



## Charley Bivins

This article is by Budd Bailey.

If Charley Bivins was hoping to be relatively anonymous in the well-publicized world of professional football, he certainly succeeded. Came out of the South as an African American player? Check. Attended a college that no longer plays football? Check. Served as a backup throughout his pro career? Check. More or less disappeared from public view after retirement? Check.

While Bivins doesn't light up search engines on the Internet for those who are curious about him, the bottom line isn't too bad in hindsight. He was a terrific athlete in college, had a good-sized football career in the pros, and earned a valuable piece of jewelry along the way.



Charles Louis Bivins was born on October 16, 1938 in Atlanta, Georgia. He seemed to have been destined to stay in that area for the rest of his life – except when he was playing professional football. Charley played high school football for Luther Judson Price in Atlanta. Bivins was the first player from that school to reach the NFL; the others were defensive back Bob Atkins and defensive end Walter Johnson.

We'll have to assume Bivins was quite a good player in high school – most future pros are, particularly those who play halfback. But he graduated in 1956, and his college options at this point were limited by the fact that he was African American. Sticking



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close to home, Charley enrolled at Morris Brown College – the first university in Georgia to be owned and operated by blacks.

The Wolverines had started playing football in the fall of 1945, and they generally were a modest success when Bivins walked on the campus as a freshman 11 years later. Morris Brown only had had one losing season in its history at that point - a 2-4 campaign in 1948. The high point of the school's football history came in 1951, when the Wolverines went 10-1 – outscoring their opponents, 449-56. It was named the Black College National Champion after a 21-0 win over Alcorn A&M in the Tropical Bowl in Jacksonville, Fla. That team was coached by Edward Clemons, who was in his second year at the school then. He stayed through 1962.

At the time Bivins turned up on campus, only one Morris Brown player had ever been drafted. Halfback Henry Mosley went to the Bears in 1955. Charley played as a freshman, and earned a letter as the team finished 5-3. Things were even better in 1957, as the team compiled a fine 5-2-1 record. The Wolverines dropped to 4-5 the next year, but bounced back to finish 6-3 in 1959.

It would be nice to have some statistics from those teams and years. However, Morris Brown dropped its athletic program in 2003. That was a year after the school was hit with a major scandal. The university discovered that its president and financial aid leader were embezzling federal aid payments and using it for their own personal purposes. The school already was having financial problems, and this worsened the situation – in part because it lost its accreditation. Morris Brown declared bankruptcy in 2012. Since then it has been trying to return to its former status, financially and educationally.

We do know that Brown ran track at Morris Brown, turning in a fleet 9.4 time in the 100-yard dash. He also played basketball for the Wolverines when he wasn't earning his biology degree.

Bivins is one of 14 players from Morris Brown who reached the pros in football. The biggest name might be George Atkinson, a defensive back for the Raiders in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Ezra Johnson was Morris Brown's lone No. 1 draft choice, going to the Green Bay Packers in 1977. Tommy Hart and Alfred Jenkins also had solid careers.

Bivins was among the first group of college players in about a decade to have a choice when it came to a professional football team. The American Football League started play in 1960 and competed with the NFL for talent. Bivins was on the radar of both leagues. He was in the first group of players taken by the Buffalo Bills; the league did not release the order of the draft that year. However, the halfback was a seventh round choice of the Chicago Bears. He was one of three players taken in that round to beat the odds and play



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100 pro games. The others were future Hall of Famer Larry Wilson and defensive back Jim Norton.

The Bears were coached by the legendary George Halas at that point. Chicago was coming off an 8-4 season, and it had some talent at halfback. Rick Casares had run for 699 yards and gone to the Pro Bowl, while Johnny Morris and Willie Galimore were also in the picture. That meant Bivins' only route to the opening day roster was on special teams, and that's what he did. Bivins and Morris divided the kick return duties for the Bears in 1960. Charley returned 15 kicks for 362 yards. Bivins only carried the ball once that season, and lost 11 yards on the play.

