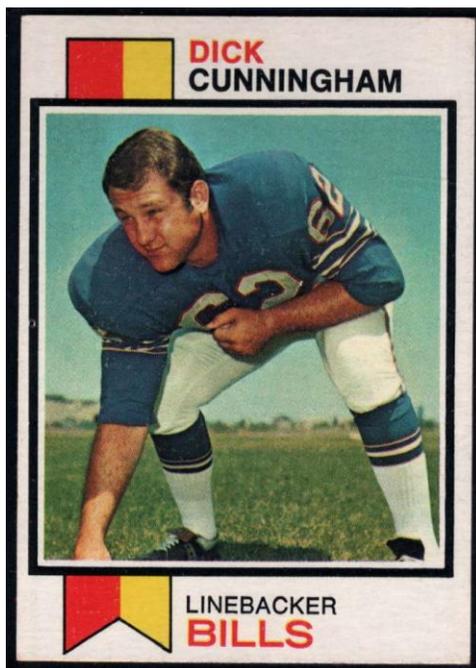


## Dick Cunningham

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Dick Cunningham won a NCAA college football national championship at Arkansas in 1964 playing alongside future Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones and head coach Jimmy Johnson. He was a three-year letter-winner with the Razorbacks and was All-Southwest Conference in 1966. The 6-foot-3, 230-pound Cunningham enjoyed a seven-year pro career, spending six of those seasons with the Buffalo Bills. He also met his wife while playing for Buffalo and it just happened to be the sister of a fellow Bills player.



Richard Karekin Cunningham was born on October 12, 1944 in Boston, Massachusetts. His father was in the Air Force and so Cunningham moved around as a youngster and spent time in Europe as well. The family came back to the U.S.A. in the middle of Dick's junior year in high school and settled in San Antonio, Texas. He attended Thomas Jefferson High School in San Antonio. He had never played tackle football before coming to San Antonio; his only experience was playing flag football in England and a couple years of rugby.

Dick only played one year of high school football, but was good enough that it earned him a scholarship to the University of Arkansas. In his senior year, the Mustangs went all the way to the quarterfinals of the AAAA Texas state championship, losing to Corpus



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Christi Ray 26-7. The team finished with a 10-2 record. Thomas Jefferson High School has a solid football tradition and has placed several players in the National Football League. The best of them are former New York Giants star Kyle Rote and Atlanta Falcons stud linebacker Tommy Nobis.

While Dick was showing his prowess on the football field for the Mustangs in his senior year, his younger brother John Joseph, a ten-year old, won the local Punt Pass and Kick competition. John compiled 188.1 yards in the three events.

Cunningham became interested in attending the University of Arkansas because a high school friend of his kept talking about what a special place Fayetteville - especially when they "call the hogs." Dick's parents wanted him to go to either Texas or Texas A&M. He wrote a letter to the Arkansas head football coach, not knowing who he was and told him he wanted to play football for the Razorbacks. A few weeks later he got a call at his high school from Frank Broyles, the head coach at Arkansas. Broyles offered Cunningham a scholarship and that was all he needed. The girl that encouraged Dick to go to Arkansas followed Tommy Nobis to the University of Texas.

Cunningham entered Arkansas in the fall of 1962. He was recruited to play fullback, but since he had never played the position, it did not last. Following a few mishaps in practice where he ran over the freshman coach, he was moved to offensive line and found his niche. He played freshman ball in 1962 and was redshirted as a sophomore in 1963 while Arkansas finished only 5-5.

During the 1964 season he alternated at strong side offensive tackle with junior Mike Bender. The starting tackle on the other side was future NFLer Glen Ray Hines, a two-time Pro Bowler during his 8-year NFL career. Also, playing on the offensive line for the Razorbacks that year was offensive guard Jones. In addition, Cunningham would mix it up in practice with defensive middle guard Johnson, a future Hall of Famer.

