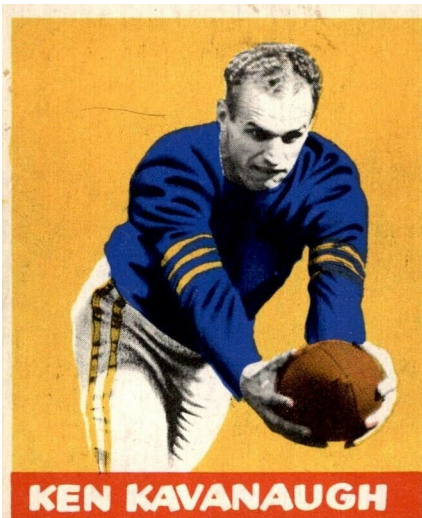


Ken Kavanaugh

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Kenneth William Kavanaugh (b. November 23, 1916) was a scoring machine. In his eight NFL seasons (1940, 1941; 1945-1950) with the Chicago Bears, Kavanaugh hauled in a touchdown pass on roughly one of every three receptions. Talk about efficient! Quite impressive for a time when Chicago's T-formation offense relied heavily on the run.

When the Bears' quarterbacks Sid Luckman and Johnny Lujack threw the ball for a big play, more often than not, it was in the direction of Kavanaugh. That would explain his 162 career receptions, 50 were touchdowns.¹ The 50 scores remain a Chicago franchise record today. Only Walter Payton and Neal Anderson have found the end zone more often than Kavanaugh in Bears history.² In six of his eight seasons, Kavanaugh ranked first or second on the Bears in either receiving yards or passes caught. What prompted his success? It all started with a phone call, and a decision.



George Halas drafted him in the third round of the 1940 NFL draft.³ Undecided as to what sport he wanted to make a career, Kavanaugh initially pursued a minor league baseball career with the Kilgore Boomers of the East Texas League (minor league affiliate of the St. Louis Cardinals).⁴ The situation seemed to be that he was destined to play for the Cardinals. In 60 games, he batted .284 with 17 doubles, five home runs in 236 at-bats: promising for a kid who was quite the athlete.⁵



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George Halas called him in the midst of a baseball practice, luring Kavanaugh to play for the Bears. Knowing he was among the critical pieces for the team's success, Halas had to sign him. Kavanaugh was earning roughly \$300 a month at the time. Halas upped the ante, eventually agreeing with Kavanaugh to \$300 a game.⁶ At first, Halas balked at such an amount, "You're getting paid better than anyone else in the league."⁷ For high talent, the price was high, but worth it.

The Bears won back-to-back (1940, 1941) championships in Kavanaugh's first two seasons, posting 8-3 and 10-1 records, respectively. Chicago blew out Washington, 73-0, in the 1940 title game and whizzed past the New York Giants, 37-9, for the 1941 title.⁸

Kavanaugh's personal success saw his name on consecutive Pro Bowl squad rosters. Kavanaugh caught 23 passes in both seasons combined, averaging over 25 yards per reception, and hauling in nine touchdowns.⁹ Physically, his build at 6'3" and 207 pounds, allowed him to strategically play as a deep threat down the field.¹⁰ His size, coupled with his quick agility, caused Kavanaugh to routinely run past defenders, only for the ball to be waiting for him on the other side. For instance, in the 1940 title game, he caught the game's only passing score on a 30-yard strike from Sid Luckman.¹¹

- 1 "Ken Kavanaugh," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/K/KavaKe00.htm>.
- 2 "Chicago Bears Career Receiving Leaders," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/chi/career-receiving.htm>.
- 3 "Ken Kavanaugh," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/K/KavaKe00.htm>.
- 4 "Kenneth Kavanaugh," BaseballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.baseball-reference.com/register/player.fcgi?id=kavana001ken>.
- 5 "Kenneth Kavanaugh," BaseballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.baseball-reference.com/register/player.fcgi?id=kavana001ken>.
- 6 Larkin, Will. "Ranking the 100 best Bears players ever: No. 37, Ken Kavanaugh," *Chicago Tribune*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/bears/history/ct-spt-bears-best-players-ken-kavanaugh-20190731-uackqu5dynhn7avce56bodc4ya-story.html>.
- 7 Larkin, Will. "Ranking the 100 best Bears players ever: No. 37, Ken Kavanaugh," *Chicago Tribune*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/bears/history/ct-spt-bears-best-players-ken-kavanaugh-20190731-uackqu5dynhn7avce56bodc4ya-story.html>.
- 8 "Chicago Bears Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/chi/>.
- 9 "Ken Kavanaugh," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/K/KavaKe00.htm>.
- 10 "Ken Kavanaugh," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/K/KavaKe00.htm>.
- 11 "Championship – Chicago Bears at Washington Redskins – December 8th, 1940," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/194012080was.htm>.



