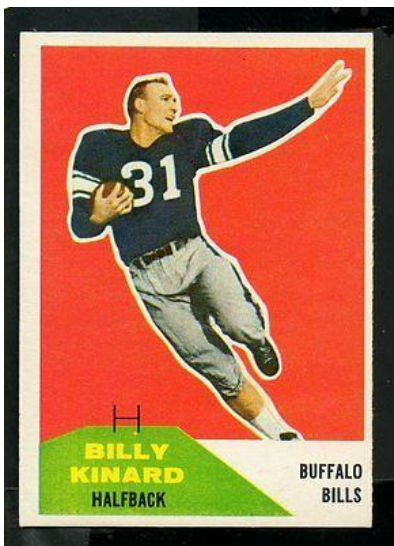


Billy Kinard

This article was written by Budd Bailey.

Billy Kinard had a long association with professional football. He not only played for a few years in the National Football League and American Football League, but he served as an assistant coach for a good period of time as well. Still, Kinard mostly will be remembered for his time in college football – in particular, as a player and coach at Mississippi. By chance, he happened to be around for one of the most tumultuous times in that school’s history in terms of off-the-field activity.



Billy Russell Kinard was born on December 16, 1933 in Jackson, Mississippi. His family tree goes back a long way in American history. The Kinard’s moved from Germany to South Carolina around 1740, and a branch of the family moved to Mississippi just before the start of the Civil War. Billy’s father, Major Kinard, was born in Coopersville, Mississippi, in 1892. That’s about 35 miles east of Jackson. His mother Pearl also was born in Mississippi (no city listed, but she lived in Smith County near Jackson at age 8). Major had worked at a variety of jobs, including laborer and farmer.

Six children arrived in short order for Major and Pearl between 1912 and 1921. One of them was named Frank, who arrived in 1914. He became a football player at a young age, and that led to a change in location for the Kinards. Frank was “recruited” to come to Jackson and play football there. The lure was the offer of a city job for his father. That



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proposition must have sounded good to someone on the fringes of the workforce at the start of the Depression in 1930, and the Kinards headed to the state capital.

"My parents didn't have even a high school education, but they raised us right," Billy Kinard said later. "My dad was a farmer and then worked for the city — a hard worker. He wanted us to be educated and be good citizens. I have fond memories growing up."

Jackson Central High is where Frank picked up the nickname of Bruiser. He became the first player from the University of Mississippi to be an All-American, winning such honors in 1935 and 1936. Bruiser went on to become a six-time NFL All-Pro and a member of the College Football and Pro Football Hall of Fame. Brother George also went on to play in the NFL in the 1940s. Genetics were definitely on the side of Billy turning into a football player when he arrived on the scene – 12 years after any of his siblings as a holiday “gift” in 1933.

Only four people have come out of Jackson Central to play in the NFL, and three of them were named Kinard. The fourth was Bill Yelverton, who was on the original roster of the Denver Broncos when they were formed in 1960. Billy showed he was a worthy member of the family with an electrifying high school career for the Tigers. Kinard won three varsity letters in football, and was all-conference and all-state at halfback as a senior in 1951. Billy also played guard for the basketball team and catcher for the baseball team.

That sort of resume probably caught the attention of a few college recruiters, but they probably never had a chance to land Billy. Three Kinard brothers already had gone to the University of Mississippi to play football (Bruiser, George and Henry). Billy probably didn't have much choice but to follow in their footsteps. It was a good time to join the Rebels. Johnny Vaught was right at the start of creating his own memorable resume. Vaught became the head coach at Mississippi in 1947, and Ole Miss went 9-2 to win the Southeastern Conference for the first time ever and played in a bowl game. Vaught had his only losing season in 1949, but Ole Miss soon rebounded and made it all the way to the Sugar Bowl in 1952 with an 8-0-2 regular season. Billy lettered for the first of four straight times as a freshman in '52.

The SEC was loaded in 1953, with four teams in the national rankings. The Rebels were not one of them in spite of a 7-2-1 season. They had started 7-1, but were clobbered by No. 1 Maryland and tied by rival Mississippi State to close the season. The team did even better in 1954. Mississippi finished 5-0 in the SEC and 9-1 overall, with only a loss to Arkansas spoiling a perfect regular season. That Rebels' team had four shutouts, and earned a trip to the Sugar Bowl – only to lose to No. 5 Navy, 21-0.



