

# Bill Dudley

By Ed Gilleran Jr

Quick, what college football player is considered by many as the greatest from south of the Mason-Dixon Line in the last 50 years?

Frank Sinkwich, Charlie Trippi, "Choo-Choo" Justice, Ace Parker, George McAfee, Beattie Feathers? No. Not Herschel Walker, either. If you said Bill Dudley of the University of Virginia, Class of 1942, you get an "A" in college football history. As an Associated Press article put it in 1941, "Bill Dudley has made a football record almost too amazing to believe."

William McGarvey Dudley's arrival at Virginia's campus in 1938 did not cause Cavalier fans to turn cartwheels. The 16-year-old, 150-lb lad was just another good high school football player from coach Marshall Shearer's Graham H.S. team in Bluefield, Virginia, a town of 5,000 population in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. But by the time his final college game arrived in 1941, Bill was All-Conference, All-South, All-America, All-Everything. He won the Maxwell Trophy and the Walter Camp award. In its review of college football during the 1933-1943 period, Illustrated Football Annual, the premier football magazine of the time, named Dudley as the "Number One halfback in the South."

In his second varsity game, in 1939 against a well-respected Navy team, Dudley scored Virginia's first touchdown on a twisting-dodging 45-yard run, and returned a Middle punt 42 yards on another occasion. His two extra-point tries were blocked as Navy won 14-12. Bill served notice that he was an outstanding kick-returner two weeks later when he galloped 36 and 81 yards with kick returns against VMI and also made a spectacular diving catch of Jim Gillette's 25-yard TD pass in a 16-13 loss.

Playing with a Virginia team which was highly respected but not thought to be of the calibre of some of the schools on the Cavaliers' schedule-Tennessee, Yale and North Carolina, for example - Dudley began to attract national attention in his junior year, 1940. At the conclusion of a spectacular season, the 19-year-old captain-elect was being mentioned in the same company as Southern grid greats Steve Lach of Duke, Joe Muha of VMI, and Frank Sinkwich of Georgia. Bill finished eighth in the country in rushing (469 yards) and fourth in passing with 67 completions out of 140 attempts (722 yards). His punting average was 37 yards, and he gained 509 yards returning punts and kickoffs.

Early in 1940 Coach Frank Murray took his team north to play Yale in the Bowl at New Haven; and in those days Yale was somebody. Before 25,000 spectators, including many of the elite of the football writing fraternity, Dudley helped Virginia upend the Elis 19-14. In a recent interview, Bill said, "To me, playing in Yale Bowl for the first time against a team as good as Yale, was a real experience."

Later in 1940, against Lehigh he zigged and zagged 31 and 37 yards for TD's, tossed a 56-yard scoring pass, and tightroped down the sideline 37 yards after intercepting a pass. Then Bill figured in all of Virginia's three touchdowns against Maryland (one by running, two passing), and also sped 30 and 39 yards to tallies in Virginia's 20-6 win over Washington & Lee.

A month later Bill won the acclaim of one of college football's master coaches General Bob Neyland, when he jitterbugged 87 yards through the entire Tennessee team to score on a punt return. Virginia did not win the game at Knoxville but Bill again was in the national spotlight. Sportswriter Wilton

Hazzard wrote that "Bill Dudley is one of the most hair-raising halfbacks in America."

The Thanksgiving Day, 1940 clash with North Carolina almost proved an upset as Virginia held the Tarheels even for most of the game. As usual, Dudley sparked the attack, passing to the Cavs' lone TD. On the final play of the game, with North Carolina ahead on a Harry Dunkle field goal, Dudley passed into the Carolina end-zone but it was intercepted.

Then came 1941 and Dudley's ascendancy as one of college football's best all-around players.

Against highly-rated Lafayette, Bill returned a punt 90 yards for a score in Virginia's surprise 25-0 victory. The Yale game was next and it saw Dudley at his spectacular best. He made a short run for Virginia's first touchdown and passed 16 yards for the second. Bill's passing, punting and running helped set up the Cavaliers' third TD and they appeared to have the game in the bag. But Yale made one of the greatest comebacks in Eli history and won, 21-19. Dudley says "The memory of that game is the strongest one I still have."

