



Hezekiah Braxton

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Hezekiah Braxton starred in football at Virginia Union University. He also played nine games at the highest level of professional football, in the American Football League, eight games with the San Diego Chargers in 1962 as a hard charging running back and one game for the Buffalo Bills in 1963. He then spent the next seven years carving out a highly successful minor league football career, including winning two ACFL Championships with the Virginia Sailors in 1966 and 1967.



Hezekiah Ezekial Braxton III was born on April 11, 1934 in Baltimore, Maryland to Ethel and Hezekiah Braxton II. He attended Frederick Douglass High School in Baltimore. He matriculated to Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia. Prior to heading to college, he served in the United States Marine Corp during the Korean War.

He played collegiate football with the Panthers, achieving greatness as a fullback. Braxton also acquitted himself well as a defensive back, tight end, kick returner, punter, and place kicker. He earned All-CIAA honors three-times and led the team with 637 rushing yards in 1959 and again with 556 yards in 1960. He also held the school scoring record when he graduated.

Braxton made an immediate impact in his first college game, intercepting a pass, returning it 30 yards for the only touchdown of the game. Virginia Union, because of Braxton's play) defeated West Virginia State 7-0 on September 15, 1956. He capped off his sophomore season with an electrifying interception and 71-yard touchdown return,



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sparking the Panthers to a 20-0 victory over Hampton Institute, enabling Virginia Union to finish its season at 5-5.

Braxton played for the Panthers in 1956, 1957, missed the 1958 season, and played in 1959 and 1960. He helped lead Virginia Union to a 7-0-2 record in his junior year, their first undefeated season since 1923. He made first team All-CIAA as a fullback.

Virginia Union had a disappointing 1960 season finishing with a 4-4-1 record despite Braxton's excellent play. He repeated as first team All-CIAA and in addition he was honored as the Most Outstanding Back.

Braxton was selected by the San Diego Chargers in the 12th round of the 1961 American Football League Draft with the 96th pick. Head coach Sid Gillman selected him in the draft because one of Braxton's coaches told a pro scout, "He's the best runner in the country except Jim Brown. He is personally responsible for 17 stretcher cases and numerous others who walked off the field under their own power."ⁱ Gillman asked the coach if Braxton could block. The coach responded, "Well now, if he would be blocking, he would not have the ball, right? Then that would be YOUR mistake."ⁱⁱ

He signed with the Chargers shortly after the draft. He played throughout training camp and in the preseason games but was cut on September 5 as the Chargers got down to the roster limit for the regular season. The Baltimore Colts signed Braxton as a free agent after he was cut by the Chargers but did so looking ahead to their 1962 training camp. They placed him on their band squad, another name for taxi-squad, in the meantime.

The Colts kept Braxton under wraps until he had a breakout scrimmage on August 6. He was the star of the day, even outshining John Unitas. He caught three scoring passes of 66, 48 and 24 yards. Jack Clary of the Associated Press wrote a story about his performance that was headlined "Hezekiah Braxton Looks Great for Football Colts."ⁱⁱⁱ

He followed up the scrimmage with an excellent performance against the Washington Redskins in a preseason game, catching four passes that covered 119 yards and scoring all of the Colts' 17 points. Despite his excellent preseason with the Colts, head coach Weeb Ewbank released him on September 11. Braxton was disappointed in being released and said, "The man kept me from getting a good job."^{iv} Ewbank released him because it was said, "As the training season progresses the coaching staff adds more complicated plays and Hezekiah just couldn't comprehend them. Too bad because he appeared to have the physical ability."^v There were also rumors that he and Ewbank had words that caused him to be cut.



Braxton was not on the street for long, as the Chargers re-signed him to provide depth at running back behind stalwarts Keith Lincoln, Bobby Jackson, and Jacque MacKinnon. Braxton made his regular season debut against the Dallas Texans on October 7. He played back-up fullback and special teams but he did not get an opportunity to carry the football. His first rushing attempt came on October 13 at War Memorial Stadium in Buffalo. With the Chargers trailing the Bills 35-3 in the fourth quarter, Braxton took his first professional hand-off from the Bills five-yard line, and raced into the end zone for a touchdown – a fine start. Sadly, it was the only TD in his American Football League career. He finished the game with two carries for 11 yards as the Chargers lost 35-10.

He played in eight games for San Diego, carrying the football in five of those games. He rushed for 35 yards on 17 carries for the season. His longest jaunt from scrimmage was for 15 yards against the Buffalo Bills on November 11 in a 40-20 loss. He also caught four passes for 17 yards for the season, with his longest being a 10-yard reception against the New York Titans in a 23-3 loss.

When Keith Lincoln was activated from the injured list prior to the Chargers' game versus the Patriots on December 9, Braxton was waived. The 1962 Chargers suffered through head coach Sid Gillman's only losing season in his ten years coaching in the league with a 4-10 record. Braxton also was guided on offense by offensive assistant Al Davis. Yes, that Al Davis, future managing partner of the Oakland Raiders. The Chargers were 2-6 in the eight games Braxton played.

After his second failed attempt with the Chargers, he began the 1963 season with the Baltimore Broncos of the Atlantic Coast Football League. The Buffalo Bills came calling and signed him to a contract on September 28. "The American Football League Buffalo Bills today moved to plug up the holes in their ailing ground attack with the signing of 227-pound halfback Hezekiah Braxton. Braxton, former Virginia Union College star, played with San Diego in the AFL last year."^{vi} Head Coach Lou Saban said Braxton probably would see action immediately when the Bills met the defending champion Houston.^{vii}

Braxton did indeed play against the Oilers on September 28. He handled the kick-off chores, played on other special teams and was the backup fullback to Cookie Gilchrist. In the game he did not get an opportunity to run with the football. His time with Buffalo was short-lived. He was released on October 2, playing only the single game for the Bills. After his release, he returned to the Broncos. Later in the season the Baltimore franchise moved to Hazleton, Pennsylvania, and became the Mustangs and Braxton followed the team to Hazelton.



