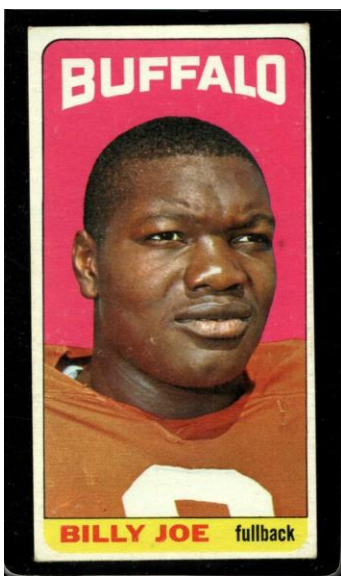




Billy Joe

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Billy Joe had an eventful and distinguished seven-year professional football career. He was the American Football League Rookie of the Year with the Denver Broncos in 1963, won a league championship with the Buffalo Bills in 1965 while being an AFL All-Star, and was part of the New York Jets Super Bowl III NFL championship team. He then went on to become one of the best African American head coaches in college football history. His teams won the second-most games (245) at historically black colleges to legendary coach Eddie Robinson, while capturing two NAIA national championships and six black college football national championships in a 34-year coaching career.



William Joe was born on October 14, 1940 in Aynor, South Carolina. He moved with his parents to Pennsylvania as a youngster. He attended Scott High School in Coatesville, PA. Coatesville is about an hour drive west of Philadelphia. Joe was All-State in football and was also an outstanding shot-putter on the track team. "I had the longest shot-put in the nation at 59 feet, one inch," he said.¹ He was highly recruited for both sports, however he contracted rheumatic fever in the spring of his senior season that impacted his athletic career. Joe graduated from Scott in the spring of 1959. He is the only professional football player to ever come from Scott High School. His older brother John was a little All-American football player at Lycoming.



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Most of Joe's scholarship offers dissipated after contracting the fever. Villanova University was one of the only schools to standby their offer despite his physical problems at the time. He attended Villanova but sat out his freshman year as he had lost upwards of 50 pounds. He slowly built his strength and weight back and by the summer before his sophomore season he was cleared to play by Villanova's medical staff.

Villanova did not have a good season during Joe's sophomore year. The Wildcats finished with a 2-8 record under head coach Alex Bell. Their only wins came against Rutgers and Xavier, not big-name football programs at the time, with the offense only scoring 10 or more points in three games. Joe scored his only touchdown of the season on a spectacular run in the season finale against Xavier. He ran over a Xavier linebacker at the line of scrimmage and then outraced the safety on a 50-yard touchdown run. Joe played in all the team's games but ran the ball only 10 times for 53 yards and the one touchdown.

Joe participated in track at Villanova also. He won the NCAA indoor shot-put title as a sophomore. Joe was the only African American player on the Wildcats football team, which was uncomfortable for him at times.

The Wildcats under Bell had a complete turnaround in 1961. They won their first five games before losing to Boston College. The five-game winning streak was highlighted by a 33-13 win over the University of Massachusetts with Billy scoring two touchdowns on runs of one and seven yards.

Following their loss to Boston College, they scored two more victories and a loss to Detroit Mercy, finishing the regular season with a 7-2 record and qualifying for the Sun Bowl. In their 40-13 win over West Chester on November 10, Joe had another two-touchdown game. With Villanova trailing 10-6 in the second quarter he rambled 60 yards for the go-ahead touchdown spurring the Wildcats to their big victory. His other TD was an 11-yard scamper in the fourth quarter. He was the leading rusher in the game with 97 yards. Joe scored the only touchdown in Villanova's 20-6 loss to Detroit Mercy.

