



Willie West

This article is by Budd Bailey

No one can deny that Willie West had an eventful career in football. He had some great personal moments on the field, dating all the way back to high school, and usually contributed to his team's successes along the way.

Off the field, West got caught up in a couple of difficult situations. One was a reflection of time and location, the other was a personal matter. Both changed the trajectory of his career. Let's take a look at the career of this nine-year veteran of pro football.



The fans appreciate: West signs autographs for admiring spectators.

Photo Credit: University of Oregon Yearbook

Willie Tennyson West was born on May 1, 1938 in Lexington, Mississippi. It's a town of less than 2,000 people that's located a little west of Interstate 55, about an hour north of the state capital, Jackson. There's no public record of exactly when West and his family headed for California. Historians say a large number of African Americans left the South to go north and west between 1940 and 1970, and it seems quite likely that Willie was a member of that group.

He landed in San Diego, California. West attended San Diego High School, a facility that deserves a paragraph of its own. The school building that West entered each day was built in 1907 in the Gothic Revival style, to the point that the place was called "The Gray



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Castle.” Graduates of the school have ranged from actor Gregory Peck to baseball’s Craig Nettles, and from comic Harold Lloyd to distance runner Meb Keflezighi.

West competed in a number of sports in high school. However, there’s little doubt that some of Willie’s best moments came in Balboa Park, right next door. That was the home of Balboa Stadium, first constructed in 1914 as part of the California-Panama Exposition of 1915. The two-year event celebrated the opening of the Panama Canal, as San Diego was the first American port that ships used after they passed from east to west through the canal. West couldn’t have guessed that someday he’d play in that very stadium as a pro football player, as Balboa Stadium hosted the San Diego Chargers of the American Football League from 1961 to 1966.

West was part of the Cavers – short for Cavemen – in the mid-1950s. He was on the roster when San Diego High went undefeated in 1955, going 11-0-1 under coach Duane Maley. That was good for a mythical national championship, which has been handed out by various organizations since 1910. The quarterback of that team was Pete Gumina, who won a total of seven varsity letters playing football, basketball, and baseball. One of the defensive backs was Dave Grayson, who was picked for the All-AFL team for its 10 years of play. Even with all that talent, the best athlete in the bunch was Deron Johnson, who turned down many football scholarship offers to sign a baseball contract with the New York Yankees. He played parts of 17 years in the majors and won a World Series title with Oakland in 1973.

West and the Cavers closed the regular season with a 57-0 win over La Jolla, with West scoring two touchdowns. San Diego had a 250-6 edge in points in those first eight wins. The victories kept coming in the playoffs. The Cavers beat Bellflower, 26-6, as West ran for 106 yards, caught passes for 57 yards, intercepted two passes, and scored two touchdowns. In the title game against Alhambra, West ran for 148 yards in 27 carries in a 26-14 win. It was the second national championship for San Diego – the other came in 1916.

West graduated in 1956 and joined Gumina in heading to Oregon. They were coached by Len Casanova, who rebuilt the program into a national power in the 1950s. As a sophomore, West and the Webfoots reached a peak when they tied for the Pacific Coast Conference title (6-2) and went to the Rose Bowl. There they lost to No. 1 Ohio State, 10-7, in a game that represented something of a moral victory. Oregon finished right in the middle of the PCC in 1957, going 4-4. West was the team’s leading running back with 470 yards, and its top receiver with 140 yards. Meanwhile, Willie was an all-Conference pick at defensive back in this era of two-way play.



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In 1959, the Pacific Coast Conference collapsed, forcing Oregon to play as an independent until 1964. The schedule still contained the usual suspects, such as Washington, Washington State, Stanford, California, and, of course, Oregon State in an annual rivalry that came to be known as the Civil War. The Webfoots had a fine 8-2 record, despite losing to Oregon State, but were overlooked at bowl selection time. West was second on the team in rushing with 474 yards, and tied for first in receptions with 17 (187 yards). The co-captain scored a total of eight touchdowns. Willie was an All-West Coast choice as defensive back as well, as he was part of a defense that allowed an average of five points per game.

That was it for college ball for West, who was inducted into Oregon's Hall of Fame in 2007. He graduated with a degree in health and physical education. It was time to think about pro football. For the first time in a decade, players had a choice of where they wanted to play. The American Football League had been formed and was scheduled to begin play in the fall of 1960. The National Football League was still around too. Willie played in a couple of all-star games, the Copper Bowl, and the Hula Bowl, to show scouts what he could do.

The AFL draft wasn't particularly structured the first time around. Teams took turns taking players by positions. Therefore, we only know that West's rights were acquired by the Denver Broncos somewhere in the first 33 rounds. Guard John Willener, a teammate of West's at Oregon, was taken by Denver as well. We also know that the freshly minted St. Louis Cardinals, who had just moved from Chicago, took West with the first pick in the fourth round in the NFL's more traditional draft.