The Razorbacks were the class of the Southwest Conference in 1964, winning their seven conference games by allowing only a total of 25 points with four shutouts. The showdown for the conference championship occurred on October 17 against the Texas Longhorns. Texas came into the game ranked #1 in the country and the Razorbacks were ranked #8.

Arkansas shocked the Longhorns, who had won 15 consecutive games. The Razorbacks scored on an 81-yard punt return by Ken Hatfield and on a 34-yard pass by future Buffalo Bill Bobby Crockett. The Longhorns were shut out until the fourth quarter when they made a valiant rally. They scored twice in the final period and went for the two-point conversion after their second touchdown, trailing 14-13. The Razorbacks' talented



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defense batted the pass away on the two-point attempt and Arkansas secured the stunning upset.

Amazingly, Arkansas did not allow a point in their next five games as they finished the regular season as Southwest Conference champions with an unblemished 10-0 record. However, Alabama - the only other undefeated team in the country - was ranked #1 in the final Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI) polls on November 30. Arkansas was ranked #1 in the country by the Football Writers Association of America (FWAA), but the other polls had more prestige. In 1964 the final polls were taken prior to the bowl games. The Razorbacks proved that they deserved to be crowned National Champions as they defeated No. 6 Nebraska in the Cotton Bowl 10-7, while Alabama lost to Texas in the Orange Bowl 21-17.

In 1965, for the second year in a row the Razorbacks ran through the Southwest Conference unbeaten and were crowned conference champions. They again upset #1 ranked Texas, this time 27-24 in front of the hometown faithful. Arkansas finished the regular season with an impressive 42-24 win over #9 ranked Texas A&M. Cunningham started every game at tackle as Bender was moved to guard. At the conclusion of the regular season, the AFL held its redshirt draft on November 27 and 28 and Cunningham was selected in the fourth round.

The Razorbacks finished the regular season at 10-0 and ranked #2 in the country by both AP and UPI behind undefeated Michigan State. Nebraska was also undefeated and ranked third. Arkansas lost to LSU 14-7 in the Cotton Bowl on January 1 and both other undefeated teams were also beaten in their bowl games. Alabama, #4 ranked going into the bowl games, snuck up to win the National Championship by virtue of a 39-28 win over Nebraska in the Orange Bowl. The final AP poll was done after the bowl games and Alabama secured the #1 ranking with Michigan State second and Arkansas third with a 10-1 overall record.

Cunningham despite being drafted by the Buffalo Bills returned for his senior season in 1966. The Razorbacks had another good season but not up to the standards of the previous two. Cunningham started every game again at tackle, but Arkansas was defeated twice in the regular season. The Broyles-led squad lost to Baylor 7-0 and Texas Tech 21-16. The Razorbacks defeated Texas for the third year in a row, this time by 12-7, and beat conference champion Southern Methodist University 22-0, handing the Mustangs their only conference loss. Arkansas finished in a tie for second place in the conference with an overall 8-2 record.

The Texas Tech loss was especially painful. It cost the team the Southwest Conference championship and a Cotton Bowl berth. The Razorbacks had some mitigating



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circumstances that impacted their ability to play their best game. On October 29, offensive lineman Claude Smithey suffered a head injury in the Texas A&M game. Cunningham was with Smithey when he collapsed in the locker room following the game. Smithey went into a coma and did not come out of it. He died on November 15, four days prior to the Texas Tech game. Cunningham and teammate Loyd Phillips were pallbearers for the funeral on November 17. It was exceedingly difficult to play a football game a couple days after that. “We just didn’t have our heart in it,”<sup>i</sup> Phillips said. “We played a poor football game.”<sup>ii</sup> “The Cotton Bowl...the Southwest Conference Championship ... football ... they seemed unimportant now. What did seem important was Claude Smithey’s widow and his year-old daughter Kimberly Ann.”<sup>iii</sup>

At the conclusion of the regular season, Dick was selected to the All-Southwest Conference first team at tackle. He was an honorable mention on the Associated Press All-American team. He also was invited to play in the East-West Shrine game in San Francisco on December 31. Cunningham was picked by his West teammates to be a co-captain. The East prevailed in the game, winning 45-22.

