



## Bill Laskey

The pro football story of Bill Laskey is an unlikely one. This is a player who lost his starting job in college as a senior and wasn't drafted. Yet he reached the pros and stayed there for about a decade. In addition, he had some "adventures" along the way that make his football story surprisingly interesting even to the casual fan.



William Grant Laskey was born on February 10, 1943 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It's easy to wonder if he was warmed by a maize and blue blanket moments after his birth. After all, everyone in that town and surrounding regions no doubt is raised to be a fan of the University of Michigan Wolverines. Bill's father, Derwood, was born in Milan (a little south of Ann Arbor), and played football at Michigan. Derwood's parents (Grant and Ruth) were both born in Milan. Meanwhile, Bill's mother, Betty, was born in Ann Arbor, and so were her parents. So, the Michigan roots ran deep. Laskey eventually followed that path nicely – although it had a bit of a detour along the way.

Laskey, one of four children, went to high school at Milan. According to the Pro Football Reference website, only three players have ever come out of Milan and reached the NFL. By coincidence, one of them was Joe O'Donnell – who was a teammate of Laskey's at Milan and Michigan, and in Bill's rookie year in the pros. The other was Les Bruckner, a fullback who played for the Chicago Cardinals in 1945.

By all accounts, Laskey was a very good high school player for the Big Reds. Bill was good enough so that the school handed out the Bill Laskey Trophy to the best athletes (now boy and girl) in a given year. In the process, he captured the eye of college teams



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throughout the Midwest. You might think it was an easy choice to go to Michigan after graduating from high school in 1961, but it wasn't.

Laskey actually committed to go to the University of Iowa at first. He told Michigan coach Bump Elliott about his decision, and Elliott asked for one last meeting. Laskey agreed, and Elliott talked him into going to school in Ann Arbor. The problem was that Laskey already had written to Iowa to accept its scholarship offer.

“Fortunately, my mother knew the local postmaster, so she called him and explained my problem,” Laskey told author E. Bruce Geelhoed. “Like everyone else in Milan, our postmaster was a dyed-in-the-wool Wolverines fan, and he was only too happy to relieve me of my predicament. So, there I was with my mom, the head coach of the University of Michigan, and the postmaster, fishing through the mailbox until we found that fateful letter, and I became a Wolverine. It was the best decision I ever made.”

When Laskey arrived in Ann Arbor, Elliott was entering his third season as the Michigan head coach. He had played for the Wolverines in 1947, teaming with brother Pete to star for one of the great teams in school history. Bump (real first name Chalmers) turned down the chance to play in the pros, and moved into college coaching. It must have been a dream come true when he was named the head coach at Michigan in 1959. The team slowly climbed up a ladder, going 4-5 in 1959, 5-4 in 1960 and 6-3 in 1961.

As a sophomore, Laskey started a three-year run on the team as a halfback, at least according to the 1962 team roster. However, Bill soon found himself as an end. In 1962, the Wolverines took a big step backwards, going 2-7. Offense was the problem, as Michigan never scored more than 17 points in a game. The team was shut out four times that season, including by a 28-0 score to rival Ohio State. The only highlight was a win over No. 10 Army. Laskey, who started five games at right end, caught two passes that season for 13 yards.

The 1963 season was better. Michigan had an odd-looking 3-4-2 season. The big news of the year was a win over Dick Butkus' Illinois team, which was ranked No. 2 in the country before that game. Laskey caught seven passes for 105 yards and a touchdown (in the opener against Southern Methodist) that season. He reportedly played some defense that season as well. O'Donnell was the co-captain of that team.

All of this made the 1964 that much more sweet. Everyone thought the Wolverines would be better, with most of the starters returning. Still, a 9-1 record that included a Big Ten Championship (capped by a 10-0 win over Ohio State) and a 34-7 victory over Oregon State in the Rose Bowl made it a terrific year.



Bob Timberlake was a classic triple-threat player at quarterback, running for 631 yards, passing for 884, and kicking field goals and extra points. The loss came to Purdue, as a missed two-point conversion was the difference. Michigan ended up ranked fourth in the nation. Sixteen of the members of that team played pro football. That's a lot of talent, and Laskey's playing time was squeezed out by others that season. He did start three games behind John Henderson. However, he did have one game to remember against Minnesota.

"Laskey had one of the most fantastic days a defensive end could have," captain Jim Conley said. "I mean he had three sacks. He had an interception. He did everything. The problem was that Laskey did everything wrong that day, and it came out right. When our coaches graded the film, Laskey was out of position so often that he was dropped down to the second team! Apparently, the Minnesota game plan didn't account for Laskey not doing what he was supposed to do, so Billy had a great day despite himself."

