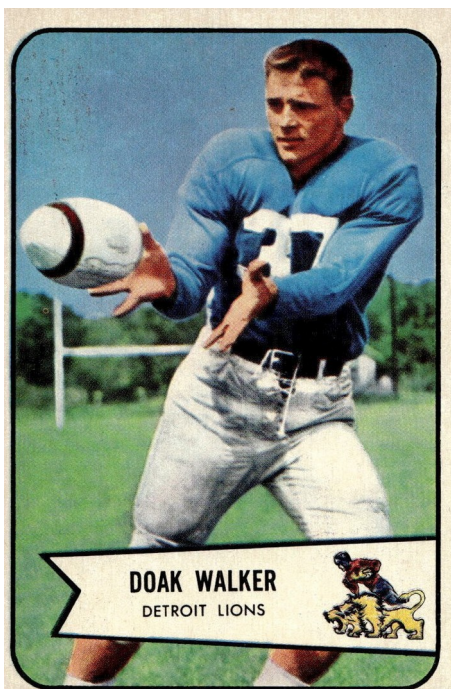


Doak Walker

This article was written by Matthew Keddie.

Doak Walker was a pivotal cog on the Detroit Lions teams that made franchise history in the 1950s. The Lions won back-to-back NFL championships in 1952 and 1953. Walker attributed his success to confidence, “You know I’ve always had confidence in myself. I still think I could do more things better than any other back that ever lived.”¹ Walker did. In his six-year NFL career, he made the Pro Bowl five times (1950, 1951, 1953-1955), was selected as a first-team All-Pro four times (1950, 1951, 1953, 1954), and played just about every snap.² Walker was in just about every stat column on the stat sheet. He not only played running back and receiver on offense, but he kicked, punted, and roamed the defensive backfield. Walker led the league twice in scoring and was reliable in the big games, making uncanny plays in favor of Detroit.³ In the 1952 NFL Championship Game against the Cleveland Browns, he scored the winning touchdown on a 67-yard rush in the second quarter to seal the game. A year later in the 1953 NFL Championship Game, a rematch with the Browns, Walker scored 11 of Detroit’s 17 points, including the game-winning extra point to give Detroit a 17-16 victory.⁴



Walker was drafted with the third pick in the 1949 NFL Draft by the Boston Yanks and by the Cleveland Browns in the ninth round of the 1949 AAFC Draft. The Yanks traded



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him to the Lions for back John Rauch.⁵ Because the Browns still had a claim to him (following the AAFC and NFL merger), NFL commissioner Bert Bell forced the two franchises to work out a resolution. As a result, Detroit traded a second-round draft choice in the 1950 NFL Draft to claim Walker's exclusive rights. He then signed a three-year contract worth over \$30,000 with the Lions.⁶

As a rookie in 1950, he joined his former college teammate and quarterback, Bobby Layne. The two were a strong foundation for the Detroit offense. Layne was the NFL's leading passer in attempts, passing yards and passing yards per game that season.⁷ Meanwhile, Walker took the league by storm, winning Rookie of the Year honors and leading the league in scoring with 128 points. He pitched in 920 yards from scrimmage, 11 rushing and receiving scores, made 38 of 41 extra points, and nabbed an interception on defense.⁸ As a result, he was selected for the Pro Bowl and named a first-team All-Pro by the UPI and the Associated Press. The Lions ranked third in points scored at 26.8 points per game, but finished out of the playoffs at 6-6.⁹ Following the conclusion of the regular season, head coach Bo McMillin resigned, prompting backfield coach Buddy Parker to take over. Over the next four seasons, Detroit would finish no lower than second in the National Conference. Parker would lead the team to two NFL titles, a 3-1 playoff record, and 35 regular season wins.¹⁰

The results were immediate as the Lions posted a 7-4-1 record in 1951, finishing a half game behind the division winning Los Angeles Rams at 8-4. Despite the success, the final three weeks of the season were frustrating for Detroit. The team lost two of its final

¹ "Doak Walker," profootballhof.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker | Pro Football Hall of Fame \(profootballhof.com\)](https://www.profootballhof.com/doak-walker).

² "Doak Walker," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WalkDo01.htm).