Villanova's stout defense in 1961 registered three shutouts and held three other opponents under 10 points. Their 89 points allowed for the season was 11th best in the nation. Joe was a solid contributor on defense, playing linebacker, to go along with his running and blocking skills on the offensive side of the ball. Assistant coach Joe Rogers said about Joe's blocking, "He's one of the best college blockers I've ever seen. He blows them out of there. He doesn't leave his feet, he just goes right through them."ⁱⁱ Joe finished the season with 267 yards rushing on 57 carries and scored six touchdowns. He was second on the team in scoring and third in rushing. Head coach Bell said about his



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prized player, “He can block, he can tackle and he’s a helluva runner. He’s strong as a bull, 235 pounds of muscle.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In preparation for the Sun Bowl, the team had some fun at a breakfast hosted for them on a ranch near the border of New Mexico. At the conclusion of the breakfast the Wildcats were requested to do some song and dance. Joe stole the show as he gave an imitation of Chubby Checker. The morning paper described Billy’s performance the next day this way: “He resembled a rhinoceros shaking off water as he twisted back and forth, his muscular arms flailing in one direction and his torso moving the other way.”^{iv} His feat brought laughter from the crowd and gun shots from the cowboys on hand.

Joe was all business once game time came. He led the Wildcats to a 17-9 upset victory over Wichita State. He scored the team’s first touchdown on a 19-yard sweep, while running over four would-be tacklers, giving Villanova an early 7-0 lead, and setting the tone for the game. He was the leading ball carrier in the contest with 63 yards. The Wildcats defense held the Shockers’ vaunted passing attack in check, allowing only 71 yards in the victory. Joe was named the game’s Most Outstanding Player.

Villanova had another excellent season in Billy’s senior year. The Wildcats put together another 7-2 regular season record with their only losses to nemesis Boston College and a one-point disappointment against UMass. Their defense again was extremely strong, allowing only 95 points, finishing 15th best in the country. They pitched two shutouts and held five other opponents to 10 points or less.

Joe rushed for 267 yards on 75 carries and scored one touchdown for the season. He caught one touchdown pass while also playing outstanding defense at linebacker. Joe was injured in the Boston College game and his ankle bothered him for the remainder of the season, although he played in every game. Despite his injury, he was named to the Associated Press All-East All-Star team at the conclusion of the season at fullback.

Joe was selected by the Washington Redskins, on December 2, 1962, with the seventh selection in the ninth round of the NFL draft, #119 overall. He was also selected by the Denver Broncos, on December 1, with the fifth selection in the eleventh round, pick #85.

Billy and his teammates earned a second consecutive Bowl bid, this time to the Liberty Bowl in Memphis, Tenn., against the Oregon State Beavers. The Wildcats lost a hard-fought 6-0 decision. Villanova was a two- to three-touchdown underdog to the Beavers. The Wildcats played toe to toe with Oregon State and their Heisman Trophy winning quarterback, Terry Baker. Despite the defeat, Joe was named the Most Valuable Back in the game. He ran through and around the Oregon State defense. He rushed for 66 yards and had a 12-yard touchdown run called back on a penalty. Washington Redskins scout



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“Bucko” Kilroy said of Joe’s performance, “It was one of Billy Joe’s two greatest games. The other was in the Sun Bowl last year.”^v

He was named to play in the Crusade Bowl on January 6 in Baltimore, Maryland. The bowl game was for college seniors already drafted by the pro teams. Joe played for the East squad and scored on a 19-yard touchdown run as the East trounced the West 38-10 at Memorial Stadium.

Joe finished his track career at Villanova in fine fashion. In the NCAA Championships in Oregon he took third place in the shot-put behind Dallas Long and Gary Grubner, making him an All-American. Billy also competed at the Pan American Games in Sao Paulo, Brazil between April 20 and May 5, finishing second in the shot-put competition to fellow American Dave Davis. Joe had a throw of 17.77 meters or 58-feet, 3.6 inches.

He waited to sign his professional football contract until after the games. He inked a deal with the Broncos on May 18. He had been courted by the Redskins, the Winnipeg Blue Bombers of the Canadian Football League and Denver. He chose the Broncos because they gave him a two-year, no-cut contract and the most money.

Joe was impressive in the Broncos training camp and preseason games, providing a running compliment to the quarterback play of veteran Frank Tripucka. He won the starting fullback job for the opening game. His regular season professional debut came on September 7 against the Kansas City Chiefs. On Denver’s first offensive play from scrimmage, Joe burst through the Chiefs line for a 19-yard gain. The game went downhill quickly for the Broncos as they were trampled by Kansas City 59-7. Joe did not play badly, gaining 61 yards on nine carries and catching one pass for seven yards.