Against Richmond, Bill ran for one score, passed for three more, and kicked a field goal in a 44-0 win. In a game called "The battle of the backs" a week later, Dudley overshadowed VMI's "Bosh" Pritchard and Joe Muha as he passed for one touchdown, kicked three extra points, and punted sensationally in a 27-7 win.

In a rout of VPI, 34-0, Dudley scored two touchdowns himself, passed for two others, and place-kicked four PAT's. He gained a total of 241 yards, completed 10 of 16 passes for 109 yards, and ran through the Tech line for 132 yards. The New York Times described Bill's performance as "a masterpiece of football versatility". Despite missing most of the game with an injury, Bill still managed to score two touchdowns, passed for another, and kicked three extra points in a 27-7 win over Washington & Lee.

The Lehigh game was over in a hurry as Dudley passed 33 yards for an early score and added the extra point. The next scoring drive, covering 59 yards in four plays was all Dudley. He passed 17 yards, ran for 33, then hit the line twice for the remaining nine. He added two more TD's and three extra points before the 34-0 game ended. Bill rushed for 167 yards, completed three passes for 81 yards, and returned five punts for 78.

Now came North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the big Thanksgiving Day game. The Cavaliers won 28 to 7 and the victory went into the books as one of the greatest games ever played by a Virginia football team. With Dudley at his brilliant best, the Virginians blasted 67 yards to scores the first two times they had the ball.

Dudley was responsible for the first TD on a 21-yard pass. Bill next cut off the whole 67 yards in one slice as he raced to the goal behind excellent blocking. Later came Dudley's story book run which not only gave Virginia its third touchdown but also seemed to take all the fight out of Carolina. With the Cavs on their own 21, Bill went back into punt formation, but instead of kicking he

sprinted around end and, side-stepping tacklers and cutting in and out of traffic, he ended up in the end-zone. In the final scoring drive, covering 82 yards, Dudley passed for 48 yards and then bucked over for the TD. His final conversion made it 28-7. Bill's game stats were 215 yards rushing in 17 tries, six of 11 passes completed for 117 yards. His achievements in this, his final college game, were described as "the most amazing performance ever witnessed at Kenan Stadium."

If ever there was a consensus All-America, Dudley was it in 1941. Running from what Coach Frank Murray called "My Virginia T", Dudley got direct snaps from center and could run, pass or quick kick. He called most of the plays himself. By the 1941 season's end he had scored 18 touchdowns, 23 extra points, one field goal, threw 12 touchdown passes, punted for a 36-yard average, and had a grand total of 2,467 yards gained rushing, passing, pass receiving, and returning punts and kickoffs. His season scoring total was 134 points, the highest in the nation.

Bill played two more games as a collegian. In January of 1942, in the East-West Shriners' game at New Orleans (moved from San Francisco because of worry about a possible Japanese air attack), Bill threw a TD pass to Colgate's Bill Geyer to help the East earn a 6-6 tie, and he was voted the game's outstanding player, largely because of four timely pass interceptions. In August, 1942 Bill played for the College All-Stars against the Chicago Bears. Despite not being voted to the All-Star starting backfield by the nation's fans, Dudley was easily the standout in the collegian's pre-game camp. But just four days before the game Bill broke a finger which greatly hampered him as the powerful Bears crushed the All-Stars 21-0.

Following graduation, Bill signed with the NFL Pittsburgh Steelers. Club owner Art Rooney, who Dudley says "Was one of the finest men I ever met", was a believer; many others thought Dudley was overrated in college and predicted he would flop in the NFL. Instead, Bill blossomed and was voted NFL Rookie of the Year. He piled up 696 yards rushing to lead the NFL, and was named to the AP All-Pro team in the same backfield as Sid Luckman, Sammy Baugh and Andy Farkas.

August 1943 found Bill at the Aviation Cadet School at San Antonio, Texas. He received his 2nd Lieutenant's bars at Ellington Field, outside Houston, in March 1944 and then became a bomber pilot flight instructor at Randolph Field near San Antonio. He played for Randolph's sensational grid team in 1944.

Bill was voted "Outstanding Player" as Randolph defeated the 4th Air Force team of March Field, 20 to 7. Bill tossed a 20-yard TD pass to Jack Goodyear; his pass interception set up another Ramblers score; and a pair of sensational quick kicks put the March Flyers behind the eight ball for large portions of the game.

