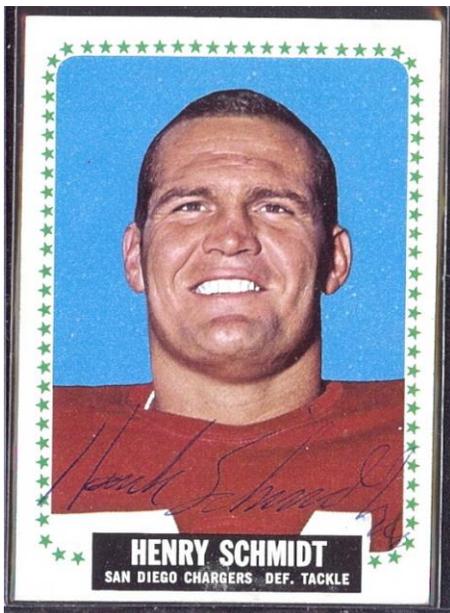


Henry Schmidt

This article was written by Budd Bailey

It seems that Henry Schmidt was destined to spend most of his life in Southern California. Even when football took him away from the region for a while, he always came back to it.



Henry Joseph Schmidt (he sometimes was called Hank) was born on September 28, 1935 in South Gate, California. That's located a few miles south of Los Angeles. He went to John C. Fremont High School in Los Angeles, named after the former Senator and the first man to run for President under the banner of the Republican Party. Fremont lost to James Buchanan in 1856.

Fremont High certainly has cranked out athletes over the years, so Schmidt is in good company. A website lists 19 former pro football players who went to Fremont. The biggest name on the list might be running back Ricky Bell. The list also includes Ricky Harris, Tony Lorick, and David Fulcher. Baseball also is well represented with Fremont grads, including Eric Davis, Bobby Doerr, Chet Lemon, Gene Mauch and Bob Watson.

Schmidt already was big when he was in high school – 6-foot-2 and 220 pounds. That must have helped him play tackle for Fremont. As a senior he was a second-team selection on the All-Southern team selection for that part of Los Angeles. Henry was the



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heaviest man on either the first or second teams. Fremont had six players on the All-Southern squad – three Pathfinders on the first team, three more on the second.

Schmidt graduated from high school in 1954, and spent his first year of college close to home, at East Los Angeles Junior College. If nothing else, Hank's size probably appealed to Southern California University. Besides, the coaches didn't have to go too far to recruit him for the football team. Hank no doubt watched the Trojans from a distance in 1954. The team went to the Rose Bowl under coach Jess Hill, although the Trojans only went because of a rule that prevented teams from playing in Pasadena in back-to-back seasons (in this case, it was UCLA).

Southern California slipped to 6-4 in 1955. Statistics for a tackle weren't plentiful back then, but we do know that Schmidt – now up to 6-foot-4 and 237 pounds – earned a varsity letter. But something must have happened at that point, because it was Hank's only varsity letter at USC.

Schmidt's next stop looks a little odd from a distance: Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. That's a long way from Los Angeles. Henry's only rival as the best player to come out of Trinity to the pros might be Marvin Upshaw, a first-round pick of the Cleveland Browns in 1968. The alumni list also includes announcer Dick Stockton, baseball's Jerry Grote, and actress Jaclyn Smith. Schmidt no doubt lost a year due to the transfer, which means he spent the 1956 and 1957 seasons with the Tigers. They were on the mediocre side during Hank's time there. Trinity went 5-3-1 in 1956, but fell to 3-5 in 1957. The school played a small college schedule for the most part, taking on such schools as Mississippi Southern, North Texas and Texas Western.

Trinity wasn't in a conference then, so Schmidt wasn't named to an all-conference team. He was still big and strong, though, and pro scouts like that. The San Francisco 49ers took him in the sixth round of the 1958 NFL draft (71st overall). It was a rather productive round for picking talent. Dick Lynch and Ken Gray were taken shortly before Schmidt by Washington and Green Bay, respectively. It might be worth noting that no Southern California players were selected in the NFL draft in 1958.

Schmidt spent some time in the Marine Corps, and even played football in San Diego for that branch of the service during that period of his life. In 1959 he began his pro football career with the 49ers. The Niners had some star power that year. The quarterbacks were Y.A. Tittle and John Brodie, and the running backs were J.D. Smith, Joe Perry, and Hugh McElhenny. Leo Nomellini and Abe Woodson were All-Pros on defense. The 49ers finished 7-5, as they lost four of their last five games. Red Hickey was the coach of that team; he had replaced Frankie Albert in the offseason.



