

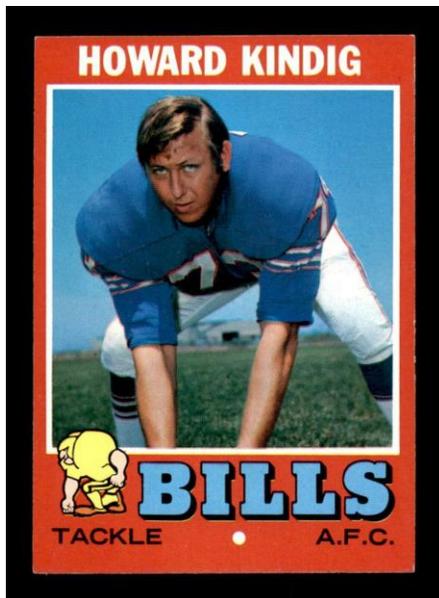


## Howard Kindig

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Howard Kindig played on the only undefeated team in pro football history, winning a Super Bowl championship with the Miami Dolphins in 1972. He took a circuitous route to get there.

After an all-state track career in high school, he was kicked off his junior college basketball team by a future NBA coach, went into the Marine Corps where he starred in football, earned a scholarship to Los Angeles State, and won a conference championship before entering pro football in the American Football League. He played 2½ seasons under Sid Gillman in San Diego, losing in the championship game in 1965, but he and Gillman did not get along, so he shuffled off to Buffalo in 1967. He played five years for the Bills during their down years, and then won the Super Bowl before concluding his NFL career with a short stint with the New York Jets. Then Howard finished his pro career in the World Football League in 1975 with the Jacksonville Express.



Howard Wayne Kindig Jr. was born on June 22, 1941 in Mexico, Missouri. Mexico is a small farming city of around 12,000 people halfway between Kansas City and St. Louis. He attended Mexico High School in his hometown. He was the first graduate of the school to play pro football. Since his graduation, two other players have made it to the NFL from the school - Andy Ekern with Indianapolis, and Jason Brookins with the Baltimore Ravens. Howard played basketball, football, and track in high school. He



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helped lead the Bulldogs to the CEMO basketball championship as a senior. “In his senior year, Kindig received the best boy athlete award, was an all-state shot putter and set new school records for both the shot put and discus,”<sup>i</sup> Kathy Clancy from the *Mexico Ledger* reported.

He attended Moberly Junior College in Missouri playing basketball for future NBA coach Cotton Fitzsimmons. However, Kindig lost his scholarship after he was involved in a fight. “Son, you’re playing the wrong game”<sup>ii</sup> is what Fitzsimmons told Kindig. He left school, went home and eventually joined the U.S. Marine Corps.

Kindig played two years of football while in the Marine Corps, with his team losing only one game. He stood out as an excellent player, making the All-Marine team. When he completed his service in the Marine Corps he was sought after by many colleges including football powers UCLA and USC. Los Angeles State head coach Homer Beatty aggressively pursued Kindig and secured him.

Kindig’s first and only season with the Diablos was a tremendous success. They won the California Collegiate Athletic Association (CCAA) championship with a 7-1 record. L.A. State finished tied with San Diego State, coached by future NFL head coach Don Coryell, but were awarded the title due to their 43-30 regular season win over the Aztecs. “We had a hell of a college football team at LA State - Walter Johnson, defensive tackle who played with Cleveland, and Jim Weatherwax who played with Green Bay for a while – (when) we were together in college,”<sup>iii</sup> Kindig said years later.

At the conclusion of his 1963 season, Kindig was named first team center by United Press International on their Little All-Coast college football team.

The 6-foot-6, 265-pound lineman was drafted by both the American Football League and the National Football League in their war over college players. He was drafted by the Philadelphia Eagles in the NFL Draft with pick No. 170 overall, in the 13<sup>th</sup> round. The San Diego Chargers of the AFL selected him in their draft in round 14, overall pick No. 112.

Kindig signed with the Chargers when he was offered a \$25,000 bonus, an \$18,000 salary, and a no-cut contract. He impressed in the preseason. In the Chargers’ second exhibition game, Kindig, playing defensive end, rushed Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Len Dawson, and forced him to fumble. The Chargers recovered, setting up their first touchdown on their way to a 31-10 victory.

Kindig played in all 14 regular season games for the Chargers, spelling starter Earl Faison at defensive end. He also played special teams for the AFL Western Division



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champion Chargers. San Diego, led by innovative head coach Gillman, finished the regular season with a 9-2-3 record. On the defensive side of the ball was coach Chuck Noll, future head coach of the four-time Super Bowl Champion Pittsburgh Steelers. The Chargers had a rematch in the championship game with Buffalo. San Diego was a heavy favorite as it was playing at home, had the No. 1-rated offense and defense in the AFL, had beaten Buffalo 34-3 earlier in the season, and had revenge on its mind after losing to the Bills in the 1964 championship game in Buffalo. Kindig played sparingly in the title contest, as he mostly watched the Bills dominate the Chargers by a score of 23-0.