Joe scored his first professional touchdown on October 18 at Fenway Park in Boston. He galloped 68 yards for a second quarter touchdown in the Broncos’ 40-21 loss to the Patriots. Joe finished the game with 83 yards on only eight carries. He achieved his first 100-yard rushing game against the New York Jets on November 17, gaining 105 yards on 20 carries in the Broncos’ 14-9 loss.

Denver struggled badly, winning only two games, and finishing the season with a 2-11-1 mark. Their poor play impacted Joe’s ability to impact the game running the football and held down his carries as they were playing from behind so frequently. Despite the Broncos’ poor play, Joe rushed for 646 yards on 154 carries. He scored five touchdowns in all, four rushing and one pass receiving. Joe was voted the AFL Rookie of The Year.

In the second year of his no-cut contract with Denver, Joe had a good season, not quite as good as his rookie year, but the Broncos were just as bad, finishing with another 2-11-1



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mark. He scored only two touchdowns, the first in a 20-16 win over the Jets on November 15, which also was his second career 100-yard rushing game as he finished with 108 yards. His other TD was a 2-yard run in a 20-20 tie with the Oakland Raiders on November 29. He finished the season with 415 rushing yards on 111 carries.

On February 24, 1965, the Buffalo Bills announced a blockbuster trade. They dealt troubled running back Cookie Gilchrist, league MVP and four-time AFL rushing champion, to the Denver Broncos for Joe. Gilchrist had problems in 1964 with Bills head coach Lou Saban and when the trade was consummated, Saban said, "It had to come." For Joe it was a great move as he was going from the worst team in the league to the best. The Bills were 1964 AFL Champions.

Joe stepped into the starting fullback job from day one with Buffalo. He did not get anywhere near the same number of carries that Gilchrist got the previous year. The Bills used Billy as a very effective blocker and their ground game was more shared responsibility among multiple backs including Wray Carlton, Bobby Smith and scrambling quarterback Jack Kemp. He finished second on the team in rushing with 377 yards, behind Carlton's 592. Joe also contributed six touchdowns, four rushing and two in the passing game.

A couple highlights of Joe's season were the two games against his former Broncos' mates. In the first game on September 19 in Denver, Joe rushed for 48 yards, caught four passes for 36 yards, and scored on a seven-yard pass from Kemp that put the Bills ahead 20-0. Buffalo went on to win the game 30-15 and Joe was delighted as he outshined his trading partner, Gilchrist, with Cookie only gaining 26 yards on 12 carries against the Bills aggressive defense.

In the rematch, it was even better for Joe. It was Gilchrist's first game back in Buffalo since the trade. On the Bills' first possession, following an end zone interception by Booker Edgerson halted a Broncos drive, the Bills faced a third and 25 from their 22-yard line. Kemp fired a 20-yard pass over the middle that Joe snagged and then he outraced the Bronco secondary all the way to the end zone. A thrilling 78-yard pass and run by Joe for the touchdown put the crowd into a frenzy. Joe finished the game with the best pass receiving game of his career with 156 yards on six catches. The Bills went on to win 31-13, though Gilchrist did rush for 87 yards and had 55 yards receiving in the loss.

The Bills won the Eastern Division title in 1965 with a 10-3-1 record and a rematch with San Diego in the AFL Championship game. Buffalo repeated as AFL Champions with a 23-0 dismantling of the Chargers who came into the game with the No. 1- rated offense and #1 rated defense in the AFL. Joe contributed 35 yards on 16 carries and had an excellent game blocking for Kemp and the running game.



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At the conclusion of the season, Joe was named to the AFL All-Star team. Despite his solid season he had a brief stay in Buffalo. He was left open to be selected in the 1966 AFL expansion draft and the Miami Dolphins picked him.

