



Willie Grate

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Willie Grate was a two-sport star in football and basketball at South Carolina State University, earning All-SIAC honors three times in football and once in basketball. He is considered one of the best all-around athletes in the school's history. He played two years for the Buffalo Bills in 1969 and 1970, catching three touchdown passes.

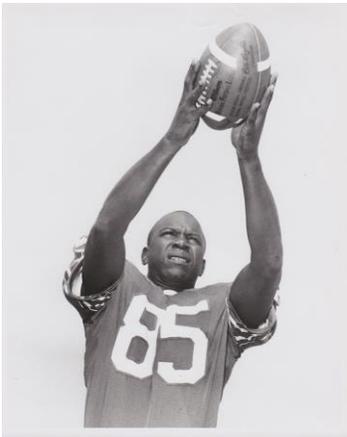


Photo Credit: Robert L. Smith

Willie Joe Grate was born in Georgetown, South Carolina, on May 25, 1947. He grew up in Conway, South Carolina, and attended Whittemore High School. He starred in both basketball and football for the school, averaging over 40 points per game in basketball during his senior year. He also scored 27 touchdowns for the football team in his final season. He was selected basketball All-State three consecutive years and was MVP of the All-Star team as a senior.

He was highly recruited in both sports. Several schools offered him a basketball scholarship, including the University of Oklahoma. He was also pursued by many top-flight college football programs for his skills in that sport, including Nebraska and Michigan State.

Grate was offered a football scholarship to South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. He decided on SC State because it was close to home and the school had an excellent academic record. He played varsity football from his freshman year forward. He began playing basketball as a junior and made a name for himself.



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He garnered attention very quickly in his freshman football season. In the Bulldogs' third game on October 9, Grate scored two touchdowns, a 20-yard run and a 44-yard pass reception, sparking a 26-6 victory over J.C. Smith. One week later he snared an 18-yard touchdown pass in a 36-6 romp over Alabama A&M. He finished out October with a 37-yard pass reception touchdown in a 21-6 upset of Bethune-Cookman. South Carolina State finished his freshman year with one of the school's best seasons ever with an 8-1 record and outscored their opponents 217-85. They finished second in the SIAC to Florida A&M.

In his sophomore year, Grate rushed 59 times for 321 yards and scored six touchdowns along with a two-point conversion. His best game came in a loss to Bethune-Cookman as he had touchdown runs of 44 and 15-yards, in the close 29-26 defeat. The Bulldogs had another good season under head coach Oree Banks, finishing at 7-2.

He had one of his best games at South Carolina State when he scored 14 of the team's 20 points in a 20-0 victory over Albany State on October 21, 1967. The junior fullback scored touchdowns on runs of 6 yards and 23 yards while also contributing a two-point conversion on a pass reception.

The Bulldogs' opponents were keying on him more and therefore he only carried the ball 40 times as a junior for 183 yards and three touchdowns. SC State had another outstanding year finishing with a 7-1 record and outscoring their opponents 206-47. Their only loss was to Florida A&M, 25-0.

Grate played varsity basketball his junior year and had an immediate impact as a starter. He averaged over 20 points and 10 rebounds per game. Both of his coaches raved about him, "Willie Grate is rated by his coaches, Oree Banks of the football squad and Ed Martin of the cagers, as one of the best all-around men they've coached. He works hard at his sports and is in the top ranks of the nationally noted."ⁱ

In January 1968, the Orangeburg Chamber of Commerce honored Grate. He was given a "special award for outstanding athletics by the Orangeburg Kentucky Fried Chicken."ⁱⁱ Frank Handel, President of the Greater Orangeburg Chamber of Commerce, "noted that the award was presented to Grate due to his having shown discipline, hard work and great determination in a most competitive sport."ⁱⁱⁱ

Grate continued to excel in his senior year. He scored two touchdowns in a 27-22 win over Alabama A&M. He caught a 19-yard pass for a touchdown and bulled over from one yard out for the other score. He scored his final TD in a Bulldogs uniform on Thanksgiving Day 1968 on a double reverse 8-yard run, in a 28-6 win over J.C. Smith.