³ "Doak Walker," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WalkDo01.htm).

⁴ "Championship – Cleveland Browns at Detroit Lions – December 27th, 1953," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Championship - Cleveland Browns at Detroit Lions - December 27th, 1953 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/det/1953-12-27.htm).

⁵ "Doak Walker," ProSportsTransactions.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Football Transactions Search Results \(prosportstransactions.com\)](https://www.prosportstransactions.com/players/doak-walker).

⁶ "Doak Walker," ProSportsTransactions.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Football Transactions Search Results \(prosportstransactions.com\)](https://www.prosportstransactions.com/players/doak-walker).

⁷ "Doak Walker," heisman.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker – Heisman](https://www.heisman.com/players/doak-walker).

⁸ "Doak Walker," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WalkDo01.htm).

⁹ "1950 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [1950 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/det/1950-roster.htm).

¹⁰ "Detroit Lions Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Detroit Lions Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/det/).



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three contests, being swept by the San Francisco 49ers, to finish in second place, watching the Rams play the Browns for the NFL title.¹¹ Detroit also suffered a frustrating 24-24 tie to the New York Yanks, who finished at 1-9-2, the league's worst club. On the other hand, Detroit's playmakers began to come full circle and gel. In addition to Walker, halfback Leon Hart and center Les Bingaman were All-Pro players.¹² Halfback Bob Hoernschemeyer and Layne turned in Pro Bowl caliber seasons.

In 1952, Detroit got off to a shaky start, losing two of its first three games, but turned it around, winning eight of its final nine contests to capture the NFL National Division crown.¹³ Walker suffered a leg injury that limited him to participation in just seven games. However, his teammates stepped up. Layne turned in an All-Pro caliber season, posting a 9-2 record as a starter. Hoernschemeyer led the team in rushing with 457 yards and four rushing touchdowns. Cloyce Box led the NFL with 15 receiving touchdowns and was tabbed a first-team All-Pro by the Associated Press.¹⁴ Meanwhile, safety Jack Christensen turned in a stellar year on defense, nabbing two interceptions en route to an All-Pro season.

Detroit met the Los Angeles Rams in the Divisional Round of the playoffs at Briggs Stadium. The Lions skated to an early 14-0 lead on two touchdown runs by Pat Harder.¹⁵ The Rams cut the lead in half on a Tom Fears touchdown reception, but Detroit responded by scoring the game's next 10 points to take a 24-7 advantage. Hoernschemeyer sealed the 31-21 victory in the fourth quarter on a touchdown run from nine yards out. In the third quarter, Walker had tossed a 24-yard touchdown pass to Leon Hart.¹⁶ Walker was also critical in the Championship Game against the Browns, scoring the game's second touchdown on a 67-yard dash to give the Lions a 14-0 lead. The play proved to be the winning score as Detroit held on, 17-7.¹⁷

The Lions continued their dominance in 1953, picking up where they left off from their title game win. Anchored by the second ranked defense, the Lions allowed just under 18 points per game, posting a 10-2 regular season campaign. Walker returned to form, starting in all 12 games. He averaged 5.1 yards per rush, converted 12 field goals, and led

¹ 1 “1952 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [1951 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

¹ 2 “1952 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [1951 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

¹ 3 “1952 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [1951 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

¹ 4 “1952 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [1951 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).



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the team in scoring with 93 points, almost doubling up Hoernschemeyer's 54, who was second.¹⁸ Walker was selected to the first All-Pro team by the Associated Press, and a second team choice by the *NY Daily News* and the UPI. Detroit lost only to the Rams in the regular season, being swept. They met the Browns for a rematch of the 1952 NFL title game again in the 1953 edition.¹⁹ Detroit prevailed in a narrow, 17-16 victory, that saw Walker play a pivotal role, accounting for 11 of the team's 17 points. His stellar performance included the game-winning score in the fourth quarter by kicking the extra point to put Detroit ahead for good.²⁰

Walker may have saved his strongest season for 1954. He converted 11 field goals and led the NFL with a perfect 43 for 43 on extra points. He averaged over seven yards per carry, running 32 times for 240 yards. He also caught 32 passes for 564 yards, second on the team. Walker's performance earned him Pro Bowl honors and he was a near unanimous first-team All-Pro selection.²¹ He also finished fifth in the MVP voting. Detroit finished at 9-2-1, good enough to win the NFL West Division, and set up a rematch with the Browns for a third consecutive title.²²