Kindig again played behind Earl at left defensive end for the first three games in the 1966 season until Faison was felled by injury. Kindig started 10 of the Chargers' final 11 games of the season. San Diego took a step back with only a 7-6-1 record, finishing in third place in the West Division behind the AFL Champion Chiefs.

A highlight for Kindig was snaring his first interception of his pro career on October 16 at War Memorial Stadium in Buffalo. He picked off a Jack Kemp pass at the San Diego 13-yard line in the third quarter to snuff out a Bills' drive. Despite his interception, the game ended in a 17-17 tie.

Kindig returned to the Chargers for the 1967 season, however he was only with the club for the first seven games as a backup defensive end. Bum Phillips was hired to coach the defensive line. Kindig lost his starting job in training camp to Jim Griffin.

Gillman criticized Kindig's play throughout the '67 season and Kindig had finally had enough. "He and I just didn't see eye to eye," Kindig said. "It was just one of those things. I had a no-cut contract, but I told him, 'You just go ahead and cut me.' And so, anyway, that's what he did. Of course, I could have gone to several other places, but I wanted to go to Buffalo."<sup>iv</sup>

"I always had a lot of friends in Buffalo. When Buffalo would come to San Diego, we'd get together, and have a few beers and laugh and all that stuff. I knew (Ron) McDole, and (Tom) Sestak, Paul Maguire, and Paul Costa. I just wanted to get to Buffalo. So, when I got up there, I thought, 'This is great!'"<sup>v</sup> Kindig was released by the Chargers on November 6. He was quickly snapped up by the Bills, signing the next day.

Kindig made his debut with Buffalo on November 19 in a heartbreaking 21-20 loss to the Denver Broncos. He played in each of the Bills' final five games of the season and earned a start in the team's season finale against the Oakland Raiders. He started in place of McDole at left defensive end and contributed 11 tackles in Buffalo's 28-21 loss. Oakland scored the winning touchdown with 2:13 remaining as the Bills finished with a 4-10 record.



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McDole was the team's fixture at left defensive end for the 1968 season and Kindig was the backup. McDole started all 14 games and Kindig was his backup for the first 12, until the Bills had an emergency on the offensive line. The Bills traveled to Oakland for the Thanksgiving Day clash with the Raiders, but the team was missing starting offensive guard Joe O'Donnell and his backup. Both were injured and could not play. Head coach Harvey Johnson switched starting center Al Bemiller to guard and inserted Kindig at center, since he had played the position in college.

Kindig played well as the Bills almost pulled a major upset over the 9-2 Raiders. Buffalo had two chances to score late to either win or tie the game. Disaster quarterback Ed Rutkowski fumbled at the goal line, depriving the Bills of a touchdown, and Bruce Alford missed a 42-yard field to tie the game with 48 seconds left as the Bills were saddled with a 13-10 loss.

Another highlight of Kindig's during the Bills 1-12-1 season in 1968 was blocking a punt against the Denver Broncos on November 24. Late in the game with the Bills trailing 31-22, Kindig bulled his way through the line and blocked Joe Devito's punt. Paul Guidry picked-up the ball and ran it to the Broncos 3-yard line. The Bills scored a touchdown on the next play with 1:33 left. Less than a minute later the Bills took the lead on an Alford field goal. However, they left 26 seconds on the clock. Plenty of time for the Broncos to move into field goal range and win the game at the gun with a 12-yard Bobby Howfield field goal, 34-32.

Kindig started the Bills final game of the season at center and was permanently switched to the offensive line after that. With the Bills drafting O.J. Simpson with the #1 overall pick in 1969, Kindig was used to help solidify the offensive line and open holes for the "Juice." Kindig backed up Al Bemiller at center for the 1969 season, playing in 12 games as the Bills finished a disappointing 4-10.

Kindig started the season opener in 1970 at center and then was switched to offensive tackle and was the starter for nine other games. He missed four games in the middle of the season, starting with the Miami game on October 18, with a torn muscle in his right shoulder. He returned on November 15 in a 17-17 tie with Baltimore and started the remainder of the season as the Bills finished with five consecutive losses to end the year at 3-10-1.

He was honored on January 29, 1971 in Mexico, Missouri by the Bulldogs Booster Club. He was honored with a plaque at the school and the day was proclaimed "Howard Kindig Day." He also began attending LSU and taking some classes and he continued that during multiple off-seasons.