Cunningham majored in business at Arkansas, graduating in the spring of 1967 and he lettered in football in each of his three varsity seasons. The Razorbacks’ overall record during his tenure was 29-3.

Dick was drafted by the Detroit Lions in the 1966 NFL draft. He was selected in the ninth round, the 136<sup>th</sup> overall pick. Cunningham wanted to play for Buffalo as two of his Arkansas teammates, halfback Bobby Burnett and wide receiver Bobby Crockett, both played for the Bills in 1966. So rather than pit the two teams against each other, his father negotiated a contract with Bills Director of Player Personnel Harvey Johnson, and he signed the contract. Cunningham executed the agreement on December 23, 1966.

Cunningham had a good first training camp in Buffalo, playing left tackle. The Bills suffered injuries to two starting offensive linemen during camp, guard Billy Shaw and tackle Dick Hudson, opening an opportunity for Cunningham. Bills head coach Joel Collier shuffled the offensive line for the home opening game against the New York Jets on September 10 and inserted Cunningham as the starting left tackle. It was exciting for Dick to start his first professional regular season game for the defending AFL East Division champions.

Cunningham’s first start turned out to be even more exciting than he anticipated. The Bills trailed the Jets and Joe Namath 17-0 entering the fourth quarter. Buffalo quarterback Jack Kemp hit Art Powell with two touchdown passes of 24 and 37 yards early in the fourth quarter, cutting the Jets lead to 17-14. The Bills tied the game with 2 minutes 27 second left on a 51-yard field goal by Mike Mercer, a team record at the time. The Bills



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defense held the Jets and Kemp behind great protection from his offensive line spearheaded another drive. He completed three straight passes for 56 yards moving the Bills to the Jets 35-yard line. Mercer was called upon again, and buried the 43-yard field goal with four seconds remaining to complete the improbable come-from-behind win for the Bills, 20-17.

Cunningham was in and out of the starting lineup throughout the season as the Bills wrestled with injuries. He played in all 14 games, playing at left tackle, right tackle, and guard, while starting six. Dick finished the season as the starting right tackle. The Bills season deteriorated from the thrilling opening day victory. The team only captured three more games the remainder of the season, finishing with a disappointing 4-10 record. Cunningham “did a commendable job ... A come-to-play type ... very strong and a quick learner”<sup>iv</sup> is how the Bills media guide described him after the 1967 season.

Cunningham became the Bills starting right tackle in 1968. It was solidified in training camp when tackle Joe O’Donnell tore ligaments in his knee and was out for the season. The Bills suffered a tremendous number of injuries, especially at the critical quarterback position as they lost both Jack Kemp and Tom Flores in training camp. Buffalo started the season with an entire rookie backfield led by quarterback Dan Darragh.

The Bills struggled through one of the worst seasons in franchise history with a 1-12-1 record. The highlight of their season was a 37-35 upset of the New York Jets, who went on to win Super Bowl III at the end of that season. The Bills also tied the Miami Dolphins 14-14. Cunningham started all 14 games at right tackle and had a commendable season.

The 1968 season for Cunningham was memorable for a vastly different non-football reason. It started the week of August 5. “I was sitting with my teammate (Al Bemiller) and his father before a practice during the preseason one day and he was telling me that his sister had been bugging him to fix her up with a football player now that she was done with college.”<sup>v</sup> Cunningham recalled. “I told her I would take her out after our preseason game against the Lions on Friday. We hit it off, went out again Saturday and I proposed on Sunday.”<sup>vi</sup> Dick and Carole Lee Bemiller were married four weeks later on September 8, following the Bills’ opening day loss against the Boston Patriots.

