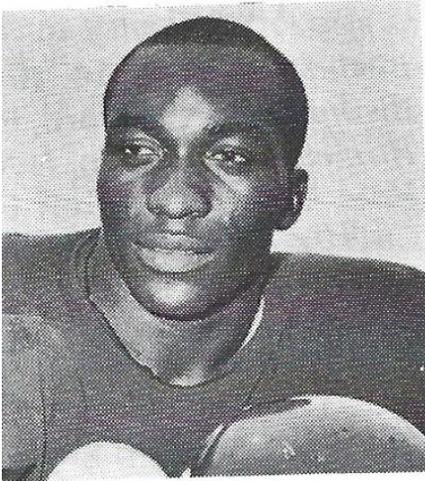


Charlie Brown

This article was written by Budd Bailey.

Football careers are like climbing a ladder. Those first couple of steps are easy, but the task gets more difficult as the altitude adds up. Such was the football life of Charlie Brown, who was a superstar in high school and a star in college, but couldn't translate that into a long stay in the highest level.



Charles Edward Brown was born on September 13, 1942 in Heflin, Alabama. For those driving between Atlanta and Birmingham on Interstate 20, it's a good place to stop and stretch your legs – because it's about halfway between the two cities. Heflin has about 3,500 people in it, and Brown seems to be the only pro athlete to have been born there.

But that's not to say that Charlie played his football in that part of the world. At some point the Browns headed north to Ohio, and were probably part of the post-World War II migration from South to North. The family landed in Massillon, perhaps because of some of the industry that was there at the time. For example, Republic Steel had a plant there.

More to the point, though, Massillon was the perfect place for a young man to live if he had some ability and interest in football. It's difficult to write a good-sized history of the game without mentioning this Ohio town. That part of the country was a breeding ground for professional football, as the sport's origins date back to shortly after 1900. Massillon and its neighbor, Canton, were sometimes in the same league during the 20 years before what the group that became the National Football League was formed, and the two teams/cities developed a good-sized rivalry.



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Once those two cities fell away from the emerging NFL, the energy from that rivalry was transferred to their respective high schools. Paul Brown arrived at Massillon Washington High School in 1922, and eventually became the starting quarterback for two years. Brown came back to coach the football team at Massillon in 1932, and the Tigers went on an incredible 80-8-2 run during his time there. Brown invented the football playbook and the idea of shuttling in plays from the bench during his tenure. That run of success springboarded him to jobs at Ohio State University, the Cleveland Browns and Cincinnati Bengals, and he became known as probably the greatest innovator in football history. Brown's dynasty back in Massillon started a tradition of excellence that eventually included 24 state championships. As you might expect, plenty of athletic talent came from Massillon. Several football players are on that list, but basketball's Bob Knight and golf's Tom Weiskopf also are from that region.

Charlie Brown turned out to be a great fit. He was an All-State and All-American selection for the Tigers. In his senior year of 1961, Charlie ran for 1,094 yards and scored 68 points. His final game turned out to be a memorable one. The Tigers played Canton McKinley, of course, and they held on for a dramatic 7-6 victory before 20,000. It included a goal-line stand, including a stop on fourth-and-1, that saved the game, in the fourth quarter. The '61 Massillon team became the first Tigers' squad in school history to win 11 games in a season. It won the third straight state championship for Massillon.

A player like that from a team like that certainly figured to be in demand when it came to recruiting from colleges. Brown eventually landed at Syracuse University, a few hundred miles to the northeast. Charlie joined a program that was more or less at an historic peak. The Orangemen were coming off a national championship in 1959, and that remains the only achievement of its kind in Syracuse's football history. It was 7-2 in 1960 and ranked 19th in the nation. Then in 1961, Ernie Davis became the first African American to ever win the Heisman Trophy when he captured that award. Syracuse went 7-3 in the regular season (including a loss to Notre Dame *after* time had expired), and beat Miami (Fla.) in the Liberty Bowl. Ben Schwartzwalder had been coaching at Syracuse since 1949. He had a losing season in his debut, but the Orangemen hadn't been below .500 since then as of 1962 – a streak that would continue until 1972, a year before Schwartzwalder's retirement.

In 1962, Brown watched the Orangemen from the sidelines as a freshman as they "suffered" through a mediocre 5-5 season. But he had the chance to contribute to the varsity in 1963. Syracuse ran up an 8-2 record that included a 14-7 win over Notre Dame in the last college football game ever played in the old Yankee Stadium. Brown saw some duty as a backup running back. He rushed 27 times for 118 yards and a touchdown, and caught four passes for 23 yards and a score.



