

HARLON HILL

By Jimmie Purvis

Harlon Hill rocketed into pro football prominence with the Chicago Bears from "nowhere," in terms of college ball -- little Florence State Teachers College. In 1954, his first pro season, he was named National Football League Rookie of the Year. The following year, his fellow players selected him as the first winner of the Jim Thorpe Trophy, an award honoring the Most Valuable Player in the league.

As a member of the All-NFL Team from 1954 to 1956, Hill piled up outstanding statistics, catching 134 passes for 3,041 yards and 32 touchdowns. In those three seasons, he averaged 22.6 yards per catch. His trademarks were 9.7 speed and remarkably soft hands. Sportswriters compared him, not unfavorably, with the great Don Hutson.

Beginning in 1957, a series of injuries slowed Hill, and he was never able to regain the form he'd displayed in those first great years. The Bears traded him to lowly Pittsburgh for a draft choice in 1962, and after that season, he retired.

In *Victory After the Game*, which he wrote in 1977 with Ronnie Thomas, Hill describes how he successfully overcame alcohol addiction after his career in the NFL ended. When interviewed in 1983, he was the principal at Brooks High School in Killen, AL.

Since 1986, the Harlon Hill Trophy has been given each year to the best football player in Division II of the NCAA.

Like all us has-beens, we look back and say they were the good old days. Which they really were. 1949 was when they reinstated football at Florence State Teachers College -- they'd dropped it for a while because there weren't enough male students -- and 1950 was my first year. They got a lot of interest created early and got some good boys and good athletes in there.

I played both offense and defense. Since Florence State threw the ball sparingly, I didn't get too many chances to exhibit any pass-catching talent. Still, 19 of the 54 passes I caught in college went for touchdowns -- about one out of every three -- so I guess you could say I made the most of limited opportunities.

We enjoyed playing. Coach Self and Coach Weeks did an outstanding job as a two-man coaching staff. We loved to play the game, and we played it like it was supposed to be played. We had fun, but we were also serious. Everyone played together as a team. We were winners.

But compared to today's players, we'd look like a high school team. We had a few players that had enough talent that they could play on any team today. But as a whole, the football team this year at the University of North Alabama (formerly Florence State) would beat the best team I played on probably by forty points.

I enjoyed every game, every year, and every thing that was related to Florence State Teachers College. Not only the football program but just being a student there.

I was surprised when I found out I was drafted by the Bears. I had no idea I had been 'discovered.' I really did not know much about the National Football League. I was walking across campus and Mr. Van Pelt -- who is still down there -- he came up to me and told me about it. I did not know what to think, but after I found out what it was all about, naturally I was elated.

Being from a small college, it was sort of a coincidence that I was discovered. One of the scouts from the Bears was at the Blue-Gray Game in Montgomery. A coach from Jacksonville State, who I had played against for four years, mentioned my name to him and told him a little about me. George Halas, one of

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 12, No. 6 (1990)

the pioneers if not THE pioneer of the National Football League, had discovered Bulldog Turner and Ed Sprinkle at a small college. They both played for Hardin-Simmons, which was a bigger school than Florence State Teachers College at the time. Anyway, he called Coach Self and asked for a film. He must have liked something he saw. I was drafted in the fifteenth round.

Of course, I didn't know what to expect when I went up there, but after staying in training camp for a week or so, I started feeling maybe I could play. I was very fortunate. At the time, they had a new innovation in professional football -- two wide receivers in most offensive formations. The Bears that particular year were going to that. I just happened to have the ability and arrived at the right time in the right place.

I think George Halas was one of the greatest men I've ever known. He came up the hard way, and everything he got he worked for. He expected the same thing out of his football players. If you worked, you got what you deserved from him. If you were loyal to the Chicago Bears and a man with him, he was a man with you. I know many, many players that got down on their luck after they left the Bears, and George Halas never hesitated to help them. The ones that spoke out against him were the ones that did not want to pay the price the way he felt like they should.

A great man. In my opinion, he's the Bear Bryant of professional football. He won more games than any professional coach. He held it together through the lean years. I know the Green Bay franchise was in trouble at one time. They probably were the Bears' most fierce rival. But instead of letting that franchise go under, he put money in it so that they could stay in Green Bay. He was that type of person.

Just being able to play the game was a great thing. One of the highlights for me took place in my rookie year. I caught four touchdown passes against the 49ers in Kezar Stadium. The last one came with thirty-or-so seconds left and won the game for the Bears by four points.

Then in 1956, we were playing the New York Giants in Yankee Stadium. At the time, we were tied in our division with the Detroit Lions. We were behind by seven points with a few seconds to go. I caught a touchdown pass to tie the game, which kept us in the running for the division title. The next week we beat Detroit for the division championship. That was a big thrill for me.

Then just playing in the Championship Game! We played the Giants on a frozen field and they beat us 47-7. Football is comparable to life. You have your peaks and valleys.

Many, many things I still relish about having the opportunity to play. Of course, there are a lot of things I'd like to forget about also.