The Dolphins played their first-ever regular season game on September 2, 1966 at the Orange Bowl in Miami. On the opening kickoff Dolphins' Joe Auer returned it 95 yards for a touchdown, quite a start for the new franchise. On Miami's first offensive series the starting backfield was Dick Wood at quarterback, Auer at halfback and Billy Joe at fullback. Joe ran for a one-yard gain on the Dolphins' second play from scrimmage. The Raiders came back to win the game 23-14 with Joe rushing for 31 yards on nine carries.

Joe played in all 14 games for the expansion Dolphins, starting seven as the Dolphins went 3-11. He sparked Miami to the franchise's first ever victory on October 16. On a screen pass from George Wilson in the first quarter, a reporter wrote "Billy Joe caught the pass and dashed, eluded, dashed, slowed and dashed again down the sideline for the touchdown."^{vi} It was a beautifully executed 67-yard touchdown that put the Dolphins ahead 7-0 and provided the momentum as they went on to defeat the Broncos 24-7. Joe also had a nifty 62-yard touchdown run called back for a penalty. A reporter asked him in the postgame locker room, "Were you running from the spirit of Cookie Gilchrist?"^{vii} There had been rumors before the game that the Dolphins might acquire the aging star. Many thought Billy was running from Gilchrist's ghost. Whatever the reason, the Dolphin locker room was jubilant with the victory and Joe said, "When you get a taste of honey, you're like a snowball going downhill. You can throw all those mistakes of the past out the window. We got the momentum now."^{viii}

Gilchrist did join the Dolphins and he split time with Joe the remainder of the season. Billy rushed for 232 yards on 71 carries for the year, finishing third on the team. He only scored one touchdown and that was on the screen pass in the Denver victory.

Joe was in the Dolphins training camp again for 1967 but was released on August 22. He was not out of work long, signing on with the New York Jets on September 1. He was placed on the Jets' taxi squad and while he waited he played for the Jets' farm team in Waterbury, Connecticut. The Waterbury Orbits played in the Atlantic Coast Football League. Joe played three games in September for the Orbits, helping them defeat the Wilmington Renegades 32-21. The Orbits quarterback was the Joe Namath of minor league football, "King" Corcoran. Waterbury finished their season at 6-6, but Joe was gone from the team by then.

Jets star fullback Matt Snell underwent knee surgery on September 29, 1967 and Billy was activated from the taxi squad for the Jets October 1 game versus the Dolphins. He



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remained with New York for the rest of the season, playing in 11 games, mostly on special teams and as a blocking back to protect quarterback Joe Namath.

He started one game against the Boston Patriots on October 29, because of injuries to both Snell and Mark Smolinski. He rushed for 23 yards and caught a pass for 15 more in the Jets' 30-23 victory. His best game of the season was the rematch with the Patriots on November 19 when Snell was knocked from the game with a concussion. Joe rushed for 63 yards on 10 carries, including a 4-yard TD run that put the Jets ahead 23-3 in a game they won 29-24. He also caught a Namath pass for 16 yards.

He was back with the Jets in 1968. Joe had one terrific game during the season. He scored three touchdowns in a 48-14 win over the Patriots. Joe carried the ball 11 times for 80 yards while garnering his three TDs. He scored on runs of 7, 15 and 32 yards. Joe tied a Jets record for rushing touchdowns in a single game. The team awarded him a game ball for his performance.

Joe played 10 games for the Jets while rushing 42 times for 186 yards. He was used primarily as a blocking back to protect Namath. The Jets defeated the Oakland Raiders 27-23 in the AFL Championship game on December 29. Joe was not active for the game.

The Jets stunned the football world and made every AFL player, executive and fan thrilled, with their 16-7 Super Bowl III upset victory over the heavily favored Baltimore Colts on January 12, 1969. Snell with 121 rushing yards, Namath with an efficient 208 yard passing game and the Jets swarming defense propelled New York to the shocking victory. Joe was not active for the game however he was awarded a Super Bowl Championship ring at the conclusion of the season for his contributions during the year.

He returned for one final season with the Jets. He played only one game in 1969 as injuries derailed his season and effectively ended his playing career. Joe retired at the conclusion of the 1969 season.

