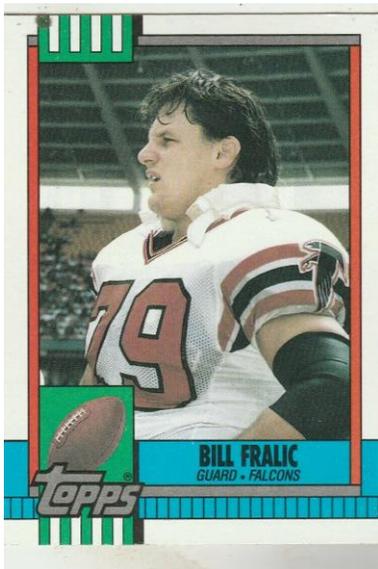




Bill Fralic

This article was written by Matt Keddie

There was always a consensus about Bill Fralic: for a young man, his stature was massive, he was a fantastic high school and collegiate football player, and he was a dynamic NFL guard during the 1980s. As a teenager his weight topped the 200-pound mark, filling a frame of six foot three inches. Born in Pittsburgh, Fralic starred on the gridiron at Penn Hills High School.¹ In 1981, he was named to the All-Century Team by the Pennsylvania Football News. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette named him as the Male Athlete of the Year.



One summer, Fralic turned a lot of heads, garnering attention from local Pitt head coach Jackie Sherrill. While serving as his caddy at a local golf tournament, Sherrill learned Fralic was not yet recruited for college ball.² That changed in a heartbeat, and the rest became history. Using the second pick in the 1984 NFL draft, Atlanta, mired in a rut of losing, chose Fralic, with hopes he would serve as a key to reworking the offense. Prior to Fralic's arrival, the Falcons were a 4-12 club in 1984, finishing last for the second straight season. Atlanta's rushing attack ranked a meager fifteenth, and was in need of serious improvement.³ Fralic became an instant starter at right guard in his rookie year. Alongside Fralic, the Falcons built a strong offensive line that was very formidable. His line mates included 16-year veteran Jeff Van Note at center, and an experienced, seven year, left tackle in Mike Kenn.⁴ Chris Hinton was brought in during 1990 via a trade with



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the Indianapolis Colts.⁵ The quartet combined for a whopping 22 Pro Bowl appearances throughout their careers.

With Fralic, the results were immediate. Atlanta rushed for nearly 2,500 yards in 1985, ranking in the top three. Running back Gerald Riggs turned in a career season, a personal best 397 rushing attempts and 1,719 yards.⁶ Darting and dashing through holes and creases opened by Fralic and the line, Riggs piled up 1,327 yards in 1986, along with nine rushing touchdowns. Fralic earned first-team All-Pro honors in just his second season, as well as a Pro Bowl selection.

The Falcons slipped to a 3-12 record in 1987, but Riggs continued success, earning 825 yards on the ground, and Fralic was named to the first-team All Pro squad for a consecutive season, and a consecutive Pro Bowl appearance.⁷ Despite the lack of the team's success in the win-column, Fralic was pleased with his role on the club, stating, "... I wish we won more football games but I was comfortable that I showed up every day ready to play. ..."⁸

Atlanta finally broke through with a winning season in 1991, the club's first playoff appearance since 1982, and double-digit wins for the first-year dating to 1980. What separated Fralic from his peers was his blocking style, developed in college.

Fralic enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh as an offensive tackle in 1981. On the field, he physically imposed his will. He consistently ran over opposing defensive players, planting them on their backs. He did not simply just brush them aside, rather literally squashed them like a pancake. This observation was noted by the sports information department, who began tracking the number of "pancake" blocks delivered, but not cooked, by Fralic.⁹ The numbers kept adding up, and Fralic was a consensus All-American in 1983 and 1984. He finished eighth and sixth, respectively, in the 1983 and 1984 Heisman Trophy voting, the highest ever for an offensive lineman. At halftime of his final collegiate game, against Tulane in 1984, the university retired his number 79.

