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Walter Payton

Editor: Dana R. Barnes
Date: 2004
From: Notable Sports Figures
Publisher: Gale
Document Type: Biography
Length: 2,560 words
Content Level: (Level 4)
Lexile Measure: 1240L

About this Person

Born: July 25, 1954 in Columbia, Mississippi, United States
Died: November 01, 1999 in Chicago, Illinois, United States
Nationality: American
Occupation: Football player
Other Names: Payton, Walter Jerry
Updated: Jan. 1, 2004

Full Text:

Walter Payton, nicknamed "Sweetness" in college for his sweet and graceful moves on the football field, never lost that sweetness, even after he left the game. Never were Payton's qualities of grace and dignity more evident than in his final days, as he struggled unsuccessfully against a rare liver disease that progressed to the cancer of the bile duct that eventually took his life. Only 45 when he died in November 1999, Payton was, until the fall of 2002, the leading National Football League (NFL) rusher of all time, with a career total of 16,726 yards. Payton spent the final weekend of his life with former teammate Mike Singletary, who later told the *Washington Times*, "With all the greatest runs, the greatest moves I saw from him, what I experienced this weekend was by far the best of Walter Payton I've ever seen. As a person, he was a bright spot for any darkness that appeared." Payton's intensity and ferocity on the football field were balanced by a generosity of spirit and magnanimity off the field that were no less impressive. In his tribute to Payton, NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue probably summed it up best: "Walter exemplified class, and all of us in sports should honor him by striving to perpetuate his standard of excellence. Walter was an inspiration in everything he did. The tremendous grace and dignity he displayed in his final months reminded us again why 'Sweetness' was the perfect nickname for Walter Payton."

Born in Columbia, Mississippi

He was born Walter Jerry Payton in Columbia, Mississippi, on July 25, 1954. The son of Peter (a factory worker) and Alyne (a homemaker) Payton, Walter Payton grew up in what he later called "a kid's paradise," close to the Pearl River and several factories where he and his siblings enjoyed playing hide and seek. His Baptist parents instilled both a strong religious faith and a desire to strive for excellence in all their children. As a boy, Payton often ran afoul of their strict rules, but he later described them as firm but fair disciplinarians. Years later, Payton told Philip Koslow, author of *Walter Payton*: "My parents spent a lot of time with us and made us feel loved and wanted. I didn't care much about what went on around me, as long as I was in solid at home."

By the time Payton was eight-years-old, his father, who worked in a nearby factory manufacturing packs and parachutes for the federal government, had saved enough money to move the family into a new home that had separate rooms for each of his children. Only a block away was the John J. Jefferson School, a segregated school attended by all of Columbia's African American children from grades one through twelve. Walter was a better than average student, but his greatest love was music, on which he spent more time than either his studies or sports. Much to the chagrin of his parents, he'd sometimes duck his chores at home so that he could dance or sing instead.

Joins Track Team as Long Jumper

Payton's interest in sports picked up in the ninth grade when he joined Jefferson's track team as a long jumper. He also played drums in the school's band. Although he was drawn to football, he didn't go out for the school team, on which his older brother, Eddie, was the star running back, because he didn't want his mother worrying about both her sons getting hurt. After Eddie graduated, Jefferson's football coach asked Payton, then a sophomore, to try out for the team. After winning a promise from the coach that he could stay in the band, Payton agreed. In his very first high school game, he ran 65 yards for a touchdown. In 1969, all-black Jefferson merged with all-white Columbia High School, and Payton quickly became the unchallenged star of the school's football

HIGHLIGHTING COLORS GUIDE FOR ARTICLE ABOUT A PERSON:

YELLOW: Background Information

GREEN: Career Information

BLUE: Most Important Achievements

team, scoring in every game of his junior and senior years. Looking back on Payton's high school football career, Columbia coach Tommy Davis said he could always count on Walter when the team needed to score. Three years in a row, Payton was named to the all-conference team, and in his senior year he led the Little Dixie Conference in scoring and was selected for the all-state team.

After his graduation from Columbia High, Payton joined older brother Eddie at predominantly black Jackson State College where together the siblings were stars in the college football team's backfield. At the end of Payton's freshman year in college, Eddie graduated and moved on to the NFL, leaving Walter alone in the spotlight. Payton proved himself a versatile player, serving as Jackson State's halfback, punter, and place kicker. He ended his sophomore year as the nation's second highest collegiate scorer. That same year he broke college records by amassing the highest number of points--46--in a single game. As a junior, Payton ran for a total of 1,139 yards and led the country in scoring with 160 points.