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Schmidt only started one game that season, but he figured out a way to make an impact – literally. He was a demon on special teams. Hank quickly became a favorite of the late Paul Zimmerman, a writer best known for his work with Sports Illustrated. “He (Schmidt) was inordinately fast coming down the field, for a guy 6’4”, 254 pounds,” Zimmerman wrote. “The Niners fans loved him, but when he’d hit the wedge and splinter it like kindling, it would draw a gasp, rather than a cheer, from the crowd. Usually the ball carrier would be part of the mob that Henry took down on his wild attacks. When people saw that he was actually able to get up and walk off the field, that’s when the cheers would come.”

Schmidt stayed with the 49ers for the 1960 season. That was a San Francisco team that mostly was remembered for a strategic innovation that continues to affect today’s game. Hickey invented the shotgun formation late in the year, in which the center would snap the ball back a few yards to the quarterback instead of handing him the ball at the line of scrimmage. On passing plays, the QB would have a bit more time to look over the defense. On running plays, the execution would be quicker and thus more difficult to defend. The 49ers won three of four games using it at the end of the season.

Schmidt got a couple of starts in 1960, but again was mostly known for his special teams work. The 49ers finished 7-5, and looked ready to unleash the shotgun for an entire season in 1961. They looked good for five games, going 4-1, before Bears coach George Halas solved the puzzle by using middle linebacker Bill George to disrupt the shotgun before it had a chance to fire. The offense went into hibernation for almost 20 years, when it became a part of many teams’ offenses in passing situations.

Schmidt didn’t see the death of the shotgun. He was let go by the 49ers on September 5 on the eve of the start of the regular season. Hank had some options. “The last training camp game (coach Red Hickey) cut me and said that they would put me on their taxi squad,” he said to website author Tom Tobias. “I was (contacted) by the British Columbia Lions. Then Jack Kemp was down here with the San Diego Chargers. Because Kemp went through the 49er camp, we had gotten to know each other. He asked me to come down and I came down to San Diego.”

Hank signed with the San Diego Chargers, who had just moved from Los Angeles, of the American Football League. Jumping leagues didn’t seem to bother Schmidt much, because he knew there was plenty of talent out there. “There were only 12 teams in the United States back then, in the NFL,” he told Tobias. “There was a lot of good talent coming out and there were not that many ballplayers kept on a team, only 30-some-odd players. And there were a lot of players that were let go that could play excellent ball. There were good ballplayers coming out of college and out of service ball. They just



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wanted to play pro ball. Not semi-pro, they wanted to play pro ball. So, I never had any doubts that it would continue at all.”

If Schmidt was looking to win, he had come to the right place. Those Chargers had one of the great coaching staffs in history. Sid Gillman, one of the best offensive minds in football history, was the head coach. He was assisted by such people as Al Davis, Chuck Noll, and Jack Faulkner. “I was very impressed with Chuck Noll,” Schmidt told Tobias. “He was very technique-oriented. He also was a very brilliant defensive strategist. . . . And then Al Davis, what can you say about Al Davis? The guy was just a great coach, great management-type of coach. He knew talent, Al Davis did. So definitely, there was a big difference from what I came from with the 49ers. I saw a tremendous difference in technique and their knowledge of the game. And their knowledge of ballplayers too. They knew their talent.” Kemp led the offense, and Paul Lowe was the leading ballcarrier.

That team could score – almost 30 points per game – but it also could defend – less than 16 points per game. No wonder it went 12-2 and reached the AFL Championship game, losing to Houston. Schmidt played all 14 games, as he backed up defensive tackles Ernie Ladd and Bill Hudson.

The 1962 season didn’t go as well for the Chargers. They fell all the way down to 4-10. San Diego lost its starting quarterback, Kemp, to injury – and then lost him to Buffalo when they tried to sneak him through waivers. Rookie John Hadl was thrown into the job, and he finished with a 1-9 record as a starter. Running back Paul Lowe missed the entire season with a broken arm.

On the other hand, Schmidt actually received some playing time. He started 10 games at defensive end, as injuries to Earl Faison and Ron Nery caused some shuffling during the season. He was in the midst of a decent career, especially when you consider the evaluation of offensive lineman and teammate Sam DeLuca. In one of his books, DeLuca – who played with him in San Diego and New York – said Hank had one move as a defensive lineman, and it was good enough to allow him to play for eight seasons.

Lowe was back in 1963, teaming with Keith Lincoln to form an excellent running tandem. Gillman brought in veteran Tobin Rote to allow Hadl to learn the game from the sidelines. They were missing one of their defensive standouts, as massive tackle Ernie Ladd missed most of the season. That allowed Schmidt to slide over and start in 13 of the team’s 14 games. San Diego was the class of the AFL that year, and it showed in the championship game with Boston. The Chargers piled up 318 rushing yards and 305 passing yards in a 51-10 demolition of the Patriots.



