

# BILLY KILMER

By Michael Richman  
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It was 1961, Billy Kilmer's rookie year in the NFL, when he learned something that would collide with the truth. His San Francisco 49ers coach, Red Hickey, told the tailback that one of Kilmer's college coaches said he wasn't tough enough to play pro football.

No assessment of Kilmer was more ironic, for he was synonymous with toughness in his 16-year NFL career. Whether it was a busted nose, a bruised shoulder or cracked ribs, the man who quarterbacked the Washington Redskins from 1971 to 1978 repeatedly played with pain. It wasn't in his blood to act otherwise.

"I was a competitor," says Kilmer. "I grew up as a little kid believing in playing hard, and it was just ingrained in me to play with a lot of injuries. You just played the game without thinking about anything else."

The 6-foot, 205-pound Kilmer didn't just play the game – he played it well. He spent his first five seasons mainly at tailback, rushing for about 1,500 yards and more than 20 touchdowns in his career. He played quarterback his final 11 years, throwing for nearly 21,000 yards and 148 touchdowns.

He passed for 12,352 yards and 103 touchdowns as a Redskin, helping Washington qualify for five playoff appearances and its first Super Bowl in January 1973. The Super Bowl season was his best one in Washington. He completed 120 of 225 passes for 1,648 yards and 19 touchdowns, posting a career-high, 84.6 quarterback rating. He earned Pro Bowl and All-NFC honors.

The high point of Kilmer's Redskin career was the team's 26-3 dismantling of the Dallas Cowboys in the 1972 NFC Championship game. His two touchdown passes to Charley Taylor helped stake the Redskins to a 17-3 lead.

But the low mark came two weeks later in Super Bowl VII versus the Miami Dolphins. Kilmer and the Redskins offense were flat against Miami's "No Name" defense, which led the Dolphins to a 14-7 victory that cemented a 17-0 season, the only perfect one in NFL history.

Kilmer was a part of one of the most bizarre plays in Super Bowl history. With Miami up 14-0 midway in the fourth quarter, the Redskins had a third and goal from the six. He tried passing to wide open tight end Jerry Smith in the end zone. But his throw hit an upright, which then paralleled the goal line, and bounced incomplete. His next pass was intercepted, ending the threat.

"The Dolphins had a perfect defense, and we didn't adjust to it quick enough offensively," Kilmer says. "They stopped our running game cold. We came out in the second half and went up and down the field, but our offense couldn't get into the end zone."

Kilmer was Mr. Everything on offense before entering the NFL. He was the last of the single-wing tailbacks at UCLA, where he did all the passing, running and kicking. As a senior, he led the nation in total offense with 1,889 yards and became an All-American.

The 49ers drafted him in 1961, and Kilmer played tailback in Hickey's exciting shotgun formation. But with two games left in the 1962 season, he shattered his right leg in a car accident. The 49ers team doctor said Kilmer's football career was probably over, even hinting at possible amputation.

"He didn't make any bones about it," Kilmer says without pun. "He was 90 percent sure I would never play again."

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But in his mind, Kilmer was far from done. He persevered by rehabilitating his leg over the next year-and-a-half, returned in 1964 and played running back for half the season. But he had lost a step due to the leg injury and moved to quarterback.

Kilmer was mostly a third-string quarterback for the next two seasons, learning under such coaches as Y.A. Tittle, a future Hall of Fame inductee. He was traded to the expansion New Orleans Saints in 1967. He played four seasons there before being traded to the Redskins, where he was the first acquisition of new coach George Allen, who was hired on Jan. 6, 1971.

Allen was a winner in Los Angeles, coaching the Rams to two playoff appearances. He also molded the Redskins, who were coming off a 6-8 season, into a contender.

He did so by acquiring a stream of talented, experienced players who were past the midway point of their careers. The team was dubbed, the "Over-The-Hill-Gang," and Kilmer was a fixture on it.

