

The Smallest Player Ever in the NFL

by Mel Bashore

In 1935, Aldo Richins was a wingback on the Detroit Lions roster. Full of hope that he would stick with the team for the entire season, he sent for his wife Helen to join him in the Motor City. Unfortunately Aldo was released only a couple of games into the regular season. The Lions were a talented team with a deep squad that year and Richins didn't figure in their plans. He missed out on finishing with the 1935 NFL champs and the newly-wed couple returned to their home in Utah. With memories of this short stay still vivid, Helen Richins recalled her first encounter with the players on the team:

"The first time when I visited Aldo, we got into the hotel in the middle of the night and I didn't see anybody on the team. We got up for breakfast and I went down to get some coffee and then Aldo came down. I told him that the circus was in town. He asked me, 'Where is it at?' I said, 'Well, here comes some of the men that are in it.' I walked the men on his football team. I had never seen so many big men in all my life."

It is a common perception that most pro football players look like Too Tall Jones or William "Refrigerator" Perry -- giants and behemoths. Tall, big, and heavy players are the norm in today's pro football ranks.

There have been quite a few beefy linemen who have been nicknamed "Tiny" (Cahoon, Engebretsen, Nicholes, Nordstrom, etc.), but how many really tiny players have found a place on pro rosters?

That question was posed to me by Billy J. Cross, the mighty-mite, pint-sized 5-foot-6, 150-pound halfback with the Chicago Cardinals in the early 1950s. Pat Summerall, his old roommate¹ had mentioned on a television broadcast that Cross was the smallest player to ever play pro football. The diminutive Cross, now retired in his hometown, asked me if I could verify Summerall's assertion. In taking a quick survey of references in my library, I was able to inform him that he very probably was the smallest player in the modern post-1950 era.

However, I found twenty players who were either shorter or lighter in weight than he had been. These guys could have been horse race jockeys. Admittedly, most of the players played in the 1920s and had brief flings, but the findings were statistically fascinating (in a trivial kind of way). Just to name a few, there was Patsy Giugliano (5'4", 140), Slim Jimmy Van Dyke (140), Bobby Wilson (147), John "Shorty" Tanner (5'5"), and Pard Pearce (5'5"). A lot of the players deservedly sported nicknames like "Pee Wee" and "Tiny." There were even two who also played major league baseball: Chuck Dressen (147) and Pid Purdy (145).

A couple of the really short players who stretched to measure 5'3" included Butch Meeker and John Law, but there was one player who beat everyone else in smallness -- Jack "Soapy" Shapiro. He was a 5'1", 119-pound blocking back on the 1929 Staten Island Stapletons. It was the Stapes first year in the NFL and Shapiro barely was allowed enough time to hang up his jockstrap. He played only one game and that as a substitute. His unofficial stats: returned a punt for 12 yards and carried the ball twice for a net of 7 yards. He was a tiny flash in the big man's pan. "Soapy" was rushed out of the pro ranks before he could even make a name for himself-except for being the smallest to ever play in the NFL.

In contrast to Shapiro, Billy Cross had a respectable 3-year career in the NFL. He was more than just a spot player, even though he did return punts and kickoffs and performed other duties now delegated to special teams. The clippings preserved in his scrapbook are proof positive that this tiny terror from the Texas Panhandle was skilled at blocking, defense, running, pass receiving, kicking and quarterback on occasion.

He first reported to the Cardinals training camp in Lake Forest, Illinois in 1951. He had been picked as a late draft choice at the annual winter meeting when all the teams were just shooting in the dark. Not much was known about him and presumably not much was expected. From out of little West Texas State College, Cross had never seen a pro player in his life. He recalled, "I felt like I had knocked on the

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wrong door." It wasn't that he didn't think he could make the team -- Billy had confidence oozing out his pores -- but he just felt like everyone there, from the coaches to the 80 to 100 players trying to make the team were saying, "What is that little boy doing here?"

A story even made the papers about the first time Mrs. Violet Bidwell Wolfner, the owner of the Cardinals, saw little Billy. He was strolling across the training camp lawn with Gene Ackerman, a 6-foot-5 end prospect from Missouri. "Who's son is that with Ackerman?" asked Mrs. Wolfner.

All of this judgmental adversity was *deja vu* all over again for Cross. It brought back memories of when he was a senior in Canadian High School, "I wanted to go to TCU. Dutch Meyer was coaching there at that time. I met him at the state track meet. He looked at me and said, 'Son, you are too small for college.' I was afraid that would happen in pro ball and I wouldn't ever get the chance."

Later in life, Billy coached with Bum Phillips at UTEP. When Phillips sent Cross out on a recruiting trip he would always remind him, "Don't bring back anyone you can look eye to eye with."