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World War II came calling in 1942, seeing Kavanaugh enter the service for three years. As a pilot in the Air Force, Kavanaugh was a member of the 490th Bombardment Group and 851st Bombardment Squadron, earning the rank of captain.¹² He flew nearly 30 missions in Europe, earning a variety of awards for his courage and achievement, including the Distinguished Flying Cross.¹³ Kavanaugh resumed his NFL career with the Bears in time for the 1945 season.

More energized than ever, his career started to literally take flight. 1946 saw him earn all-pro honors for the first time. He was a first-team choice by the UPI and second-team selection via *Pro Football Illustrated* and the New York Daily News.¹⁴ The Bears won their third NFL title of the decade in 1946, beating the Giants, 24-14, for the second time. Kavanaugh was a factor on the NFL's top ranked scoring offense, catching a 21-yard score from Sid Luckman to open the scoring.

Statistically, his greatest season was in 1947, when he piled up 818 receiving yards and led the NFL with 13 receiving scores.¹⁵ He also posted a 25.6 yards per reception average. His 13 touchdowns remain the Bears' single-season record. He was noticed by once again earning all-pro honors by a majority of the major selectors. He was voted all-pro by the Chicago Herald American, NY Daily News, UPI, *Pro Football Illustrated*, and the Associated Press.¹⁶

Kavanaugh had a secret for his style of play. Bears assistant coach Luke Johnsos caught on how Kavanaugh would purposely take advantage of their tendencies. Johnsos observed, "The average football end thinks he's open all the time. He's forever clamoring for the ball. Kavanaugh was the opposite. Luckman would call his number on a pass play and, unless he knew he had the defensive man in his pocket, he'd say, 'Not yet, Sid.' ... Finally, Ken would say, 'I got this guy all set up now, Sid,' and when he said that, you knew he was touchdown-bound."¹⁷

1 2 Judge, Clark. "State Your Case: Few receivers did more with less than Chicago's Ken Kavanaugh," SI.com, March 26, 2019, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/state-your-case/state-your-case-few-receivers-did-more-with-less-than-chicago-s-ken-kavanaugh>.

1 3 Judge, Clark. "State Your Case: Few receivers did more with less than Chicago's Ken Kavanaugh," SI.com, March 26, 2019, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/state-your-case/state-your-case-few-receivers-did-more-with-less-than-chicago-s-ken-kavanaugh>.

1 4 "Ken Kavanaugh," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/K/KavaKe00.htm>.

1 5 "Ken Kavanaugh," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/K/KavaKe00.htm>.

1 6 "Ken Kavanaugh," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/K/KavaKe00.htm>.

1 7 Larkin, Will. "Ranking the 100 best Bears players ever: No. 37, Ken Kavanaugh," *Chicago Tribune*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/bears/history/ct-spt-bears-best-players-ken-kavanaugh-20190731-uackqu5dynhn7avce56bodc4ya-story.html>.



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Kavanaugh earned all-pro honors once again in 1948 and led the NFL in receiving scores once again in 1949 with nine.¹⁸ The Bears finished in second in 1948 and 19-49, despite 10-2 and 9-3 records, respectively. They went 9-3 in 1950, but lost in the divisional playoff against the Los Angeles Rams, 24-14.¹⁹

Kavanaugh retired following the 1950 season. He played in a total of 90 NFL contests, starting 36. He totaled two Pro Bowl selections and three seasons in which he was named to all-pro teams.²⁰ Kavanaugh's career 22.4 yards per reception is the highest ever recorded among receivers. It is not calculated as the most all-time, however, as he did not have a sufficient number of receptions to qualify.

Kavanaugh remained with the Bears in 1951 as a receivers coach, before moving to the collegiate ranks in the same role, first with Boston College (1952-1953), then Villanova (1954), before returning to the professional ranks with the Giants for 16 years (1955-1970). He remained with the Giants as a scout through 1999, when he retired from the football ranks.²¹ Sadly, Kavanaugh passed away from pneumonia on January 25, 2007 at the age of 90. Throughout his career, he was a three-time NFL champion, named to the NFL 1940s All-Decade Team, and is one of the 100 greatest Bears of All-Time.²² he was named to the PFRA's Hall of Very Good in 2009.