The next couple of years must have sounded like a broken record. The Packers, who won the NFL West but lost to Philadelphia in the 1960 championship game, simply got better in 1961. Green Bay was the class of the league, leaving the Bears (8-6) well behind. Bivins set a career high for rushing yards with 188, and returned 25 kickoffs for 778 yards – including a 78-yarder. In 1962, the Packers again dominated play with a 13-1 record, well ahead of the Bears at 9-5. Bivins ran the ball 14 times and returned 12 kicks.

The 1963 season, though, was better. The defense, under assistant coach George Allen, became a dominant force in the league. The Bears only allowed 144 points in a 14-game season, the best figure in the league. The offense, led by quarterback Billy Wade and tight end Mike Ditka, was good enough to put some points on the scoreboard (10<sup>th</sup> in the league) to go 11-1-2. That was just good enough to finish ahead of the 11-2-1 Packers and win the division. Chicago's two wins over Green Bay were decisive. Bivins carried the ball 44 times that season, but only returned two kickoffs in the regular season.

That left the Bears to play the New York Giants in the NFL championship game in Chicago on December 29, 1963. It was four degrees that day in Wrigley Field. The Bears fell behind, 7-0, but received a huge break when New York quarterback Y.A. Tittle was injured. The veteran returned to action but was ineffective, throwing five interceptions. The Bears did enough on offense – two quarterback sneaks by Wade – to win the game, 14-10. Bivins never touched the ball in that game, but he did come away from it with a championship ring – thus becoming a member of an exclusive club.

The defending champions earned the chance to play the College All-Stars in Chicago the following summer. Bivins scored on a five-yard run in that game, which helped his team to a 28-17 win. The Bears stumbled in 1964 to a 5-9 record, with a 2-7 start dooming their season. Chicago's defense fell to 13<sup>th</sup> in points allowed, and the offense couldn't make up the slack. Bivins carried the ball 29 times for 92 yards that year, and had eight kickoff returns.



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That would be Charley's last season as a runner in Chicago. The Bears moved him to tight end in 1965. If Bivins hoped to escape obscurity, this was not the way to do it. Chicago had Mike Ditka as its starter at the position, and he was headed for the Hall of Fame. The Bears added halfback Gale Sayers in the draft, so Bivins wasn't needed to run the ball that season. Charley caught four passes for 108 yards that year, including a 52-yard play. Chicago improved to 9-5, good for third place behind Green Bay and Baltimore.

Despite a lack of production in his limited opportunities, the Bears kept Bivins around for one more season. He again was a backup tight end in 1966, but only caught two passes for six yards. Chicago slumped to 5-7-2, as Sayers and Ditka were its only top players on offense. That sort of record figured to bring changes to the roster, and it did.

On August 28, 1967, Bivins finally ran out of time in Chicago. He was traded to the Steelers for Dan James, an offensive lineman who apparently was ready to retire from football. According to transaction records, Bivins stayed on the Pittsburgh roster for a few days and then was cut. However, he did play in a couple of games for the Steelers later in the season.

Charley didn't get a third chance in Pittsburgh after he was cut again. He signed with the Buffalo Bills in mid-October to finish out the season. In doing so, Bivins joined the team that had drafted him almost eight years earlier. There he played in nine games, running for 58 yards. Interestingly, 43 of those yards came on one carry against the Boston Patriots on December 9 – the longest run by a Bills' player that season. Bivins led the team in kickoff returns, averaging 23.8 yards per trip. That was good enough to get him an invitation to Buffalo's training camp in 1968. However, he was cut in late August, and that was it for his pro football playing career.

For someone on the fringes of the roster, Bivins had a good career. He played in 102 games, with six career touchdowns. What's more, he won a championship along the way. Since he did some teaching in the offseason, it's certainly possible that he continued on that track after leaving football.

Bivins died on March 15, 1994, in the Atlanta area; wife Aldrich died on January 5, 2020.



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