

WALTER PAYTON

By Don Smith, for The Pro Football Hall of Fame

It is a popular adage that there are only two certain things in life -- death and taxes. But for the last decade or so in the National Football League, there has been another sure thing -- as soon as he was eligible in 1993, Walter Payton was destined to be elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. That is exactly what happened in January, 1993.

In 13 seasons with the Chicago Bears from 1975 to 1987, Payton literally rewrote the NFL record book with his ball-carrying feats. He rushed 3,838 times for 16,726 yards and 110 touchdowns -- all records. He also caught 492 passes for 4,538 yards and 15 more touchdowns. Altogether, he scored 125 touchdowns, second most ever, and he accounted for a record 21,803 combined net yards.

Payton rushed for an all time high 275 yards against Minnesota on November 20, 1977. He rushed for more than 100 yards a stunning 77 times. He won the NFL kickoff return championship as a rookie. He even completed 11 of 34 passes for 331 yards and eight touchdowns. No other running back has even remotely threatened Payton's overall production.

Ironically, Payton's exceptional rushing statistics tend to obscure the fact that he was an exceptional all-round football player, arguably the best who ever lived. He was blessed with a wide variety of athletic skills and he put them all to good use during his NFL career.

"He is a complete football player," Jim Finks, the former Chicago Bears general manager who drafted Payton, said. "He is better than Jim Brown. He is better than O.J. Simpson."

Payton prided himself on his blocking ability. When he talks about career highlights, one of his fondest memories drifts back to 1985 when he intercepted a blitzing Minnesota linebacker to make it possible for Jim McMahon to throw a crucial touchdown pass.

"Walter takes pride in the little things, the blocking, the faking. Once against Cincinnati, he picked up a couple of linebackers and liked to have killed them," Payton's last Bears coach, Mike Ditka, remembers.

His teammate, Brian Baschnagel, insisted that Payton could play any position. Then he hesitated: "I guess at 5-10, 202 pounds, his size might limit him at defensive tackle. The most incredible thing I ever saw was the time he threw me a 50-yard touchdown pass. He was literally going down and he had to whip the ball that far sidarm."

Payton played football with "the enthusiasm of a 10th-grader trying to be the best tailback on the team," teammate Dan Hampton once said. He trained tirelessly by weightlifting and jogging during every off-season and always appeared at training camp in perfect physical condition.

He missed only one game in his rookie 1975 campaign in his first 12 seasons. "I could have played but my coach, Jack Pardee, wouldn't let me. I don't count that as a miss," Payton insisted.

Payton never tried to avoid contact. In fact, he relished it. His only possible flaw was his reluctance to run out of bounds. He would rather punish a tackler than let the tackler punish him.

More than one opponent accused him of going out of his way to run over them and Payton readily admitted that was so. "See, the thing about defensive players is that they want to hit you as hard as they can. They're obsessed with that," he said. "My coach at Jackson State, Bob Hill, always said that if you are going to die, you should die hard, never die easily."

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Undoubtedly Payton suffered all of the bumps and bruises that all-pro players experience, but he never let it bother him. When he had arthroscopic surgery on both knees after the 1983 season, Payton referred to it merely as "my 11,000-yard checkup."

Payton's running style was unusual in that his knees rarely bent when he ran. Most running backs flexed their knees at least twice as much. Payton's leg swing came from the hips instead, thus giving him more power and extra leverage and shifting the burden of running to the upper leg and off the knees, the most vulnerable joints.

His relatively straight-legged motion made it easier for Payton to run on his toes, for the ordinary player a nearly impossible task. Payton could do it because he was inordinately strong in his thighs, hamstrings and buttocks. Payton thus was more a power runner than the breakaway speedster that is more common among high-yardage ball-carriers.

Payton's teammates may remember him as much for his practice antics as for his on-the-field success. If he wasn't running plays, he was in a state of perpetual motion. He was impatient when asked to take time out for an interview and preferred to answer questions on the run.

When placekickers were working out, Payton would stand under the uprights and throw a football at the kicked balls as they reached the crossbar. About half the time, he registered "kills."

Payton once leapfrogged over the head of a 6-4 assistant coach, booted a kickoff through the uprights with a running back's shoe and matched one of the Bears quarterbacks blister for blister in a game of burn-out catching at short distance. Nothing could ever surprise his teammates.

He also specialized in pranks, particularly during training camp. He would set off fireworks in the middle of the night, rearrange papers on the coaches' desks and "borrow" their phones.

Payton insisted his pranks were his way of staying young. "Life is so short, you better enjoy it while you can," he said.

Payton was born on July 25, 1954, in Columbia, Mississippi. He was the youngest and the shyest of three children. His father, a factory worker, played semi-pro baseball but Walter described himself as a "Mama's boy." His mother often made trips to Chicago to see her boy play.

Walter thrived in the classroom but music was as much a part of his life as organized sports. "My cymbal playing is one thing I'll brag about," he once said. "Man, I was good."

He also was an excellent dancer who once made the national contest finals of the television show, "Soul Train."

Payton did not play football until his junior year in high school. He ran 65 yards for a touchdown on his first high school carry and scored on a 75-yard play later the same game.

He was avidly recruited by major colleges but enrolled at Jackson State so he could play in the same backfield as his older brother, Edward.

At Jackson State, he rushed for 3,563 yards in four seasons and scored an NCAA record 464 points on 66 touchdowns, five field goals and 53 extra points. It was in college that Payton picked up his famous nickname, "Sweetness," because of the smooth way he ran.

