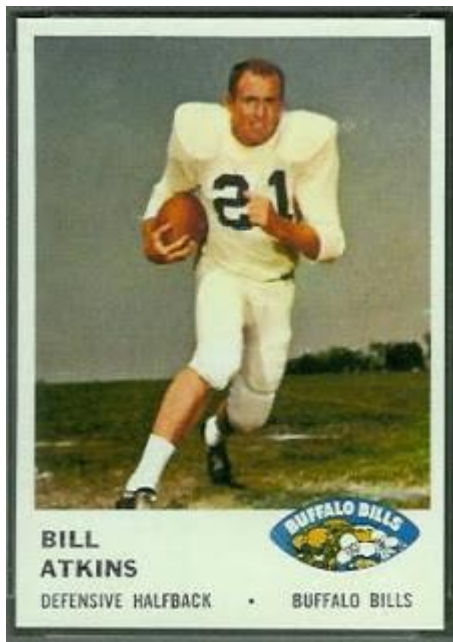


Billy Atkins

This article was written by Budd Bailey

It was as if a beam of light came down from the heavens in the summer of 1957 and landed on Billy Atkins, changing his life forever. Atkins went from an unknown reserve to a nationally recognized star almost overnight, and he rode that transformation for the rest of his too-short life. To show just how far he traveled during the course of nearly six decades, we have to visit the starting point.



The roots that tied William Ellis Atkins to the state of Alabama went back for generations. Billy was born in Millport, Alabama, on November 19, 1934. Millport is a small town (about 1,000 people) located about 95 miles west of Birmingham near the Mississippi border. His father was Samuel Atkins, who was born in nearby Fernbank in 1891, while his mother was Linnia Fields, born in Fernbank in 1901. Samuel's father, William Jefferson Atkins, was born in Alabama in 1852; he and wife Tabitha teamed up to have 15 children. William's father, Martin, was born just over the border in Lowndes County, Mississippi. Martin enlisted for a year in the Confederate Army at the age of 44 in 1863. He apparently was captured during the Battle of Vincent's Crossroads in Mississippi on October 26, 1863, but was either released or escaped and served out his term. Linnia also had a Confederate soldier in her family tree.



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As you might expect, Billy Atkins is in a class by himself when it comes to pro football from that area. He's the only person to come out of Millport High School and reach the game's highest level. The Junior Tide was coached by W.C. Hickman in 1952 to a 6-3-1 record. Melvin Wheat took over in 1953, and Millport went 3-7 despite being outscored by only a 129-120 margin. As a senior back, Billy was named to one first-team All-State squad, and was a second-teamer in another. The school merged with Kennedy High School to form South Lamar High School in 1985, so Atkins' distinction as Millport's only NFL player will last forever. He also played basketball and baseball at Millport.

When it was time to go to college, somewhere in Alabama seemed like a natural choice under the circumstances. Billy headed off to Auburn after graduating from high school in 1954. Take this for what it's worth, but an Internet forum has a posting saying that an Auburn graduate named ZD Vick steered Atkins to his alma mater – and, in fact, paid his way there. A Z.D. Vick did die in Fayette in 1999 at the age of 80, and he operated a furniture business there, so a connection with Atkins certainly is possible.

Atkins arrived in Auburn, Alabama, in the fall of 1954, but he didn't arrive at Auburn University. The school was known as Alabama Polytechnic Institute when it wasn't called the state's "cow college." The university was known mostly for agriculture and engineering. Over in Tuscaloosa sat the University of Alabama, which produced the state's doctors and lawyers. That produced something of a white collar/blue collar rivalry between the schools that continues to this day. Auburn was introduced as the formal name of API in 1960, but it will be used here to avoid confusion.

The Tigers had gone through a long dry spell when Ralph "Shug" Jordan was hired as head coach in an effort to find better days. Auburn went 0-10 in 1950 under Earl Brown, who won three games in three years. Jordan topped that total during the '51 season, as the team went 5-5. Auburn reached the Gator Bowl in 1954 and 1955, and made it three bowls in a row in Atkins' junior year. Billy only carried the ball four times for 13 yards as a sophomore. It was more of the same as a junior in 1956. Atkins ran the ball 16 times for 83 yards, although at least he did score a touchdown. It was hard to argue, though, with what Jordan was doing. The team went 7-3, including a 34-7 win over Alabama.

