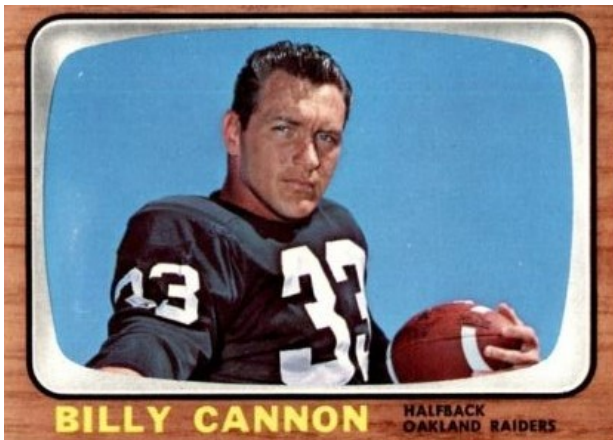


Billy Cannon

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Lost in the shuffle of outstanding talent in football history is William Abb Cannon. Most renown for his iconic 89-yard punt return touchdown during college at Louisiana State University, Cannon was a solid, dual-threat back and receiver for the Houston Oilers, Oakland Raiders, and Kansas City Chiefs in 11 professional seasons (1960 to 1970).¹

When he came to play for Houston in 1960, it was a major win against the NFL in their continuous war for talented players. Oilers' fullback Dave Smith attributed a portion of the team's success due to Cannon's versatility saying, "Billy's running and receiving ability also played a big role in our success. He was an intelligent ball player and good competitor."² Standing at 6'1" and over 200 pounds as a pro, Cannon possessed the rare combination of electrifying speed and brute strength. These qualities led Cannon to a successful career, where he was a three-time All-AFL selection (1960, 1961 & 1967) and three-time AFL champion.³



Cannon was selected first overall by the Los Angeles Rams in the 1960 NFL draft and was a territorial pick by the Houston Oilers in the 1960 American Football League draft.⁴ In 1959, Cannon secretly signed a contract with Rams general manager Pete Rozelle to play for the Rams. Shortly thereafter in 1960, he then signed a contract with the Oilers that paid him more money and included more incentives.⁵ Upon finding out, the Rams filed a lawsuit against him, however, judge William Lindberg ruled in favor of Cannon. The decision voided Los Angeles' contract. Lindberg pointed to Cannon's naivety, that he was young and swayed by the Rams to sign.⁶



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Cannon made an immediate impact as a rookie, leading Houston in rushing with 644 yards. He added five receiving scores on 15 receptions, as the Oilers went 10-4 in the new league, winning the AFL title.⁷ Houston defeated the Los Angeles Chargers, 24-16 in the championship game. He accumulated 178 total yards in the contest and sealed the victory on an 88-yard touchdown reception from George Blanda in the fourth quarter. The play led Cannon to garner game MVP honors.⁸

He was on his game again in 1961, leading the AFL in rushing (948 yards), yards per carry (4.7), yards per game (67.7), and total touches (243), as the Oilers repeated as AFL champions.⁹ Cannon again won title game MVP honors, hauling in a 35-yard touchdown pass from Blanda in the third quarter, which held up to be the winning score in a 10-3 decision over the Chargers.¹⁰ Cannon's best statistical game of his career occurred in Week 13 against the New York Titans. He totaled 373 all-purpose yards and five total touchdowns in a 48-21 romp that saw the Oilers extend their winning streak to eight games. He was named first-team All-AFL and to the AFL-All Star team later that season.¹¹

Playing for his third different head coach in as many years, 1962 marked a turning point in Cannon's career with the Oilers. Houston posted an 11-3 record with a trip to their third consecutive AFL title contest.¹² This time, the Oilers fell in double-overtime to the Dallas Texans, despite rallying from a 17-0 deficit.¹³ Cannon led the team in total