Detroit was seeking to become the first team in history to win three straight NFL championship games. In the regular season, Detroit beat Cleveland 14-10 in the final game in Cleveland, where the title game was to be held.²³ Walker opened the scoring with a field goal to give Detroit a 3-0 lead, but the Browns answered with three straight

¹ 5 “Divisional Round – Los Angeles Rams at Detroit Lions,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Divisional Round - Los Angeles Rams at Detroit Lions - December 21st, 1952 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

¹ 6 “Divisional Round – Los Angeles Rams at Detroit Lions,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Divisional Round - Los Angeles Rams at Detroit Lions - December 21st, 1952 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

¹ 7 “Championship – Detroit Lions at Cleveland Browns – December 28th, 1952,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Championship - Detroit Lions at Cleveland Browns - December 28th, 1952 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

¹ 8 “1953 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [1953 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

¹ 9 “Championship – Cleveland Browns at Detroit Lions – December 27th, 1953,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Championship - Cleveland Browns at Detroit Lions - December 27th, 1953 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

² 0 “Championship – Cleveland Browns at Detroit Lions – December 27th, 1953,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Championship - Cleveland Browns at Detroit Lions - December 27th, 1953 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

² 1 “Doak Walker,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

² 2 “1954 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [1954 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).



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touchdowns, before Detroit found the end zone, trailing 21-10.²⁴ Detroit did not score again as the Browns romped, 56-10, snapping Detroit's hold. The story of the game was the Lions turning the ball over nine times on three lost fumbles and six interceptions.²⁵

Prior to the 1955 season, Walker signed a \$27,500 contract for what would be his final season. The contract also stated he would serve as a coach/scout for the two seasons thereafter.²⁶ He played in all 12 games, leading the NFL in scoring with 96 points, averaging eight points per game. Walker was named an All-Pro by the *NY Daily News*, *Sporting News*, and the Newspaper Ent. Association, and to the Pro Bowl.²⁷ However, the Lions regressed to a 3-9 mark, missing the playoffs for the first time since 1951. The team's 3-9 record was also worst in the league.

Detroit retired Walker's number during his final home game at Briggs Stadium on December 11.²⁸ It was the first number retired in franchise history. He ranked third all-time in scoring with 534 points, trailing only Bob Waterfield and Don Hutson. However, Walker averaged 8.0 points per game, higher than both Hutson (7.1 points per game) and Waterfield (6.3 points per game).²⁹ He was just 28 years old at the time of his retirement, still very much in his athletic prime. He said of it, "I'd been on three division champions and two world champions. I'd been to five Pro Bowls and made All-Pro four times. What else is there to do?"³⁰

Upon retiring, he pursued private business interests in Texas that included managing building spaces. For instance, he had ownership in a sporting goods store, medical clinic, and housing projects. In 1967, he returned to football, accepting a coaching role with the Akron Vulcans of the Continental Football League.³¹ Almost two decades later, in 1986,

² 3 "1954 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [1954 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

² 4 "Championship – Detroit Lions at Cleveland Browns – December 26th, 1954," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Championship - Detroit Lions at Cleveland Browns - December 26th, 1954 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

² 5 "Championship – Detroit Lions at Cleveland Browns – December 26th, 1954," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Championship - Detroit Lions at Cleveland Browns - December 26th, 1954 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

² 6 Smith, Lyall. "Doak Signs ... for \$27,500," *Detroit Free Press*, July 30, 1955, 11.

² 7 "Doak Walker," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

² 8 Northard, Lloyd. "Walker Hangs Up NFL Cleats, Scoring Title," *Brownwood Bulletin*, December 12, 1955, 4.

² 9 "NFL Career Points Scored Leaders Through 1956," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [NFL Career Points Scored Leaders Through 1956 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

³ 0 "About Doak Walker," smu.edu, accessed August 15, 2023, [About Doak Walker | World Changers Shaped Here \(smu.edu\)](#).

³ 1 "Doak Walker," heisman.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker – Heisman](#).



