

FRED BILETNIKOFF: "I like catching passes."

By Don Smith

For more than 20 years of football in high school, college and the pros, Fred Biletnikoff played just one position -- wide receiver.

Unlike many great athletes who try several different jobs before settling on one spot, Fred had no desire to play anywhere else. "I like catching passes," he always insisted. "And I like playing outside. I would be lost if I were ever told to do anything on a football field except catch passes."

So catching passes it was for Biletnikoff at Technical Memorial High School in Erie, Pa., at Florida State University in Tallahassee and with the Oakland Raiders in the American and National Football Leagues.

When his 14-year pro career came to an end after the 1978 campaign, Biletnikoff had amassed 589 receptions, the fourth best lifetime total ever up to that time. He had converted those catches into 8,974 yards and 76 touchdowns. During Fred's tenure, the Raiders never suffered a losing season and the dependable, sure-handed receiver was a major contributor. He caught more than 40 passes 10 straight years and his 77 touchdowns are the most ever scored by a Raider.

Although Biletnikoff's lack of breakaway speed kept him from being a receiver who could regularly contribute spectacular long gains to the Raiders attack, he did enjoy many outstanding days on pro football gridirons. By every measurement, however, he reached the zenith of his career in Super Bowl XI when he caught four passes for 79 yards and was named the game's Most Valuable Player.

MVP

The Raiders were leading by a field goal when Ken Stabler set up the game's first touchdown on a third-down-and-three slant-in pass to Biletnikoff, who made a sliding catch at the Minnesota 1-yard line. On the next possession, Stabler found Fred open again, this time with a 17-yard connection to the 1. Pete Banaszak scored on the next play to put Oakland ahead, 17-0.

The combination clicked again in the fourth quarter when Biletnikoff broke free up the middle on a 48-yard post pattern that placed the ball on the Vikings 2. Banaszak followed with the touchdown as the Raiders wrapped up a 32-14 victory.

While Biletnikoff prized the new car he received for winning MVP honors, he particularly savored the Super Bowl XI triumph because of his unhappy experience in Super Bowl II, when the Raiders lost to the Green Bay Packers, 33-14.

"I only caught two passes that day," Fred remembers. "The final blow came in the last period when Daryle Lamonica tried to hit me with a pass and Herb Adderley picked it off and returned 60 yards for a touchdown. When we made it back to the Super Bowl nine years later, I was 33 and I knew it could be my last opportunity to be on a World Championship team."

The fact that Biletnikoff came close to scoring three touchdowns but was stopped just short every time underscored his one talent deficiency -- a lack of blazing speed -- that made many question Fred's potential as a pro when he completed his Florida State collegiate career.

"Every scouting report we had was fantastic," Al Davis, the Raiders' managing general partner, recalls. "They all said Fred was outstanding in college, but they questioned his speed and weren't sure he would be outstanding in the pros. But we felt, with our approach to total pass offense, that speed wasn't the only consideration, that we could tailor our offense to our players."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 18, No. 5 (1996)

In the long run, Fred's speed problem proved to be only a minor detriment. "I run the 40 in 4.7 and that's fast enough," he pointed out. "If the game of catching a football was simply a 40-yard race between the receivers and the cornerbacks, I'd lose some races. But it is more than just that. I know how to beat those speed burners. The secret is to get the jump on the defensive back."

Lamonica and Stabler

To help Biletnikoff in these pursuits were a pair of quarterbacks, Daryle Lamonica from 1967 through 1972 and Stabler after that. Both recognized Fred's pass-catching capabilities and worked countless hours to take full advantage of them.

"We've been together so long we know exactly what to expect from each other," Stabler said after Super Bowl XI. "I know where he's going before he gets there and he knows where I'll be throwing almost before I do. Like a great pianist, he is tops in his field. I look at him sometimes and wonder how he does the things he does."

Biletnikoff's pass-catching expertise can be traced in large part to the extensive experience he had with coaches who emphasized the passing game. "We probably threw 25 times a game in high school," he reflects, "really just as much as we did in Oakland."

Florida State coach Bill Peterson offered Fred a scholarship and teamed him with another future pro, quarterback Steve Tensi, to form a dynamic pass-catch duo with the Seminoles. "In my junior year, we went to a pro-type offense with four receivers," Fred said. "In my senior season, we threw all the time."

Biletnikoff finished fourth in the nation with 57 receptions for 11 touchdowns as a senior. A consensus all-America selection, he capped off his super year by catching four touchdown passes in Florida State's Gator Bowl victory over Oklahoma.

Fred was drafted by both the Raiders of the AFL and the Detroit Lions of the NFL. Oakland offered more money but Fred also took two other factors into consideration. First, he remembered the winters of his childhood in Erie, where he was born on February 23, 1943, and he didn't want to play regularly in the cold weather. He also felt the Lions were loaded with star receivers and that he would have a better chance to play with the Raiders. Right after the Gator Bowl game, he signed with Davis under the goal posts in front of a national television audience.

But he was introduced to the reality of pro football once he joined the Raiders. He seemed unsure of himself and for a while, he dropped more passes than he caught. When the season started, his play was confined to the special teams.

