

# **Wallace “Wally” Triplett:**

## **Struggling for Success in the Postwar NFL**

**By Jim Sargent**

In the nineteenth round of the National Football League's annual draft in 1949, the Detroit Lions selected Wallace (Wally) Triplett, a “triple threat” all-around halfback at Penn State University. But Lions coach and general manager Alvin “Bo” McMillin could not be sure his number 19 choice would accept, since no African American player had yet signed as an NFL draft choice.

Triplett changed that perception. Not only did the Pennsylvania native have the personality, character, and mindset to defy the odds in pro football, then considered a white man's game, he also possessed the skills, speed, and toughness necessary to carry the ball and block on offense, defend against the run and the pass, and return kickoffs and punts.

Although he played only four seasons in the NFL, Triplett earned a place in the league's history. First, when the Lions selected him, Wally became the first African-American to accept the NFL's draft. Several other black players preceded him in pro football, including end Bob Mann and halfback Mel Groomes, both of whom played for Detroit in 1948.

Second, the speedy Triplett, a great scatback, excelled at football. Given an opening, he could sprint down the field. His finest hour came on October 29, 1950, when he set an NFL record (which lasted 44 years) by returning four kickoffs for 294 yards and one touchdown as the Rams ripped the Lions, 65-24, at the Los Angeles Coliseum. Early in the second quarter, with the Rams ahead, Triplett returned his first kickoff for 81 yards, before being hauled down at the Rams' 16-yard line. With a minute left in the first half, the rookie ran back another kick 97 yards to score.

The Rams tried to kick away from him in the second half, but Triplett returned one kickoff for 74 yards and another for 42. Praising the 5'10" 175-pounder for his offensive performance as well as his play on defense, *Football Digest* reported, “The only man smiling in the Detroit Lions' dressing room following their loss to the L.A. Rams recently in Los Angeles was Wallace Triplett, III, *Football Digest's* Pro Player of the Week.”

Wallace, the fifth of six sons of Mahlon and Estella Triplett, grew up in La Mott, Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia. He played basketball and baseball as well as football at Cheltenham High School. A versatile athlete, he made the starting eleven at right halfback at Penn State as a sophomore in 1946. Finishing with a 6-2 record, the team voted to cancel a November game with the University of Miami, after Miami officials told Penn State to leave “Negro” players at home.

Triplett was a valuable player for the unbeaten Nittany Lions of 1947, and the team was selected to play in the Cotton Bowl in Dallas. Penn State, a powerhouse in the East, played Southern Methodist University to a 13-13 tie. In a decade when football did not yet use separate offensive and defensive teams, Wally scored the tying touchdown in the third quarter on a 6-yard pass, and he made three touchdown-saving tackles at defensive halfback. Also, Triplett and teammate Dennis Hoggard were the first blacks to play in the Cotton Bowl. But when the integrated Penn State squad arrived in town, they had to find accommodations outside Dallas.

Triplett went on to enjoy a good senior year, and Penn State lost only once in 1948. Wally led the team in scoring with 36 points and in all-purpose yards, gaining 424 rushing, 90 receiving, and 220 in punt returns. Often called “the best all-around back in the East” by football scribes, the former Cheltenham ace graduated from Penn State in June 1949.

Triplett talked about his interesting pro football career in a 2004 interview. Compared to today's NFL, he particularly remembers major differences in the social aspects of the game as it was played during the late 1940s and the early 1950s. A highly visible member of Penn State's team in 1947 and 1948, Wally became almost invisible with Detroit's club in 1949 and 1950.

"Half of the Detroit players wouldn't speak to me," Triplett recollected. "I was made to feel like I was 'intruding.' I know Bob Mann felt the same way. Pro football did not welcome Negroes, the term we used to use, in the 1940s. Paul Brown and the Cleveland Browns brought in several colored players like fullback Marion Motley and guard Bill Willis in the old All-America Football Conference in 1946. But the NFL was slow to integrate. After Joe Lillard played for the Chicago Cardinals in 1933, pro football had no colored players until Paul Brown came along."

Also in 1933, the Steelers had one Negro, Ray Kemp, a 6'1" 215-pound tackle from Duquesne. But Kemp played in only five games for Pittsburgh, while Joe Lillard played the entire 1932 and 1933 seasons with Chicago. A triple threat tailback, Lillard, dubbed the "Midnight Express," led the Cards in scoring with 19 points and provided much of his club's spark on offense in 1933.