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- 2 Grosshandler, Stanley. "When Houston Struck Oil," *The Coffin Corner*, Vol. 18, No. 5, 1996.
- 3 "Billy Cannon," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/C/CannBi00.htm>.
- 4 "Billy Cannon," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/C/CannBi00.htm>.
- 5 Schudel, Matt. "Billy Cannon, 1959 Heisman Trophy winner later convicted of counterfeiting, dies at 80," *The Washington Post*, May 23, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/billy-cannon-1959-heisman-trophy-winner-later-convicted-of-counterfeiting-dies-at-80/2018/05/23/49c0ab0a-5de9-11e8-b2b8-08a538d9dbd6_story.html.
- 6 "Rams Lose Battle to Keep Cannon," *The Victoria Advocate*, June 21, 1960, 9.
- 7 "Houston Oilers/Tennessee Oilers/Tennessee Titans Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/oti/>.
- 8 "Championship - Los Angeles Chargers at Houston Oilers - January 1st, 1961," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/19610101oti.htm>.
- 9 "Billy Cannon," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/C/CannBi00.htm>.
- 10 "Championship - Houston Oilers at San Diego Chargers - December 24th, 1961," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/196112240sdg.htm>.
- 11 "Billy Cannon," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/C/CannBi00.htm>.



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touchdowns during the regular season with 13, primarily serving as a return man. Charley Tolar became the team's featured running back, with Cannon's role shifting from primary rusher to pass catching back. As a result, Tolar led the team in total yards.¹⁴ Cannon sustained a back injury that sidelined him for a few games, "It was in my third season, we were playing in San Diego, and I carried the ball into the line on a short yardage situation. There as no hole, so I tried to jump over the pile and was thrown back and fell flat. A linebacker came running over and he landed on me with both knees and tore the muscles loose in my back."¹⁵ Cannon recalls, "My lateral mobility was gone."¹⁶ He started in just two games the following season, then was traded to the Oakland Raiders for Bob Jackson, Irv Bishop, and Dobie Craig.¹⁷

As a member of the Raiders, Cannon was an ideal fit for head coach Al Davis. He transformed Cannon to a physical, hard-nosed fullback, that Cannon fully embraced. Later, he became a blocking tight end, where he was able to utilize his strength and size.¹⁸ The Raiders were built to contend, posting back-to-back 8-5-1 records in 1965 and 1966. Cannon's offensive output declined on the stat sheet, but his presence was still a threat to opposing defenses.¹⁹ Coach John Rauch occasionally sent him deep on post plays for long gains. Oakland also played him as a decoy to set up big plays for their other skilled players.²⁰

1967 was a paramount season for the Raiders, as they earned a 13-1 record and the opportunity to play in Super Bowl II. In the AFL title game, the Raiders trounced the

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- 1 2 "Houston Oilers/Tennessee Oilers/Tennessee Titans Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/oti/>.
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 - 1 4 "1962 Houston Oilers Statistics & Players," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/oti/1962.htm>.
 - 1 5 Maiorana, Sal. "Billy Cannon: Everybody's All-American, At Least for a While," Medium.com/sportsraid, September 30, 2020, <https://medium.com/sportsraid/billy-cannon-everybodys-all-american-at-least-for-a-while-3c9692cc76c1>.
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 - 1 8 "Billy Cannon, the Original Oakland Raiders Outlaw," bleacherreport.com, October 5, 2008, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/65310-billy-cannon-the-original-oakland-raiders-outlaw>.
 - 1 9 "Las Vegas/Oakland/LA Raiders Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/rai/>.
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Oilers, Cannon's former club, 40-7.²¹ Cannon earned consensus first-team All-AFL honors, leading all tight ends with 629 receiving yards. Cannon was an AFL All-Star in 1968, and his final season in Oakland was 1969. He was released during the 1970 preseason.²²

Cannon was preparing to retire when he was convinced to join the Chiefs for one season in 1970. He played in just six contests, before getting injured, that effectively ended his career. Cannon finished his professional football career with 2,455 rushing yards, 3,656 receiving yards and 64 combined touchdowns.²³