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Braxton was an all-everything for the Broncos/Mustangs. He was the team's starting tight end, hauling in 28 passes for 601 yards with six TDs and the longest scoring play in the league. In a game against the Springfield Acorns on October 12, he took a flat pass from quarterback Walt Gentry and raced 90 yards for a touchdown. He also was the Mustangs place-kicker, successfully converting 12 extras points and one field goal, and was the team punter, averaging 36.4 yards on 29 punts. In addition, he returned kicks, averaging 27.6 yards per kick-off return. He was described by the Hazelton media as the best player in the league and the most colorful. Despite Braxton's heroic efforts, the Broncos/Mustangs finished dead last in the ACFL with a 2-10 record.

He returned to Hazelton for the 1964 ACFL season, but the team was even worse, finishing with a 1-13 record. Despite their poor record, Braxton finished eighth in the league in receiving with 990 yards on 42 catches. He led the league in yards per catch at 23.5 to go along with five touchdowns.

For the 1965 season he joined the Annapolis Sailors of the North American Football League. He switched positions, becoming the team's fullback. He was just as impressive playing fullback as he was tight end. He was the second leading rusher in the league with 741 yards. He led the Sailors to the NAFL Northern Division title with an 8-2 record, while being named first team All-NAFL at fullback. The Sailors won the League Championship, defeating the Mobile Tarpons 40-13. Braxton had two touchdown runs in the championship game victory.

The Annapolis Sailors joined the ACFL for the 1966 season and rebranded themselves the Virginia Sailors. Braxton came along and had another stellar season. He was the third leading scorer in the league with 11 TDs for 66 points and was sixth in the league in rushing with 545 yards on 137 carries. He also threw a TD pass on a halfback option play. Braxton helped lead the Sailors to the Southern Division crown with a 10-1 record. Before a game against the Wilmington Clippers, Sailors general manager Bob Spitler said Braxton was the best pro football running back on the East Coast. He said, "I don't restrict my evaluation to just the ACFL when I say he may be the best. I think some big-league team in need of a speedy, hard running back like Hezey is plain missing the boat. It's all a mystery to us. Some people have said he may be too old or isn't capable of grasping a big-league offensive system, but all I know is there aren't many better runners in the business."^{viii}

The Sailors routed the Lowell Giants in the 1966 ACFL Championship 42-10. Braxton was the game's leading rusher with 18 carries for 94 yards and a 1-yard TD run. As his performances continued to captivate fans that watched him and wearing a 00 jersey, he became known as "double zero."



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In 1967 Virginia repeated as ACFL Champions with an 8-2 record to secure the Southern Division title and then won a hard-fought championship game over the Westchester Bulls, 20-14. Braxton finished second in the league in scoring with 13 TDs and 78 points. He became their touchdown maker as he only rushed for 335 yards on 104 carries. He also was second in the league in punting with a 38.6-yard average on 44 punts. He was now a three-time league champion.

He played one more season with the Virginia Sailors, but his skills began to erode at 34 years old. The Sailors made it back for a fourth consecutive championship game, but this time, they were defeated by the Hartford Knights 30-17. In his final game as a pro, Braxton caught an 11-yard TD pass from Danny Talbott to go along with his three receptions in the game. He called it a career after the season.

He was a very exciting player and once was described as, “a burly 240-pounder with the flexible legs of a Watusi dancer and the speed of a gazelle.”^x And he had “a combination of determination, slick skill, and showmanship.”^x It is hard to understand with all his skill and success why he never got another chance in the NFL.

He was enshrined in the Virginia Union University Hall of Fame in 1988.

Braxton died on August 9, 2013. He is buried in the Garrison Forest Veterans Cemetery in Owings Mills, Maryland. He was survived by his wife, Vivian and their two children Hezy R. Braxton and Shawn L. Braxton.



End Notes:

- ⁱ Staff, "Reports from the Scouting Front," *Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, Mississippi), January 31, 1961, p14
- ⁱⁱ Staff, "Reports from the Scouting Front," *Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, Mississippi), January 31, 1961, p14
- ⁱⁱⁱ Clary, Jack, "Hezekiah Braxton Looks Great for Football Colts," *Estherville Daily News* (Estherville, Iowa), August 7, 1962, p5
- ^{iv} Snyder, Cameron, "Moore Put on Waivers, Colts drop Braxton and Myhra from Squad," *The Baltimore Sun*, September 12, 1962, p28
- ^v Snyder, Joe, "Sports Beat," *The Morning Herald* (Hagerstown, MD), June 22, 1963, p10
- ^{vi} UPI, "Bills Add Hefty Halfback Braxton," *The Fresno Bee*, *The Republican*, September 28, 1963, p10
- ^{vii} UPI, "Bills Add Hefty Halfback Braxton," *The Fresno Bee*, *The Republican*, September 28, 1963, p10
- ^{viii} Feldner, Karl, "Braxton: A Sailor Clippers Must Scuttle," *Evening Journal*, Wilmington, DE, September 14, 1966
- ^{ix} Staff, "Original '00' Ghost, Hezekiah Braxton, Returning to Haunt Grid Miners Saturday," *Scrantonian Tribune*, October 23, 1966, p57
- ^x Staff, "Original '00' Ghost, Hezekiah Braxton, Returning to Haunt Grid Miners Saturday," *Scrantonian Tribune*, October 23, 1966, p57