In his excellent book *Outside the Lines*, Charles K. Ross examined the NFL from the league's early years through the integration of the Washington Redskins in the 1960s. Ross concluded the informal agreement among owners not to sign black players after 1933 stemmed from several factors, notably the racist beliefs of Redskins owner George Preston Marshall.

But when the new league arrived in 1946, the Cleveland Browns and the Los Angeles Dons of the AAFC along with the NFL's Rams (moved that season from Cleveland) announced plans to sign good black players. The Rams did sign halfback Kenny Washington and end Woody Strode, both standouts a few years earlier at UCLA. Thanks to Marion Motley, Bill Willis, Washington, Strode, and other star athletes like Triplett, pro football's color line gradually faded.

"In the postwar years," Triplett recounted, "football was a game played mainly in the East and the Midwest, not so much in the South. But football was played mostly by white people for the pleasure of white people, and they wanted to keep it that way."

On January 15, 1949, when Triplett signed with the Lions, he became the first black to enter the league through the draft. But the first African-American to be drafted by an NFL club was George Taliaferro, All-American halfback from Indiana who was selected in the thirteenth round of the 1949 draft by the Chicago Bears. The AAFC's Los Angeles Dons also picked him, and Taliaferro signed with them. A fine athlete with good speed, he played for the Dons in 1949.

Reflecting on the Lions in 1949, Triplett said Bo McMillin was not a good head coach. However, McMillin had an assistant, George Wilson (who later became the Lions' head coach in 1957), who impressed Triplett.

McMillin, who signed with Detroit in 1948, had coached Indiana from 1934 through 1947. The Texas native was selected Walter Camp All-American at quarterback when, as a senior in 1919, he led Centre College of Danville, Kentucky, to a 9-0 season. Going on to a successful career in college coaching, McMillin led the Hoosiers to their first Big Ten football title in 1945. One of the top players on Bo's championship team that fall was Taliaferro, who gained 719 yards.

"McMillin got the Lions' coaching job as a result of his Big Ten championship with Indiana," Triplett said recently. "He brought Mel Groomes with him from Indiana in 1948, so he knew talent. Bo also signed Bob Mann. Mann was an All-Conference end on Michigan's 1947 unbeaten team which tied for the Big Ten championship and then won the Rose Bowl.

"I never got along with Bo. But George Wilson's influence kept me with the team. Bo felt like I had a 'chip' on my shoulder, and he didn't like that, no matter how good you were.

"At Penn State, they valued defense, but Detroit's system didn't. Penn State tied Michigan State in 1948, 14-14, and we played good defense. Our halfbacks would play 7-8 yards behind the line, but most teams would play the halfbacks closer. We had good speed in the backfield, and we could play off the line. Playing the defense we played at Penn State helped me make the Lions.

"Buddy Parker came to the Lions in 1950 as an assistant from the Cardinals. We didn't see eye-to-eye. I was one for speaking my mind rather quickly. I guess Parker, who was from Texas, didn't like that. I only had one conversation with him the whole time I played for Detroit.

"The Lions got Bobby Layne in 1950 from the New York Bulldogs. Bobby came from Texas, and he had that western drawl, and Buddy had a kind of nasal drawl. It was hard for me to understand them. Sometimes I had to check a play with Bobby in the backfield, after he called it in the huddle. I just couldn't understand what he said. By the end of the 1950 season, I think Parker wanted to trade me. Eventually, he became head coach, and when I got out of the Army in November 1952, he did trade me—to the Chicago Cardinals."

Triplett found the Lions' offense confusing. McMillin's scheme combined the newer T formation with the once-dominant single wing. In addition, Bo believed in three or four hour practice sessions, his behavior had become erratic and unorganized (he died of cancer in 1952), and his play-numbering scheme was hard to understand.

Bobby Layne later called McMillin's system "Neanderthal football." In his biography of Layne, *Heart of a Lion*, Bob St. John quoted Buddy Parker on Bo's confusing play numbering: "McMillin knew football frontwards and backwards but he had play numbers that nobody could get straight except him.... He had an '89' where the left halfback went into the right guard and an '87' where the quarterback threw a pass. Nothing had anything to do with anything."

Triplett played the single wing at Penn State, but he disliked McMillin's hybrid formations:

"There's a big difference between our formation at Penn State, where the ball was centered to the tailback, and in Detroit's offense, where we would run a wing T and the tailback would be up under the center. In Detroit, the tailback would get the ball and hand it off, and the wingback would go in motion. And Bobby Layne had that twang where the numbers, which were already confusing, came at you in a Texas drawl!"