In fact, No. 17 started at quarterback in the 1971 season, when the Redskins went 9-4-1 and reached post-season for the first time since 1945. The job became his when star quarterback Sonny Jurgensen suffered a season-ending shoulder injury in an exhibition game.

Today, Kilmer has nothing but praise for Allen, who used dynamic motivational skills – along with a keen coaching intellect – to produce winning teams.

"He really gave me my second wind in football," Kilmer says, "because I was basically almost at my retirement age at 31 when he traded for me. He believed in me personally. Also, I had played 10 years in the NFL and had never played for a winning coach. He just had a different attitude and was a real motivator not just in games but in practice."

Kilmer started the first three games of the 1972 season. But after the Redskins lost the third game, the job returned to Jurgensen. Thus launched the first real Redskins quarterback controversy, one that spilled over to the team's fans. Bumper stickers surfaced saying "I Like Billy" or "I Like Sonny." But Kilmer and Jurgensen never let the rivalry become bitter, building a friendship that lasts to this day.

Kilmer didn't have Jurgensen's grace, strong arm and accuracy. But he made up for it with a powerful will to win. He quarterbacked the Redskins to 50 wins in 68 games in his first seven seasons in Washington.

Kilmer's determination was infectious among his teammates. Ray Schoenke, a Redskins guard from 1966 to 1975, once said:

"I admire him so much. I didn't have much in common with Billy – and yet I'd have died for him."

Kilmer retired after the 1978 season. He proceeded to work different jobs, including one as commissioner of a semi-pro football league in Texas. He was also a television commentator for Redskins exhibition games.

Today, he lives in complete retirement in Coral Gables, Fla., spending much time playing golf. He keeps in touch with ex-Redskins, such as Jurgensen, center Len Haus and defensive tackle Diron Talbert, and cradles his fond memory of being a part of the "Over-The-Hill-Gang."

"The characters we had on that team, the Ron McDole's, the Diron Talbert's, it was just a great bunch of guys," Kilmer says. "We were the first team in so many years to make Washington a winning town. We got the fans enthused and really brought them alive."

Passing			Rushing										
Year	Team	G	Att	Comp	Yds	YPA	TD	Int	RATE	Att	Yds	Avg	TD
1961	San Francisco	11	34	19	286	8.41	0	4	44.1	96	509	5.3	10
1962	San Francisco	12	13	8	191	14.69	1	3	91.5	93	478	5.1	5
1963	San Francisco			INJURED									
1964	San Francisco	10	14	8	92	6.57	1	1	71.1	36	113	3.1	0
1966	San Francisco	6	16	5	84	5.25	0	1	24.0	3	23	7.7	0
1967	New Orleans	10	204	97	1341	6.57	6	11	56.4	20	142	7.1	1
1968	New Orleans	12	315	167	2060	6.54	15	17	66.9	21	97	4.6	2

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1969	New Orleans	14	360	193	2532	7.03	20	17	74.9	11	18	1.6	0
1970	New Orleans	13	237	135	1557	6.57	6	17	55.5	12	42	3.5	0
1971	Washington	14	306	166	2221	7.26	13	13	74.0	17	5	0.3	2
1972	Washington	12	225	120	1648	7.32	19	11	84.8	3	-3	-1.0	0
1973	Washington	10	227	122	1656	7.30	14	9	81.3	9	10	1.1	0
1974	Washington	11	234	137	1632	6.97	10	6	83.5	6	27	4.5	0
1975	Washington	12	346	178	2440	7.05	23	16	77.2	11	34	3.1	1
1976	Washington	10	206	108	1252	6.08	12	10	70.3	13	-7	-0.5	0
1977	Washington	8	201	99	1187	5.91	8	7	66.5	10	20	2.0	0
1978	Washington	5	46	23	316	6.87	4	3	74.2	1	1	1.0	0
<b>NFL Total</b>		170	2984	1585	20495	6.87	152	146	71.6	362	1509	4.2	21