

8 GREAT GUARDS (Not in the Hall of Fame)

(Courtesy *Total Football*)

DICK BARWEGAN

Guard. 6-1, 230. Purdue

Born 12/25/21, Chicago, IL. Died 09/03/66.

1947 New York AAFC, 1948-49, 1953-54 Baltimore, 1950-52 Chicago Bears

"He was a helluva ballplayer, not real tall, but quick and tenacious," said former teammate Paul Stenn (Stenko), who played tackle alongside the much-honored Barwegan both with the Chicago Bears in the early 1950s and earlier on the crack March Field service team during World War II. Stenn added, "All I worried about was my man. I knew Dick would get his with no help. His quickness made him an ideal pulling guard, and don't forget, he could play defense as good as the best, too."

In 1943, Barwegan was voted MVP as a freshman with an undefeated Purdue team. Because of wartime considerations, he, was one of two men chosen to play in four consecutive Chicago College All-Star Games. The other was Hall of Famer Charlie Trippi.

When Barwegan joined the New York Yankees of the AAFC in 1947, he immediately earned second-team all-league honors. But before the next season, the league tried to improve some of its weaker teams with players from the stronger clubs. Barwegan was sent to the Baltimore Colts. For the final two years of the AAFC, he was first-team all-league.

He joined Stenn and the Bears in 1950 and was consensus all-pro that year and again in 1951. All-pro offensive guards were usually taken from championship teams, but Barwegan made the Pro Bowl for four consecutive years, 1951-54. His final two seasons were spent with the reconstituted Colts.

When the Pro Football Hall of Fame picked its all-1950s team in conjunction with the league's 50th anniversary, Barwegan was one of three guards named.

JOE DeLAMIELLEURE

Offensive guard. 6-3, 250. Michigan State.

Born 03/16/51, Detroit, MI

1973-79, 1985 Buffalo N, 1980-84 Cleveland

Joe DeLamielleure was the foreman of Buffalo's "Electric Company." DeLamielleure and the Bills' offensive line of the 1970s earned that nickname because "they turned the Juice loose." The "Juice," of course, was O.J. Simpson who always gave credit to the men who blocked for him. Simpson began the press conference after he became the first man to run for 2,000 yards by introducing his offensive line.

An All-America and three-time All-Big Ten performer at Michigan State, DeLamielleure was picked by the Buffalo Bills on the first round of the 1973 draft, but at first, when he failed his physical, it seemed he would never play pro football. Fortunately, further tests showed his irregular heartbeat was not serious, and DeLamielleure went on to win a spot on the NFL's All-Rookie team. Running behind the Electric Company, Simpson continued to gain large totals of yardage over the next several years.

DeLamielleure was the most honored of a deserving line. In 1975, he began a string of six consecutive All-Pro years and an equal number of Pro Bowl selections.

He was traded to Cleveland in 1980 where he played four seasons and helped the Browns win a division title.

Extremely durable, he had a streak of 185 consecutive games at one point. Tough-minded and dependable, he was best known for run blocking for Simpson, but DeLamielleure was also fine when it came to protecting passers. The Pro Football Hall of Fame has named him to its All-Pro Squad of the 1970s.

ABE GIBRON

Offensive guard. 5-11, 255. Valparaiso, Purdue

Born 09/22/25, Michigan City, IN Died: 09 / 23 / 1997, Bellaire, FL

1949 Buffalo AAFC, 1950-56 Cleveland, 1956-58 Philadelphia, 1958-59 Chicago Bears

Round Abe Gibrion is often cited as one of the three or four best offensive guards of the 1950s. Though gruff on the field, he was a strong family man, taking pride in his wife and three children.

He was the first draft choice of the Buffalo Bills of the All-America Football Conference in a secret draft held in July 1948 -- before his final season at Purdue. The AAFC hoped to get the jump on the rival National Football League in signing college seniors. In the 1949 NFL draft, he was selected on the sixth round by the New York Giants, but he signed with Buffalo and became an immediate starter. When the AAFC merged with the NFL after the 1949 season, the players from defunct AAFC clubs like Buffalo were thrown into a general pool to be drafted by the remaining NFL teams. Cleveland Coach Paul Brown remembered Gibrion "had the fastest and quickest charge I ever saw" and "was very spirited." He grabbed Gibrion.

The roly-poly Gibrion became one of the Browns' "messenger guards," linemen who alternated in taking each play called by the coach into the quarterback. Eventually, he was deemed too valuable to play part time and stayed in the lineup while the "other" guards ran messages. He was selected for the Pro Bowl four times from 1952 through 1955 and was named All-NFL by the United Press in 1955. In the meantime, Cleveland played in six straight championship games, winning three.

GENE HICKERSON

Guard. 6-3, 250. Mississippi

Born 02/15/36, Trenton, TN

1958-60, 1962-73 Cleveland

"He was the consummate guard." That's how fellow guard and NFL assistant coach Howard Mudd saw Gene Hickerson of the Browns. Hickerson, a somewhat mysterious man out of Tennessee, who played at Ole Miss, is the man that paved the way for two Hall of Famers -- Jim Brown and Leroy Kelly, for fifteen quality seasons.

His forte was pulling out of the line and leading the sweep. Hickerson did that so well we was selected to play in the Pro Bowl six consecutive years, 1966-1971.

When the NFL, in conjunction with its 50th anniversary named its All-Sixties team, Hickerson was one of the decade's all-star guards.

The Browns drafted Hickerson as a "future" pick in 1957. He joined the team the following year. Coach Paul Brown installed him as one of his "messenger guards," delivering plays to the quarterback. Although he was on the field only half the time, he still attracted attention, and he was sorely missed when a broken leg cost him the entire 1961 season. After Brown was fired following the 1962 season, Hickerson played full time.