Born on August 3, 1937 in Philadelphia, MS, Billy moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana during his youth. Attending local Istrouma High School, he starred in football, basketball, and track.²⁴ As a senior in 1955, Cannon led the football team to the state championship, behind his 39 total touchdowns. Football was his choice to pursue, but he was also a star track athlete. He set Louisiana records hurling the shot put 57 feet and ran 9.4 seconds in the 100 yard dash.²⁵ With numerous offers to play college football, Cannon decided on Louisiana State, which also offered him a car sales job between semesters. There, he embarked on a distinguished career that put him among the greatest football players in school history.²⁶

Cannon's athleticism allowed head coach Paul Dietzel to play him in a variety of positions. In an era where just about all players played two-ways, Cannon starred as a back and receiver on offense, punting and returning punts on special teams, and a defensive back on defense. He broke onto the scene as a sophomore in 1957, running for 583 yards on 105 attempts, catching 11 passes for 199 yards, and serving as a kick returner and punter.²⁷ The results led him to second-team All-Southeastern Conference honors (UPI) and selection to the All-Southeastern Conference Sophomore Team. The honors were exemplified by his 140 yard rushing and two touchdown performance over rival Alabama in a 28-0 win, and his 37.1 yards per punt average.²⁸

2 1 "Las Vegas/Oakland/LA Raiders Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/rai/>.

2 2 "Billy Cannon," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/C/CannBi00.htm>.

2 3 "Billy Cannon," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/C/CannBi00.htm>.

2 4 Donahue, Ben. "The Life And Career Of Billy Cannon (Complete Story)," ProFootballHistory.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.profootballhistory.com/billy-cannon/>.

2 5 Donahue, Ben. "The Life And Career Of Billy Cannon (Complete Story)," ProFootballHistory.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.profootballhistory.com/billy-cannon/>.

2 6 Donahue, Ben. "The Life And Career Of Billy Cannon (Complete Story)," ProFootballHistory.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.profootballhistory.com/billy-cannon/>.



As a junior in 1958, Cannon was LSU's top player. The Tigers' backfield was loaded with talent in the form of Cannon, Warren Rabb, and Johnny Robinson, all of whom earned first-team All-Conference honors. Dietzel ran a three-platoon system, where he used 11 different players on offense, defense, and special teams in an effort to reduce fatigue and keep players fresh.²⁹ Cannon again led the Tigers in rushing with 686 yards. LSU ran the table, turning in an 11-0 record, capped by a victory over No. 12 Clemson in the Sugar Bowl, a game in which he threw the game's only touchdown pass on a 9-yarder to Mark Mangham.³⁰ As a result, Louisiana State was named national champion by the Associated Press and the Coaches Poll. The team also won the Southeastern Conference title for the third time. The 1958 season set the tone for Cannon's senior campaign in 1959.³¹

As a senior, Cannon continued to aid in the success of the team with the Tigers turning in a 9-2 record. They were the consensus preseason favorite to repeat as national champions, but were upset on November 7 at Tennessee, 14-13.³² The Tigers scored to make it 14-13 in the fourth quarter, but failed on a two-point conversion. Tennessee held on to preserve the victory.³³

The week prior, on October 31, was one of the great games in Tigers' history, arguably of the season, when No. 1 LSU defeated No. 3 Mississippi in Baton Rouge.³⁴ The Rebels boasted arguably one of the best defenses in the country and were also in the hunt for the national championship. In front of over 67,000 fans at Tiger Stadium, Ole Miss kicked a field goal in the first quarter for a 3-0 advantage, which they held until the fourth quarter.³⁵ Throughout the game, Ole Miss frequently punted, and did so on early downs, which Cannon recalled, "They kept punting the ball, sticking us back in a hole and I thought, 'if I can get my hands on this one, I'm going to take it back.'"³⁶ That set up a

