

An Aw Shucks Guy

Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 1999

By Joe Horrigan

Guard Billy Shaw, once described as an "aw shucks sort of guy from Mississippi," makes perfect strangers feel instantly comfortable with his polite disposition and broad smile. His friendly demeanor makes it difficult to believe that this gentle giant was one of pro football's toughest competitors. However, when the game whistle blew and the ball was snapped, Shaw's "Mr. Nice Guy" nature metamorphosed to an aggressive, focused lineman, with one thing on his mind, winning football games.

"When you played against Billy," remembers Kansas City Chiefs Hall of Fame linebacker, Bobby Bell, "you brought your lunch. He played every down to the maximum. He was relentless."

A 6-2, 258-pound All-America lineman out of Georgia Tech, Shaw was the second-round pick of the Buffalo Bills in the 1961 American Football League draft and a fourteenth-round pick of the Dallas Cowboys of the then-rival National Football League. It wasn't that the Cowboys failed to recognize Shaw's potential when they selected him in the late round. It was simply a calculated risk on their part.

"I had already signed with Buffalo when the National Football League held their draft," Shaw explained. "In those days, people didn't know if the AFL would last the year, and I guess the Cowboys wanted to be able to claim me."

Since the AFL did survive, the Cowboys never got their chance to claim the two-way Georgia Tech star, whose steadying influence on the Bills led the team to consecutive AFL titles in 1964 and 1965.

Born on December 15, 1938, Shaw participated in sports throughout his youth. However, his high school and early college years in no way served as an indication of the success the Natchez, Mississippi native would achieve in pro football. He was an end at a small country high school near Vicksburg, until the school dropped football. His father, who had attended the University of Mississippi on a football scholarship, moved the family into town so his son could continue to play football at the larger Carr Central. As a 188-pound senior at Carr, he played offensive and defensive tackle. At Georgia Tech, Shaw continued to grow and by his senior year weighed 220 pounds. That year he earned All-America honors as a two-way tackle and was named to Georgia Tech's All-Time Team.

"Actually," Shaw once said, "I thought I played defense much better than offense, and I still believe most of the honors I received were for my defensive play."

Included in his post-season honors was being named to the 1961 College All-Star team. As a member of the All-Star team, coach Otto Graham worked out Shaw as a defensive end for nearly two weeks. When guard Houston Antwine injured his ankle, Graham decided to move Shaw into Antwine's spot.

"I was scared to death," Shaw recalled about playing the NFL champion Philadelphia Eagles in the annual All-Star contest. "I was up against Ed Khayat, a Mississippi boy who later finished his career with Boston (Patriots). I thought this might ease the tension a bit since he might take it easier on me. It was just the opposite. He turned me every way but loose."

Shaw did turn some heads, however, when he blocked Eagle linebacker Maxie Baughan, knocking the wind out of him, causing the Eagles to take an injury time out. "The papers made a big fuss about it because we had been roommates in college," the humble Shaw explained. But from that point on, the All-America tackle was a guard.

Although the Bills had planned all along to use Shaw as a guard, they did consider and even once used their future All-AFL offensive lineman as a defensive end. "Buster (then-Bills head coach Buster Ramsey)

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had some big fat guys who couldn't rush the passer," recalled Eddie Abramowski, the Bills' trainer, "so he sent in Shaw and Ken Rice (another rookie guard) for two plays. They couldn't get to him either," Abramowski chuckled.

Although Shaw won a starting job on the offensive line, he was somewhat surprised at the level of play he faced in the pros. "At Tech," he said, "we ran a lot, but up here we're passing 75 or 80 percent of the time. It takes a lot to keep some of those old cagey veterans out every play."

The Bills made several changes in Shaw's sophomore year in the pros. First, a new head coach, Lou Saban, was hired. Gone were Ramsey and the "big fat guys." Also gone was the offense that passed "75 or 80 percent of the time."

Along with Saban came offensive line coach Red Miller. Miller let Billy know that it was his goal to "make a hitter instead of a pusher" out of the young lineman. Shaw, under Miller's watchful eye, worked tirelessly through his second training camp. With his physical maturity -- he grew to 258 pounds -- he became exceptionally strong, and at the same time he developed and refined his skills, particularly his explosiveness off the line. By the start of the regular season, Shaw was not just "a hitter"; he was "the hitter" on the offensive line.

The AFL in those days was looked upon by many as a pass-happy league with little or no defense. That couldn't have been further from the truth in Buffalo during Shaw's days. Bills' teams featured power running by Cookie Gilchrist and Wray Carlton, a solid defense, and controlled passing from Jack Kemp or his understudy Daryle Lamonica.

"One of the awesome sights of that era," a veteran Buffalo sportswriter recalled, "was the Bills driving close to the goal line, Lamonica inserted into the lineup and a quarterback bootleg was called. Shaw would pull from his left guard position followed by Gilchrist and Carlton. Lamonica would follow those heavy bombers into the end zone."