Hickerson was an ideal combination of speed, power, durability, and athletic ability. Few offensive linemen performed at the level and quality he did for so long a period of time. As the position's requirements changed, so did Hickerson -- he came into the league at 230 and left at 260. The added bulk never affected his overall speed.

"A high quality football player for a long time," Mudd recalled. "When I came into the league, I said, 'Wow! That's the guy I want to be like.'"

JERRY KRAMER

Guard. 6-3, 245. Idaho

Born 01/23/36, Jordan, MT

1958-1968 Green Bay

Even an offensive lineman, the epitome of anonymity in the National Football League, can gain a measure of fame if he takes a key part in one of the most celebrated plays of all time. For Jerry Kramer that play was Bart Starr's quarterback sneak for the winning score in the 1967 NFL championship game.

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The game, played under such frigid conditions in Green Bay that it was dubbed "The Ice Bowl," sent the Packers rather than the Cowboys on to Super Bowl II. Starr's touchdown sneak came with only seconds left and was made possible by Kramer's block (with help from center Ken Bowman) on Dallas' Jethro Pugh. Then, through the then-new television technology of instant replay, the play was seen again and again until Kramer became arguably the best known lineman in America.

The irony was that the block was only one in a long line of superior plays by Kramer, the kind of performance he had made routine in ten years of NFL play. That level of excellence had made Kramer a five-time All-NFL selection but it took the "Ice Bowl" block to make his name a household word among casual fans around the league. Small wonder that Jerry made *Instant Replay* the title of his best-selling book on his years with the Packers.

He was a legitimate star without technology. Along with fellow pulling guard Fuzzy Thurston, he put the power in the fabled Green Bay Sweep. Kramer endured 22 operations to play pro football. He had so many stitches that his team mates called him "Zipper."

TOM MACK

*Guard 6-3, 250 Michigan
Born 11/1/43, Cleveland, Ohio
1966-78 LA Rams*

Offensive guard Tom Mack was an essential part of some great Los Angeles Rams teams that rang up a record of 129-48-7 and won eight division titles.

Mack reveled in the brutal run-blocking action that delights any offensive lineman. "I've always thought that one of the best things I've had going for me is my speed," he once said. "I'm not as big and strong as some guards but one of the things I can do best is block on a sweep."

Mack was always amused by the anonymity afforded offensive linemen, even for some, like himself, who were perennial choices to play in the Pro Bowl. He played in eleven of them during 13 seasons, maintaining a path of excellence that reached back to his days as an All-America lineman at the University of Michigan where he played in the Rose Bowl, the East-West Shrine Game, the Hula Bowl and the College All-Star game.

"It wasn't until instant replay became popular on television that people began to take notice of players other than quarterbacks, running backs and receivers," Mack once said. "The rest of us were spear-carriers--just part of the background, but in the public's eye, not necessary to the game.

"When I saw myself on some of those instant replay shots, I always seemed to be blocking the wrong man. But that didn't matter. What mattered was that I was wiping out somebody -- showing the world that a guard has a big job to do."

Few did it as well.

BILLY SHAW

*Offensive guard. 6-3, 250. Georgia Tech.
Born 12/15/38, Natchez, MS.
1961-69 Buffalo*

In 1961, Billy Shaw chose to sign with the Buffalo Bills of the year-old American Football League instead of the Dallas Cowboys of the established NFL, but not because the Bills chose him on a higher draft round or made him a better offer. He'd heard Dallas planned to use him as a linebacker. Although he'd played both offense and defense at Georgia Tech, he believed his size and speed were better suited to offensive guard where the Bills wanted him to play. That Shaw went on to become one of the best and most honored guards of the 1960s proves that he chose well.

All-AFL from 1963 through 1966, he played in eight league All-Star Games and was selected to the all-time AFL team. He was a key member of the Bills' teams that won league titles in 1964 and 1965.

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Billy was perfectly suited to the Bills' offense which stressed the running game. His speed allowed him to pull and get out in front of runners on sweeps. In fact, because Buffalo's runners tended to be more durable than speedy, he sometimes was able to stay in front of them to make blocks far down the field.

Shaw credits Bills' all-star tackle Tom Sestek with making him a better player. Good friends, the two would always line up against each other in one-on-one practice scrimmages. "Those were some battles," he says modestly. "Sometimes I won, but mostly he did." But going against the best helped make Shaw one of the best himself.

DICK STANFEL

Offensive guard. 6-3, 236. San Francisco.

Born 07/20/27, San Francisco, CA

1952-55 Detroit, 1956-58 Washington

Because he got a late start and retired early, Stanfel played only seven seasons in the NFL, but during that time, he was on two championship teams, three division winners, was named All-NFL five times and selected for an equal number of Pro Bowls.

After serving in the army, Stanfel played guard at the University of San Francisco under Coach Joe Kuharich from 1948-50, captaining the team in his senior year. Selected by Detroit in the second round of the 1951 draft, he suffered a knee injury practicing for the College All-Star game and missed the whole season. By the time he played his first NFL game in 1952, he was 25-years old.

Detroit won its first NFL championship in twenty seasons in Stanfel's rookie year. He solidified an offensive line that already included Hall of Famer Lou Creekmur. Stanfel was taller than most guards of his day, and that along with his speed helped make him devastating blocking on sweeps. In straight ahead or pass blocking, he was considered among the league's best. When the Lions won a second consecutive championship in 1953, his teammates voted Stanfel the club's MVP.

Even though he missed half the 1955 season with an injury, he was still voted to the Pro Bowl. In 1956, Kuharich as coach of the Redskins worked a trade to bring Stanfel to Washington where he enjoyed three more all-pro seasons. When Kuharich became head coach at Notre Dame in 1959, he took his star guard with him as line coach.