- 2 7 "#20 Billy Cannon," LSUsports.net, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://lsusports.net/sports/fb/roster/player/billy-cannon/>.
- 2 8 "#20 Billy Cannon," LSUsports.net, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://lsusports.net/sports/fb/roster/player/billy-cannon/>.
- 2 9 "#20 Billy Cannon," LSUsports.net, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://lsusports.net/sports/fb/roster/player/billy-cannon/>.
- 3 0 Donahue, Ben. "The Life And Career Of Billy Cannon (Complete Story)," ProFootballHistory.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.profootballhistory.com/billy-cannon/>.
- 3 1 "#20 Billy Cannon," LSUsports.net, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://lsusports.net/sports/fb/roster/player/billy-cannon/>.
- 3 2 "#20 Billy Cannon," LSUsports.net, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://lsusports.net/sports/fb/roster/player/billy-cannon/>.
- 3 3 "Vols end long LSU spurt," *The Montana Standard*, November 8, 1959.
- 3 4 Glier, Ray. "Cannon's Halloween Trick vs. Ole Miss still a treat at LSU," *USA Today*, October 28, 2009.
- 3 5 Glier, Ray. "Cannon's Halloween Trick vs. Ole Miss still a treat at LSU," *USA Today*, October 28, 2009.
- 3 6 Higgins, Ron. "Billy Cannon, LSU's only Heisman Trophy winner, dies at age 80," *Nola.com*, July 12, 2019, https://www.nola.com/archive/article_f8871ab3-f866-57a9-a863-813653250b45.html.



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thrilling moment for Louisiana State. Rebels punter Jake Gibbs booted the ball to the LSU 11-yard line, fielded by Cannon. He slipped away from seven would-be tacklers, then zoomed the remaining 60 yards untouched into the end zone for a 7-3 lead. Cannon provided a thorough synopsis of the play: “After I caught the ball, the first person looking me in the eye was Larry Grantham. I knew how good he was. I wanted to go to the left toward the open field, but there he was, so I cut back to the right, and he missed the tackle. I started down the field, following the sideline, picking up a few blocks, and some guys missed their tackles. Finally, I broke into the open, and there was nobody left but me and Jake Gibbs. Gibbs thought I was going to the west side of the field, so I gave him a little head fake. Now I've got to give Jake credit on this: That was the only tackle he had missed in his entire career to that point. Of course, with the team he had around him, that was the only tackle he tried to make in four years. After I had the clear sailing to the goal line, it was a question of was I going to make it, was the referee going to beat me there, or was the cameraman gaining on both of us to outrun the whole bunch.”³⁷ Ironically, the game was not yet decided. Mississippi drove down the field to the Tigers five yard line. On the final play of the game from the LSU 1-yard line, Cannon was in on the tackle to stop Ole Miss' Doug Elmore from breaking the plane of the goal line as time expired, causing LSU to hang on for the win.³⁸ Much of the media and voters utilized this moment to select Cannon as their Heisman trophy favorite. On December 9th, Cannon gratefully accepted the award, at the Downtown Athletic Club in New York City, from President Richard Nixon. He became the second player from the Southeastern Conference to win the award, following Georgia's Frank Sinkwich (1942).³⁹

Cannon went out on top at Louisiana State, with the team going 25-7 in his three years. Among the numerous awards and accolades he collected: Southeastern Conference Player of the Year (1958, 1959), unanimous first-team All-American (1958, 1959), first-team All-Southeastern Conference (1958, 1959), and Player of the Year by the Associated Press, UPI, and *The Sporting News*.⁴⁰ He left a legacy behind as arguably one of the greatest players in school history, and his iconic status is mentioned any time his name is brought up. After his senior season in 1959, Cannon's number 20 was retired by the school. In 1975, he was inducted to the LSU Athletic Hall of Fame, then to the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame in 1976.⁴¹ Cannon was formally inducted to the College Football

3 7 Higgins, Ron. “Billy Cannon, LSU's only Heisman Trophy winner, dies at age 80,” Nola.com, July 12, 2019, https://www.nola.com/archive/article_f8871ab3-f866-57a9-a863-813653250b45.html.

3 8 Longman, Jere. “College Football; Never Forgotten, Billy Cannon Is Now Forgiven,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 2003.