Laskey and Conley also teamed up to play a role in the win over Ohio State. They noticed a lineup trend when the Buckeyes were going to the ball. If the play was going to be run to the left, Conley yelled out "Kill." If the play was going to the right, Laskey did the yelling.



A few months after the Rose Bowl, Laskey earned a little publicity as a fashion model of sorts. Esquire magazine came to Ann Arbor looking for people to display some summer clothes. It hired Laskey, a friend named Jane Horsfall, and two other Wolverines plus another student from a fraternity house. Conley, one of those involved in the photo shoot, said in an interview with MVictorys, "It started at the Sigma Chi house. It wasn't about the athletes because, of course, they can't do that, but they could do it about the student athletes. Since our house was totally filled with athletes, it was pretty easy for them to round up the right amount of guys and put this whole spring fashion thing together. The



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guy that was doing it apparently was a U-M grad. He came to campus and he went to Sigma Chi house and said, ‘Hey guys, you want to get some clothes?’ What they did was they had all these clothes in there, and if you did the shoot you got to keep the clothes.”

Laskey was not selected during the drafts of the American Football League and the National Football League. Still, there were plenty of openings for players at that point. It was a good year to be a member of the Buffalo Bills. The Bills had a couple of Michigan grads on their roster in O’Donnell and Tom Keating. The two men told coach Lou Saban that Laskey was the best player on the Wolverines’ roster, and that Laskey could help the Bills. Saban is quoted in the team yearbook as saying, “If Laskey is as good as you say, we had better try to get him under contract.”

Buffalo succeeded in signing him, and the team called him “fast, quick, active and tremendously strong” in the yearbook. The Bills had won the AFL championship in 1964, and looked ready to defend their title. The downside was that Laskey was slotted as a linebacker, and the Bills were well-stocked at that position. They had Harry Jacobs, John Tracey, and Mike Stratton as starters, and those were the heart of the team’s defense.

Finding playing time was a problem for Laskey as a rookie. Tracey and Jacobs started 14 games and Stratton was in the lineup for 13, leaving only one start for Laskey. The 6-foot-3, 235-pound linebacker had to be content with special teams’ duties. He was joined in that role by another rookie who went on to do good things in football: Marty Schottenheimer. As for the Bills, they defended their title with a win over San Diego. That earned the entire roster the chance to play in the AFL All-Star Game, which matched the league champions with the best players from the rest of the league.

The Raiders apparently liked what they saw when they looked at film of Laskey. They offered a sixth-round pick for him, and the Bills accepted the deal in the summer of 1966. Al Davis had stepped down as coach to concentrate on management duties, and John Rauch moved up to become Oakland’s coach. Laskey ran into another good set of linebackers with the Raiders in Dan Connors, Gus Otto and J.R. Williamson. Laskey continued to be a backup, getting only a couple of starts.

The 1967 season was different – for Laskey and the team. Williamson was gone, and Bill Slid slid into a starting job at left linebacker. He started 12 games and recovered three fumbles. What’s more, a former teammate from Buffalo – quarterback Daryle Lamonica – also came to Oakland. He grabbed the starting job and led the Raiders to a 13-1 record in the regular season. Oakland eventually reached the Super Bowl, only to lose to the Packers. Still, Laskey had played on two teams in the pros and both reached the championship game. This was the team and year that most fans associate with Laskey.



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Laskey's luck changed in 1968, as an Achilles' tendon injury kept him out of the lineup for the entire season. Chip Oliver – remembered as the player that quit pro football to join a commune - took his place that year. But Bill was back in 1969, again teaming with Conners and Otto. Laskey had three interceptions that season – a career best. The Raiders were again terrific, going 12-1-1 in the regular season. However, they were beaten by Kansas City in the championship game, and the Chiefs went on to down Minnesota in Super Bowl IV.

Laskey again was in the lineup for the Raiders in 1970. He had a good view at seeing one of the great runs by a player in NFL history. George Blanda played a key role – either as a quarterback or a kicker – in five straight rallies for wins by the Raiders. It was part of an 8-4-2 season that led to an appearance in the AFC championship game – a loss to Baltimore.

And speaking of the Colts ... that was Laskey's next team. In 1971, he was traded to Baltimore with a second-round draft choice for Tommy Maxwell and two draft choices. Bill had one unusual moment in the preseason that year. He had the chance to return to Michigan Stadium, as the Lions played Baltimore there. That game is remembered as the one in which some of the climatic scenes of the football movie "Paper Lion" – starring Alan Alda and based on George Plimpton's book – were filmed.