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he was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. His lifelong friend and former teammate, Bobby Layne, served as his presenter. At Walker's enshrinement speech, Layne said, "Doaker and myself we started in grade school not high school in 1939. You all just think about that and although we had quite a few different habits through the years, we have remained the closest friends in the world. He is probably the greatest player I ever played with in my life and I know he is the greatest clutch player of all time. This is Doak's day, it is not mine, so I want to present the one and only, the Doaker, Doak Walker."³² Walker responded saying, "Well, that is pretty tough to follow. ... I would like to thank Bobby for being my friend all these years."³³

Born on January 1, 1927 as Ewell Doak Walker II in Dallas, Texas, he was a natural athlete growing up. He attended Highland Park High School where he played just about every sport possible: football, baseball, basketball, track and field, and swimming.³⁴ On the high school gridiron, Walker was extremely versatile, playing nearly every position: halfback, defensive back, quarterback, etc. He and Layne led Highland Park to a shared state championship in 1945. Walker was also a standout track athlete, winning a Texas state championship in the 100-yard dash.³⁵ The duo parted ways for college, with Layne attended the University of Texas, and Walker to local Southern Methodist University. Walker served in the United States military service as a result of World War II for several months prior to the 1945 football season.³⁶

In his first college season, he was an All-Southwest Conference player and played in the annual East-West Shrine Game. SMU went 5-6 with wins over rivals Rice and archrival Texas Christian University.³⁷ He did not play college football in 1946 because he served another stint with the U.S. military. Upon returning in 1947, his presence transformed the Mustangs to an outstanding season. SMU went 9-0-2 en route to the Southwest Conference championship, where they met Penn State in the Cotton Bowl. The game was extremely evenly matched, ending in a 13-13 tie.³⁸ Walker was named co-MVP along with Penn State's Steve Suhey. For the season, Walker earned consensus All-American

³ 2 "Doak Walker," profootballhof.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker | Pro Football Hall of Fame \(profootballhof.com\)](https://profootballhof.com/doak-walker).

³ 3 "Doak Walker," profootballhof.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker | Pro Football Hall of Fame \(profootballhof.com\)](https://profootballhof.com/doak-walker).

³ 4 "Doak Walker," heisman.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker – Heisman](https://heisman.com/doak-walker).

³ 5 Kelly, KP. "Texas HS Football Legend: Doak Walker," texashsfootball.com, April 27, 2023, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker: The Remarkable Life and Career of a Legend \(texashsfootball.com\)](https://texashsfootball.com/doak-walker).

³ 6 "Doak Walker," heisman.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker – Heisman](https://heisman.com/doak-walker).



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honors and won the Maxwell Award, and finished third place in voting for the Heisman Trophy.³⁹

That set the stage for the 1948 season, which would be special for Walker. He averaged nearly five yards per carry on 532 rushing yards, scored 11 total touchdowns, and picked off three passes on defense. There was literally no play he could not make. As a result, he won the Heisman Trophy convincingly. He beat out North Carolina's Charlie Justice and the University of Pennsylvania's Chuck Bednarik.⁴⁰ SMU repeated as Southwest Conference champions and returned to play in the Cotton Bowl. The Mustangs squared off against the ninth ranked Oregon Webfoots (now Ducks), who was the Pacific Coast Conference champion.⁴¹ SMU started off the scoring with two touchdown runs, one each by Walker and Kyle Rote, to take a 14-0 lead. Those plays set the tone as Oregon did not score until the fourth quarter as SMU prevailed, 21-13. Walker and Rote were named game co-MVPs for the Mustangs. In addition to their scoring, each boomed 79- and 84-yard punts, respectively, which helped tilt the field position in favor of SMU.⁴² The win capped a 9-1-1 season and number 10 ranking in the final Associated Press poll. Walker earned first-team All-American honors for the second straight year.

He followed up his Heisman winning season with a solid year in 1949. He passed for 605 yards and five passing touchdowns, rushed for 449 yards and 10 rushing touchdowns, good enough for third place in the Heisman voting.⁴³ He became just the third player in college football history to finish inside the top three in the Heisman voting in three straight years, sharing the honors with Army's Glenn Davis and Georgia's Herschel Walker.⁴⁴ SMU regressed to a 5-4-1 record, missing out on a bowl game.