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The Bills were the worst team in pro football in 1971, finishing with a 1-13 record. Kindig was the all-around backup offensive lineman, playing center, guard, and tackle, wherever the Bills needed him. He also played on several special teams and returned two kickoffs as an up man in the kickoff formation. He had an eight-yard return in the opening game loss to Dallas 49-37, and had another eight-yard return the following week in a 29-14 loss to Miami. After that, teams kicked away from Kindig. He finished the season with two returns for 16 yards. He played in all 14 games as a reserve. The team's only victory was a 27-20 win over the New England Patriots on November 28.

Kindig did not report to the Bills training camp in 1972, nor did he have a signed contract with the team. He pretty much had retired and decided to spend time on his emerging real estate business in Baton Rouge, LA. But then, head coach Don Shula of the Dolphins called him to see if he had interest to return to football. Following that conversation, Shula arranged a trade with Buffalo. On August 15, the Bills traded Kindig to Miami for defensive tackle Frank Cornish.

"I felt the whole atmosphere up there wasn't conducive to winning football."<sup>vi</sup> Kindig said. "I'm not knocking the Bills. Hell, they got enough problems up there without me knockin' 'em. I just thought that, with my rigors and pressure of my real estate business in Baton Rouge, it was better for my family if I got out."<sup>vii</sup>

Kindig played five different positions for the Bills during his 4½ seasons with the club (right and left defensive end, right and left offensive tackle and center). Kindig said "I was never great at anything, but I could do a lot of things. I could play defense or offense – snaps punts and field goals."<sup>viii</sup>

After joining the Dolphins, he was quickly inserted as their long snapper on punts and field goals as well as playing as a reserve offensive lineman. He played in all 14 regular season games for the undefeated Dolphins. Miami became the first modern-day NFL team to make it through the regular season winning all 14 of their games. The closest the Dolphins came to losing was against Kindig's former club in Buffalo, a 24-23 controversial nail-biter.

The Dolphins won their two playoff games over Cleveland 20-14 and at Pittsburgh 21-17 to qualify for Super Bowl VII against the George Allen-led Washington Redskins. Kindig played in both playoff games and was perfect in his long snaps in both close games.

The Dolphins completed their undefeated season with a 14-7 victory over Washington but not before a couple of trying moments for Kindig. On the fourth play of the game, a



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punt by the Dolphins, Kindig snapped the ball but he appeared to fumble it at the line of scrimmage and the Redskins recovered. Washington linebacker Curtis McClinton had been instructed to bat at the ball when Kindig went to snap it. He did just that creating the fumble. “Their center (Howard Kindig), kind of ‘winds-up’ (lifts the ball) when he snaps for punts,”<sup>ix</sup> George Allen said in the postgame locker room, “So we planned for McClinton to bat at the ball when he lifted it.”<sup>x</sup> Luckily for Kindig one official noted what McClinton had done and ruled it an illegal procedure penalty and the fumble was negated by the penalty.

Late in the game with the Dolphins leading 14-0 and lining up for a field goal, the play that is most noted in this Super Bowl came next. It was voted the 75<sup>th</sup> greatest play in NFL history in 2019. Kindig snapped the ball to Earl Morrall who placed the ball down as kicker Garo Yepremian swung his leg forward to make the kick, but the Redskins penetrated the line and blocked it. Yepremian picked up the ball and attempted to pass the football. The ball went right to Mike Bass of the Redskins who proceeded to run 49 yards for a TD, cutting the Dolphins lead to 14-7 and giving the Redskins life. Thankfully for Kindig, Morrall, and Yepremian, the Dolphins hung on to win 14-7 and complete their undefeated season.

Kindig sat out most of the 1973 season with a broken thumb and then a knee injury. He was activated for one game, but did not play. He was awarded a Super Bowl ring after the Dolphins repeated as Super Bowl champions with a 24-7 victory over the Minnesota Vikings.

He was back in the Dolphins training camp in 1974, hoping to secure a job with the club. On August 22, 1974, the Dolphins traded Kindig to Washington for an undisclosed draft choice. He was cut by the Redskins at the end of training camp in mid-September. He then signed a three-year, \$75,000 a year contract with the World Football League’s Jacksonville Sharks, a lot of money for a run of the mill offensive lineman. He played three games with the Sharks before the franchise was suspended by the league and Kindig as well as many other players did not get paid.

Kindig decided to break his contract with the WFL. He claimed the Sharks violated his contract by not paying him and declared himself a free agent. He then signed a contract with the New York Jets on October 22.

