

# **CHUCK HOWLEY**

By Bob Barnett & Bob Carroll

It's less than a three-hour jet flight from the hills of Appalachia to Dallas, but a million miles from pumping gas in Wheeling, W.Va., to the Ring of Honor at Texas Stadium. Chuck Howley made that trip.

In 1960, he was a gas jockey in Wheeling, his short-lived pro football career apparently over, his future none too bright. That was a long drop for a guy who was one of the best all-around athletes ever to come out of West Virginia. He was used to being on top.

Chuck never tried football until his junior year at Warwood High School, but by the next season he was good enough to be named all-state tackle while playing for a team that could win only three games. He also excelled at basketball, baseball, track, and public relations with an easy manner and easy smile that maintained his popularity among his classmates despite the attention he got from college recruiters.

He chose West Virginia University, where he lettered in five sports: football, track, gymnastics, swimming, and wrestling. In football, he the logical successor to the All-American mantle worn earlier by Sam Huff and Bruce Bosley. He was a regular for three years at guard, center, and linebacker. The shifting of positions and WVU's mediocre records cut into his All-American notices, but the Chicago Bears made him their number one draft pick in 1958.

In 1958 the Bears already had two All-Pro linebackers in Bill George and Joe Fortunato, but Chuck looked like he'd become a third until he tore up his knee. In 1959, his second season with the Bears, he played only three games and went home to the West Virginia hills to run a service station. "I had satisfied my curiosity that I could play with the pros during the two seasons with the Bears. That and the knee injury encouraged me to retire," said Howley recently.

He spent the 1960 season watching pro football on TV between trips to the pump to fill 'er up for customers. He didn't mind hard work. As a boy, he and his four brothers and his sister always knew that whenever they wanted to buy something special for themselves, they'd have to work for the money. The Howleys weren't poor, but they didn't have extra money to waste spoiling their children. Chuck often drove his grandfather's produce truck while his classmates were out "playing around." While the Bears played around in Chicago, Chuck pumped gas and never complained. But he missed football.

All that time, his knee grew stronger. In the spring of 1961 he tested it in a WVU alumni game and found it had come back.

Meanwhile, the Dallas Cowboys had suffered through an awful expansion season – 0-11-1. They were desperate for help. Don Healy, an offensive lineman who'd come to Dallas from the Bears in the expansion draft, suggested Howley might be a bargain.

The deal was made. Chicago got a second and ninth round draft choice, Dallas got a once-promising linebacker with a questionable knee, and Howley got a second chance at pro football.

"I went back because I decided there were better things to do than run a gas station," said Howley. "Also I thought it would be a unique opportunity to play for Dallas, a team that was just getting started."

In his first season with the Cowboys (1961), Howley started at linebacker. The team improved to a 4-9-1 record, only because Coach Tom Landry created a strong offense. Chuck e had a lot to learn about playing linebacker, but at 6-2 and 225 pounds and with 10.1 hundred speed he had the size and mobility to develop.

And develop he did. In 1963 *The Sporting News* named him to the all-east NFL squad. He got even better along with the team. By 1966 he was named to both the all-pro team and the Pro Bowl teams. That was

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the season the Cowboys won their first division championship (10-3-1). Unfortunately they lost the NFL championship game to Green Bay, 34-27 in the now infamous "ice bowl" game. Before he retired following the 1973 season Chuck was named to four more all-pro teams and played in five more Pro Bowl games.

Always a big-play performer, he studied films looking for the chance to produce the "turn around" play. The Cowboys' structured defense had no place for a lone wolf, but Howley and Hall of Fame tackle Bob Lilly were given a little leeway. Dick Nolan, then a Dallas assistant, estimated that when Howley gambled he was right ninety percent of the time. That kind of percentage produces victories.

His 97-yard return of an Atlanta fumble in 1966 is still the third longest in the NFL record book. On another play, he spotted Cleveland's great runner Leroy Kelly 10 yards and caught him within 45 yards. Tom Landry always said Howley might have made it in the NFL as a back if he hadn't been too valuable to move from linebacker.

Like old wine, Chuck seemed to get better each year. He hit his peak in Super Bowl V (1970), the Cowboys' first. Against Baltimore he intercepted two passes and jarred a fumble loose from Johnny Unitas. Although the Cowboys finished on the short end of a 16-13 score, Chuck was chosen Most Valuable Player – the only time a member of the losing team has been so honored.

"I remember the 'Ice Bowl' game and the 1971 Super Bowl win over Miami as being great games," said Howley recently, "but the 1970 Super Bowl was my best game. It was one of those kind of games when I was in the right place at the right time, all the time. Even when I made mistakes and was out of position, I was in the right place."

Chuck played with the Cowboys through the end of the 1972 season, and at age 37 spent the 1973 season on the taxi squad. "Coach Landry asked me to stay on the taxi squad that season because he had a couple of young linebackers and wanted me for insurance," said Howley. "Being on the taxi squad helped me adjust to retiring. But even after that it took a couple of more years for me to really get down to saying, 'I am retired and a spectator.' "If you do anything for fifteen years, it is hard to change."

"I retired," Chuck continued, "because I had had 15 good years and I was 37 years old. I had a responsibility to the dry cleaning-uniform business I had started in 1969. My family needed me at home instead of traveling six months a year with the team. I just felt it was the time."

In the 10 years since his retirement Howley has built his business into the largest independent dry cleaning-uniform company in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. He credits much of his success to sports. "I applied many of the lessons I learned in sports to business," he said. "In both you have to have a positive attitude, know what you can do, and have a strong motivation to succeed. Sports and business both have setbacks, but in each you have to go back and review your mistakes so you don't make them again. Being in football helped my business, but in business you have to do a good job or you won't be there long. There is a whole different world outside of sports, but a lot of things that help you succeed in football also help you succeed in life."

Chuck Howley has succeeded in both. In 1977 when a fourth name went up at Texas Stadium's Ring of Honor, joining Bob Lilly, Don Meredith, and Don Perkins, it was that of an ex-gas jockey from West Virginia – Chuck Howley.