In the seventh game of his rookie campaign, Biletnikoff got his chance to start. He made the most of it with seven receptions in a 30-21 win over the Boston Patriots. He still did not become a regular but his play did improve. His rookie totals showed just 24 receptions for 331 yards but no touchdowns. The 1966 campaign started slightly better but in the ninth week, he tore up his knee and was out for the year. He needed off-season surgery to repair the damage.

Fred played the first four games in 1967, his third pro campaign, as a reserve. He finally broke into the starting lineup in the season's fifth game. Aided by the presence of Lamonica, who had come to Oakland from Buffalo in a trade, Biletnikoff blossomed.

Lamonica learned to take advantage of Fred's quick moves away from his defenders. The result was that Biletnikoff caught 40 passes for 895 yards and five touchdowns as the Raiders marched to the AFL championship. He never was anything but a Raider regular the rest of his career. He was picked for the AFL All-Star game after the 1967 season and again two years later. He was later named to four AFC-NFC Pro Bowls in five years. Fred was all-AFL in 1969 and all-AFC in 1970, 1972 and 1973.

Worry ! Worry !

Throughout his career, Fred was an acute worrier. He worried himself into an ulcer when he was only 21 and still in college. He agonized on the field and off. Biletnikoff became enraged when he dropped a pass -- which fortunately wasn't often -- even in practice. Before a game, he paced around the dressing room and often threw up. He kept a case of antacid in his locker and usually drank as much as two

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 18, No. 5 (1996)

bottles of the white liquid before he took to the field. Even when Fred had a good day, it took him six to eight hours to calm down after the game.

"All of this stems from his desire to compete," his roommate, Tom Keating explained. "He is tough physically and mentally and he is also one of the most intense competitors I have ever seen."

Biletnikoff particularly relished his confrontations with some of the more talkative defensive backs. "I like to play against them," He explained. "If you catch a few passes, suddenly they quit talking."

One such confrontation came in a Kansas City game in 1967 after Fred Williamson, the Chiefs' touted defender, boasted all week how he would contain the rambling Raider. On his first pass from Lamonica, Biletnikoff went 56 yards for a touchdown. Fred wound up with six catches for 158 yards while Williamson watched in comparative silence.

Playing opposite the New York Jets' John Sample in the 1968 AFL championship game, Fred caught seven passes for 190 yards. Testimony to his penchant for excellence in the biggest games, Biletnikoff, at the time of his retirement, held two post-season records with 70 receptions for 1,167 yards in 19 games.

Fred often faced double-coverage, in spite of his comparative slowness, but he did have one big advantage. Through most of his career, his fellow wide receivers, Art Powell first followed by Warren Wells and then Cliff Branch, possessed blazing speed. As a result, Oakland opponents were constantly faced with the dilemma of whether it was best to risk the long-bomb threat and concentrate on stopping Biletnikoff or to do just the opposite and let Fred run wild.

One of the hardest-working players in the league, Biletnikoff practiced his patterns, gazed at films and studied his opponents hour after hour. Before a game, he always smeared his hands with a green, goeey substance to improve his grip.

"The thing that is most impressive about Fred," long-time Raiders coach John Madden said, "is that he is a man-made receiver. He has to work hard for everything he's got. He can catch anything he can touch. That's no accident -- some receivers might catch 15 or 20 passes in practice. Fred will catch 100."

Fred Biletnikoff

WR 6-1 190 Florida State

Born: February 23, 1943, in Erie, PA

YEAR	TEAM	LG	G	NO	YDS	AVG	TD
1965	Oak	A	14	24	331	13.8	0
1966	Oak	A	10	17	272	16.0	3
1967	Oak	A	14	40	876	21.9	5
1968	Oak	A	14	61	1037	17.0	6
1969	Oak	A	14	54	837	15.5	12
1970	Oak	N	14	45	768	17.1	7
1971	Oak	N	14	61	929	15.2	9
1972	Oak	N	14	58	802	13.8	7
1973	Oak	N	14	48	660	13.8	4
1974	Oak	N	14	42	593	14.1	7
1975	Oak	N	11	43	587	13.7	2
1976	Oak	N	13	43	551	12.8	7
1977	Oak	N	14	33	446	13.5	5
1978	Oak	N	16	20	285	14.3	2
14 yrs			190	589	8974	15.2	76

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 18, No. 5 (1996)

"Pass receiving to Fred was a job," Keating said on hearing of his good friend's election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. "Nobody put more pressure on himself than he did. There was no one quite like Fred Biletnikoff!"

* * * *

A GOOD DAY FOR CATCHERS

Three Hall of Fame pass receivers were born on the the same day -- February 23. Dante Lavelli first saw the light of day in 1923 in Hudson, OH; Jackie Smith was born in Columbia, MS, in 1940; and three years later, Erie, PA, welcomed Fred Biletnikoff into the world.

COMPARING RAIDERS RECEIVERS

	YRS	NO	YDS
Fred Biletnikoff	1965-78	589	8,974
Cliff Branch	1972-85	501	8,685
Todd Christensen	1979-88	461	5,874
Tim Brown	1988-95*	405	6,076

* - active in 1996