His signing forced the NFL to act. There were rumors of a potential merger with the WFL and the league was becoming worried if other players from the WFL signed with NFL teams they could face a lawsuit from the fledgling league. NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle met with NFL owners on October 30 and 31 to discuss the burgeoning issue. “There will be no complete or partial merger with any World Football League teams. The



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league has never considered it. The World Football League will have to make it or not make it on its own, without any help from us,"<sup>xi</sup> said Rozelle following the owners meeting. In addition, the NFL owners passed a resolution that "no NFL teams will be stocked with any more WFL players for the remainder of this (NFL) season."<sup>xii</sup> That essentially ended all the talk, but Kindig, since he had already signed with the Jets was free to play in New York.

Kindig joined a 1-5 Jets squad and played the final eight games of the season. With Kindig playing as a reserve offensive lineman and a special teamer, the Jets went 6-2 with him on the club. How much direct impact he had on their winning is probably hard to determine, but all of sudden the Jets were winners.

Kindig returned to the WFL in 1975, this time with the Jacksonville Express. It was a new franchise with more money, supposedly. He was the starting center for quarterback George Mira, helping the Express to a 6-3 record. However, they were only averaging 12,000 fans per game at the Gator Bowl, so they did some cost cutting. Kindig was part of the cost cutting because his salary was among the higher at \$40,000. Following his release, the Express lost their next two games and then the WFL folded.

That was the end of Kindig's football career. He went back to his real estate business in Baton Rouge. "I identify raw land for development as shopping centers, apartment complexes, office buildings, subdivisions - things of that nature," he said.<sup>xiii</sup>

Kindig had a pretty amazing pro football career, playing 11 years as primarily a backup offensive lineman while winning two Super Bowl championship rings. He played in over 120 games while starting only 23, but his longevity was something to be admired.

Several years later Kindig reflected on his move to Miami: "Then I got traded. And of course, it's the greatest thing that ever happened to me, going to Miami like that. I was lucky."<sup>xiv</sup>

Kindig did not have the same team success in Buffalo as Miami, but he enjoyed his time playing in Buffalo. "The greatest thing was the closeness of the team. The guys were very, very close. To this day, I still get together with Ron McDole, Jim Dunaway, and George Flint every year. Sometimes, a couple times a year,"<sup>xv</sup> said Kindig. "It was just a bunch of great guys up there."<sup>xvi</sup>

He is now retired in Louisiana with his wife Selena and they have two adult children, Keith, and Jess, and three grandchildren. In 1990 he was inducted into the California State University at Los Angeles Hall of Fame.



End Notes:

- <sup>i</sup> Clancy, Kathy, "Mexico's Pro Player Honored," *Mexico Ledger, Mexico, Missouri*, January 26, 1971, p9
- <sup>ii</sup> Miller, Jeffrey, *Rockin the Rockpile, The Buffalo Bills of the American Football League*, ECW Press, p55
- <sup>iii</sup> Miller, Jeffrey, *Rockin the Rockpile, The Buffalo Bills of the American Football League*, ECW Press, p55
- <sup>iv</sup> Gehman, Jim, "Where are They Now: Howard Kindig," BuffaloBills.com, April 9, 2003
- <sup>v</sup> Gehman, Jim, "Where are They Now: Howard Kindig," BuffaloBills.com, April 9, 2003
- <sup>vi</sup> Braucher, Bill, "Can't Throw Helmet on Field, Win Spot," *The Miami Herald*, July 17, 1973, p63
- <sup>vii</sup> Braucher, Bill, "Can't Throw Helmet on Field, Win Spot," *The Miami Herald*, July 17, 1973, p63
- <sup>viii</sup> Miller, Jeffrey, *Rockin the Rockpile, The Buffalo Bills of the American Football League*, ECW Press, p490
- <sup>ix</sup> Nightengale, David, "What's Big Deal," *The Charlotte News (Charlotte, NC)*, January 15, 1973, p10
- <sup>x</sup> Nightengale, David, "What's Big Deal," *The Charlotte News (Charlotte, NC)*, January 15, 1973, p10
- <sup>xi</sup> Associated Press, "Rozelle says WFL must sink or swim without any merger," *The Miami News*, November 1, 1974, p23
- <sup>xii</sup> Associated Press, "Rozelle says WFL must sink or swim without any merger," *The Miami News*, November 1, 1974, p23
- <sup>xiii</sup> Miller, Jeffrey, *Rockin the Rockpile, The Buffalo Bills of the American Football League*, ECW Press, p55
- <sup>xiv</sup> Gehman, Jim, "Where are They Now: Howard Kindig," BuffaloBills.com, April 9, 2003
- <sup>xv</sup> Gehman, Jim, "Where are They Now: Howard Kindig," BuffaloBills.com, April 9, 2003
- <sup>xvi</sup> Gehman, Jim, "Where are They Now: Howard Kindig," BuffaloBills.com, April 9, 2003