

BILL DUDLEY

By Michael Richman

The Pro Football Hall of Fame describes him as "small and slow with an unorthodox running style." Indeed, "Bullet" Bill Dudley was hardly fleet of foot, although his nickname may suggest otherwise. But the 5-foot-10, 176-pounder compensated for any deficiencies to become one of the greatest all-around players in NFL history.

Dudley played nine seasons in the NFL from 1942 to 1953, three each with the Pittsburgh Steelers, Detroit Lions and Washington Redskins. (He also missed three seasons due to military service and injuries.) Along the way, he was Mr. Versatility, amassing 8,157 yards in rushing, receptions and kick returns, scoring 484 points and intercepting 23 passes. He kicked field goals and extra points, punted and threw passes, too.

His best season was in 1946, when he claimed a "triple crown" by finishing No. 1 in the NFL in rushing (604 yards), interceptions (10) and punt returns (14.3-yard average). He earned All-NFL and league MVP honors that season.

How did Dudley, a 1966 Hall of Fame inductee, dispel the belief that he wasn't equipped to play in the NFL?

"I don't know," he said at the Bobby Mitchell charity golf tournament in July. I loved the game of football. I didn't even think about being good, bad or indifferent. I never concerned myself with whether I was the leading ground gainer or pass interception leader, or anything else like that. I just played to try to win a ball game."

He didn't win a lot – his best team was a 7-4 Steelers' squad in 1942. But he always exerted 100 percent effort until the final gun sounded. Part of a pro football era when players went both ways, he was positioned at tailback, halfback and defensive back, averaging 50 minutes per game one season. He drew kudos for his fierceness and dedication.

"Dudley is rated by rival coaches and players as one of the league's most versatile backs," according to a Redskins' 1951 game program. "But first and foremost is his competitive spirit, the hallmark of a true champion."

Dudley, 78, needed an aggressive instinct, or he might not have made it in pro football. A native of Bluefield, Va., a small town nestled in the mountains in the western part of the state, he was once denied a football tryout because his high school didn't have a uniform small enough for him. But he didn't give up and eventually made the team. Later, the Virginia Tech football program rejected him because of his size.

He went instead to Virginia, where he began his college career in 1938 as a 150-pound tailback and defensive back. He defied the pessimists.

Dudley was one of the nation's most exciting players in 1941. He led the major colleges in total yards with 2,441, including rushing, receptions, interceptions returned and punt and kickoff runbacks. He also scored 134 points, nearly half the point production for the 8-1 Cavaliers. He completed 57 passes for 856 yards.

He became the school's first football All-American and received the Washington Touchdown Club's Camp Memorial Trophy as the outstanding college football player of the year.

The Steelers drafted Dudley in 1942, and he made an immediate impact playing in the old single-wing formation. He ran for a 55-yard touchdown in his first game and led the league in rushing yards (696) and punt return yards (271). He was named All-NFL. With World War II underway, he entered the Army Air Corps and flew in B-25 bombers as part of air supply missions. He returned to the Steelers in 1945.

Despite his amazing 1946 season, Dudley had differences with Pittsburgh coach Jock Sutherland and was traded to Detroit. But he kept pace as one of the league's top all-around players, scoring 13 touchdowns in 1947, seven on receptions, four on rushes, one on a punt return and one on a kickoff return. He also threw two touchdowns.

He was again traded before the 1950 season to the Redskins, for whom No. 35 played offense, defense and kicked. He played in all 12 games for a 3-9 team in 1950, returning a punt 96 yards for a touchdown in one game to set a team record that still stands, a 5-7 squad in 1951. He made the Pro Bowl both years. He then sat out the 1952 season with arthritis and bursitis in his knee before returning in 1953 as a player-coach under coach Earl "Curly" Lambeau. The Redskins finished 6-5-1.

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He nearly didn't return to the Redskins in 1953. After earning \$12,500 in his previous two seasons, he was set to receive \$5,500 to coach but wanted a bit more for playing. Redskins owner George Preston Marshall refused Dudley's request for the extra payment but then agreed. But at season's end, something was missing from Dudley's check.

Dudley approached Marshall. "I said, 'Sir, do you recall our conversation at the beginning of the season? I said if I played, I would get the extra money.' He asked, 'Do you think you did all right?' I said, 'I told you I'd let you make that decision.' So he gave it to me. It was \$500 or \$1,000."

Like many other people, Dudley had mixed feelings about Marshall, a curmudgeonly man with a brilliant business mind.

"Marshall could be very arrogant and very pleasant at the same time," Dudley said. "He was different from just about everybody else, he was very flamboyant. But I liked him. He didn't treat me any better or any worse than anybody else."