Walker received his Bachelor of Science degree in 1950 from the university. In total, he was a three-time consensus All-American (1947-1949). SMU later honored his number 37 jersey, one of just six former players to achieve this feat.⁴⁵ Because of the team's

³ 7 “1945 SMU Mustangs Schedule and Results,” sports-reference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [1945 SMU Mustangs Schedule and Results | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

³ 8 “1947 SMU Mustangs Schedule and Results,” sports-reference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [1947 SMU Mustangs Schedule and Results | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

³ 9 “Doak Walker,” heisman.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker – Heisman](#).

⁴ 0 “Doak Walker,” heisman.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker – Heisman](#).

⁴ 1 “1948 SMU Mustangs Schedule and Results,” sports-reference.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [1948 SMU Mustangs Schedule and Results | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

⁴ 2 “1949 Cotton Bowl – SMU 21, Oregon 13,” smumusgtangs.com, December 23, 2009, accessed August 15, 2023, [1949 COTTON BOWL - SMU 21, OREGON 13 - SMU Athletics \(smumusgtangs.com\)](#).

⁴ 3 “Doak Walker,” heisman.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker – Heisman](#).

⁴ 4 “Doak Walker,” heisman.com, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker – Heisman](#).

⁴ 5 “About Doak Walker,” smu.edu, accessed August 15, 2023, [About Doak Walker | World Changers Shaped Here \(smu.edu\)](#).



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success during his years, the university constructed a plaque in front of the Cotton Bowl stadium that reads, “The Cotton Bowl, the House that Doak Built.”⁴⁶ Francis Pulattie, who played football with Walker at SMU said of Doak's presence, “Having Doak on our team was like having loaded dice or marked cards. We just felt like we had to do our part and Doak would do the rest. The most amazing thing is that he did it all so effortlessly. He made it look so simple.”⁴⁷ In 1990 the Doak Walker Award was created in honor of his achievements in football. It is given to the nation's top collegiate running back.⁴⁸

Walker married Norma Patterson in 1950. The couple had four children: Laurie, Kris, Russ, and Scott. They divorced in 1965, and he went on to marry Olympic skier Skeeter Werner in 1969. In 1998 Walker was paralyzed during a skiing accident in Colorado. He died several months later on September 27, 1998, as a result of the injuries and complications.⁴⁹

Rick Reilly of *Sports Illustrated* wrote, “... He's Doak Walker, and he was as golden as golden gets. He had perfectly even, white teeth and a jaw as square as a deck of cards and a mop of brown hair that made girls bite their necklaces. He was so shifty you couldn't have tackled him in a phone booth, yet so humble that he wrote the Associated Press a thank-you note for naming him an All-American. Come to think of it, he was a three-time All-American, twice one of the Outstanding Players in the Cotton Bowl, a four-time All-Pro. He appeared on 47 covers, including *Life*, *Look* and *Collier's*. One time, Kyle Rote, another gridiron golden boy, saw a guy buying a football magazine at a newsstand. 'Don't buy that one,' Rote said. 'It's not official. It doesn't have a picture of Doak Walker on the cover.’”⁵⁰

⁴ 6 “About Doak Walker,” smu.edu, accessed August 15, 2023, [About Doak Walker | World Changers Shaped Here \(smu.edu\)](#).

⁴ 7 “About Doak Walker,” smu.edu, accessed August 15, 2023, [About Doak Walker | World Changers Shaped Here \(smu.edu\)](#).

⁴ 8 Kelly, KP. “Texas HS Football Legend: Doak Walker,” texashsfootball.com, April 27, 2023, accessed August 15, 2023, [Doak Walker: The Remarkable Life and Career of a Legend \(texashsfootball.com\)](#).

⁴ 9 “Doak Walker Takes Bride,” *Arizona Republic*, March 18, 1950, 9.

⁵ 0 Reilly, Rick. “THE LONGEST YARD FOR DOAK WALKER,” vault.si.com, May 18, 1998, accessed August 15, 2023, [The Longest Yard for Doak Walker - Sports Illustrated Vault | SI.com](#).