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For the first time in his career, Hank Schmidt was a champion. “I don’t remember anything specific about it,” he told Tobias about the game. “It was kind of a blowout. We just shocked them. We did everything right and they did everything wrong. Everything. I mean everything was clicking. There (were) no big injuries, no nothing. Everything clicked just right. It was a perfect game that we played. And the talent we had was excellent. They all complemented each other.”

Schmidt probably had the greatest individual moment of his career on October 25, 1964. George Blanda went back to pass for the Oilers, and Hank came up with the interception. He rumbled 58 yards for a touchdown as the Chargers won, 20-17. It was the only interception of Schmidt’s career, and the only touchdown. It was the eighth-longest interception return in the AFL that season. Schmidt started six games at defensive tackle that season, lining up next to the massive Ladd – the largest man in pro football at 6-foot-9, and an alleged 290 pounds (it may have been more).

Hank was tough by almost any standard in those days. For example, he had this answer to a question from Tobias on equipment: “I don’t think I ever wore a cage on my face. I only wore the two bars. I never wore a facemask until I went with the 49ers and I only had a one-bar. I came with the Chargers and they had the two plastic bars. I didn’t want anyone grabbing the facemask and using it on my neck. I never had a cage on my face, ever.”

The Chargers weren’t quite as good in 1964 as they were in 1963, going 8-5-1. That still was good enough to win the AFL West and go to the championship game. This time, the Bills stopped San Diego from repeating as champions, as they took a 20-7 win in Buffalo.

Neither team knew it at the title game, but the teams would play again for the AFL title a year later. The difference was that Schmidt would change sides. He joined the Bills sometime in the 1965 season, setting up a reunion with the man who helped bring him to San Diego - Kemp. The guess, based on the fact that there’s nothing about him in the team’s 1965 yearbook, is that he was a late cut by the Chargers and claimed by Buffalo. Hank, now about 30, turned up on the Bills’ roster, and played in eight games. The Bills already had a fine defensive line, consisting of Ron McDole, Tom Day, Tom Sestak, and Jim Dunaway. Schmidt wasn’t going to break into that group, but a little veteran depth is always appreciated.

Despite only spending a season in Buffalo, Schmidt was well remembered – especially by trainer Eddie Abramoski. After all, how many pro football players lived out of their car? “Guys didn’t make much money playing back then, so Schmidt figured he could save a little cash that way,” he told author Scott Pitoniak. “The bottom line was that he was cheap. He had a sleeping bag and blankets and he would take showers at the stadium and



park his car in the tunnel when the weather started becoming cold and windy. That was a tough neighborhood around War Memorial, but Schmidt never worried about someone attacking him. He told me, ‘Abe, nobody’s going to bother somebody crazy enough to live in his car.’ I have to admit, he had a point.”

The Bills made an early statement that they were serious about winning again, taking their first four games. That led to a 10-3-1 record, good for the AFL East title. They advanced to play San Diego in the title game, and dominated the game in a 23-0 victory. The Chargers were held to 12 first downs, and Hadl was 11 for 23 for 140 yards with two interceptions and three sacks. Schmidt had earned another ring.

Hank was cut by the Bills in training camp the following season, but the New York Jets quickly claimed him on waivers. The years in pro football hadn’t been too kind to Schmidt physically, thanks to all that crashing into bodies on kickoffs. He was limping on and off the field thanks to some sore knees – all for a salary of \$15,000. “The problem,” Jets linebacker Larry Grantham told Zimmerman, “was that Henry was terribly near-sighted. He’d just aim at the biggest cluster he could find. Then someone fitted him with contact lenses. When he actually could see what was coming at him, well, that was it for Henry as a wedge-buster.”

Schmidt did the best he could under the circumstances. Schmidt played in 11 games for New York, starting two. At least he got a good look at a young Joe Namath, who threw for 3,379 yards in his second year in the pros. The Jets finished 6-6-2, but better times seemed to be on the horizon for them.

Schmidt, however, was done. He had carved out an eight-year career in the pros mostly through hard work and dedication. Hank finished with 99 career games played. “That New York team, with Joe Namath and some of the guys there, that was going to be a good team, which they were,” he told Tobias. “They had some good receivers and some good linemen. I’m sorry I didn’t go back. I decided I had a wife and two kids and I could go get a job. So, I went into insurance and never went back. Weeb Ewbank called a couple of times and said I couldn’t play with anyone else. I told him I didn’t want to.”

Schmidt went back to San Diego and spent the next few decades there. Henry was still around as of 2020. His wife Lorena died in 2009; the two had married in 1984. Schmidt’s biggest post-football career highlight might have come when Zimmerman wrote a book that contained his all-time pro football team. What do you know? Schmidt was on it for his work on special teams.

It’s nice to be remembered.



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