There's a famous photograph of me fighting with Pat Summerall. Actually George Blanda caused that. He was the quarterback at the time and I ran a pass pattern. His pass was intercepted. So George came running up the field, and a fight broke out. Of course I was trying to protect myself. The first person, the closest person, to me was Summerall. He and I were just trying to protect ourselves, and it appeared as if we were fighting. Those things happen in the heat of competition. You know, Pat Summerall is one of the great players that played the game, and everyone knows that he's had an extremely successful career as a sports announcer.

There are many stories I like to recall. I can remember a big defensive tackle we had named John Kreamcheck. He's a policeman now in Chicago. He came out of the coal mines of West Virginia. A great football player. But he, like myself, sort of had been in an environment -- he was not well versed in the ways of the world. He came to training camp and did not have a coat or tie. One of the rules was that on all trips we had to wear a coat and tie. I think George Halas went out and got him a dress shirt, tie, and coat.

We went to Pittsburgh to play an exhibition game. John had all his family there. Like me, he was real excited about making the team and playing with the Bears. In the lobby of the hotel he had about fifteen or twenty of his relatives with him. He called George Halas and asked him to come down. He wanted his family to meet him. So when he introduced Halas to his family, he told them, "I want you to meet a millionaire."

Another time John was on the field goal and extra point team, and he went to sleep on the bench. We scored a touchdown and were lining up for the extra point when John realized he was supposed to be out there. He took off. About the time he got to the 40-yard-line the center was getting ready to snap the

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 12, No. 6 (1990)

ball. So in front of fifty or sixty thousand people John just got down in a three-point stance on the 40-yard-line!

The people in northern cities were always questioning me about the race relationships in the South. When we came south to play an exhibition game, black players had to stay in a different hotel. It strained, I would say, relationships to a certain degree with our black athletes. Especially if you were a person from the South, they were a little skeptical or reluctant until they got to know you. As time went on, it got better, even before I retired. I had, I feel, as good a relationship with my black teammates as I did with any of my white teammates.

The biggest difference that I see in professional football today is the salaries. No, I'm just being facetious. It's become more sophisticated. The defensive formations more so than the offensive formations. You have less down linemen and more linebackers. And you have different types of coverages in the defensive secondary. It's become a better game due to that.

Offensively, Tom Landry has been a big innovator with the shifting from one position to another before the ball is snapped. Another thing that is a big difference -- it's more specialized. They have defensive players for the running game, defensive players for the passing game. Offensively they specialize with players for certain downs and different positions on the field. Athletes as a whole are better even in your skilled positions. They're faster, quicker, and due to the conditioning programs, they're probably more durable.

Football is a rough game. The difference today from back when I played is that on the average the players, especially the linemen, are twenty or thirty pounds bigger. And, they're stronger. The game is not played with any more fierceness today, but it would be rougher on smaller people like me if they were trying to participate with these bigger people.

I feel like this artificial turf contributes to injuries, especially separations and dislocations -- shoulders and elbows and wrists.

I took some hard licks. I was the first one to ever recover -- any athlete -- to recover from a completely severed Achilles tendon. That was a serious injury. But I had a great doctor in Chicago that repaired it and enabled me to play five years after that. But it slowed me down quite a bit.

Probably the tackle that hurt the most was when I caught a little curl pattern, or stop pattern, about ten or fifteen yards downfield against the Los Angeles Rams. It was a high pass, and I leaped as high as I could to catch the ball. A boy -- I cannot remember his name right offhand -- he hit me so hard it sprained both my ankles. I hurt from my toes to the top of my head.

About the salaries. I'm tickled to death to see it get this big financially. The players are getting paid because you go up and play nine, ten, fifteen years, you lose those years as far as getting established in any type of career or business or whatever. Sometimes you are not able physically or mentally to step back down and start all over. I feel the salaries may be out of proportion with a few players. It needs to be balanced out a little more.

But it really does not matter as far as I'm concerned. The game of football, any athletic event for that matter, is for the benefit and the lasting value of playing as a team, as a unit. The competition! That's what makes better people, and better communities, and a better country to live in.

HARLON JUNIOUS HILL

Born: May 4, 1932, at Killen, AL

Hgt: 6-3 Wgt: 200

High School: Rogersville, AL

College: Florence State Teachers College

Selected by Chicago Bears in 15th round of 1954 draft

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 12, No. 6 (1990)

YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	PC	YDS	AVG	TD
1954	Chi. Bears	N	12	45	1124	*25.0	*12
1955	Chi. Bears	N	12	42	789	18.8	*9
1956	Chi. Bears	N	12	47	1128	*24.0	11
1957	Chi. Bears	N	8	21	483	23.0	2
1958	Chi. Bears	N	8	27	365	13.5	3
1959	Chi. Bears	N	11	36	578	16.1	3
1960	Chi. Bears	N	12	5	98	19.6	0
1961	Chi. Bears	N	14	3	51	17.0	0
1962	Pittsburgh	N	7	7	101	14.4	0
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9 years			96	233	4717	20.2	40