In 1949, McMillin's Lions produced a 4-8 record and ranked fourth of five teams in the NFL's West Conference. But the Lions were acquiring talent that would help produce great Detroit teams. Don Doll, a rookie halfback, led the team in kickoff returns with 21 for a league-leading 536 yards. Doll also intercepted 11 passes, and he returned those for a league-high 301 yards, scoring once. Second-year halfback Jim Smith, who played for Buffalo and Brooklyn of the AAFC in 1948, made nine interceptions. Like Doll, Smith proved himself a good runner, returning the nine picks for 218 yards and one touchdown. Les Bingaman, a stalwart middle guard who weighed almost 350 pounds, shored up Detroit's defensive line.

On offense, Frank Tripucka, the Notre Dame All-American, and Fred Enke, the first Arizona high school and college athlete to start at quarterback in the NFL, shared quarterbacking duties. Tripucka passed for 833 yards and nine touchdowns, and Enke threw for 793 yards and six scores. Bob Mann topped Detroit with 66 receptions, good for a league-best 1014 yards, and he scored four times; end John Greene caught 42 passes for 542 yards and seven touchdowns; and Bill Dudley, a great triple threat halfback, made 27 receptions for 190 yards and seven TDs.

Dudley, later a Pro Football Hall of Famer, seemed to specialize in scoring during his nine seasons with the Steelers, the Lions, and the Redskins. In 1949 "Bullet Bill" was playing his third year for Detroit, and he accounted for 81 points. The 5'10" 180-pounder, a shifty but not speedy runner, led the club in rushing with 402 yards, and he scored four times on the ground.

In addition to being the team's punter, Dudley led the Lions in average punt return yardage, running back 11 punts for 199 yards and one touchdown. Triplett shared punt return duties with Dudley, returning more punts, 21, for more yards, 281. Wally averaged 13.4 yards per return, while the former Virginia All-American averaged 18.1 yards on 10 fewer runbacks.

Triplett particularly recalled one return during the 1949 season. Under the system used in those days, the back who caught the punt was dependent on his partner—who watched the other team's offensive players charging upfield—to determine whether to make a fair catch, return the punt, or let the ball go.

Playing during a snowstorm at Detroit's Briggs Stadium, Wally, who could not make out the yard markers, settled under a punt on the 3-yard line. Starting behind his blockers, the speedster ran the ball 97 yards to the end zone, but a clipping penalty nullified his touchdown.

"When I reached the sidelines," Triplett stated in the *Lions Report* dated December 31, 1998, "there were no congratulations or anything. Bo McMillin proceeded to inform me loudly that I had caught the ball on the three-yard line, and what was I doing?"

"Bill Dudley heard Bo getting on me, and Bill walked over and said in that sort of Virginia drawl of his that it was his mistake, not mine. All Bo could say was 'Oh,' and walk away. There was no apology."

"Bill Dudley was our captain," Triplett said in 2005, "and a real nice guy, and his word was final. We couldn't see the goal posts or yard lines, and I was a rookie." But such treatment helps explain why Triplett was not impressed with McMillin as a head coach.

Triplett enjoyed one major highlight on October 30, 1949, when he set a then Lions record by running a reported 80 yards from scrimmage to score against the Packers. Despite Wally's performance, the Packers won, 16-14, and the crowd in Green Bay was a pitiful 6,177.

Regardless, Triplett did not get the credit he deserved, because he remembered the touchdown run covered 90 yards. The Packers had just punted, and the pigskin went out on bounds on the Lions' 11. Fred Enke was playing quarterback, Camp Wilson, at 6'2" and 200 pounds, was the fullback, and Wally was at right halfback.

Enke tried a quick hitter up the middle, handing off to Wilson. Detroit's fullback bounced off the Packers' big middle guard, Ed Neal, a hard-hitting 6'4" giant who weighed nearly 300 pounds. The Lions lost a yard on the play. In the huddle, Enke called an off-tackle dive for Triplett. But when Wally plunged into the line, he was hit so hard by the defensive tackle that he bounced sideways, past the outside linebacker. Keeping his balance and heading for the sidelines, the speedster raced by the defensive halfback for a 90-yard touchdown.