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The 1955 season looked like it came out of a copying machine, except with a better ending. Ole Miss went 5-1 to win the SEC, and finished with a 9-1 record. The Rebels went on to the Cotton Bowl on January 1, 1956, and knocked off TCU by a score of 14-13. Kinard's record on the varsity, therefore, was 26-5-1. Billy was a third-team all-SEC selection that season, as he played halfback and defensive back. Speaking of conference honors, Kinard was a first-team All-SEC choice in baseball in the spring of 1956, as he played catcher and in the outfield. His team, which featured future major leaguer Joe Gibbon, finished third in the College World Series. That was the second time he lettered in that sport.

If that wasn't enough activity for a year, Billy found the time to marry his college sweetheart, Kay. She had been a cheerleader at Mississippi. "We had to get permission from the head coach to get married because the team was practicing," Kay told a Milwaukee newspaper. "We got married and then we beat TCU."

Along the way, Kinard had become a good prospect to play in professional football. The 1956 draft wasn't a great one at the top. Gary Glick of Colorado State went first overall to Pittsburgh; as of 2019 he was the only secondary player to go No. 1 in NFL history. Hall of Famers Lenny Moore and Forrest Gregg went in the first and second rounds, respectively. Then came the last pick in the second round, when the Cleveland Browns grabbed Kinard.

Second-rounders are supposed to have an easy time moving up to the pro ranks, but this was no ordinary pro team. The Browns were coming off a fabulous season, going 9-2-1 and then beating up the Rams for the NFL Championship. Cleveland had a starting secondary consisting of Warren Lahr, Don Paul, Ken Konz and Johnny Petitbon. The great Paul Brown, coach of the Browns, saw no reason to break up that combination, so Kinard spent his rookie season learning the ropes. The 6-foot, 189-pound defender only played in six games, and had no starts or statistics. The Browns had a rare offseason for that era, falling to 5-7. The retirement of quarterback Otto Graham had a lot to do with that losing record.

Things would be different in Cleveland a year later, thanks in part to the arrival of a rookie running back named Jim Brown. However, Kinard didn't get to enjoy it. The Browns completed a massive trade with the Green Bay Packers. Kinard went to the Packers with Babe Parilli, Petitbon, Sam Palumbo, John Macerelli, and Carlton Massey. Cleveland picked up Bobby Garrett and Roger Zatkoff in the transaction. Garrett was an interesting story. He was the Browns' No. 1 overall pick in 1954, but had a stuttering problem that hurt his ability to be a quarterback. Cleveland dealt him to Green Bay, where he played nine games and then left for two years in the military. Garrett was back with the Browns in 1957, but retired in the middle of training camp.



Kinard fit in nicely on a personal level at Green Bay. The small-town atmosphere made him feel comfortable, and the Kinards became friendly with Bart Starr and Hank Gremminger. "We had fond memories of Green Bay because of the people and how nice they were to us," Kay said. "They just took us in. With our Southern accents, they knew right away Billy must play for the Packers."

Still, Billy couldn't crack the Packers' starting lineup in 1957, either. He played in 12 games for Green Bay, who suffered through a 3-9 season. One of them, by the way, provided a personal highlight. The Packers played their first game in City Stadium – a facility now known as Lambeau Field. Green Bay beat Chicago before a crowd that included Vice President Richard Nixon and actor James Arness.

Billy's career took an upswing in 1958, as he finally saw some playing time. Kinard received 12 starts at cornerback. That means he had a good view of what went wrong in Green Bay, which was just about everything. The Packers went 1-12-1, and that led to the dismissal of head coach Ray McLean. "Billy was a nice quiet kid from down south, a good defensive back," teammate Jerry Kramer said to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. "He only played a couple seasons and I played with him in 1958, when wins were far and few between."

Better times were ahead for the Packers. Green Bay hired Vince Lombardi away from the Giants to become the head coach. Kinard, though, didn't see any of it. He decided to retire from playing football, and spent 1959 as the head coach of Mainland High School in Daytona Beach, Florida.

But Kinard thought he still had something in the tank, so he answered a call from the Buffalo Bills of the new American Football League. Billy signed a contract, and started all 14 games for the Bills that season – including the very first game in franchise history, a loss to the New York Titans on September 11. He was part of a secondary with fellow safety Jim Wagstaff, and cornerbacks Billy Atkins and Richie McCabe. Interestingly, all four players had at least four interceptions that season. The Bills finished 5-8-1 under head coach Buster Ramsey.

That was it for Kinard as a player. He finished with 45 games played and four interceptions. Bill decided it was time to move on, and he took 1961 off as he looked for work as a college coach. He found a job at Auburn University, where he worked for Shug Jordan for two years. Then it was on to Florida for three seasons under head coach Ray Graves. The University of Georgia called on him to be an assistant for three seasons, and in 1970 Kinard worked for Frank Broyles at the University of Arkansas. If nothing else, Billy learned from the top coaches in the country during that apprenticeship.