Named NCAA Leading Scorer of All Time

After a grueling summer of training with brother Eddie in 1973, Payton, now a senior, returned to Jackson State stronger than ever. At the end of his senior year in football, he was named the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) leading scorer of all time with 464 points. Somehow, through it all, Payton managed to keep up with his studies, earning his bachelor's degree in special education in only three and a half years. It was during his college years that Payton picked up the nickname "Sweetness," which was to stay with him for the rest of his life.

In the first round of the 1975 NFL draft Payton was chosen by the Chicago Bears, making him the fourth player to be drafted overall. He successfully pushed for a signing bonus larger than that the Bears paid four years earlier to Archie Manning, a quarterback from the University of Mississippi. In the end, the Bears paid Payton \$126,000. The Bears, which had had their last winning season in 1967, were hoping that Payton could help turn things around for them. Sadly, the dreams of a quick turnaround were not to materialize. Even with Payton energizing the Bears lineup, the team lost six of its first seven games. Slowed by an ankle injury, Payton played only sporadically in the first half of the season and missed one game altogether--the only missed game of his career.

Payton snapped back in the second half of his rookie season as his ankle healed. At season's end, he led the NFL in kickoff returns and had amassed a total of 679 yards rushing, the highest for any Bears runner since 1969. During the summer following his first season with the Bears, Payton married Connie Norwood, his college sweetheart at Jackson State, on July 7, 1976. During Payton's second season, the Bears fared better than they had in eight years, with an even split of seven wins and seven losses. Had it not been for an injury he suffered in the final game of the season, Payton almost certainly would have won the NFL rushing title for the year--and he did lead the National Football Conference (NFC) in yards gained with a total of 1,390.

Breaks Single-Game Rushing Record

Payton's breakthrough year came in 1977. In the opening game of the Bears' season, Payton gained 160 yards, and six weeks later he posted the first 200-yard game in his pro career. Three weeks later, Payton broke O.J. Simpson's single-game rushing record when he ran for 275 yards. Freezing rain during the Bears' final game of the season held down Payton's rushing yardage for the year to 1,852, just 151 yards short of Simpson's season rushing record of 2,003 yards.

As his performance on the football field grew steadily more impressive, armchair fans across the country became increasingly familiar with Payton's unique running style--running on his toes with short, stiff-legged strides. Payton also seemed to derive genuine pleasure from blocking for other running backs and protecting the Bears quarterback against blitzing linebackers. Interviewed by *Esquire*, legendary Bears running back Gayle Sayers commented on this side of Payton's game: "That's what sets him head and shoulders above other running backs, the maximum effort he puts into other phases of the game." Payton also showed his appreciation to the offensive linemen who blocked for him by handing the football to one of them after he had scored a touchdown.

Negotiates Lucrative Contracts

Having proved his worth to the Bears, Payton in 1978 negotiated contracts that guaranteed him \$400,000 for the 1978 season, \$425,000 for 1979, and \$450,000 plus incentive bonuses for 1980. However, despite the front office's high hopes, Payton's 50 pass receptions and 1,395 yards in rushing yardage were not enough to keep the Bears from another losing season. They ended the 1978 season with a 7-9 record. Payton and fullback Roland Harper, with 992 rushing yards, accounted for 72 percent of the Bears' offense in 1978.

Hampered by a painful pinched nerve in his shoulder through much of the 1979 season, Payton nevertheless managed to rush for 1,610 yards, the best in the NFC. With a 10-6 record, the Bears made it into the playoffs, but they were eliminated in the first round. With a season total of 1,460 yards, Payton snagged his fifth consecutive NFC rushing title in 1980, but it was not enough to keep the Bears from a dismal 7-9 record. The following year was even worse for the Bears, who finished the season with a record of 6-10. Slowed for much of the 1981 season by a sore shoulder and cracked ribs, Payton managed to rush for only 1,222 yards for the season, failing to win the NFC rushing title for the first time in several years.

Signed to 3-Year, \$2 Million Contract

In advance of the 1982 season, Payton negotiated a three-year contract worth \$2 million with the Bears. To beef up its chances, the Bears' owners brought in Mike Ditka as coach. But the season was marred by a players' strike, and the Bears finished the shortened season with a disappointing record of 3-6. In 1983 the Bears brought in Jim McMahon as quarterback. Thus strengthened, the team finished with an 8-8 record. Payton alone accounted for more than a third of the Bears' offense, running for 1,421 yards and catching 53 passes for 607 yards. Payton's performance in 1984 was electrifying. Early in the season, he broke Jim Brown's 19-year-old NFL

career rushing record of 12,312 yards and ended the year with a season total of 1,684 yards. The Bears ended the regular season with a record of 10-6. In the first game of the playoffs, Chicago defeated the Washington Redskins by a score of 23-19 but fell to the San Francisco 49ers in the NFC title game.