"We were trying to get some yardage to punt," Wally said recently, "and Fred's orders were to 'hold onto the ball,' because inside plays had a 'slow whistle' and fumbles could happen. Green Bay had their officials, and that was how the game was played. A play wasn't 'over' until the whistle finally blew."

But Triplett had produced a good rookie year. Others received more press coverage, but the unsung hero from Pennsylvania made an important contribution to the Lions in 1949.

Over the Christmas break in 1949, Wally got engaged to Leonore Bivins. They were married a year later. Eventually they would have four children, Nancy, Wallace, Alison, and David. Commenting for the *Lions Report* of December 31, 1998, Leonore laughed and referred to her husband's historic achievements: "I still call him 'The Legend,' and his grandkids don't know what I am talking about."

Returning to Detroit for the 1950 season, Triplett seemed destined for stardom. Instead, McMillin, who needed to improve the team's record, had assembled more talent. Buddy Parker was hired as an assistant coach, and Parker and George Wilson became a good team. Detroit acquired Bobby Layne, one of the great Hall of Fame quarterbacks of the 1950s. Also, halfback Doak Walker, the 1948 Heisman Trophy winner and a lifelong friend of Layne's, signed with the Lions after a brilliant career at Southern Methodist.

In 1950 the NFL became a 13-team league by merging with the All-America Football Conference and keeping three AAFC teams, the Cleveland Browns, the San Francisco Forty-Niners, and the Baltimore Colts. But the Colts won just one game, and the owner sold the franchise back to the league after the season—making the NFL a 12-team circuit in 1951.

"I was the only Negro on the Lions in 1950," Triplett remembered, "and most of the guys wouldn't talk to me. The Notre Dame guys and the Michigan guys would speak, but most of the others wouldn't. After I was traded to the Cardinals in 1952, I got more or less the same treatment."

Despite the new talent in 1950, the Lions ranked fourth in the renamed seven-team National Conference with a 6-6 mark. But Detroit's long-needed field leader, Bobby Layne, had arrived, and he threw for 2323 yards and 16 touchdowns. Bob Hoernschemeyer, a versatile halfback acquired from the Cardinals, excelled in his fifth season. "Hunchy" led Detroit's rushers with 471 yards and scored once. With Bob Mann traded to the New York Yanks, the Lions moved Cloyce Box, a product of West Texas A&M who played halfback in 1949, to end. Teamed with Layne, the 6'4" 220-pound Box, who had good speed, became the Lions' big-play receiver, making 50 catches good for 1009 yards and 11 TDs.

Why did Detroit trade Mann, one of the NFL's best ends in 1949? In *Outside the Lines*, Charles K. Ross found that Mann, who earned \$7,500 in 1949, was asked to take a \$1,500 pay cut. Bob refused. Also, a black organization, Business Sales Inc., boycotted the Goebel Brewery in the summer of 1950 when two long-time

white employees received a beer distributorship, after Goebel did not consider a possible black owner. Mann, who worked for Goebel in the offseason, had talked with Business Sales officials about the boycott and the distributorship. Edwin Anderson, president of Goebel, was the Lions' president. Mann lost his job with Goebel on July 31. He was traded to the Yanks, released before the regular season, and became the first African-American to play for the Packers, finally signing a contract in late November. Speaking in 2005, Triplett was blunt: "Because he wanted to own a franchise to sell beer (become a businessman), Bob Mann was dumped and blackballed, before Green Bay picked him up. Green Bay was trying to change its image, because it was NOT a hospitable place to be black."

Still, the Lions featured great offensive talent in 1950. In addition to Layne and Box, Doak Walker replaced Dudley (who signed with the Redskins) as the team's top scorer. The Doaker tallied 128 points on 11 TDs, eight field goals, and 38 extra-point conversions, plus he was second (behind Hoernschemeyer) in rushing with 386 yards. Ollie Cline, a halfback acquired from now-defunct Buffalo, was Detroit's third leading rusher, gaining 227 yards and scoring twice. Triplett ranked fourth, gaining 92 yards on 14 carries, but he played only seven games before the Army drafted him.

Triplett, who loved defense, again proved his value in many ways. Officially, Doak Walker led the team in kickoff returns, making 10 runs for 225 yards, a 22.5 average per return. While Triplett ran back eight kickoffs, he amassed a surprising 411 yards, an average of 51.4 yards per run. While his sterling performance against the Rams on October 29, 1950, accounted for 294 of those yards, Wally played only seven games compared to Walker's 12. The NFL's kickoff return leader in 1950 was the Rams' Vitamin Smith, who ran back 22 kicks for 742 yards and three TDs. Smith's average was a nifty 33.4 yards—almost 18 yards below Wally's exceptional mark.