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That leads to an interesting twist in Kinard's life story. Vaught had suffered a heart attack in the middle of the 1970 season, and decided to retire from his job as head coach at Mississippi. Athletic director C.M. Smith, who also had heart problems, also retired at that point. Bruiser Kinard, an assistant to Vaught, filled in as the head coach for the rest of 1970. Then he was promoted to athletic director, and he needed a coach soon, Bruiser decided to hire brother Billy for the job. It was the first time that a Mississippi graduate had served as the coach of the Rebels.

It's never easy to replace a legend, and Vaught was certainly that at Mississippi. But Kinard did quite well in his first year on the job. Ole Miss went 10-2 with a win over Georgia Tech in the Peach Bowl, and finished No. 15 in the rankings. But that was the high point of his tenure.

In 1972, Ole Miss slipped to 5-5. What's more, significant changes had come to the program. Ben Williams and James Reed were on the roster, and they were the first African Americans to play for Mississippi in school history. The Rebels were the last team in the SEC to have a black player. We can only guess about the amount of outside pressure that was placed on Kinard and the rest of the program at that time. After all, it was only two years before (1970) when a Jackson Clarion Ledger sports columnist wrote this: "There will be no Negro flashes in the Ole Miss backfield, or lightning-fast black flankers in the flats or tough Negro troopers in the offensive or defensive lines as long as the stars and bars of the Confederacy remains the true standard of the school."

The Rebels opened 1973 with two losses in three games. The two Kinard brothers were said by some to be having trouble getting along with the media and the boosters. To be realistic, racism must have been playing a role in some of those problems. The college administration had seen enough at that point. Both Kinards were fired, and some called the school's action "The Midnight Massacre." Vaught – apparently feeling better after more than two years off – returned to his old duties for the first time for the rest of the season. It marked the first time that Vaught had ever coached an Ole Miss team with African Americans on the roster. By the way, Williams went on to become the first black All-American in Ole Miss history, and played about a decade as a defensive end for the Buffalo Bills. Meanwhile, Mississippi has not won an SEC title since 1963.

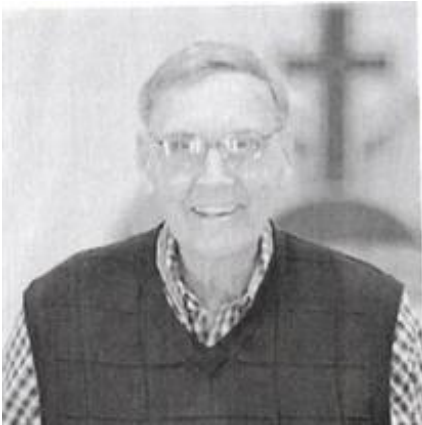
Billy Kinard decided to move up a notch in the coaching business to the NFL; it's tough to know whether the sudden divorce from his alma mater played a role in that. Still, he landed an assistant coach's spot with the Packers in 1974. He stayed for two years before moving to Cleveland for the 1976 and 1977 seasons. Kinard couldn't resist returning to the college ranks when Gardner-Webb called and offered him the head coaching job of the Runnin' Bulldogs in 1978. That relationship lasted for a year after a 4-5-1 season.



From there it was back to the pro ranks to work with the 1979 and 1980 New England Patriots.

With his itch to coach in the pros apparently scratched, Kinard moved back to the South to spend time coaching in high school ball. He coached three Alabama high schools - Jackson Academy in 1986-87, Lanett High School in 1990-92, and Northview High School from 1993 to 1997. Billy also worked as a teacher in that period. Apparently Kinard made an impact wherever he went, and not just on the football field. One of his fellow coaches at Northview, Janasky Fleming, thought Billy made a difference in his players' lives.

"He was an advocate for students and the student-athlete," Fleming said to Dothan Eagle years later. "He would take kids home so his wife could tutor them or he would have her come to the school and help tutor the kids. He is one of the most open-hearted people I have ever known."



Eventually Kinard retired and lived out the rest of his life in Alabama. He died on June 30, 2018, at the age of 84 after a long illness. He and Kay had been married for more than 62 years at that point. They had a son, Bill, and daughter, Kathy.

"I wasn't a great football player, but I played with a lot of great ones, like Bart Starr and Paul Hornung and Jim Taylor and Forrest Gregg and Jim Ringo," Kinard said in a newspaper interview. "My memory isn't as good as it used to be, but I was lucky to coach for 30 years in college and the pros without having to look for a job. It put food on the table and paid the bills and I enjoyed working and coaching with young players."



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