

John Prchlik

This article was written by Chad Moody

Once humorously praised by famed sportswriter Red Smith for lacking nothing on the football field “but vowels,” John Prchlik was indeed a talented tackle who found success at every level.ⁱ And although he patrolled the gridiron like a “berserk mastodon,” there was much more to Prchlik than the game.ⁱⁱ “He saw football as merely a way to pay his way through law school,” his daughter said. “He just happened to be really good at it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

John George Prchlik was born on July 20, 1925, in Cleveland, Ohio. His father, John, worked in jobs including truck driving and managing a beer store, and his mother, Bessie (née Kral), worked as a seamstress before becoming a homemaker. Prchlik was the oldest of the family’s four children. Arthur, Richard, and Ruth were his younger siblings. Prchlik was raised in a Czech immigrant community on the west side of Cleveland; his father was a native of what is now the Czech Republic and his mother was the child of two Czech-born parents.



An honor student and standout on the football and track squads at Cleveland West Tech High School, Prchlik had plans to attend college in his home state at Ohio State University.^{iv} His plans changed, however, when he enrolled at Yale University in 1943 as part of the War Department’s World War II Navy V-12 College Training Program. Immediately joining the football team as a lineman, Prchlik was “uncovered” as a potential gem by the Bulldogs when he “distinguished himself by going a full 60 minutes



of slam-bang activity” against an excellent Army squad at midseason.^v Already labeled as “stellar” by the end of his freshman season, the “towering tackle” continued his fine play into the first half of Yale’s 1944 campaign before being sent to the Navy Midshipmen’s School at Notre Dame for military training.^{vi} From there, he spent the next year and a half serving in World War II active duty aboard a carrier in the Pacific.^{vii}

Upon returning stateside in 1946, Prchlik again strongly considered Ohio State as a potential destination at which he could restart his studies.^{viii} In the end, however, he opted to re-enroll at Yale. Picking up where he left off, Prchlik resumed his role as a stalwart member of the Bulldogs’ line—despite assuming new positions as an offensive guard and defensive end. “Although I played tackle all through my high school days, I always thought I’d like to be an end,” he said. “But when I got to Yale in the V-12 program there wasn’t much time for the coaches to experiment, so I tried out for the position I knew how to play. I’ve had a lot of experience [at defensive end] since getting out of the service, though.”^{ix} After the 1946 season during which he was described as an “unusually fine” lineman, Prchlik was drafted by the Boston Yanks in the 30th round (277th overall) of the 1947 National Football League Draft.^x He returned to Yale for the 1947 campaign, however. The tallest and among the heaviest of the Yale players, Prchlik received this praise from the *Bridgeport (Connecticut) Post* when heading into his final collegiate season: “On offense he has few peers in the East, and the same can be said for his defensive play. Several of the nation’s outstanding football authorities label Prchlik as a potential All-America in this, his senior year.”^{xi} Indeed, he capped his college gridiron career as an Associated Press honorable mention All-American and suited up as a starter in the prestigious postseason East-West Shrine Game on New Year’s Day 1948. And as a further testament to his athleticism, Prchlik also competed for Yale’s wrestling and rowing teams. Had he not decided to pursue a career in professional football, it was speculated by some that he quite possibly would have rowed for the United States in the 1948 Olympic Games.^{xii}

Signed by the league champion Cleveland Browns of the All-America Football Conference for the 1948 season, the 6-foot-4 rookie was initially rostered at the tackle position. But because he weighed 20 pounds less than any other tackle on the squad, he eventually was given a trial at defensive end; the end position was viewed as a better fit for his 220-pound frame. As training camp progressed, however, a series of personnel moves resulted in Prchlik moving back to tackle where he found himself in a battle for a roster spot with veteran Ben Pucci.^{xiii} With future Hall of Fame coach Paul Brown preferring “huge” tackles, the larger Pucci ultimately won the job.^{xiv} As such, the 23-year-old was waived by the club just prior to the beginning of the regular season.

In late July of the following year, Prchlik was signed by the NFL’s New York Bulldogs.^{xv} About a month later, he was sent to the Detroit Lions along with fellow tackle John



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Treadaway in exchange for center Merv Pregulman.^{xvi} Having now bulked up to 234 pounds, Prchlik impressed during training camp. “John Treadaway and John Prchlik gave evidence of being first-line tackles against the husky [New York] Giant forward wall,” opined the *Detroit Free Press* after the Lions’ final preseason tune-up game.^{xvii} Although the “rugged workman” ultimately did not win the primary starting job, he did appear in all 12 regular season games and gave “great exhibitions of defensive play” as one of the “stalwarts of the Lions’ defensive strength.”^{xviii}

After his breakthrough season in 1949, Prchlik spent the next four years with Detroit as a fixture at the right defensive tackle position. Often described as underrated and unsung, he was one of the three defensive “hunks of granite” (along with linemates Les Bingaman and Thurman McGraw) key to the rise of the Lions in the early 1950s that culminated in championships in 1952 and ’53. As a 1952 United Press honorable mention All-Pro and team co-captain for the 1951 and ’52 campaigns, Prchlik attributed his success to teamwork. “Defensive play, more than any other phase of the game, is a team effort,” he explained. “Every man has a job to do—and how well you can do yours depends on how effectively the other fellow does his.” Additionally, Prchlik took a decidedly cerebral approach to measuring the efficiency and effectiveness of his play. “Each year I find myself making much less motion on the field, yet doing the job better,” he said. “A lineman who is running all over the field isn’t getting the work done.”^{xix} During training camp in 1953, Prchlik announced his intention to retire at the end of the season; he kept his word after leaving the field four months later following Detroit’s victory over the Cleveland Browns in the NFL Championship Game.

“Football has been the means toward realization of a lot of ambitions for me,” said the then 28-year-old. “Without it I never would have had an opportunity to get a college education.”^{xx} Indeed, Prchlik’s ambitions extended well beyond a successful career on the gridiron. In 1951, he received a law degree from Wayne University (now Wayne State University) after having continued collegiate studies during his time in the NFL. And later that year, Prchlik passed the Michigan state bar exam.^{xxi} “He should cut quite a courtroom figure,” quipped the Associated Press of the new attorney’s large stature.^{xxii}

Parlaying his education into a career after football, Prchlik joined the legal team at Ford Motor Company in 1952 and remained there as a labor relations executive before retiring in 1982. He and his wife Patricia (née Hallihan) wed in 1949 and were long-time residents of Canton Township in suburban Detroit. The couple had six children: John Jr., Jean Perry, James, Mary Ann, Julie Marie, and Michael.

Once Prchlik stepped off the gridiron for the last time, he did not look back. “He didn’t talk much about his days with the Lions,” his daughter Mary Ann said. “He would talk



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about it if somebody asked him about it, but it wasn't something he volunteered. He didn't even watch football.”^{xxiii}

On December 31, 2003, Prchlik died at age 78 of pancreatic cancer at his home in Fairfield Glade, Tennessee. His cremated remains were interred at the Columbarium at Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic Parish in Fairfield Glade.



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