Then the roof seemed to fall in on the Tigers. Auburn already had been put on NCAA probation and banned from bowl games for five years in May, 1956, because it paid a couple of players a \$500 bonus to enroll at the school. Then Jordan kicked Jimmy Cooke and one other player off the team for violating team rules. Supposedly, Cooke was caught in a "panty raid" of a girls sorority house. Lloyd Nix moved from third-string halfback to first-string quarterback for the opener. Jordan knew he wasn't loaded on offense, but he loved his defense. The plan was to take care of the football, and wear out the opposition.



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The Tigers opened the season with a win at No. 8 Tennessee, 7-0, with Atkins scoring the lone touchdown. Victories over Chattanooga, Kentucky, Georgia Tech and Houston followed. Auburn found itself 5-0 and had allowed a total of 14 points along the way. It only got better, as the Tigers knocked off Florida, Mississippi State, Georgia, and Florida State to move to 9-0. The defense was just as good in the second half, allowing 14 more points. Three of those touchdowns supposedly came against the second-team defense.

"We just went out and played," said Tommy Lorino, a running back/defensive back on the team, said to the Birmingham News. "There wasn't a lot of hoopla about it, we just played every game and kept winning and winning."

Now comes a fun part of the story. Auburn had one game left – the rivalry contest with Alabama. Sports Information Director Bill Beckwith knew the Tigers were ineligible for the UPI poll because of the probation, but the AP was a different story. He realized that any AP subscriber could vote in the wire service poll, including small radio stations. Beckwith did some recruiting of those outlets to vote, and – oh by the way – it sure would be nice if you'd put Auburn No. 1. (The rule about voting rules was changed shortly after that.) It worked. The Tigers routed Alabama, 40-0, and they finished undefeated for the regular season. Auburn received 210 first-place votes to Ohio State's 65. For the first time in history, a team won a national championship while on probation. Oklahoma would match the accomplishment in 1974.

Atkins could take as much pride as anyone on the team for the undefeated season. He led the team with 90 carries, gaining 359 yards in the process. More important, he was a sure bet around the end zone, running for 11 touchdowns. That helped him run up 83 points, first in the SEC and third in the country. Billy also played defensive back, and did the kicking and the punting. He was picked as the team's Most Valuable Player. From there it was on to the North-South Shrine Game and the Senior Bowl, and then it was a matter of waiting for the NFL Draft to take place.

That must have been an interesting time for Atkins. After all, he probably harbored no illusions that he was pro material entering his senior year of college. Relatively suddenly, it became more than possible. Billy also had the uncertainty of his future position, since he played both ways in college. Atkins received a little clarity on draft day, when he went to the San Francisco 49ers in the fifth round (No. 59 overall). The Niners took him as a defensive back. Four players from that round played more than 100 pro games: Frank Ryan, John Baker, Bobby Joe Conrad, and Jim Gibbons.

After the draft, Sports Illustrated magazine polled several incoming players about whether they should have the chance to pick their pro team. Here's Atkins' answer: "Although I am content, I think that the college graduate should be allowed a preference.



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Some clubs pay more money than others. The draft may be necessary to balance the pro league, but it destroys a player's bargaining potential.”

Upon arriving in San Francisco, the 6-foot-1, 196-pound Atkins had a battle to find playing time. He was listed as a safety, although he did carry the ball once. Billy mostly was known for sharing the punting duties with Bill Jessup, although he did intercept one pass during the season. And things turned worse in terms of playing time in 1959, when Tommy Davis took over all of the kicking and punting chores for the team. On November 24, the 49ers signed a player and needed a roster spot for him. Atkins received his walking papers to make room for him. Oddly, the new player was Jack Kemp. He and Atkins would play on the same team later in their careers.

It was another fork in the road for Atkins. Should he give up on football, or should he give it another try? The new American Football League provided an option. It was starting play in 1960, and it was looking for players. Atkins signed to play defensive back with the Buffalo Bills. What's more, he was the starting free safety when Buffalo played its first regular season game, a 27-3 loss to the New York Titans at the Polo Grounds.

