

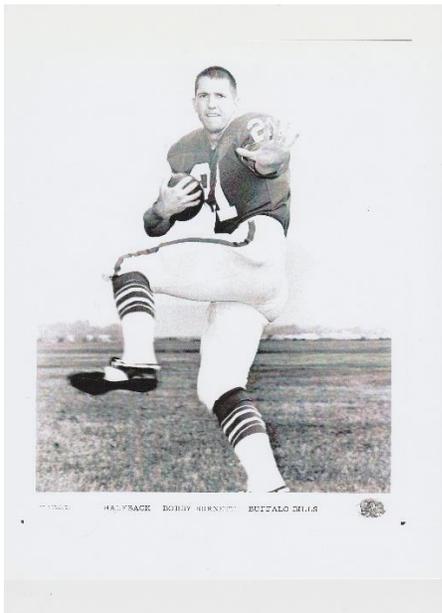


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Bobby Burnett

This article is written by Jeffrey J. Miller

Buffalo's Bobby Burnett was the AFL Rookie of the Year in 1966, but his bright star faded almost as quickly as it rose, for within a year of winning the award, his promising career was essentially over after suffering a severe knee injury. Instead of being the franchise's next Cookie Gilchrist, as some predicted, Burnett became another in a long line of Bills heartbreak kids--players who, whether due to injury or illness, never got the chance to fully realize their potential on the field.



Burnett came to Buffalo in 1966 after a stellar collegiate career at the University of Arkansas, where he led the Razorbacks in rushing touchdowns as a junior and senior with eight in 1964 and 16 in 1965, and led the Hogs to a combined 21-1 record. He lugged the leather 232 times and never fumbled. He is credited with scoring what is arguably the most important touchdown in team history when his three-yard run with 4:41 remaining in the 1965 Cotton Bowl lifted Arkansas to a 10-7 triumph over Nebraska. The victory capped a perfect 11-0 season for the 1964 Razorbacks and share of the 1964 national championship with the Crimson Tide of Alabama, who were awarded the title by The Associated Press and United Press International before losing to Texas in the Orange

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Bowl to finish 10-1. The Football Writers Association of America and Helms Foundation, however, gave Arkansas the No. 1 seed at the end of the season.

The Bills selected the six-foot, three-inch, 210-pound halfback in the fourth round in 1966, the third back taken by the team after first-round pick Mike Dennis of Mississippi and second-rounder Jim Lindsay, Burnett's backfield mate with the Razorbacks. But after Dennis and Lindsay opted for the NFL, the baton was passed down to Burnett.

"I didn't come in with my nose up in the air," Burnett remembers. "I came in with my head down a little bit. Billy Shaw, in one of the very first practices, told me, 'You want to be All-Pro?' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'You get on my butt and you follow me where I go—I'll make you All-Pro.'"

Burnett took Shaw's advice literally. "There were many times that I was tackled ten or twelve yards down the field, and I was lying on top of Billy. I took his word to heart—he told me, 'You get on my ass and you stay with me.' And boy, I did!"

Running behind Shaw and the rest of the Bills' formidable offensive line, Burnett put together perhaps the finest season of any Bills rookie running back to that point, leading the team in rushing and compiling a total of 1,185 yards from scrimmage. He had his finest day in the 17-17 tie with San Diego on October 16 when he rushed for 138 yards on 27 carries and caught two touchdown receptions. With the speedy Burnett setting the pace on the ground, the Bills returned for their third-straight appearance in the American Football League title game at the end of the year. He played a spectacular game, catching six passes for 137 yards, but it wasn't good enough as the Bills fell, 31-7, and the Chiefs advanced to play the Green Bay Packers in the very first Super Bowl.

For his efforts, Burnett was a consensus All-AFL selection and named Rookie of the Year. By 1967, however, the Bills were in serious decline, getting off to a dismal 3-5 start. Burnett too started slowly after suffering cracked ribs in preseason and losing his starting job to Keith Lincoln, whom the Bills had acquired in an off-season trade. He was seeing his first significant action of the year against the New York Jets in Week 9 when defensive back Johnny Sample ended his campaign with a devastating tackle.

"He caught my leg low, Burnett recalled, "and it totally dislocated my knee joint," Burnett recalled. "That was the end of it. I knew when I looked at my leg and my leg literally was out of joint out there on the field. It was hyperextended—it was dislocated out the wrong direction. I was laying on the ground, and I was looking at my foot almost in my

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eyeball—my foot was right up in my mouth. I was hurting—I was screaming and yelling. I tore the holy crap out of my knee. I tore the ligaments, I tore both cartilages, and broke the tibia.”

The Bills, unsure whether Burnett could make a full recovery, left him unprotected in the 1968 expansion draft. He was claimed by the Cincinnati Bengals but was released before ever playing a down for the team. He signed with the Denver Broncos in 1969 but appeared in only three games before calling it a career.

"I was thrilled that I made the [Bronco's] roster," he says. "I had a good training camp, but when I got that football, I could tell that I wasn't running with no fear. That's your edge. You are looking at other people about to hit you and you are subconsciously protecting that leg. When a back loses a step, or he loses the edge, it's over. I don't care how much you get it back—you've lost the edge—you're done. I had to step up and say, 'It's over.'"

Burnett spent his later years working in real estate in the Denver area, but remained a loyal follower of the Bills. "I die with the Bills when they don't play very well," he said. "I am a fan, and I always will be. That's where my heart is—how does it not be? That's where I had the time of my life. I died all four times they went to the Super Bowl.”

He was living in Castle Rock, Colorado, when he succumbed to pancreatic cancer on October 1, 2016. He was survived by his wife of 51 years, Dorothy, with whom he raised four children and 12 grandchildren.

Burnett was inducted into both the University of Arkansas Sports Hall of Fame and the state of Arkansas' Sports Hall of Fame in 2000. With his induction into the ASHOF, Burnett became the third member of his family so enshrined, joining his father Clell (class of 1995) and younger brother Bill (1996).