There wasn't much room for Bill in the Colts' lineup that season. Their linebackers were Mike Curtis, Ted Hendricks and Ray May. Laskey returned to backup duty as the Colts went through a 10-4 season before losing to the Dolphins in the conference championship game. The trio of Colts' linebackers was back in 1972, and Laskey was back in a reserve role. The season didn't go well for Baltimore. The Colts lost six of their first seven games, as Johnny Unitas was replaced by Marty Domres. A coaching change didn't help, and Baltimore finished 5-9. Shortly after the season, Laskey picked up a valuable souvenir from that game.

"I was a teammate of John Unitas's during the 1971 and 1972 Baltimore Colts seasons," he told WealthManagement.com. "Upon the conclusion of the final game of the 1972 NFL Baltimore Colt football season, I returned to the locker room a couple days later to clean out my locker and pick up my personal things before moving back to my home state of Michigan. While I was there our game jerseys from the previous Sunday's game had been returned to the locker room from the cleaners.

"I asked the locker room attendant if it was O.K. to take a couple jerseys along with my own. He said, 'No problem,' since we would be getting all new ones for the next season. I took my jersey along with Unitas's. I later was traded after the 1972 season to the Denver Broncos and John was traded to the San Diego Chargers. Not realizing it at the



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time, this was the last time John Unitas or myself would ever wear a Baltimore Colt uniform again.” It supposedly sold at some point for \$36,000.

The 1972 collapse led to another coaching change for 1973, as Howard Schnellenberger took the job. Laskey never had the chance to play for him, as he was traded to the Broncos for a draft choice during training camp.

Ray May, now a Bronco, was waiting for Laskey in Denver. However, Bill grabbed the starting job at the other outside linebacker spot next to Tom Graham. Laskey started 11 games before suffering a thigh injury late in the season. He helped the Broncos go 7-5-2 for coach John Ralston. That was the first winning season in franchise history, and the area came down with a case of Bronco-mania along the way. Denver hosted its first Monday Night Football game that season, and Laskey caused a fumble that Billy Thompson picked up and ran 80 yards for the opening touchdown. Bill also made a game-clinching interception in a game on November 24 against the Raiders.

A year later, May moved over to the middle to make room for a second-year player by the name of Tom Jackson, who would go on to the Hall of Fame. Laskey started 10 games and finished with one interception. Denver again had a winning record (7-6-1). By 1975, though, Randy Gradishar – a first-round pick the year before – was ready to claim a starting job. That meant Laskey was expendable. On February 3, 1975, Bill was traded to the Lions for wide receiver Chuck Walton.

What would be a better place for Laskey to finish his career? His friends and family could drive to Detroit to see him. However, he apparently did not make the Lions’ opening day roster. Laskey probably could have landed a job in the World Football League – the Detroit Wheels had his rights – but he never played pro football again.

Around the time that Bill’s football career was winding down, he went back to Milan - naturally. As it turned out, he had a business that was waiting for him in a sense. Bill’s mother took over the family’s car dealership after Derwood died in 1958. Chrysler had a rule at the time that women couldn’t own that business, so she had to sell the business and start a used car dealership. When Betty remarried (William Isaksson), they bought a Ford dealership in Milan. In the Seventies, Bill bought the business.

He had two sons Lance and Beau, and a daughter, Margaux. Laskey married wife Dona (a Michigan grad, of course) in 2011. Bill’s sister, Charlene, married his Michigan teammate, Rick Volk – who went on to become a three-time Pro Bowl player with the Colts. Laskey eventually had another dealership in Valdosta, Georgia, but then moved to Leland in Northern Michigan. There he took a job in insurance with Zurich, one of the



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world's biggest companies in that field, before starting his own agency in 2010. Bill apparently spent much of his time talking football with his clients.

In 2012, Laskey's name was added to a lawsuit of the NFL involving concussion-related injuries. The section on his situation read as follows: "Plaintiff William "Bill" Laskey ("Laskey") is 69 years old and resides with his wife, Dona Laskey, in Leland, Michigan. He was an NFL linebacker who played for the Buffalo Bills (1965), the Oakland Raiders (1966-70), the Baltimore Colts (1971-72), and the Denver Broncos (1974). He was selected AFL All-Star honors in 1965. He suffered repeated and chronic head impacts during his career in the NFL and is at an increased risk of latent brain disease. As a result, Laskey has experienced cognitive and other difficulties including, but not limited to, headaches, dizziness, loss of memory, impulse control problems, depression, sleep problems, irritability, neck and cervical spine arthritis and associated numbness/tingling. As a result of Laskey's impairments, his wife has been deprived of marital services including, but not limited to, loss of companionship, affection, and support."



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