West, who checked in at 5-foot-10 and 190 pounds, soon signed with the Cardinals, and he had some good company among the rookies. Seven of the team's draft choices that year eventually played at least 100 professional games. The biggest name was Larry Wilson, who revolutionized play at free safety by blitzing a lot and eventually made it to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. He was joined by such players as quarterbacks Charley Johnson and Jacky Lee, center Bob DeMarco, and defensive lineman Jim Hunt and Tom Day. Interestingly, the Cardinals had five draft picks in the first three rounds, and none of them played more than 70 pro games.

It must have been "challenging" to be an African American professional athlete in St. Louis in 1960. In 1959, the NFL's teams were located in the Northeast, Midwest and West Coast, and there were no Southern cities with franchises. That changed with the 1960 expansion to Dallas, but the move of the Cardinals to St. Louis – on the edge of the South - was also significant in that sense. The city had gone from 18 percent black in 1950 to 29 percent black in 1960. The baseball Cardinals didn't have an African American on their roster until 1954 (Tom Alston), and Curt Flood was the first black



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standout on the St. Louis roster in 1958. The St. Louis Hawks of the NBA were the last all-white champion basketball team in 1958. As the Hawks were integrated, interest dropped in the franchise until it moved to Atlanta in 1968. It seems likely that West encountered some elements of racism when he arrived in St. Louis.

West didn't make much of an impact for the Cardinals in 1960. He only carried the ball seven times for a total of 45 yards as he played in only seven games. The highlight of Willie's rookie year may have come on October 16, against the Steelers. He returned a kickoff 87 yards, but tripped over a teammate and came up short of the end zone. As for the Cardinals, they improved from a dreadful 2-10 in 1959 to a respectable 6-5-1 in 1960 under coach Pop Ivy.

The Cardinals decided to try West at cornerback in 1961, and it worked out relatively well. He became a starter, at least for five games in that season. West was part of a crowd at the position that included future regular Pat Fischer, Billy Stacey, and Jimmy Hill. Willie had one interception, picking off a Milt Plum pass during a game with the Cleveland Browns on September 24, 1961. St. Louis had to win its last three games to reach .500 at 7-7 that season.

St. Louis changed coaches in the offseason, hiring Wally Lemm for the 1962 season. The racial atmosphere on the team reportedly was quite charged in that era, as Sports Illustrated reported that blacks were threatened with unemployment if they didn't keep quiet. Starting halfback Prentice Gault told the magazine in 1968 that he had been part of a coaching session and heard an African American talk back to a Cardinals coach. "If he were white, he'd still be on the team," Gault said. "He was playing first-string defense, and the guy who took his position shouldn't have made the ball club. Maybe it got back to the quota. I don't know. Maybe it worked out better for the quota if they could get rid of the Negro and play a white player, which is what they did." Gault then identified the player in question as Willie West.

No matter what the circumstances were, West was cut by the Cardinals on September 11, just five days before the start of the season. He soon found work in the American Football League, signing with Buffalo. The Bills certainly were in need of talent and experience in the secondary, and Willie could provide both. Their starting cornerbacks, Booker Edgerson and Carl Charon, were both rookies, and their safeties, Carl Taseff and Joe Cannavino, were in the last year of their careers. West came in and made a good impact, eventually becoming a starter. He had one interception in the game against San Diego on Oct. 13, and two against Dallas on December 2. The Bills finished 7-6-1.



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Photo Credit: Robert L. Smith

Bills coach Lou Saban was slowly building up an excellent defense in Buffalo, and he revamped the secondary some more for 1963. Charon was gone, so West had a clear path to a regular job at the corner. Taseff and Cannavino were replaced at safety by Ray Abruzzese and George Saimes. Willie held his job through the season as he started all 14 games. A lowlight to the season for West came on Sept. 22, when he was tackled in his own zone for a safety by the Chiefs. It started a rally by Kansas City in a game that ended in a 27-27 tie. “I know I wasn’t in the end zone. They pulled me in,” West said after the game.

There were more good moments than bad, though. He finished the year with five interceptions to earn a spot in the AFL All-Star Game. Buffalo was again 7-6-1, but tied for first in the AFL East – only to lose the playoff game to the Boston Patriots.

