

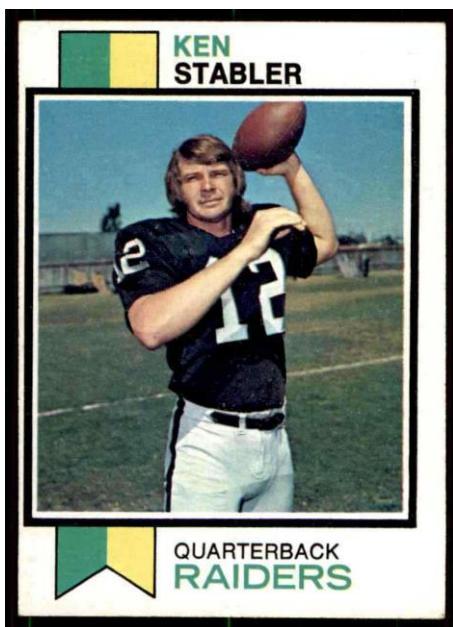


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## Ken Stabler

This article was written by Rich Shmelter

Wine, women, and song. This combination of revelry represented the image of quarterback Ken “Snake” Stabler off the field, where the light of a honky tonk jukebox served as his beacon. On the football field, however, Stabler displayed the desire of a fierce competitor. His passion was winning games for the Silver and Black, which the Raiders did on a consistent basis under his seven seasons of leadership as starting signal caller for Oakland’s band of renegades during the bulk of their glory years.



Stabler earned his moniker, and reputation as a talented left-handed signal caller back in his native Foley, Alabama. He was dubbed “Snake” by his high school coach after running downfield in a slithering motion through an opposing defense. During his tenure under center, Foley High School amassed a near-perfect 29-1 record and earned Stabler countless accolades. He was also a star on the basketball team, and his talent as a baseball pitcher brought him minor league offers from the New York Yankees and the Houston Astros. His abilities also drew the attention of Alabama’s legendary football coach Paul “Bear” Bryant.

Stabler decided that the gridiron was in his future and he continued on his winning ways as a collegiate quarterback for the coaching legend by leading Bryant’s teams to a 28-3-2 record from 1965 to 67 that included winning the 1965 national championship. As a



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junior in 1966 he led the Crimson Tide to a spotless 11-0 campaign and followed that with an 8-2-1 record in his senior year.

The Oakland Raiders made Stabler their second-round selection in the 1968 draft. However, at first, the “Snake’s” initial experience in the pro ranks was shaping up to be a bust. He came to the Raiders with a sore knee and lacking the arm strength needed to guide Oakland’s long-ball offensive attack. Added to Stabler’s woes was the fact that Daryle Lamonica was firmly entrenched as the starter. He was the reining AFL Most Valuable Player and led the team to a Super Bowl appearance just months prior to Stabler’s arrival.

The Raiders sent Stabler to the semi-pro Spokane Shockers of the Continental League where he played in one game before Oakland brought him back. In an effort to rest up his sore knee, the Raiders placed him on injured reserve. After missing the 1969 season, Stabler came back ready to stick with the team at the dawn of the 1970’s and remained in the silver and black colors throughout the entire decade.

He still was not anywhere near the starting job in 1970 but took advantage of his apprenticeship while waiting for the opportunity. He began lifting weights to strengthen his throwing arm and body and was taken under the tutelage of Raider great George Blanda. Blanda took a liking to the young man from Alabama, who held for him on extra points and field goal attempts, and began sharing all his vast knowledge, of which Stabler absorbed like a sponge. Stabler also met with Oakland’s offensive linemen on a regular basis to discuss what plays would work in different situations. Not only did this help Stabler learn more about the pro game, but it also earned him the respect of the men who protected him. With Blanda and one of the greatest offensive lines in the history of the game teaching him the ropes, Stabler was gaining on an aging Lamonica for the starting role at quarterback.

By 1973, “Snake” was unleashed on the rest of the NFL, and he made the most of the opportunity given to him. After his knee injuries limited his running skills, Stabler became an accomplished and much revered drop back passer. He was exceptional at locating an open receiver swiftly and efficiently, and within the 10 to 20-yard range, there was no better in regard to accuracy. His cool and calm demeanor allowed him to gain the respect and confidence from his teammates, and it also helped to even out the frenzied sideline rants of head coach John Madden. More than anyone else, Stabler was able to bring the emotional Madden down to a somewhat tranquil level. His demeanor and talents also allowed Stabler to pull victory from the jaws of defeat on many occasions and is still regarded as the team’s all-time quarterback. Under his field generalship, the Raiders posted a 71-25-1 regular season record, four division titles, one AFC Championship, and the crown jewel of the gridiron, a victory in Super Bowl XI.



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Along the Silver and Black road to stardom, Stabler earned four Pro Bowl trips (1973, 74, 76, and 77), was voted All-Pro in 1974 and 1976, and bestowed with the honor of beginning selected the NFL Most Valuable Player in 1974 and 1976. In 1976, he also won the league passing championship while leading the team to their first Super Bowl triumph. He also holds most of the team's then-passing records and reached 100 wins faster than any other quarterback up to that time.

As the 1970's began their descent into the history books, so too did the reign of Stabler as Oakland's quarterback. Team owner Al Davis began to belittle his quarterback after Stabler threw 30 interceptions and only 16 touchdowns in 1978, and the Raiders failed to make the playoffs for just the second time in the decade. Stabler shot back with many negative remarks about Davis, and the union between the two became broken. After missing the post-season yet again in 1979, it looked like either Davis or Stabler was going to leave town. Seeing that it was Mr. Davis who paid the bills, it was not a good bet to assume that the patriarch of Raider Nation would be heading to the airport any time soon. This left the "Snake" as the one who was going to be handed a ticket to another destination. In March of 1980, Davis traded Stabler to the Houston Oilers for strong-armed quarterback Dan Pastorini. Stabler remained with the Oilers for two seasons before they released him in 1982. He then signed with the New Orleans Saints before retiring on October 26, 1984, just two months shy of his 39<sup>th</sup> birthday.

During his illustrious run as field general for the Silver & Black, Stabler threw for 19,078 yards and 150 touchdowns. Over the course of his entire career with three teams, he amassed 27,938 yards, 194 touchdowns, and 222 interceptions.

The wild good times of this renegade signal caller were silenced on July 8, 2015 when "Snake" died of colon cancer at the age of 69 in Gulfport, Mississippi. His remains were returned to Foley, Alabama, where his life and athletic glory began. It was a true testament to the cycle of life, and what a life it was!!! One year later, on August 6, 2016, another celebration for Ken Stabler occurred in Canton, Ohio, when he was finally enshrined into the Professional Football Hall of Fame after many years of being eligible.