The money Dudley and Marshall haggled over is pocket change compared with the million-dollar salaries of today. But Dudley, who lives in Lynchburg, Va., and works in the life insurance business, holds no bitterness toward the current players because of their huge contracts. To him, they should earn what the market bears.

"I respect all the ball players," he said in his southern drawl. "It's up to them to get as much as they can. At the same time, it's up to the owner to put the best team on the field at what they feel is the best possible price. That's business."

Dudley begrudges the high-priced players, however, for sometimes underachieving during games.

"It happens particularly late in the season, when a player has a big contract and is getting his butt kicked in, and he's not really trying to do his best," Dudley said. "That's not right. A player may say, 'What the hell do they need me busting my back just to get another 10 yards when my team is 25 to 30 points down, just a few minutes are left, and it's muddy and cold?'"

Dudley said the primary on-the-field difference from when he played is that today's players are bigger and faster. Offensive linemen now are also allowed to use their hands in a liberal manner when blocking, which would have been penalized when he played, he said. He noted, though, that the basic concept of the game remains the same.

"The game involves hitting and getting hit," he said. "That's the way it is, and the big people can hit harder than the little people."

Dudley was one of those "little people." But that didn't erode the toughness of a man whose nose is like a sponge from getting smashed so many times during play. (Only some linemen wore facemasks in those days.) He simply persisted with a savvy and mental fortitude that made up for his limited size and speed.

"He couldn't do anything with, let's say, finesse," Steelers president Dan Rooney once said. "He was just one of those guys that really got it done."

Year	Team	LG	GM	RUSHING-----				PASS RECEIVING--				INTERCEPTIONS--				PUNTING-		KICKOFF RETURNS-			
				ATT	YDS	AVG	TD	NO	YDS	AVG	TD	NO	YDS	AVG	TD	NO	AVG	NO	YDS	AVG	TD
1942	Pit	N	11	*162	*696	4.3	5	1	24	24.0	0	3	60	20.0	0	18	32.0	11	298	27.1	1
1943-44 Military Service																					
1945	Pit	N	4	57	204	3.5	3	-	-	-	-	2	47	23.5	0	2	18.0	3	65	21.7	0
1946	Pit	N	11	*146	*604	4.1	3	4	109	27.2	1	*10	*242	24.2	1	60	40.0	14	280	20.0	0
1947	Det	N	9	80	302	3.8	2	27	375	13.9	7	5	104	20.8	1	15	43.8	15	359	23.9	0
1948	Det	N	7	33	97	2.9	0	20	210	10.5	6	1	3	3.0	0	23	35.9	10	204	20.4	0
1949	Det	N	12	125	402	3.2	4	27	190	7.0	2	-	-	-	-	32	39.9	13	246	18.9	0
1950	Was	N	12	66	339	5.1	1	22	172	7.8	1	2	3	1.5	0	14	41.8	1	43	43.0	0
1951	Was	N	12	91	398	4.4	2	22	303	13.8	1	-	-	-	-	27	34.9	11	248	22.5	0
1952 Did not play																					
1953	Was	N	12	5	15	3.0	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
9 years			90	765	3057	4.0	20	123	1383	11.2	18	23	459	20.0	2	191	38.2	78	1743	22.3	0

Year	Team	LG	PUNT RETURNS----				SCORING-----						PASSING-----								
			NO	YDS	AVG	TD	TD	XP	XA	FG	FA	PTS	ATT	COM	PCT.	YDS	TD	IN	AvgG		
1942	Pit	N	20	*271	13.5	0	6	0	0	0	0	36	94	35	37.2	438	2	5	4.66		
1943-44 Military Service																					
1945	Pit	N	5	20	4.0	0	3	2	3	0	0	20	32	10	31.3	58	0	2	1.81		
1946	Pit	N	*27	*385	14.2	0	5	12	14	2	7	48	90	32	35.5	452	2	9	5.02		
1947	Det	N	11	182	16.5	1	11	0	0	0	0	66	4	3	75.0	24	2	0	6.00		
1948	Det	N	8	67	8.4	0	7	0	0	0	0	42	1	0	0.0	0	0	1	0.00		
1949	Det	N	11	199	18.1	1	6	30	32	5	14	81	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
1950	Was	N	12	185	15.4	1	3	31	31	5	10	64	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
1951	Was	N	22	172	7.8	0	3	21	22	10	13	69	1	1	100.0	13	0	0	13.00		
1952 Did not play																					
1953	Was	N	8	34	4.3	0	0	25	25	11	22	58	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		

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9 years 124 1515 12.2 3 44 121 127 33 66 484 222 81 36.5 985 6 17 4.44
* - Led league