Equally adept at pass blocking and run blocking, Shaw's ability to pull out in front of runners was a perfect fit for the Bills. In fact, because Buffalo runners tended to be more durable than fast, he sometimes was able to stay in front of them to make blocks far down field. In a 1965 game against the Houston Oilers he escorted Carlton 80 yards for a then-Bills record touchdown jaunt.

Shaw, along with tackle Stew Barber and center Al Bemiller -- who like Shaw were drafted by the Bills in 1961 -- became the nucleus of the AFL's premier offensive line and often became the focus of their team's success. Such was the case following a 1963 win over the Boston Patriots.

Although Kemp passed for an impressive 317 yards, three of the four touchdowns scored that day came on short-yardage situations. "The play we used on those three touchdowns from in close," recalled a justifiably proud Bemiller, was called quarterback-3 which means Kemp going between me and Billy Shaw. The blocking is straight ahead. On the first score, we even told (defensive tackle Houston) Antwine we were coming over him."

At the time of Shaw's election to the Hall of Fame, the Bills of 1962, 1963, and 1964 still ranked second, third, and fourth in the team record book for rushing touchdowns scored in a season. For Shaw, 1962 was the start of his string of five consecutive first-team All-AFL honors.

The Bills 1964 and 1965 championship seasons were the team's "glory years." Many observers still feel that the 1964 team was the Bills' best ever. That year, the underdog team from Buffalo beat the AFL's glamour team, the high-scoring San Diego Chargers, 20-7 in the AFL Championship Game. However, it was the rematch a year later that Shaw feels the team really proved itself a champion.

"Cookie was gone by then, and our two best receivers, Doby (Elbert Dubenion) and Glen Bass, were hurt early in the season," Shaw said. "I think one of the biggest things was that we realized that the guys who were left after those injuries could carry the load." Carry the load they did. The two-touchdown underdog Bills stunned the Chargers 23-0 in the championship game and captured their second consecutive title.

"The memory of Billy most vivid to me was the AFL Championship rematch against the Chargers in San Diego in 1965," remembers Jack Kemp. "He was knocked out on the opening kickoff and had to leave the game. I was knocked out myself late in the first half and Daryle came in for me."

"It was still a close game in the second half. I couldn't read Lou Saban's mind, but I think he felt we needed some inspiration. I was calling a play when Saban sent Billy back into the game; his nose broken and blood all over the front of his jersey. When he came into the huddle the whole team seemed to rise."

Shaw was as fiery on the field as he was friendly off it. He was always prepared for a game, both physically and mentally. "Winning or losing often depends upon the mental approach of a team," he explained. "For that reason, I try to get myself 100 percent right mentally for every game. That way I don't have to 'psych up' as some of the players call it, for any particular game."

Shaw's value to his team may have been best illustrated in 1967 following a training camp injury in which he tore the ligaments and cartilage in his right knee. Original estimates on the time Shaw would be lost to the Bills varied from half a season to as long as almost the full season.

However, anyone who knew him, knew that he would be back sooner rather than later. "With a player of Shaw's type," said Joel Collier, who replaced Saban as head coach in 1966, "you knew he'd be back as quickly as possible. It takes a lot of work to get back with that kind of injury, but Billy's the type that will do what needs to be done."

Shaw was discharged from the hospital a week ahead of schedule and immediately was back with the team, watching practices, attending meetings, making all the road trips.

On September 1, five weeks after his surgery, his leg cast was removed. He immediately began his road back to playing condition under the supervision of his friend and trainer Abramoski.

Even his mother had some advice concerning his rehabilitation. "You know what she said," Shaw asked with a smile. "She told me, 'Son, don't be in a hurry to play after you take off that thing (the cast). Take at least two weeks.'"

"Most guys would take 12 to 16 weeks to be ready to play," Abramoski said. "But Billy always set his goals higher than the average person. That's the type of person he is. He wanted to be the best guard in the league, and he is. He wants to be a success in his off-season business, and he is. He set out to play sooner, and he did. He actually was ready to go in 10 weeks, but we held him out an extra week, frankly, because we were afraid."

Finally, in week six of the season, Shaw stopped leading the cheers and began hearing them again, when he returned to the starting lineup. During his absence, the team made eight different offensive line adjustments in an attempt to fill the void left by their all-star guard.

Shaw's approach to the game was nothing short of inspirational. Seven times "Steady Eddie," as his teammates called him, was elected offensive team captain, a role he took seriously. Collier assessed Shaw as "being as close to a perfect leader as you can get."

Named a first-team All-AFL choice five times and a second team choice twice, Shaw was selected to play in eight AFL All-Star Games and was named to the All-Time AFL Team. A member of pro football's All-Decade team of the 1960s, Billy Shaw is the only player elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame to play his entire career in the American Football League.