Atkins' big moment that season came on October 16 against the Titans. He intercepted three passes against the Titans' Al Dorow (remember that name for later), in the Bills' 17-13 loss to New York. Billy had another game to remember on October 30. Kicker Joe Hergert was injured, so Atkins was pressed into duty. He kicked two fourth-quarter field goals – the second of which came with 5:14 left - to give the Bills a 25-24 win over the Oilers. The result delighted the crowd of 23,001 in War Memorial Stadium, the team's biggest attendance so far in that first year.

That season Billy averaged 39 yards per punt, and was 6 for 13 on field goals and 27 for 33 on extra points. He even had a couple of runs, probably on fake punts, and averaged 23.5 yards per carry. All in all, Atkins couldn't have done much more to help the Bills that year. However, the Bills stumbled to a 5-8-1 record.

The 1961 season was the best individual season of Atkins' career. He intercepted 10 opposing passes, including four games of multiple picks, which earned him a trip to the All-Star Game. That double-digit total led the league. Two picks came in a game against Dallas on October 15, with the second one wrapping up the win. He was named the league's defensive player of the week for that performance. Billy received the same honor for his play against the Texans on November 12.

Atkins also averaged 44.5 yards per punt, tops in the AFL. When Hergert was cut after missing four field goals in a Sept. 30 game with the Chargers, Atkins took over those duties too. He only went 2 for 6 in field goals that season. The highlight of the season on



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a personal level might have come on Oct. 29 against the Houston Oilers. Billy took a fake punt and rambled 56 yards for a touchdown – the only time in his pro career that he carried the ball into the end zone.

As for the team, the problems continued at quarterback. The Bills went through five signal-callers that season, and none of them were effective. Ramsey paid the price for two losing seasons when he was fired on January 4, 1962. Lou Saban, who had joined the organization in 1961 after coaching the Boston Patriots, was named as his successor. Saban started to make moves in that area by summer. On July 5, quarterback M.C. Reynolds and defensive tackle Chuck McMurtry went to the Raiders for fullback Wayne Crow. Then on August 16, the Bills dealt Atkins and quarterback Johnny Green to New York for, yes, Dorow. “We felt it was necessary to strengthen ourselves at quarterback,” Saban said. Atkins arrived in New York with a separated shoulder, and the Bills told the Titans they would send another player to New York if Atkins wasn’t ready for the opener.

Atkins probably knew at the time of the trade that the Titans were in bad shape financially. It became even more of a problem as the 1962 season went on. The Titans missed their payroll at one point and needed a bailout from the league to finish the season. It was rather obvious that owner Harry Wismer’s days with the AFL were ending. The team went 5-9 for the season. As for Atkins, he hadn’t lost his gifts. Billy picked off four passes in seven games played, and led the league in punting again. But injuries limited his effectiveness.

Sonny Werblin headed a new ownership group that took over the team for the 1963 season. It brought in former Colts’ coach Weeb Ewbank to run the newly-named Jets. Atkins reported to camp under doctor’s orders to take it easy, as he had undergone knee surgery only two weeks before the start of workouts. Atkins only wore his somewhat unconventional No. 2 for a couple of games that season. The Jets then put him on waivers, and he was claimed by the Bills. Billy stayed in Buffalo for the rest of 1963. But he only played in one game for Buffalo without recording a statistic. The Bills – led by quarterback Kemp, who had come over from the Chargers the previous year - went 7-6-1 and lost a playoff game to Boston for the right to advance to the AFL title game.

On May 27, 1964, Atkins’ time in Buffalo came to an end. He and linebacker Marv Matuszak were traded to the Broncos for center Walt Cudzik. The Broncos were coming off a 2-11-1 season under Jack Faulkner, but gave their coach another chance at the start of the season. Records indicate that Atkins was cut on August 31, although he is credited with playing three games for Denver that season. Perhaps he was on the taxi squad, or he could have been re-signed if the Broncos needed a defensive back because of injuries. In any event, Atkins’ playing days came to an end at the conclusion of the 1964 season.