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That apparently was the end of Brown's days as an offensive back. He didn't have any more offensive statistics at Syracuse, moving over to full-time work on defense. Charlie was part of a first-string defense that called itself "The Spiders," who placed a spider decal on its helmets in an effort to promote unity among the members. "Anything that provides the spark, that makes them work as a unit is OK with me," Schwartzwalder said. The offense didn't need a nickname. Its starting running backs were Jim Nance and Floyd Little; no wonder Brown wound up in the defensive backfield.

The season didn't start well. Syracuse opened the season with a game at Boston College. It looked as if the contest was headed for a tie. Then with four seconds left, Eagles quarterback Larry Marzetti threw a long pass into the end zone. Brown and Wally Mahle collided, and BC receiver Bill Cronin caught the pass for a 45-yard, game-winning touchdown. Fans stormed the field and tore down the goalposts.

Brown and Syracuse bounced back a week later to knock off Gale Sayers and Kansas, and went on to a 7-3 record in the regular season. One of the wins came against UCLA, as Brown was one of two Orangemen to return an interception for a touchdown. The fine season earned the Orange a trip to the Sugar Bowl, where SU fell to Louisiana State.

The 1965 season was a similar one to 1964. The Orangemen went 7-3 again, rebounding from a 2-2 start. But they didn't have a particularly tough schedule (one ranked opponent, Miami), and missed out on a bowl game. Brown, meanwhile, had a great season, earning first-team All-American honors from the Sporting News. He took a postseason trip to the East-West Shrine Game. By the way, "A Charlie Brown Christmas" first ran on network television in the holiday season of 1965, and was presented annual through 2019. It's easy to wonder how much kidding the real Charlie Brown received about that over the years.

With his college football days over, Brown could afford to spend the rest of his college days relaxing just a little. (He did run on the SU track team.) Early in 1966, a student named Howie Wythe brought together 11 of the best musicians Syracuse University had to offer. He called the band "The Sidewinders," and Brown was the lead singer. Since Charlie did some work on the side as a male model, there's no doubt that he was a popular front man for the band. The group eventually turned into "The Jam Factory," and became a legendary local band in Syracuse – but Brown had missed most of the fun because pro football had called in the summer of 1966.

This was the last year that the National Football League and American Football League had separate drafts, so it was a good time for Brown to enter the pros. He was picked in



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the second round (28th overall) by the NFL's Chicago Bears, and in the fourth round (32nd overall) by the AFL's San Diego Chargers. Charlie signed with the Bears.

Chicago was coming off a 9-5 season, as the Bears were led by legendary coach George Halas. The team had one of the great drafts in history the season before, taking both Sayers and Dick Butkus in the first round. They needed no time to play like all-time greats. Brown arrived in Chicago and found that the Bears had a good, veteran secondary. Roosevelt Taylor, Richie Petitbon, Bennie McRae and Dave Whitsell were firmly in place, leaving Brown on the outside. Charlie played in all 14 games that season, but didn't start any of them. The Bears ended up a disappointing 5-7-2.

It was a similar story in 1967. The Bears were a little better but nothing special at 7-6-1, as Sayers and Butkus still didn't have enough help. Brown only played in eight games – injuries probably were an issue – and he didn't start in any of them. Charlie did see some duty as a kick returner when he wasn't a backup safety, but probably wasn't too busy. If you guessed that Brown probably was on his way out of Chicago ... you'd be right.

Charlie's next stop was in Buffalo, signing with the Bills in the middle of the 1968 season. Buffalo was on its way to a 1-12-1 season, so any help was appreciated. Brown saw a little duty as a running back, carrying the ball three times for 39 yards. He also returned 12 kicks for 274 yards. The plan was for Brown to try again with the Bills in 1969.

However, he didn't make the team. Charlie, therefore, had to go north if he wanted to continue to play football. Brown stayed close to Buffalo by signing with the Hamilton Tiger-Cats of the Canadian Football League. He arrived in time to play seven games there as a defensive back, and returned one interception 115 yards for a score – one of the longest such returns in league history (Remember, the field is bigger in CFL ball.) He also returned a punt and 13 kickoffs. Hamilton finished 8-5-1 and lost in the first round of the playoffs.

That was it for Brown's pro football days. He played in 30 games on the American side of the border, and never started a game. Information about Brown since then is difficult to find. We do know that he spent some time as the head of NFL Alumni's Chicago branch. He turned 78 at the time of this writing.



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