3 9 “Billy Cannon,” Footballfoundation.org, accessed June 12, 2022, https://footballfoundation.org/hof_search.aspx?hof=2223.

4 0 “#20 Billy Cannon,” LSUsports.net, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://lsusports.net/sports/fb/roster/player/billy-cannon/>.

4 1 “#20 Billy Cannon,” LSUsports.net, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://lsusports.net/sports/fb/roster/player/billy-cannon/>.



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Hall of Fame on December 9, 2008, and a statue of him was unveiled outside Tiger Stadium in 2018.⁴²

While in college, Cannon married Dot Dupuy. The couple had five children together.⁴³ During the NFL off-seasons with the Oilers, Cannon completed post-graduate studies at the University of Tennessee, earning a D.D.S. Following his career in football, Cannon returned to Baton Rouge to start his own dental practice.⁴⁴

On July 9, 1983, the U.S. Secret Service confronted Cannon, who was involved in a money laundering scheme that he and friends produced roughly \$6 million in counterfeit money into circulation. After serving a few years in prison, he rebounded by regaining his dentistry license and accepting a position at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in 1995.⁴⁵ The program was in turmoil, but Cannon worked to restore it, and in the process, provided top medical care to inmates. One convict recited, "I saw you [Cannon] on TV when you made that runback and scored that touchdown."⁴⁶ He instantly had a reputation at the prison, but that was nothing new for Cannon. Like anywhere else previously in his life, he was equipped with all the tools to succeed.⁴⁷ Prison Warden Burl Cain observed Cannon's upgrades to the dental program, "The man cares. The inmates love him, and because they love him, he cares more and won't dare let 'em down."⁴⁸ Impressed with his work, Cain placed him with upgrading the system's medical program, "I put him over the whole hospital. Look, he's a leader of men. He got the whole thing organized like a team. Here we go. We got all legal and fixed up, and he went back to the dental office."⁴⁹ Cannon was not just an icon on the football field, he earned the nickname, "Legend," by convicts for his hard work and dedication to their medical care. Former college track teammate Scooter Purvis saw it in Cannon's body of work, after his prison sentence that he was on the rebound, "Once he got that job at Angola, he began to feed off that. When he saw he could get ahold of something and start giving, start coming back, start building

4 2 "#20 Billy Cannon," LSU sports.net, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://lsusports.net/sports/fb/roster/player/billy-cannon/>.

4 3 Thompson, Wright. "The Redemption of Billy Cannon," ESPN.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <http://www.espn.com/espn/eticket/story?page=091030BillyCannon>.

4 4 Thompson, Wright. "The Redemption of Billy Cannon," ESPN.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <http://www.espn.com/espn/eticket/story?page=091030BillyCannon>.



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back, I think that was the beginning of the resurrection.”⁵⁰ That defined Billy Cannon. Every time he was hit on the field, he rose again. The significant moments in his life where fate counted, Cannon found perseverance.

End Notes:

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- 4 5 Thompson, Wright. “The Redemption of Billy Cannon,” ESPN.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <http://www.espn.com/espn/eticket/story?page=091030BillyCannon>.
 - 4 6 Thompson, Wright. “The Redemption of Billy Cannon,” ESPN.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <http://www.espn.com/espn/eticket/story?page=091030BillyCannon>.
 - 4 7 Thompson, Wright. “The Redemption of Billy Cannon,” ESPN.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <http://www.espn.com/espn/eticket/story?page=091030BillyCannon>.
 - 4 8 Thompson, Wright. “The Redemption of Billy Cannon,” ESPN.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <http://www.espn.com/espn/eticket/story?page=091030BillyCannon>.
 - 4 9 Thompson, Wright. “The Redemption of Billy Cannon,” ESPN.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <http://www.espn.com/espn/eticket/story?page=091030BillyCannon>.
 - 5 0 Thompson, Wright. “The Redemption of Billy Cannon,” ESPN.com, accessed June 12, 2022, <http://www.espn.com/espn/eticket/story?page=091030BillyCannon>.