Kavanaugh was born and raised in the Little Rock, Arkansas area. He attended Little Rock High School, graduating in 1936.²³ He moved south to Louisiana to play college football at Louisiana State University. The Tigers were a regional power at the time under legendary coach Bernie Moore. Moore had an outstanding run at the school, winning 83 games, two SEC titles, and five bowl appearances in 13 seasons (1935 to 1947).²⁴ The 1936 team won the SEC and played in the school's first ever Sugar Bowl.

1 8 "Ken Kavanaugh," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/K/KavaKe00.htm>.

1 9 "Chicago Bears Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/chi/>.

2 0 "Ken Kavanaugh," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/K/KavaKe00.htm>.

2 1 "Ken Kavanaugh," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/coaches/KavaKe0.htm>.

2 2 "Ken Kavanaugh," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/K/KavaKe00.htm>.

2 3 "Ken Kavanaugh," ProFootballReference.com, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/K/KavaKe00.htm>.

2 4 "Bernie Moore," NationalFootballFoundation.com, accessed March 6, 2022, https://footballfoundation.org/hof_search.aspx?hof=1625.



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Kavanaugh had high expectations to fill the shoes for the departed Gus Tinsley, the first All-American end in school history. Kavanaugh had no issue, starring at end and playing along the line as well. He was a two-time first-team All-SEC selection (1938, 1939), a consensus first-team All-American (1939), and SEC Player of the Year in 1939.²⁵ The Tigers struggled to a combined 10-9 record in his junior and senior years, but Kavanaugh was a pure joy to watch. Moore consistently praised him, admiring his fine leaping ability, and said that Kavanaugh “was a pass completer rather than a receiver, simply because he'd catch passes no one else could get to.”²⁶

Kavanaugh's signature game was in 1939 when he hauled in four touchdowns in a 26-7 victory over Holy Cross. LSU lore has it, before the game, he found nails on the sideline, a trend correlating to his performance.²⁷ He was also a big part of the team's 20-0 win over Loyola (LA), when, before the game he also found a couple of nails, “Lanky Ken Kavanaugh, L.S.U.'s magic-fingered terminal, scored two touchdowns for the Bayou Tigers, in the first period he intercepted a pass from Fred Dykes, scrapping Loyola halfback, and dashed 35 yards to the goal.”²⁸ In the second half, Kavanaugh picked up where he left off, “Just after play resumed for the second half, Ken took one from his favorite pitcher, Little Leo Bird, on an aerial scoring thrust extending 59 yards.”²⁹ The trend continued the week after in a 12-6 win over Vanderbilt, scoring both of LSU's touchdowns, however, the Tigers were shut out the following week against #1 Tennessee, 20-0, ending his streak, when he failed to score and failed to find any nails prior to the game.³⁰

Upon completion of his collegiate career, Kavanaugh was awarded the Knute Rockne Memorial Trophy as the nation's best lineman. His stellar play saw him finish seventh in the Heisman Trophy voting.³¹ In 1963, Kavanaugh was inducted to the College Football Hall of Fame.³² He is regarded as one of the greatest players in Louisiana State University football history for all his efforts.

2 5 “LSU, NFL Hall of Famer Ken Kavanaugh, 90, Dies,” LSUSports.net, January 26, 2007, <https://lsusports.net/news/2007/01/26/775731/>.

2 6 Mule, Marty. “Game of My Life LSU Tigers: Memorable Stories of Tigers Football,” Sports Publishing (October 1, 2011), 17.

2 7 “Nails Bring Ken Kavanaugh Luck Grabbing Passes,” *The Evening Independent*, November 1, 1939, 16.

2 8 “Kavanaugh Stars As Bengals Beat Loyola Wolves,” *The Times*, October 22, 1939, 22.

2 9 “Kavanaugh Stars As Bengals Beat Loyola Wolves,” *The Times*, October 22, 1939, 22.

3 0 “Vols Vanquish L.S.U., 20 To 0,” *The Tuscaloosa News*, November 5, 1939, 10.

3 1 “Ken Kavanaugh,” NationalFootballFoundation.com, accessed March 6, 2022, https://footballfoundation.org/hof_search.aspx?hof=1495.

3 2 “Ken Kavanaugh,” NationalFootballFoundation.com, accessed March 6, 2022, https://footballfoundation.org/hof_search.aspx?hof=1495.



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End Notes: