

Gail Cogdill:

Playing Split End for the Lions, Colts, and Falcons in the 1960s

By Jim Sargent

A master of the clutch reception for long yardage, Gail Cogdill made a career out of spectacular catches in the 1960s. During his eight-plus seasons with Detroit, two of which were shortened due to injuries, Cogdill became one of the greatest of all Lion split ends.

While his records have been surpassed in an era where 40 or more passes per game are common, Cogdill made his mark on a team that seldom threw 25 times. An outstanding split end for Detroit when 14-game seasons were the standard (before 1961 the NFL played 12 game seasons) instead of today's 16 games, he caught 325 passes for 5,221 yards and 28 touchdowns.

For his 11-year National Football League career, which he finished with two seasons for the Atlanta Falcons, Cogdill played 127 games, hauled in 356 aerials, gained 5,696 yards, and scored 34 touchdowns.

Based on statistics through the 2002 season, Cogdill's total of 5,221 yards ranks fourth all-time on Detroit's list for most receiving yards in a career, following three receivers who played mainly in the 1990s, Herman Moore (9,098 yds), Johnnie Morton (5,345 yds), and Brett Perriman (5,244 yds). Gail's 325 career receptions for the Lions ranks sixth, but only one receiver was his contemporary, Charlie Sanders (336 catches).

Known for having great (but small) hands, making excellent fakes, and throwing good blocks, the former track star displayed excellent speed, at least until his knee was injured in 1965. For Detroit in 1960, Cogdill became an immediate sensation.

Drafted in the sixth round, the fleet 6'2" 190-pounder became the starter at left end in the opening game. He and 6'5" defensive tackle Roger Brown, drafted in the fourth round out of Maryland State College, were the only rookie starters.

"Gail came to Detroit with enthusiasm, ability, and cockiness," recalled tight end Jim Gibbons. "His ability demanded that he be a starter, and he started."

Detroit (7-5), which lost the first three games but won the last four, finished second to the Green Bay Packers (8-4). Cogdill started all 12 games, caught 43 passes for 642 yards, and scored one touchdown.

His 14.9 yards per reception topped the Lions and ranked him among the NFL's top seven receivers. End Jim Gibbons led Detroit in receptions with a career-best 51, while gaining 604 yards for an 11.8 average.

Cogdill and Gibbons, a third-year pro from the University of Iowa, both made the Pro Bowl (along with five more Lions). The club's two top receivers accounted for 1,246 of 1,678 net yards, or more than 70% of the ground Detroit gained through the air.

For his splendid season, Cogdill was voted Rookie of the Year. Gathering 17 votes in a UPI Poll of 39 sportswriters in 13 NFL cities, Gail won easily over Green Bay halfback Tom Moore (4 votes), fullback Ted Dean (4), and linebacker Maxie Baughan (4), both of the Philadelphia Eagles.

Tall, handsome, friendly, and often outspoken, the crew-cut Cogdill enjoyed five straight seasons as one of Detroit's two top receivers.

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This table summarizes Detroit's record, the passes completed, and Cogdill's stats in his eight full seasons as a Lion:

Year	Tm	Rec	Pos	Lion Passes	G	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
1960	Det	7-5	2 nd	166 of 333	12	43	642	14.9	1
1961	Det	8-5-1	2 nd	186 of 398	14	45	956	21.2	6
1962	Det	11-3	2 nd	211 of 379	14	53	991	18.7	7
1963	Det	5-8-1	4 th	202 of 406	14	48	945	19.7	10
1964	Det	7-5-2	4 th	206 of 385	11	45	665	14.8	2
1965	Det	6-7-1	6 th	170 of 374	9	20	247	12.4	0
1966	Det	4-9-1	6 th	239 of 456	14	47	411	8.7	1
1967	Det	5-7-2	3 rd	160 of 351	12	21	322	15.3	1
	Det	53-49-8		1540 of 3082	100	322	5179	16.1	28

But injuries limited his accomplishments. Along with numerous minor ailments, Cogdill suffered two major injuries. In game eleven of the 1964 season, a 23-all tie with the Minnesota Vikings, Gail's shoulder was dislocated, ending his season. Still, during 11 games he made 45 receptions, gaining 665 yards and scoring twice.

In the last exhibition game of 1965, Cogdill's right kneecap was fractured. He played the first three games with constant pain. After sitting out five weeks, he finished the campaign. He caught 20 passes for 247 yards, making 1965 his worst year as a regular.

Born on April 7, 1937, in Worland, Wyoming, Gail's family moved to Spokane, Washington, in 1951. A three-sport star at Lewis and Clark High, the slim youth earned all-state honors in football, basketball, and track during his senior year.

At Washington State, Cogdill concentrated his efforts on football. As a junior he set a then NCAA record when the Cougars beat Northwestern University. Quarterback David Wilson connected with Cogdill seven times for 252 yards, the longest being an 80-yarder. Also in 1958, the pair teamed up for a 72-yard completion in a win over Stanford.

Against the University of Houston in Rice Stadium on Thanksgiving Day of 1959, Cogdill made a spectacular scoring reception that helped the Cougars to a 32-18 victory.

Sportswriter Harry Missildine later described the pass that quarterback Mike Agee overthrew, after Cogdill ran a fake hook pattern and then reached the goal line:

"But Cogdill accelerated, leaped and barely tipped the ball with one fingertip, checking it slightly, and on his next step Cogdill launched himself after the tumbling football. When he caught up with it, his heels were higher than his head.

"He speared the ball with an outstretched hand, ducked his head and shoulder-rolled to a stop in the back of the end zone."

Cogdill was selected All-American in his junior and senior years. Altogether in his three WSU seasons, he caught 64 passes for 1,256 yards and 13 touchdowns. As a result of his stellar career, he was later inducted as a member of the All-Time All-Northwest Football Team in 1979, Washington State's Athletic Hall of Fame in 1982, and the Inland Empire Sports Hall of Fame in 1987.

Drafted by the Lions in 1960, Cogdill played in four all-star games, including the East-West Shrine Game. But in those days the big one was the College All-Star Game. In the 1960 contest, the Baltimore Colts dominated the collegians, 32-7. During that week in Chicago, however, Gail and fellow Lion rookie Roger Brown became friends. The College All-Stars played on Friday. Cogdill and Brown were suited up the next night when Detroit played an exhibition against the Cleveland Browns.

"George Wilson stuck me in the Cleveland ball game. I didn't even know the plays," Cogdill said in a 200 interview. "'Just go out there and look like you're gonna run a pass pattern,' Wilson said. I think Roger played, too. That's how we got our start with the Lions."

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The sure-handed Washington State ace caught no passes in the opener, a 28-9 loss to Green Bay. In Detroit's second game, won by the San Francisco Forty-Niners, 14-10, Cogdill grabbed seven passes for 115 yards and helped keep the Lions in the game.

"That gave me a big lift, knowing they had that much confidence in me," Gail told reporters when he was picked Rookie of the Year. "From then on I had all the confidence in myself I needed."

The starting quarterback in Cogdill's first two years was Jim Ninowski.

"He used to throw to me quite a bit," Cogdill recalled in 2000. "Then he was traded back to Cleveland, and we had Milt Plum and Earl Morrall. A few years later they got rid of Morrall and obtained Karl Sweetan, backed up by Plum. So I never really had a 'true one quarterback' in my years with Detroit.

"George Wilson told me a couple of times, 'Gail, it's a shame you're playing here, because you will never break any records.'

"That was true. The Lions didn't throw the ball that much.

"We also had 'bump and run' all the way down the field, which the receivers don't have today. The blocking then and now is completely different. They could hold their arms out and slow you down. Today they can't do that.

"We could catch 48, 50, maybe 60 balls, and go for a 1000-yard season. Today if you do that, you're a millionaire!

"I was mainly a 'third-down' guy. I'd go down across the middle and get killed, that type of thing. Bob Whitlow, our center, used to call me 'Crazy Cogs.' I'd come down and break it off so fast, and go into the middle real quick. The guy who could really get the ball to me the quickest was Jim Ninowski."

The offense, Cogdill recollected, seemed to be stereotyped. The opposing defense often had a good idea of what to expect in a certain situation.

"But we always had a good defense. We had Roger Brown and Alex Karras at the tackles.

"The two guys who never really got the credit, but who I thought were as good as anyone in the league, were Sammy Williams and Darris McCord, our ends. They were always left off the all-star teams.

"But Williams and McCord were always there, always doing their job. They didn't really get beat that much. They didn't get run over. You look back and say, 'Why didn't they get the recognition?' We had a 'Fearsome Foursome,' but Williams and McCord were seldom recognized as part of that foursome.

"We had a real solid defense, especially my first three years in Detroit. Wayne Walker played linebacker for 15 years. Joe Schmidt was another great linebacker, and Carl Brettschneider was a good one.

"In those years our defensive backs were Yale Lary, and he's in the Hall of Fame, Dick 'Night Train' Lane, another Hall of Famer, and we had Dick LeBeau and Gary Lowe."

In the Pro Bowl after the 1960 season, Cogdill remembered dropping a pass from Johnny Unitas:

"We were playing at Los Angeles Coliseum. Johnny laid one up in the corner over Larry Wilson from the St. Louis Cardinals, and he became a Hall of Famer.

"But I had Larry beat bad. I was gone for 80-some yards for a touchdown. I was looking up over my shoulder, and the ball went right through my arms!

"So I came back to the huddle, and Johnny said, 'Hey, rookie, I'm gonna call that play again, and you'd better damn well catch it the next time.'

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"We go in at halftime and come back out again. It seems like we were in the same position as we were before.

"Unitas calls the play. By that time the halfback came up, and he nailed me right in the face with his elbow, and I kind of stumbled for about 10-11 yards, and I fell to one hand and one knee. Unitas throws the ball and it sticks under my right arm, you know, on the back side of my arm.

"I got up and started running with the ball. I ran 40 yards straight, and I cut back across the field to the other side, which was another 40 yards, and I went all the way down the sideline and got knocked out of bounds at the one-yard line.

"That's the way to do it!" Johnny said.

"Well, I was all out of gas because I had run about 100 yards.

"I said, 'It would have been a hell of a lot easier the first time!'

"That was a long run, for having a bloody nose and having my helmet put on backwards for me, when I come off the line of scrimmage.

"Unitas called me 'rookie' for the next ten years. I never lived that down!"

In 1961 and 1962 the Lions also finished second, both times behind Green Bay. Cogdill enjoyed fine seasons, making 45 receptions for 956 yards and six touchdowns in 1961, and 53 catches for 991 yards and seven touchdowns in 1962.

In 1962 Detroit's usual starting lineup on offense featured Cogdill at left (weak side) end and Jim Gibbons (33 rec, 318 yds, 2 TD) at tight end; John Gonzaga and Dan LaRose at tackles; Harley Sewell and John Gordy at guards; and Bob Whitlow at center.

In the backfield, Milt Plum was the regular signal-caller, backed up by Earl Morrall. Danny Lewis (488 yds, 4.1 avg, 6 TD) and Tom Watkins (485 yds, 4.3 avg, 3 TD) were the halfbacks, Nick Pietrosante (445 yds, 3.3 avg, 2 TD) was the fullback, and speedy Pat Studstill (36 rec, 479 yds, 4 TD) was the flanker.

The Lions, sporting the league's best defense, finished at 11-3. The toughest loss was 9-7 to Green Bay in game four. In fact, the three losses came by a total of eight points.

But on November 22, 1962, Detroit handed Green Bay, the eventual NFL champions, the Packers' only loss of the season, 26-14, in what Detroiters call the "Thanksgiving Day Massacre."

Roger Brown recorded six of Detroit's 10 sacks of quarterback Bart Starr, who took 110 yards in losses. One of Roger's tackles caused a fumble and led to a 6-yard touchdown jaunt by Sam Williams. Brown also sacked Starr for a safety.

Before that, Cogdill caught two touchdown passes from Milt Plum, the first covering 33 yards and the second good for 27 yards. Those receptions, made within 21 seconds of each other, put Detroit ahead early in the second period, 14-0.

George Wilson told reporters about Cogdill's first score: "We had third down and four yards to go at the Green Bay 33-yard line. Green Bay was looking for the short pass from Plum, and actually it could have worked that way.

"The play Milt called had three men out as receivers—Danny Lewis, Pat Studstill, and Cogdill. I think he really planned to throw to either Lewis or Studstill, but he told Gail to go straight up the field.

"When Cogdill broke behind Willie Wood, Milt saw it right away and let the pass go. It was a beauty. Gail's catch was timed perfectly. He didn't even break stride."

Cogdill, beating Herb Adderly, made a diving grab of Plum's second TD pass in the end zone, making the score 14-0 early in the second quarter.

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With Brown and the Lion defense applying fierce pressure, Detroit led by halftime, 23-0. Two fourth-quarter Packer touchdowns had no effect on the outcome.

On a day with many heroes, the two greatest were pointed out in *Lions Pride: 60 Years of Detroit Lions Football* (1993): "They were Gail Cogdill, surely one of the great pass catchers of recent times, and ponderous Roger Brown, 303-pound defensive tackle."

Recalling the widespread publicity in the aftermath of the Thanksgiving game, Cogdill said he and Plum appeared on TV's "Ed Sullivan Show." But Gail didn't learn about the TV offer for that Sunday evening until he and several teammates had driven on Friday to Michigan's Upper Peninsula to go deer hunting:

"We drove eight hours in a snow storm to get there. Somebody from a local food store drove six miles in to our cabin to get me. I drove back to the store to make this call to New York about the Sullivan Show. I had to drive 10 hours back to the Detroit Airport and fly to New York. So my hunting trip went kaput that time!

"Anyway, it was a lot of fun. We were in the audience and Ed Sullivan introduced us as the guys who beat Green Bay on Thanksgiving.

"The writers picked the defense over the offense that day, so *Sports Illustrated* had a big article about the defense. We got paid about \$580 for the TV appearance, and they paid our airline tickets to New York."

Cogdill made his second Pro Bowl appearance after the 1962 season. More importantly, he was voted by his teammates as Detroit's Most Valuable Player. Gail still cherishes the honor.

In 1963 the Lions, the second place club in the Western Conference for three straight years, suffered an up-and-down season. Cogdill made the Pro Bowl for the third time in four years, but Detroit finished fourth in the Western Conference. While Danny Lewis led the team in rushing with 528 yards (4.0 avg), he only scored twice.

Detroit's passing game, however, accounted for 26 touchdowns. Steady Earl Morrall connected on 174 of 328 aerials for 24 scores. Flanker Terry Barr topped the club in receptions with 66 for 1,086 yards and 13 touchdowns, while Cogdill caught 48 passes for 945 yards and a career-best 10 TDs.

But Detroit's season was marred by several close losses, including 17-14 to the Dallas Texans, 25-21 and 24-21 to the Baltimore Colts, and 34-31 to the Minnesota Vikings.

Detroit experienced a better season in 1964, going 7-5-2 in George Wilson's last year. But in game eleven against the Vikings, Cogdill suffered a dislocated shoulder, ending his season. He still made 45 receptions. But his average gain of 14.8 yards was down, because Milt Plum seldom threw deep. Terry Barr again led the Lions with 57 receptions, and Jim Gibbons tied Cogdill with 45.

Cogdill was picked for a fourth Pro Bowl, but he couldn't play due to the injury.

Recalling the difficulties of excelling in the NFL in a different era, Gail said:

"I bounced around that 900 to 1,000 yard mark. We had bump-and-run all the way down the field, and we had double coverage. I had quick moves, and I could get away from the defender.

"Today you can't touch the receiver. Back then they could beat the holy stuffing out of you before you got off the line.

"You'd line up, and a linebacker would be in front of you, and you knew what was going to happen. He'd pound on you for two or three yards, and the defensive halfback was gonna get you, and release you to the safety, and he was gonna pound you!

"For a long time in the 1960s, we weren't scoring very many points. The passing game just wasn't that good. Most of the receivers had a tough time getting open.

"Alex Karras used to say, 'If you can't get rid of the ball in less than 3.5 seconds, I'm gonna tear your head off.'

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"Now the offensive linemen can reach up and grab the defender, so the quarterback may have 5, 6, 7 seconds to release the ball.

"I watch these games today and I see receivers 'dropping' the ball. Man, I think back and I don't remember *dropping* more than five or six balls in my *whole career*."

In 1965 Gail again suffered a major injury: his right kneecap was fractured when he was driven out of bounds by a tackle during the last exhibition game. While Detroit finished at 6-7-1 under new coach Harry Gilmer, Cogdill missed five games because of the injury. He probably should have sat out the season:

"I played nine games on a broken kneecap. The leg gave out on me, so I had part of the kneecap taken out after the season.

"In 1966 I was really having trouble because I tore a quad. I was working the weights to come back from the knee injury, and I tore a quad up here by my hip. But nobody knew about it. They kept saying, 'You're getting slower, you're getting slower.'

"Hell, I was dragging my leg is what I was doing. My leg was taped all the time, from my hip to my knee. So it was pretty hard to drag it around."

