't won in so long, he'll die just for the smell of victory."



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The Bills finished 6-8 in 1961, and Felton announced his retirement after the season. But he thought the Bills had a chance to do well the next year. So, he came back for the 1962 season under new coach Lou Saban. The linebacker spent most of the first month in the lineup, but he was waived after a one-sided loss to the Dallas Texans on Sept. 30. Ralph retired on Oct. 2. "I just quit," Felton told Miller. "I played with Lou Saban for a little while – I worked with him, I should say. I was never a Saban fan. It comes to the time when you know you've had enough, and I'd had enough."

Felton finished with 93 pro games to his credit, starting 81 of them. He had seven career interceptions and seven fumble recoveries. Razz was inducted into the Western Chapter of the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame in 1993.

Felton moved into the scouting department of the Bills from there, and stayed about a year. That's something of a lonely life, with a lot of time spent away from home. One Sunday morning, Ralph woke up and realized how much he missed his wife, Carole, and his children, sons Terry and Dwain and daughter Cindy. Ralph soon resigned from his job with the Bills. "That's a testament to his commitment to the family," Terry Felton told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

It was time to go back to Midway. "I came home from Buffalo and I bought a grocery store (Midway Grocery), and I became the butcher," Felton said. "My wife and I ran it. After that, I went to work for the (state) highway department. In 1992, I quit. Fully retired." Felton also served as a Sunday School teacher at the Center United Presbyterian Church. "You could know my father for months and months and months and never know he played professional football," Terry Felton said to the Post-Gazette.

Ralph died at the age of 78 on January 22, 2011 at his home. He's buried in Center Cemetery in Midway, now next to his wife and no doubt near his mother and father. They are all home for keeps.

"Even though we drifted away over the years, I still remember him as a great and true friend," Szafranski wrote on a tribute page. "He was someone I could talk to easily. I just wanted you to know that I thought the world of him."



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