Joe was an assistant coach and assistant admission director at Cheyney State in 1970. For 1971 he was an assistant coach at the University of Maryland, becoming the first African American assistant coach in the Atlantic Coast Conference. Cheyney State hired him to be there head football coach in 1972.

Joe had an immediate impact at Cheyney State leading them to a 6-3 overall record, there best season in many years. He stayed at Cheyney for seven years finishing with an overall 31-32 record.



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He was hired by the Philadelphia Eagles as their running back coach in 1979. He coached Wilbert Montgomery and helped the Eagles win the NFC Championship in 1980 and playing in Super Bowl XV. The Eagles lost the Super Bowl 27-10. Montgomery had the best season of his career under Joe's tutelage, rushing for 1,512 yards in 1979.

He left the Eagles following their Super Bowl season to become head coach at Central State University in Ohio. He led the Marauders to two NAIA Division I National Championships. His 1990 team finished 10-1 and defeated Mesa State 38-16 to capture the championship. The Marauders won the championship again in 1992, finishing with a 12-1 record. They defeated Gardner-Webb 19-16 to win the title. He was named NAIA Coach of the Year at the conclusion of the season.

While at Central State he also lost two National Championship games. In 1983 the Marauders finished with a 12-1 record but lost the NCAA Division II championship game to North Dakota State, 41-21. In 1991 Central State lost a heartbreaker to Arkansas State in the NAIA title game, 19-16, and finished with an 11-2 record.

In addition while at Central State, he won five consecutive black college football national championships from 1986 to 1990. Joe left the Marauders after the 1993 season with a terrific 120-30-4 overall record.

Billy was hired at Florida A&M for the 1994 season. His first year the team struggled to a 6-5 record, but after that, the Rattlers were the class of the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (MEAC). Over the next eight years they were the MEAC Champion five times and finished second three times. They won one black college football national championship in 1998, making it six for Joe. He retired after the 2004 season and left Florida A&M with an 86-46 overall record. He was named MEAC Coach of the Year three different times (1995, 1996, 2001). During his 24 seasons at Central State and Florida A&M he took 17 of those teams to the national playoffs.

He stayed out of football for three seasons, but the bug caught him again and he became head coach at Miles College for the 2008 season. He stayed at the Division II college in Fairfield, Alabama, for three seasons and then retired in 2010 for good this time, citing ill health. His final coaching record was 245-157-4.

Billy Joe was elected to the College Football Hall of Fame in 2007. His Hall of Fame induction description says, "Billy Joe made the transition from successful professional playing career to becoming one of the most highly decorated black college football coaches in history....Greatly respected by his peers, he served the American Football Coaches Association as both president and vice president."^{ix}



Joe is retired and living in Tallahassee, Florida.

End Notes:

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- ⁱ Miller, Jeffrey, *Rockin the Rockpile*, ECW Press, c2007, p44
- ⁱⁱ Hochman, Stan, "His Desire: To Be The Best," *Philadelphia Daily News*, November 6, 1961, p55
- ⁱⁱⁱ Hochman, Stan, "His Desire: To Be The Best," *Philadelphia Daily News*, November 6, 1961, p55
- ^{iv} Shefski, Bill, "Wildcats in Wild West Have Rootin', Shootin' Time," *Philadelphia Daily News*, December 29, 1961, p52
- ^v McKinney, Jack, "Kilroy: Billy Joe Would Start for Redskins," *Philadelphia Daily News*, December 18, 1962, p69
- ^{vi} Fitzgerald, Tommy, "Dolphins First Triumph Paced By Billy Joe And 'A Perfect Play,'" *The Miami News*, October 17, 1966, p21
- ^{vii} Fitzgerald, Tommy, "Dolphins First Triumph Paced By Billy Joe And 'A Perfect Play,'" *The Miami News*, October 17, 1966, p21
- ^{viii} Fitzgerald, Tommy, "Dolphins First Triumph Paced By Billy Joe And 'A Perfect Play,'" *The Miami News*, October 17, 1966, p21
- ^{ix} https://footballfoundation.org/hof_search.aspx?hof=2191, accessed August 8, 2020