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He started every game except one from his freshman year through his senior year. He was very versatile, playing flanker, fullback, and wingback for the Bulldogs. In his four years, it was one of the greatest periods of sustained success in the program's history with an overall 29-6 mark. He was named All-SIAC three times.

Grate had an exceptional senior basketball season. He led the team in scoring and rebounding, averaging 24.3 points and 14.6 rebounds per game in leading the Bulldogs to a 20-3 regular season record. He also had one of the top field goal percentages in the country. He was named to the All-South Carolina basketball team and the District 6 NAIA All-Star team as the leading vote getter. He was also selected to the National All NAIA third team.

His senior season came to a disappointing end in a loss to Newberry College in the NAIA basketball tournament. He fouled out of the game while scoring 17 points. Grate majored in Physical Education at South Carolina State and graduated in 1969.

Prior to the NFL draft a pro scout listed Grate "as the nation's ninth best professional prospect available this season. Far behind Grate are some more familiar names, like Miami's Ted Hendricks, Florida State's Ron Sellers, and Penn State's Ted Kwalick."^{iv} He had big hands, a good combination of strength and speed as he ran a 9.6 100-yard dash, and had a toughness about him.

Grate was also coming from a school with an excellent pedigree of producing NFL level talent. Former Bulldog alumni include Pro Football Hall of Famers Harry Carson, Deacon Jones, Marion Motley, and Donnie Shell as well as Pro Bowlers Barney Chavous, John Gilliam, and Robert Porcher.

He was drafted by the Houston Oilers in the sixth round, the 143rd player chosen. After the draft he said, "I had hoped I would be drafted a little higher."^v And when asked how he was going to decide which sport he would play professionally he said, "I like football the best, but if I get a better deal in pro basketball, I will take that. The Oilers told me to wait until after basketball season before getting together with them on a contract."^{vi}

He surprisingly went undrafted by both the NBA and the new American Basketball Association, so he negotiated and signed a contract with the Oilers. He signed on April 11, 1969 and was pleased with his signing bonus. Houston's chief scout Tom Williams, who signed Grate, and said, "We are happy to have Willie with us."^{vii} He indicated that Grate would likely play flanker or split end.

Grate was in the Oilers training camp throughout, except for a few days when he attended his father's funeral. He played in each of the Oilers preseason games until he was



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released on September 1. It came down to him or another rookie named Charlie Joiner for the last receiver spot on the team. Joiner made the club and would go on to have a Hall of Fame career. Grate was claimed on waivers by the Buffalo Bills. He was with the Bills a little more than a week. He saw limited action in their final preseason game on September 6, a 50-20 shellacking by the Los Angeles Rams. He was cut by the Bills on September 9 but was then re-signed a day later and made the active roster to start the season.

The 6'4", 225-pound tight end made his professional debut on September 14 against the defending Super Bowl champion New York Jets. He played special teams in the Bills' 33-19 loss.

He contributed throughout the season on special teams and saw limited action at tight end behind Billy Masters, who started all 14 games while catching 33 passes. Tight end was a new position for Grate, and he spent 1969 learning the role. Grate played in 11 of the team's 14 games, missing three games with fractured ribs. He missed the Patriots game on November 23, and the following two weeks versus Cincinnati and at Kansas City.

He was back for the final game of the season on December 14 at San Diego, which also happened to be the last AFL regular season game played. He caught the first pass of his professional career. The Bills were trailing 45-0 in the fourth quarter. Grate caught a 19-yard scoring pass from Tom Sherman with 1:26 remaining in the game. It was his only catch during his rookie season. It was also the last regular season touchdown in AFL history and the last points scored, as the Bills' point after touchdown was blocked. So, Willie Grate is the answer to an excellent trivia question: who scored the last points in AFL regular season history?