Payton's dream of making it to the Super Bowl finally came true in 1985. The Bears compiled a stunning record of 15-1 in the regular season and handily polished off its two playoff opponents in home games to power its way into Super Bowl XX. It was a storybook finish for the Bears as they demolished the New England Patriots, 46-10, in the big game. The following year, the Bears finished the season with a blazing 14-2 record but stumbled in its first playoff game, losing to the Redskins, 27-13. In 1987, the season was once again marred by a player strike. However, the Bears performed strongly in the regular season, finishing with a record of 11-4 and making it into the playoffs again. Paired off against the Redskins, the Bears' post-season march was stopped in its tracks. Not long after the end of the season, Payton, now 33, decided it was time to call it quits and announced his retirement from pro football.

After his retirement, Payton focused most of his attention to the operations of Walter Payton Inc., his personal holding company with investments in restaurants, timber, and real estate. He managed, however, to find time to race cars and boats. In July 1993, Payton was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. In making the presentation to his father, Payton's son, Jarrett, said: "Not only is my dad an exceptional athlete, he's a role model; he's my biggest role model and best friend. We do a lot of things together. . . . I'm sure my sister will endorse this statement: we have a super dad."

In February 1999 Payton called a press conference to reveal that he was suffering from a rare liver disease called primary sclerosing cholangitis (PSC) that causes the bile ducts to close, backing up bile, and permanently damaging the liver. Only three months later, he learned that he had developed bile duct cancer as a result of the PSC. On November 1, 1999, surrounded by his family and close friends, he died at his home in South Barrington, Illinois.

Records are made to be broken, and so it was with Payton's career rushing record. In late October 2002, Emmitt Smith of the Dallas Cowboys amassed a total of 16,743 career yards to surpass Payton's 16,726. But Payton was so much more than just a rushing record. In the hearts of his fellow players, coaches, and football fans everywhere, he lives on as one of the game's greatest players. Former teammate Dan Hampton probably said it best: "No one on this football team and no one in the NFL is actually in Walter Payton's league."

Career Statistics

Career Statistics		Rushing	Receiving	Yr	Team	GP	Att	Yds	Y/A	TD	Rec	Yds	Y/R	TD
1975	CHI 13	196	679	3.5	7	33	213	6.5	0					
1976	CHI 14	311	1390	4.5	13	15	149	9.9	0					
1977	CHI 14	339	1852	5.5	14	27	269	10.0	2					
1978	CHI 16	333	1395	4.2	11	50	480	9.6	0					
1979	CHI 16	369	1610	4.4	14	31	313	10.1	2					
1980	CHI 16	317	1460	4.6	6	46	367	8.0	1					
1981	CHI 16	339	1222	3.6	6	41	379	9.2	2					
1982	CHI 9	148	596	4.0	1	32	311	9.7	0					
1983	CHI 16	314	1421	4.5	6	53	607	11.5	2					
1984	CHI 16	381	1684	4.4	11	45	368	8.2	0					
1985	CHI 16	324	1551	4.8	9	49	483	9.9	2					
1986	CHI 16	321	1333	4.2	8	37	382	10.3	3					
1987	CHI 12	146	533	3.7	4	33	217	6.6	1					
TOTAL	190	3838	167	26	4.4	110	492	4538	9.2	15				

AWARDS

1974, Named Little All-American after setting nine school records at Jackson State College; 1975, Tops 100 yards rushing for Chicago Bears for the first time; 1976, Named *Sporting News* NFC Player of the Year and picked to play in Pro Bowl; 1976-81, Rushes for 1,000 yards or more each season; 1977, Sets single-game rushing record with 275 yards vs. Minnesota on November 20; 1977, Named NFL Player of the Year and *Sporting News* NFC Player of the Year; 1977, Named NFL Offensive Player of the Year; 1978-81, 1984-87, Selected to play in Pro Bowl; 1984, Breaks Jim Brown's NFL career rushing record; 1985, Named NFL Player of the Year; 1993, Inducted into Pro Football Hall of Fame.

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Source Citation (MLA 9th Edition)

"Walter Payton." *Notable Sports Figures*, edited by Dana R. Barnes, Gale, 2004. *Gale In Context: Biography*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/K2440301400/BIC?u=glenb87_east&sid=bookmark-BIC&xid=21e6c479. Accessed 16 Oct. 2024.

Gale Document Number: GALEIK2440301400