Cunningham’s 1969 season was the season that wasn’t. While the Bills welcomed overall #1 draft choice, superstar running back O.J. Simpson, into the fold, Cunningham struggled with an ankle injury. He injured his ankle early in training camp and never was able to get onto the field. He relented to ankle surgery and missed the entire season.



Between the 1969 and 1970 seasons, head coach John Rauch switched Cunningham to linebacker from tackle. At 6-foot 2, 232 pounds he was not an ideal size for a tackle and with his good football instincts and aggressiveness it was thought he would make a good linebacker.

Dick was the Bills backup middle linebacker to Edgar Chandler throughout the 1970 season. He played in all 14 games while also participating on special teams. He had two fumble recoveries, one in a 14-10 loss to the New England Patriots on November 29 and the other on December 13 in a 20-14 loss to the Baltimore Colts.

His fumble recovery in the Patriots game came in the fourth quarter on a punt return that Patriot returnee Carl Garrett muffed, and Dick pounced on. The recovery set up a Bills touchdown on a 28-yard pass from James Harris to Willie Grate with 1:58 left in the game that cut the Patriots lead to 14-10. The Bills got the ball back one more time, but were unable to score.

Cunningham's other fumble recovery also came on a Maguire punt that Colts cornerback Ron Gardin mishandled in the third quarter. Buffalo trailed 17-14 at the time, but the Bills were unable to turn the recovery into any points. The Colts ultimately prevailed 20-14.

The Bills finished their first National Football League season with a 3-10-1 record. Their three victories came against former AFL teams. They did notch a 17-17 tie against the Colts on November 15, their best result against established NFL teams. Their other four games against former NFL teams resulted in losses, 19-0 to the Los Angeles Rams, 23-10 at the Pittsburgh Steelers, 20-6 at Yankee Stadium against the New York Giants and the aforementioned 20-14 loss to Baltimore.

Cunningham faced some additional tough luck in the 1971 training camp as he injured his knee. The injury kept him out of the Bills' first nine games, all losses. He finally returned on November 21 in a 20-7 loss to the New York Jets. He played the final five games of the season, substituting at middle linebacker and playing special teams. The Bills' only win of 1971 was a 27-20 win over the Patriots on November 28, as the team finished with the worst record in team history at 1-13.

In the offseason he began working for Buffalo Van & Storage as a sales rep. He also owned "Dick Cunningham's Art Gallery."

Cunningham finally made it through a training camp without injury and was again backing up Edgar Chandler at middle linebacker for the 1972 season. Chandler was injured in the Bills' opening game against the Jets. The injury provided Cunningham with



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his chance to finally start at middle linebacker for the Bills, three years after switching positions. He started on September 24 against the San Francisco 49ers, but his opportunity was abruptly halted as he dislocated his left shoulder late in the third quarter. The good news is the Bills went on to win their first game against an established NFL team since the merger, defeating the 49ers 27-20.

Cunningham could not seem to shake the injury bug. He missed five games, returning for the November 5 game versus Miami. He was the starting middle linebacker for the remainder of the Bills' 4-9-1 season, their first under head coach Lou Saban's return engagement. He played exceptionally well in the last five games of the season with the Bills finishing strong at 2-2-1.

Cunningham was on the field for the Bills' final game at the Old Rockpile (War Memorial Stadium) on December 10, a 17-17 tie with the Detroit Lions.

Unfortunately, Cunningham never got the opportunity to play for the Bills in their new home of Rich Stadium. Just hours before the Bills were set to conduct the first practice in their new facility on August 16, 1973, Cunningham was told he had been traded to the Philadelphia Eagles for fullback Larry Watkins. Cunningham had become expendable with the Bills' offseason acquisition of middle linebacker Jim Cheyunski. The Bills officially opened their new stadium versus the Washington Redskins the following evening without Cunningham.