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The lure of the state of Alabama for Atkins became obvious about a year later. The then-31-year-old had been working as the head coach and athletic director of Jordan High School in Columbus, Georgia. In January of 1966, he was hired as the head coach of Troy State, which was located about 200 miles southeast from his hometown of Fayette. The Red Wave (the nickname was changed to Trojans in the early 1970s) was coming off a 1-8 season, so help was needed. Atkins no doubt was well remembered in the state because of his college exploits. He needed immediate help in his rebuilding program, taking in transfers from throughout the South to add talent to the roster.

It took three years to go from the bottom of NAIA football to the top. Troy State went 5-5 in Atkins' first season, and advanced to 8-2 in 1967 to win the conference championship. That set up 1968, a year that is still remembered fondly in Troy. The offense more or less broke every scoreboard in sight that season, scoring at least 30 points in 11 of 12 games. The final regular season win was a 76-0 romp over Concord.

Essentially, the Red Wave was running an offense that came out of the future – one that looked like Bill Walsh's "West Coast Offense." Sim Bird – a transfer from Georgia - threw for more than 3,500 yards and 41 touchdowns. "It was a pro-style offense, and it took other teams and defenses a pretty long time to figure out what we were doing," said backup quarterback Al Head, who threw for seven touchdowns that season, to the website Troy Today. "Coach Atkins' biggest strength was preparation. We put a lot of points on the board. We basically called our own plays. Coach Atkins drilled in the situations to us so much that I'd guess 80 to 90 percent of the plays we called, which was a really fun situation to have there."

Student-coach Tommy Brewer added, "I don't know of anybody in this area that ran an offense like that. A lot of it was short, drop-back passes. Sim was a magician in getting rid of the ball really quick, which was key. Our receivers, if they went up with someone else to get the ball, they came down with it. They were fighters, just like Coach Atkins."

The points kept coming in the playoffs. In the semifinal, Troy State downed Williamette, 63-10. Texas A&I was next, and the Trojans won the national title with a 45-35 decision. It started a run of excellence at the Alabama school that has gone on for decades. There were no more national titles during Atkins' stay at Troy, but he did compile a glittering 44-16-2 record through 1971 and finished with four conference titles.

It would be easy to guess that Atkins probably could have stayed at Troy State for as long as he liked (as long as he kept winning, of course). Instead, he couldn't resist when Lou Saban – his former coach with the Bills – called and offered him the job in Buffalo as defensive backs coach. Having coached teams that knew how to score at Troy State, it's



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interesting that Atkins didn't attract the attention of a big-time college team that was looking for a new offensive coordinator. However, Saban knew him as a defensive back from his AFL days. Billy took the job and moved to Buffalo for the third time in his life. He stayed through four seasons, and thus was around to see O.J. Simpson at his peak in a Buffalo uniform.

Saban left during the 1976 season, but Atkins was already gone at that point. He had taken an assistant coaching job with San Francisco, but only stayed for a year. Then it was on to Detroit for a couple of years, and finished his coaching career with two years with the St. Louis Cardinals.

Atkins moved into a scouting job with the San Francisco 49ers in 1984, handling the South, and stayed almost eight seasons with the team. It was a glorious run for the team, as the Niners won three Super Bowl championships during his time there. There's a story from the Chicago Tribune that in 1989, Atkins was talking to Auburn tailback Stacey Danley when the college standout was asked about his Southeastern Conference championship ring. Danley proudly showed it to his group at lunch. Then Atkins took off his ring – a Super Bowl championship ring – and let Danley try it on. "That's what I'd like to have one of these days," Danley said.

On November 5, 1991, Atkins unexpectedly suffered a heart attack while scouting in El Paso, Texas, and died at the age of 58. He left behind his wife, Doris, a daughter, Paige, and a son, Ace, who played for Auburn's undefeated football team in 1993 and then became a nationally known author of crime fiction. Billy eventually was inducted into several Halls of Fame, including Troy's Athletic Hall of Fame, Sports Hall of Fame Birmingham, and the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame.

"He changed my life," Byrd said about Atkins years later. "There isn't a day that goes by that I don't use something I learned playing at Troy. I think that goes, not only for myself, but for a lot of the guys that played for him."



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