In a game against an undefeated Charlie Trippi-led 3rd Air Force team, Dudley intercepted a pass and ran it back 50 yards to set up a Randolph score. He also passed 5 yards to Goodyear for another touchdown as Randolph won 19-0. Later in 1944, before 50,000 fans at Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, Dudley was "loaned" to the March Field Flyers for a Treasury Bond fund raiser against the Washington Redskins. Bill turned in several spectacular runs but the Redskins won 7-3.

In December 1944, as Randolph Field entered the big "Treasury Bond Bowl" game at New York's Polo Grounds against the Second Air Force Superbombers team that featured the great Glen Dobbs, Dudley had already turned in TD runs of

47, 48, 50, 59 and 67 yards, and had 10 touchdown passes; seven extra points; had amassed 640 yards rushing, and had 32 complete passes for 520 yards.

Coach Frank Tritico's Randolph lineup included nine "alumni" of the NFL and also stars such as Baylor's Jack Russell, Martin Ruby (Texas A&M), Walt Merrill (Alabama), Johnny Goodyear (Marquette), "Tippy" Madarik (Detroit), Pete Layden (Texas), Don Looney (TCU), Bobby Cifers (Tennessee), and "Dippy" Evans (Notre Dame).

"Some expert insist Randolph's gridders are superior to any combination, professional or collegiate", said Art Daley of the New York Times. Famous sportswriter Bob Considine of the Washington Post wrote that "They are the best, college, service or pro."

In what the Philadelphia Inquirer called a "bone-crushing battle between super-charged lines amid snow flurries, Randolph took to the skyways and triumphed, 13-6, on touchdown passes by Pete Layden and Bill Dudley."

Dudley was selected for the GI All-America team of 1944 by the Associated Press. His mates in the GI backfield were Otto Graham (Northwestern and North Carolina Pre-Flight), Charlie Trippi (Georgia and 3rd Air Force), and Len Eshmont (Fordham and Norman Oklahoma Navy).

The following year, before 45,000 service men and women at Pearl Harbor, Dudley scampered 30 yards for the game's only score as the Army Air Force All-Stars downed the Navy Stars 9-0.

Dudley resumed his career as a pro in 1945. In 1946 he won a rare NFL triple crown for being tops in rushing, pass interceptions and punt return yardage, and was the 1946 NFL MVP. Bill moved to the Detroit Lions for the next three seasons, and then to the Washington Redskins in 1950, 1951 and 1953 (he had temporarily retired in 1952). All told, Bill gained 8,147 combined net yards as a pro, scored 434 points, made 23 interceptions. He won the Touchdown Club Award in 1946 as the Outstanding Pro Player. In the Official Pictorial History of the NFL, the caption on a photo of Dudley describes him as "one of the most elusive backs who ever carried a football." He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1966. Bill was also inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1956.

Throughout his career Dudley was widely recognized as an excellent player an outstanding individual. Dick Hudson, of the Charleston Daily Mail, pointed out the extra element that made Dudley a superstar: "He was a leader with a flaming spark who fired up a whole team to action." Arthur Daley, Pulitzer

Prize-winning columnist of the New York Times commented one time that "Dudley is a singularly modest youth in spite of all the acclaim he has received, is an intensely religious lad, and a very likeable individual." Charlie Justice called Bill the "best I've ever seen."

Paul Christman, former Missouri All-America star and quarterback of the 1947 championship Chicago Cardinals, described Bill in pure football terms: Dudley is the finest football player I've ever seen. He was the only break-away runner I know who could run the ends or buck up the middle for a yard or two when you really needed it. He punted good enough, kicked off, kicked field goals and extra points, threw passes, fielded punts, tackled with more guts than brains, and did whatever his team needed."

Before retiring from football for good and becoming an insurance executive in Lynchburg, Virginia, Bill served briefly as an assistant coach at Yale and then became backfield coach in 1954 at his alma mater Virginia.

College football has had its share of glittering specialists -- the great runners, passers, punters, kick returners, field goal stars, and pass defenders. A long time ago the University of Virginia had them all wrapped up in one package, Bill Dudley.