Dick played nine games with the Eagles and then created a controversy after he was inactive for the next two games, though healthy. Eagles head coach Mike McCormick activated Cunningham on November 28 for the December 2 game versus the 49ers. However, Cunningham told him he was not interested in playing. McCormick described his interaction with Cunningham, "I told Dick he was going to be active for the game and he said he didn't want to be active. He said if he was not good enough in our estimation to be active for our last two games with the Cowboys and Giants, then he didn't want to be active for this game."<sup>vii</sup> After confronting McCormick, Cunningham packed his bags and left Veterans Stadium. Cunningham was suspended by the Eagles.

Less than two weeks later, Dick called McCormick and apologized. McCormick decided to activate Cunningham but the veteran had to pass through waivers. The Oilers claimed him off the waiver wire and Cunningham was on his way to Houston. He played one game for the Oilers on December 16, a 27-24 loss to Cincinnati.

In 1974 he started in the Oilers' training camp but was waived early on. He was picked up by the Detroit Lions but injured his shoulder and was out for the season. He was back with the Lions in 1975 and lasted all the way through training camp, making the final



roster. However, the week prior to the Lions opening game they signed a new kicker and waived Cunningham. Dick decided it was time to call it a career. “I was tired. I’d had five or six different surgeries and I was beat up. I recall telling Carole Lee that if I don’t make it in Detroit, then that’s it. When it happened, I was happy to get on with the rest of my life.”<sup>viii</sup>

In reflecting on his six-year tenure with the Bills in which the team never won more than four games in a season, Cunningham mused, “It was tough. We played in a stadium we called the Old Rockpile and practiced in horse arenas among the manure, and parking lots. We had to walk through the stands to go to and from the locker room. It was important to keep your helmet on and your chin strap buckled. Buffalo had great fans, but they weren’t too friendly during losing seasons.”<sup>ix</sup>

He spent his post-football career as a successful professional salesman, first in the insurance industry. Then he moved into the apparel industry and finished his sales career in industrial sales. Since retiring from his sales career, he is a courtesy cart driver for the Piedmont Fayette Hospital Auxiliary.

Dick and Carole Lee are still married, more than 50 years later. They have two adult children, a son Karekin and a daughter Kahlil Ann.

Cunningham was selected to the Arkansas Razorbacks All-Decade team for the 1960’s and in 2019 he was named to the University of Arkansas Hall of Fame.

#### End Note:

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<sup>i</sup> Padwe, Sandy, “Mourns a Friend,” *Hope Star* (Hope, Arkansas), December 31, 1966, p7

<sup>ii</sup> Padwe, Sandy, “Mourns a Friend,” *Hope Star* (Hope, Arkansas), December 31, 1966, p7

<sup>iii</sup> Padwe, Sandy, “Mourns a Friend,” *Hope Star* (Hope, Arkansas), December 31, 1966, p7

<sup>iv</sup> *Buffalo Bills 1968 Media Guide*, Buffalo Bills, Inc., p17

<sup>v</sup> *The Citizen*, Former NFL player a driving force for Auxiliary, <https://thecitizen.com/2015/09/03/former-nfl-player-driving-force-auxiliary/>, accessed 9/4/2020

<sup>vi</sup> *The Citizen*, Former NFL player a driving force for Auxiliary, <https://thecitizen.com/2015/09/03/former-nfl-player-driving-force-auxiliary/>, accessed 9/4/2020

<sup>vii</sup> UPI, “Dick Cunningham Not Interested,” *Lebanon Daily News* (Lebanon Pennsylvania, November 29, 1973, p25

<sup>viii</sup> Miller, Jeffrey, *Rockin the Rockpile*, ECW Press, c2007, p479

<sup>ix</sup> *The Citizen*, Former NFL player a driving force for Auxiliary, <https://thecitizen.com/2015/09/03/former-nfl-player-driving-force-auxiliary/>, accessed 9/4/2020