In 1992, Atlanta regressed to a 6-10 record, which prompted changes in personnel. Around the NFL, a new free agency system was in the works. The current Plan B system paved the way for a new set of rules prompted by the "White Settlement" White v. NFL court trial. This designated players with five years of experience to become unrestricted free agents.¹⁰ Bill Fralic signed with the Detroit Lions for the 1993 season. His salary raised from several hundred thousand dollars to nearly \$1.5 million, as a result.

Although 1993 would be his final NFL season, Fralic had the honor of being called on for his veteran experience, anchoring a line to open running lanes for the legendary Barry Sanders. Detroit featured a top-ten ground attack, with Sanders rushing for 1,115 yards,



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earning a Pro Bowl selection. The Lions finished at 10-6, qualifying for the playoffs, but lost a tight 28-24 home contest to the rival Packers, which was Fralic's final NFL game.

In total, Fralic played nine NFL seasons, started in 131 of 132 games, was a four time (1985-1988) Pro Bowl selection, and two time (1985, 1986) first team All Pro honoree. He was also first-team All-NFC in 1988 and 1989 by UPI, and a second-team All-Pro choice by the Associated Press in 1988. He was also named to the NFL's 1980s All-Decade Second Team.¹¹ Fralic was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1998. Fralic was very philanthropic, on numerous occasions he exhibited generosity, from giving back to the Pittsburgh and Atlanta areas.

In 1989, while playing with the Falcons, Fralic opened Bill Fralic Insurance Services in Atlanta to serve commercial truckers and took a closer role in the business after retirement. He also played an active role in giving to the local golf clubs, including the Golf Club of Georgia. The club restaurant is named after Fralic, a sought-after spot for members following their rounds, that provides a place for gathering and entertainment.¹²

In 1999, Fralic donated a large sum to a new athletics facility at Penn Hills High School, which included a new locker room, athletic fields, weight, and training rooms. In 2018, he paid for the school's hotel costs for their trip to Hershey, PA to play in the state championship game. Penn Hills ended up winning the title that weekend.¹³

Sadly, he passed later that month in a long fight with a rare, incurable cancer at the age of 56. Current Pitt head football coach Pat Narduzzi said in a statement, "His generosity, support and concern for others was unmatched. For as a hulking figure as he was, Billy was larger in his kindness and passion for others. He leaves a wonderful legacy that goes well beyond football at Pitt, Penn Hills and all of Western Pennsylvania."¹⁴ Fralic not only cared for his teammates on the field, but off-the-field as well. He was a strong advocate of drug testing, specifically targeting steroid use. Fralic claimed over three of every four players took them during the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, he testified in front of congress on the matter in 1989. This resulted in the NFL implementing increased drug testing. "I'm here, I'm in the game and I know as much of what is going on as anybody, And I'm not far off" Fralic said.¹⁵ Throughout his life, he made an impact everywhere he went, from Penn Hills to Pittsburgh to Atlanta, among the numerous coaches and players he interacted with.



End Notes:

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- 9 "Bill Fralic," Pittsburgh-Panthers.com, accessed 7 July 2020, <https://pittsburghpanthers.com/sports/general/roster/bill-fralic/8668>.
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- 13 "Bill Fralic, Pitt All-American and Penn Hills football great, dies at 56," Post-Gazette.com, accessed 9 July 2020, <https://www.post-gazette.com/news/obituaries/2018/12/14/bill-fralic-death-pitt-football-penn-hills-pittsburgh/stories/201806200156>.
- 14 "Bill Fralic, Pitt All-American and Penn Hills football great, dies at 56," Post-Gazette.com, accessed 9 July 2020, <https://www.post-gazette.com/news/obituaries/2018/12/14/bill-fralic-death-pitt-football-penn-hills-pittsburgh/stories/201806200156>.
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