In fact, with Triplett missing five games, Detroit used 11 different players to return kickoffs. Clarence Self, a halfback out of Wisconsin who excelled on defense, ran six kicks back for 155 yards. Self averaged 25.8 yards per return, ranking third behind Walker and Triplett. The only other Detroit halfback with more than two returns was Lindy Pearson. The rookie from Oklahoma returned seven kickoffs for 120 yards, an average of 17.1 yards per attempt. Clarence Self also led the Lions in punt returns. He ran back 12 for 129 yards, an average of 10.8 yards per attempt. But Triplett ranked second: he ran back 11 punts for 94 yards, an 8.5 yard average.

Still, Triplett points out they did not *play the game* to set records or become leaders in statistical categories: "When we played 'back then,' we were not thinking of records—just that play, and maybe the next one. We didn't think of statistics. We just focused on playing the game."

On November 15, 1950, Triplett was inducted into the Army. He was not alone. The Korean conflict started in June, and many professional athletes served in the armed forces during the 1950s. But after Triplett left Detroit, the Lions had only one African-American player on the roster until 1957, when the club traded for the Forty-Niners' hard-running fullback John Henry Johnson. Before John Henry, later a Hall of Famer, the Lions signed Walt Jenkins, a 6'1" 220-pound tackle from Wayne State in Detroit. But Jenkins played only two games in 1955.

Wally was assigned to the 594<sup>th</sup> Artillery Battalion at Camp Polk, Louisiana. At the time of his induction, the Army press release stated the former Lion was leading the NFL with his 51.4 average in kickoff returns. Also, he was taking classes for a Master's Degree at Wayne [now Wayne State] University in Detroit, where he lived during the season.

During his first year and a half with the Lions, Wally lived in a rooming house in a section of Detroit called "Black Bottom." The area was filled with speakeasies and "houses of ill repute," Triplett said, but it was also the center of Detroit's sporting life. Players from the Lions and other pro teams came there to drink, dance, and have a good time at "black and tan" nightclubs.

When the legitimate bars and nightclubs closed at two o'clock in the morning, Triplett recalled, people looking for a good time moved to the "after-hour joints," because they stayed open until 6:00 or 7:00 in the morning. The Dorsey brothers and other big names would play at the black and tans, so the area attracted celebrities, athletes, and others looking for excitement. Wally recalled seeing Joe Louis, the famed world champion boxer, many times in Black Bottom.

After his two years in the Army, Triplett returned to the Lions in November 1952. Buddy Parker, now the head coach, soon traded him to the Cardinals. Wally finished the season with Chicago, but he got into only two games. In 1953 he appeared in four games for the Cards, playing defense, carrying the ball three times, and returning 10 kickoffs for 253 yards—a solid average that indicated Wally still had good speed.

After the 1953 season, Triplett left football. He taught one year in a Philadelphia high school, and he returned to Detroit. Over the years his positions included working as a teacher, in the insurance business, in middle management at a Chrysler plant, and as a state pari-mutuel clerk.

"My heart was never really in the game," Wally remembered, "because of the obstacles and attitudes we faced. Today the game is played with spirit. When I played, you just tried to do your best. Places like Chicago and Green Bay were difficult towns to play football. I remember standing in the tunnel waiting to take the field before my first game against the Bears in Chicago, and I was scared. But Green Bay was the worst place to play. You could stay in a hotel in Green Bay, but you could only eat in certain places, not with the other players.

"Overall, the fans in Detroit treated me well. I never got to be a 'fan favorite,' and I heard all of the racial remarks. But most of the fans were white, and that was the tenor of the times. I think the big difference between the NFL today and when I played is the camaraderie that you see today. During my years, we didn't have enough of the team spirit, the togetherness."

Wally Triplett has few regrets about his NFL career. He remains proud of his achievements, regardless of statistics. Personable and outspoken, today the former halfback is an ambassador for the Lions and for pro football. Triplett made the most of each opportunity that came his way, and he always gave football his best shot. The versatile Penn State and Lions' standout should be remembered for his all-around performances as well as for helping to integrate the game at a time when African-American athletes faced many social and other barriers.

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