

Walter Payton Bio

Walter Payton, who passed away on November 1, 1999, was the essence of what an NFL player should be. His Hall of Fame career with the Chicago Bears still rings in the ears of Bear's fans and to this day, sports announcers, still compare rookies to Payton's running style.

Payton was born in Columbia, MS in 1954 and came to the game relatively late in life for an NFL player. It was not until high school that he discovered his talent for and love of the game. He continued to play in college at Jackson State in Mississippi.

Fourth in the Heisman Trophy voting, Walter was also the fourth pick in the 1975 NFL draft going to Chicago. With his rookie season starting slow with only 679 total yards and 7 touchdowns, his final rookie game against New Orleans was a vision of what was to come when he ran for 134 yards-a site unseen in Chicago since the Gale Sayers days.

His second year as a Bear saw him with 13 touchdowns and 1,000 yards, a performance which won him the NFL's 1977 MVP title. The Bears went to the playoffs this year and Payton ran an impressive 274 yards in a single game, a record which stood for 23 years.

With 16,726 total career-rushing yards, 110 touchdowns, and seventy-seven 100-yard rushing games throughout his 13 years in the NFL, Walter was fondly given the nickname "Sweetness," early in his career.

He made it look easy rushing for 1,000 yards every season between 1976 and 1981 and his first Pro-Bowl came in 1979-he was voted to every Pro-Bowl after that year until his retirement. Although his rushing yard record has been broken, that was mainly due to two strikes during his career in the NFL, which cut the seasons short, and between 1975 and 1977, the NFL season was only 14 games, unlike the 16 games it is today.

With the arrival of coach Mike Ditka and his authoritative attitude, new players were recruited to Chicago to ensure Payton's success. That came in 1984 when they led the NFC Central Division, the year that Walter broke Jim Brown's running record. Walter, being the gentleman he was, accepted his new title with dignity, but reminded everyone that day to think of other athletes whose careers were cut short due to injury or illness.

The Bears hurrah came in 1984 where they finished the season 10-6, the first time they made the post-season since 1963. It was then in 1986, that the Bears beat New England in the Super bowl with an ending score of 46-10-a game to be remembered, even if New England stopped Walter's running or scoring attempts-he now had a Super bowl ring and started what is still called "The Super bowl Shuffle."

In 1987, Walter Payton said goodbye to football with a tremendous send off at Soldier Field in Chicago. Walter was not one to slow down after his retirement from the NFL and sat on the Bears Board of Directors in 1988, started a CART racing team, and opened a restaurant brewpub. In 1993, his greatest triumph was achieved by being named to the NFL's Hall of Fame.

Payton went public with the announcement that he had been diagnosed with Primary Sclerosing Cholangitis. He was placed on a waiting list for a new liver; sadly, he passed away on November 1st of that year.

The number 34; Payton's is one which instantly brings a smile to the face of any Bears fan. The foundation started by Payton's wife Connie is yet another of his legacies, urging the people of Illinois to become organ donors. To this day, people in Chicago feel that they lost something truly special when they lost this remarkable man.

About the Author

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