Cross came to the attention of the coaches during that first week in training camp in an intra-squad game. Leo Sanford recalled, "Bill and I came to the Cardinals as rookies. He was scared to death that first week and then the first time they let him run with the ball he ran crazy. He went 65 yards for a touchdown and from then on everybody on the team was crazy about him." The Cards signed him to contract for \$5,000.

During his 3-year stint with the Cards, Cross was widely regarded as one of the best blocking backs in the NFL. Both Len Ford of the Browns and Ed Sprinkle of the Bears called him the best blocker of all the backs in the league. High praise for the little man. One time Cross blocked the 250-pound Ford so effectively that the Hall of Fame end took a tumble in a surprising flip. Ford exacted revenge the next time the little guy tried to take him with a crackback block. Cross said, "The next time I tried, he flicked his arm. I rolled 10 yards. He came over and helped me up."

In his rookie year, Cross shared the scoring lead on the club with Don Paul. He ran the ball 53 times for a 5.3 average and caught 18 passes for 322 yards while racking up 6 touchdowns.

In the first Card-Bear tilt in Comiskey Park in 1951, the unheralded little speedster quickly captured the notice of Chicago fans. He figured prominently in the Cards upset victory by scoring two TDs. The first came when Frank Tripucka rifled an 18-yard scoring pass to Cross and he followed that up seven minutes later with a 39-yard scoring romp. He was selected as the Cards' MVP of that game and was awarded a tailor-made suit.

Cross joked, "Maybe they selected me because they could have a suit made for me at one-third the price of outfitting some other guy." In another game in his rookie year, he snared a pass and went 80 yards for a score against the Rams.

Coach Curly Lambeau called him the "most surprising football player he ever coached. He attested, "I found out early that he was tough. He proved to me he could do everything just as well, or better, than players of normal size. He just runs past, or under, the big fellows."

Although the undersized gamer was far from fragile, he had to learn how to take his licks. He didn't always roll "under the big fellows." Cross said, "I learned a lot about how to protect myself. You've got to know how to relax and roll with the tackle." The game little guy almost made it sound easy.

For Hall of Fame quarterback Charlie Trippi, size was not an issue in his assessment of the little blocking back. Trippi was unstinting in his praise, "Pound for pound he's the greatest football player I ever saw."

The general consensus is that NFL players have increasingly become bigger, stronger, and faster. Nevertheless, a look at the height and weight of those who have played in the league in the last ten years demonstrates that there is still a place for the smaller player. It's evident that other factors come into play in making it as a pro. Single-minded determination and desire undoubtedly supersede every other attribute. Those are the qualities that fueled Jack Shapiro and Billy Cross.

SMALL NFL PLAYERS

Weight under 150 or height below 5-6

| | | | |
|-----------------------|---------------|------|-----|
| Nate Abrams – E | 1921 | 5-4 | 145 |
| Chase Boldt - BB-E-FB | 1921-23 | 5-7 | 145 |
| Ray Brenner – WB | 1925 | 5-5 | 145 |
| Michael Clemons – HB | 1987 | 5-5 | 166 |
| Herb Clow – FB | 1924 | 5-4 | 180 |
| Dick Dobeleit – B | 1925-26 | 5-4 | 155 |
| Chuck Dressen – BB-QB | 1920, 1922-23 | 5-6 | 147 |
| Patsy Giugliano – BB | 1923 | 5-4 | 140 |
| Ed Gregg – E | 1922 | 5-6 | 135 |
| Mack Herron – HB | 1973-75 | 5-5 | 174 |
| Two Bits Homan – BB | 1925-30 | 5-5 | 145 |
| Tony Jones – WR | 1990-93 | 5-7 | 139 |
| John Law – T | 1930 | 5-3 | 180 |
| Dub McGibbony –TB-DB | 1944 | 5-10 | 148 |
| Butch Meeker – BB-TB | 1930-31 | 5-3 | 143 |
| Pard Pearce – QB-BB | 1920-25 | 5-5 | 150 |
| Pid Purdy – BB | 1926-27 | 5-6 | 145 |
| Rollin Roach – FB-WB | 1927 | 5-6 | 145 |
| Jack Shapiro – BB | 1929 | 5-1 | 119 |
| Howard Stevens – WR | 1973-77 | 5-5 | 167 |
| John Tanner – B | 1922-24 | 5-5 | 165 |
| Jimmy Van Dyke –TB-BB | 1921-23 | 5-7 | 140 |
| Bobby Wilson – TB-BB | 1936 | 5-9 | 147 |
| Buddy Young – HB | 1950-55 | 5-5 | 173 |