Payton was the Bears' first choice in the 1975 draft. The Bears had gone a long time without a championship and the horde of rabid Chicago rooters sensed that Payton might be their long-awaited saviour. Inevitably, he was immediately compared to the great Gale Sayers, who had terrorized NFL defenses in the 1960s.

"If the people of Chicago give me some time and are patient, I'll give them a new Gale Sayers," Payton promised. "No running back patterns himself after anybody. It's something that is innate, it's reflexes and instinct."

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Payton reported to rookie camp with a sore elbow he received in the College All-Star game and he missed the 1975 pre-season. In his debut in the season-opener, he was held to no yards rushing on eight carries. Still, he wound up the season with 679 yards, the most for a Bears, running back since Sayers in 1969, and led the NFL in kickoff returns. Yet he was not named to the NFL all-rookie team, Payton was disappointed, not for himself but for his team.

"He thinks he has to carry the Bears on his shoulders," coach Jack Pardee said. "He has a great sense of loyalty."

Payton returned in 1976, determined to breath fire into the Bears. By the time the pre-season ended, he had hyperventilated in several games, suffered nausea, headaches and dizziness. Doctors warned him he was too intense, that he should loosen up.

But it came together for Payton that year. He had four 100- yard rushing outings in the first six games and wound up the year with an NFC-leading 1,390 yards and 13 touchdowns. He was an all-pro choice and he appeared in his first of nine Pro Bowls. In 1977, he recorded a career-high 1,852 yards, scored an NFL- leading 16 touchdowns and 92 points.

In his career, he rushed over 1,000 yards in 10 of 13 seasons, won one NFL and five NFC rushing titles. He was named all-pro five straight years from 1976 through 1980 and four more times from 1983 through 1986. He was selected as the NFL's Most Valuable Player in 1977 and again in 1985 and was the NFC Player of the Year three times.

Still, there was one big thing missing from Payton's football life -- as his career neared its mid-point, he still had not played on a championship team. The Bears won the 1984 NFC Central championship but were beaten in the NFC championship game by the San Francisco 49ers 23-0 even though Payton led all ground- gainers with 92 yards.

The next year, the Bears swept through the NFC with a 15-1 record and then defeated the Los Angeles Rams 24-0 for the NFC championship. Payton had a banner season with 1,551 yards rushing and 483 yards on 49 pass receptions.

The Bears overwhelmed the Patriots 46-10 in Super Bowl XX. While Payton was the game's leading rusher with 61 yards on 22 carries, he was denied the chance to score a Super Bowl touchdown. With the ball on the Patriots 1-yard line late in the game, Ditkacalled on William "The Refrigerator" Perry to carry the ball. "I knew I was going to be a decoy today and I was prepared for it," was Payton's only comment after the game.

Despite his nickname "Sweetness," Payton was an obsessive overachiever with a searing competitive instinct. He always went last in the Bears' strength and running tests so that he would know how high a score he had to have to win.

As a rookie, he insisted on a \$126,000 signing bonus because that's what it took to pass Archie Manning when the New Orleans Saints signed him. It was the biggest bonus yet for an NFL player from Mississippi.

When the 1984 season rolled around and both Payton and Franco Harris were chasing the all-time record of 12,312 yards held by Jim Brown, Payton announced: "I want to get it before Franco gets it, he said, "so I'll be starting the season with the afterburners on." Payton did beat Harris to the record on a 6-yard run in the season's fourth game. Perhaps as an omen of things to come, Pro Football Hall of Fame Executive Director Pete Elliott was there to receive the ball Payton carried before the next play began.

Still, Payton was not entirely satisfied. "Brown set his record in nine season," hesaid. "I wish I could have done it in nine. I could have, too, if the strike hadn't shortened the 1982 season."

Payton, who retired three years later after the 1987 season, was determined that his new rushing record would be something for the ages. "My father always told me never to settle for second best," he said, "that you either try to do your best or don't try at all. "

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WALTER (Sweetness) PAYTON

RB 5:11 203 Jackson State
Born: 07/25/54, in Columbia, MS

WALTER PAYTON'S RUSHING AND RECEIVING RECORD

		RUSHING-----						RECEIVING-----			
YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	ATT	YARD	AVG	TD	PC	YARD	AVG	TD
1975	ChiB	N	13	196	679	3.5	7	33	213	6.5	0
1976	ChiB	N	14	*311	*1390	4.5	*13	15	149	9.9	0
1977	ChiB	N	14	*339	*1852	*5.5	*14	27	269	10.0	2
1978	ChiB	N	16	*333	*1395	4.2	*11	50	480	9.6	0
1979	ChiB	N	16	*369	*1610	4.4	*14	31	313	10.1	2
1980	ChiB	N	16	*317	*1460	4.6	6	46	367	8.0	1
1981	ChiB	N	16	339	1222	3.6	6	41	379	9.2	2
1982	ChiB	N	9	148	596	4.0	1	32	311	9.7	0
1983	ChiB	N	16	314	1421	4.5	6	53	607	11.5	2
1984	ChiB	N	16	381	1684	4.4	11	45	368	8.2	0
1985	ChiB	N	16	324	1551	4.8	9	49	483	9.9	2
1986	ChiB	N	16	321	1333	4.2	8	37	382	10.3	3
1987	ChiB	N	12	146	533	3.7	4	33	217	6.6	1
13 yrs			190	3838	16726	4.4	110	492	4538	9.2	15

* - Led NFC