Cogdill had difficulty with running, cutting, and diving throughout 1966. He did come through with 47 receptions. But his speed was hindered, so his pass routes were shorter. His average gain of 8.7 yards was the lowest of his career.

"Today I've got sciatic nerve problems really bad on that right side. I've also got arthritis in my right foot because of that. I should have never played until the leg was completely healed. But what are you going to do?

"You know, when you're a young guy, you always think you're tough, don't you?"

Cogdill laughed at the bittersweet memory.

Wide receiver and punter Pat Studstill enjoyed a career year in 1966, making 67 catches for a league-leading 1,266 yards (18.9 avg). He also punted 72 times for a 41.1 yard average.

"Gail was big, strong, and fast," Studstill recollected, "and he had the best hands on the team. He could block and he was quick. Gail was not used properly. They never threw to him enough. It's too bad because he could have been greater than he turned out—which was great anyway."

In 1967, under new coach Joe Schmidt, the Lions finished third of four teams in the Central Division. Karl Sweetan and Milt Plum alternated at quarterback. Cogdill played 12 games but caught only 21 passes, his second lowest production as a Lion.

"Finally, in the early part of the 1968 season, I was waived and Baltimore signed me. Don Shula wanted me there. He had been a Lions assistant when I came to Detroit.

"They were making a run for the championship that year. I suited up for eight games, which would give me a full share of the Super Bowl, if Baltimore made it. We won our division but lost it to the New York Jets, 16-7.

"I was on the side lines. I didn't suit up, because my leg was still not that great. I got a full share anyway.

"I made more money that year than I ever did with the Lions. With the division championship, that was an extra check, plus the Super Bowl was an extra check.

"Then I retired, and Shula asked me to come back. I went back to camp with Baltimore in 1969. They had an extra receiver, so I said, 'I'm not interested any more.' I packed up and went home to Detroit.

"Shula called and said, 'I traded you to Atlanta for a couple of linemen. Can you go to Atlanta?'

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"I thought, 'Well, hell, I'll go to Atlanta. Norm Van Brocklin and I are both from the West Coast. He went to Oregon and I went to Washington State. Maybe this thing will work out. So I went to the Falcons and played two more years, and retired."

Cogdill made 24 receptions in a reserve role in 1969, including one for a TD against Detroit. But he caught only seven passes in six games in 1970.

"Van Brocklin was a completely different guy than I thought. He was brilliant at putting a game plan together, but it seemed that he never stayed with it. I played for Atlanta for two years.

"On my way home after the 1970 season, Kansas City called and said they would sign me to a two-year contract. But my leg was bothering me, and I chose not to do it."

It was time to retire. Owning a ranch in Oregon, Cogdill also engaged in a variety of business ventures, including a sports consulting firm during the 1980s. Today he lives in Washington, works part-time, and sponsors a celebrity golf tournament, the proceeds of which are used to benefit children's' causes.

The former Lion great has one regret about his football career:

"My big mistake came just before the leagues merged in the middle of 1966. I had been suspended indefinitely [in February 1966] by the Lions coach, Harry Gilmer.

"The newspapers said I called him an 'unfit coach,' which I didn't.

"But during that time, being suspended, I had a chance to go with the American Football League. It was just a matter of hours and I was getting ready to sign a contract with Oakland, for way more than I ever got for Detroit. I was waiting for the person involved to bring the contract out to be signed. During that time, the leagues merged, so of course I couldn't do it. I waited a little too long."

Detroit's leading receiver for total yardage gained until the 1990s, Cogdill earned a variety of honors, including four Pro Bowls and being elected as the Lion MVP in 1962. When members of the Detroit media picked an All-Golden Era Team covering the first 30 seasons, 1934-1963, Cogdill and Cloyce Box were selected as ends on the first team. For the All-Modern Era Team covering the years 1964-1993, Gail was picked as one end on the second team.

"I played with and against the very best players in the NFL," Cogdill observed. "With Gibbons, Studstill, and Barr, Detroit had great receivers. If the ball had been thrown then like it is today, what careers we would have had! But having teammates like Roger Brown, Alex Karras, Wayne Walker, and the rest of the Lions, I enjoyed playing with the very best."

Considering his records and accomplishments and that he was not fortunate enough to play for a championship team, the Washington State All-American enjoyed a great football career. In fact, Gail Cogdill was the type of personable, outstanding, and exciting player who made the National Football League more popular than Major League Baseball in the 1960s.