All of that made what happened next all the more surprising. In April, the Bills traded West and the rights to Leon Mavity (he played in the Continental Football League) to the Broncos for defensive back John Sklopan and an undisclosed draft choice. The Bills did have rookie Butch Byrd coming on to the team that year, and one report said that Byrd was penciled in as a starter as soon as he signed with Buffalo. Meanwhile, Sklopan had played in three games for the Broncos in 1963, so in hindsight this seems like a one-sided transaction. Sklopan didn’t play in Buffalo in 1964 (there’s no sign of him in the team yearbook) and was traded to the Jets for quarterback Pete Liske in 1965. Sklopan never played pro football again.



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West arrived in Denver and quickly grabbed a spot in the Broncos' starting lineup. The Broncos lost their first four games, including a defeat in Buffalo on September 20 that saw West make his only interception as a Bronco. Denver then outscored the Kansas City Chiefs, 34-27, for their first win on October 11. Two weeks after that on October 25, West and kicker Gene Mingo were both suspended by coach Mac Speedie before a game in Oakland for "conduct detrimental to the club." In Mingo's autobiography, he writes that an assistant coach had discovered and confirmed that the roommates had two white women in their hotel room after bed check the night before. "We had made a serious error in judgment, and we became the whipping boys for all that was wrong with the Broncos," Mingo wrote.

West was waived by the team immediately, while Mingo was fined \$1,000 and then traded to the Oakland Raiders for Stan Fanning and a sixth-round draft choice a few days later. West was claimed off waivers by the Jets. By coincidence, West had played against the Jets for the Broncos in New York's first game in the new Shea Stadium on September 12. Willie eventually fit in nicely to the Jets' squad. He returned five kickoffs for an average of 28.4 yards per return, and had an interception against the Raiders on October 22. He was a starter at safety, but only played in three games for New York that year – perhaps because of an injury. New York finished 5-8-1.

The 1965 season was an exciting one for the Jets. They had signed the most dynamic rookie in the draft class, quarterback Joe Namath from Alabama. It took a few games for Namath to take the starter's job from Mike Taliaferro, but when he did, he showed good-sized flashes of his potential. As for West, he won the starting cornerback job and played in all 14 games. Willie finished with six interceptions, second on the team, and returned 10 punts as well.

In a game with his former team, the Bills, West had a difficult reunion with his old roommate. Buffalo wide receiver Elbert Dubenion caught a touchdown pass against West's defense, but he landed incorrectly and stayed on the turf for some time. "Willie West landed on top on me," Dubenion said. "We just landed the wrong way. My body was bent back over him, and my leg was underneath." Dubenion missed the rest of the season.

It would seem that West might have found a home with an improving Jets team, but fate again had other ideas. Miami was coming into the league in 1966, and the new Dolphins needed players. New York was only allowed to protect 23 players in the expansion draft on January 16. Miami took four others, and West was one of them. The Jets had signed cornerback Johnny Sample, who played for New York coach Week Ewbank in Baltimore, so West was left available. Miami also took linebacker Wahoo McDaniel, center Mike Hubok, and defensive lineman Laverne Torczon. West moved right into the



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new Miami lineup, and coach George Wilson was happy about that. "West is the best we have," says Wilson. "He's with the ball all the time. If we can get performances like his all over, we'll be O.K. in the secondary."

The Dolphins may have been a typical expansion team in 1966, but West turned out to be one of their few stars. He had eight interceptions on the season to lead the team and set a career high. Two of them came in Miami's very first game, a 23-14 loss to the Raiders on Sept. 2. Another came in the Dolphins' first win, a 24-7 victory over the Broncos on October 16. The team finished 3-11, but Willie was one of four players on the Dolphins' defense who participated in the AFL All-Star Game. He was a second-team All-AFL pick, after leading the team with 118 tackles.

By the way, a familiar name reappears in this story at this point, as Mingo joined the Dolphins as the team's kicker. There would be no repeat performances during road trips by Mingo and Wood. "Willie and I vowed never to let ourselves get into another situation like Oakland. We took an oath of clean living and fidelity just to make sure."

The 1967 season didn't go too well for West, as he suffered a shoulder separation during a preseason game. He came back in midseason, and started five of seven games. Willie had one interception, that coming on November 19 against the Raiders. The 1968 season was a bit kinder to him, as he played in 13 of the 14 games and started nine. West showed he still had an eye for the ball, as he finished second on the team in interceptions with four. One of them was returned 32 yards against the Chargers, the longest return of his career.

Dick Anderson had arrived as a starting free safety at that point, and he had eight interceptions to lead the team. Anderson eventually would become part of the great Dolphin teams of the 1970s, teaming with Jake Scott to form one of the great safety tandems in history. West probably figured out that his time in pro football was coming to an end. He announced his retirement from the game on April 2, 1969.

West finished his career – which included five teams in nine years - with 30 interceptions in 105 games. He hasn't received much attention since his retirement. As of 2020, it was believed that he was living in Eugene, Oregon, the scene of some great moments as a college football player.



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