Throughout the 1969 season, Grate lived in the same apartment complex as O.J. Simpson and befriended O.J. He was asked what it was like playing with O.J. "If you didn't know who O.J. was, you couldn't tell him from anyone else. He acted just like everybody else," he replied.^{viii} "When we get a good line, I think he will live up to his billing. He didn't do too bad last season, but our line just couldn't get it together."^{ix} And then he was asked to compare O.J. with Gale Sayers, "I don't know about him being as good as Gale Sayers. They don't make them like Sayers anymore, but I do think O.J. will move up in the rushing department if our line improves."^x

Entering 1970, Grate's future looked bright. The Bills media guide said about him, "Has fine hands and good speed. Plays tight end, could be an outside receiver."^{xi} He played in all six of the Bills' preseason encounters and started four. He got his first start on August 14 in a 22-6 loss to Detroit. He caught one pass for 13 yards. He started the next three games, a 35-20 win over Philadelphia, a 27-0 loss at Washington, and a 10-7 loss to Atlanta. He did not start the team's final preseason game with Austin Denney taking over



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the starting position and Denney began the regular season as the starting tight end. Denney became the team's regular tight end, starting all 14 games.

Grate was again relegated to special teams and played some tight end throughout the season. He played in all 14 games, catching seven passes for 147 yards while scoring two touchdowns. His first reception of the season was a two-yard catch in a 33-14 loss to Miami on October 18.

He caught two passes for 60 yards and his second career touchdown, a 28-yarder from James Harris, in a 14-10 loss to Boston on November 29. In the Bills' final game of the season on December 20, at Miami, Grate caught two passes for 43 yards and his third career TD reception. It was a 30-yard strike from James Harris for the Bills' only TD with 4:22 left in their 45-7 loss.

Grate was back with the Bills in 1971. The Bills had upheaval early in training camp when Bills owner Ralph C. Wilson Jr., and head coach John Rauch feuded over comments Rauch made about some of the Buffalo players. Wilson confronted him and accepted his resignation during the feud. Player personnel director Harvey Johnson took over as interim head coach. Grate had earned respect from Rauch that he didn't have with Johnson. A few weeks later after playing sparingly in two preseason games, Grate was released on August 25.

Grate was in the Washington Redskins training camp in 1972, but again was released. He tried to catch on with the new World Football League, signing a contract with the Florida Sharks on March 6, 1974. He was released on June 24 and his playing career was over.

Grate died prematurely young at only 33 years old on December 27, 1980. He was posthumously enshrined in the South Carolina State University Hall of Fame in 2008 for both basketball and football. He was among the best all-around athletes in South Carolina sports history.



End Notes:

- ⁱ Staff, "Special Athletic Award -- Willie Joe Grate," *The Times and Democrat* (Orangeburg, SC), February 4, 1968, p21
- ⁱⁱ Staff, "Special Athletic Award -- Willie Joe Grate," *The Times and Democrat* (Orangeburg, SC), February 4, 1968, p21
- ⁱⁱⁱ Staff, "Special Athletic Award -- Willie Joe Grate," *The Times and Democrat* (Orangeburg, SC), February 4, 1968, p21
- ^{iv} Staff, "Watch out for Willie Grate," *The Charlotte Observer*, November 13, 1968, p41
- ^v <https://oldestlivingprofootball.com/williegrate.htm>, accessed on July 21, 2020
- ^{vi} <https://oldestlivingprofootball.com/williegrate.htm>, accessed on July 21, 2020
- ^{vii} Staff, "Grate Signs with Oilers," *The Times and Democrat* (Orangeburg, SC), April 12, 1969, p8
- ^{viii} Beck, James, "Ex-Bulldog: O.J. is No Different," *The Times and Democrat* (Orangeburg, SC), April 17, 1970, p6
- ^{ix} Beck, James, "Ex-Bulldog: O.J. is No Different," *The Times and Democrat* (Orangeburg, SC), April 17, 1970, p6
- ^x Beck, James, "Ex-Bulldog: O.J. is No Different," *The Times and Democrat* (Orangeburg, SC), April 17, 1970, p6
- ^{xi} Buffalo Bills 1970 Media Guide, Buffalo Bills Inc., c 1970