

Billy Masters

This article was written by Budd Bailey

Billy Masters had a rather typical football career for pros – an excellent college record followed by a stay in the pros in which he was essentially caught between starter and reserve. The most surprising part of his life story, though, might center on a relatively brief episode in college. If a TV-movie had been made of it, it would be called “Undercover Crimefighter.”

Who knew? Here’s the full description.

William Joel Masters was born in Grayson, Louisiana on March 15, 1944. There may be smaller cities than Grayson with a native son who played pro football, but not many. In the 2010 census, Grayson had a population of 532 – one more than it had in 2010. At least the town is growing. Grayson is in the north central part of the state, and the nearest decent sized city probably is Monroe to the north (47,877 in 2018).



Photo Credit: Robert L. Smith

Grayson isn’t big enough to have its own high school. Some residents go northeast to Caldwell Parish High School in Columbia. Masters went in the other direction, going southwest on U.S. 165, as his family moved to Olla. That’s where La Salle High School was located. La Salle isn’t exactly a football factory either; Masters is the only pro player to come out of it.



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“There were about 350 kids who went to school there,” Masters told author Jeffrey J. Miller. “I was a nose tackle and a fullback.” Masters certainly was big enough to play with the big schools at 6-foot-5. He’d eventually weigh 240 pounds in the pros. One teammate of Masters in high school posted an Internet message forum that he tried to tackle Masters in practice one time. “I almost got killed,” he remembered from his sophomore year about the run-in with the senior. Bill graduated from La Salle in 1963.

If you were a high school graduate from the state of Louisiana in that era, it might have been difficult to turn down a recruiting effort from Louisiana State University. LSU was in the midst of a run that was only matched at that time by consecutive national championships in the 1930s. Coach Paul Dietzel had won 35 games in his last four years in Baton Rouge, including a national title in 1958. Charlie McLendon took over in 1962, and the team went 9-1-1 in his first season.

“LSU recruited me for both football and basketball, and I ended up going for football because I figured I wasn’t tall enough to play basketball,” Masters told Miller. The Tiger jumped into the freshman lineup as a tight end, and stayed at that position when he joined the varsity as a sophomore. LSU went 7-4 in 1963 and lost in the Bluebonnet Bowl. The Tigers improved to 8-2-1 in 1964 and won the Sugar Bowl. Billy might have had his best moment of his college career during that sophomore season. He caught a late touchdown pass to get the Tigers within one of Mississippi, and then Doug Moreau caught a two-point conversion to give LSU an 11-10 win.

Then as a junior, Masters switched positions, even though it wasn’t his idea. “I ended up playing what they called a ‘strong back’ – it was a running back/flanker type position. You could be anywhere. Coach McClendon said, ‘That’s what I want you to play.’ ... I would block, I would run, I would go receive.”

The 1965 season went well for the Tigers. They went 8-3, won the Cotton Bowl by beating No. 2 Arkansas, 14-7, and finished eighth in the Associated Press rankings. Masters was a runner and receiver in his new role. He carried the ball 22 times for 138 yards, and caught eight passes for 104 yards. Overall, Billy scored three touchdowns that season.

He had big hopes for an even better senior season, but fate got in the way. “My senior year, I came out of the box and got sick my first game, and with the hot weather down there, it was hard to get back to where I needed to be, so it was a little tough,” he said. Even so, his numbers in the passing game went up – 24 catches for 241 yards and two touchdowns. He also ran the ball 23 times for 87 yards and two scores.



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This is where the story goes off on a surprising tangent. Masters was in the middle of an odd set of circumstances while playing in 1966. He and two teammates, tailback Jim Dousay and fullback Gawain Dibetta, were offered bribes by gamblers to throw games. The three worked with the FBI in the investigation, which eventually led to the arrest of Samuel J. Graziano, a Baton Rouge barber. The suspect's only comment after his indictment was "God help me." Two others were later arrested as part of the investigation. Athletic department officials saluted the trio for their "courage, leadership and character."

LSU saw its streak of playing in a bowl in five straight seasons come to an end, thanks to a 5-4-1 record. Ainsworthsports.com ranks him No. 17 on the list of LSU's best football players – ahead of quarterback Bert Jones.

From there, it was on to the Senior Bowl and a date with pro football. Masters was part of the Class of 1967, mostly known as the group that was first affected by the merger between the American Football League and National Football League. The bidding war for college players had ended, and salaries stopped spiraling upward. Masters went in the third round, 77th overall to the Kansas City Chiefs, that year. Two other Tigers were taken in the NFL draft in 1967. Offensive lineman John Demarie went to the Browns, and linebacker Thomas Fussell was taken by the Patriots.

Masters never did play a regular-season game for the Chiefs, the defending AFL champion at the time, in 1967. The prospect was cut just before the season, and the Buffalo Bills put in a claim for him. "(Coach) Hank Stram called me in and said, 'I want you to be here. We pulled you back off waivers. Buffalo has picked you up because the backup tight end had had a sprained ankle,'" Masters said to Miller. "Kansas City drew me back and traded me for a (fourth-round) draft choice. So that's how I ended up in Buffalo." The Bills had a couple of Masters' former teammates on the roster. Paul Guidry and Rudi Prudhomme were drafted by Buffalo out of LSU in 1966.

Masters was stuck behind the regular tight end, Paul Costa, for much of the first half of the season. He had only caught two passes through October 15. Here's another example of why one man's misfortune can be another man's opportunity. The Bills lost wide receiver Art Powell to a season-ending knee injury. Buffalo only had two other wideouts in Elbert Dubenion and Ed Rutkowski. With the team off for the week, head coach Joel Collier installed a new double tight end offense – with Masters as the new starter.

The catches started coming: two against Houston, four against Miami (including two touchdowns), and three against the Dolphins. They eventually added up to 20 catches for the season, and Masters averaged 13.7 yards per catch. The starter, Costa, did even better with 39 catches for 726 yards (an eye-popping 18.6 yards per catch – better than both



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Powell and Dubenion). However, the good production from the tight ends didn't help the team in the won-loss department. The Bills, who had gone 9-4-1 and reached the AFL championship game the year before, slumped to 4-10 in 1967.

The Bills added to their depth at wide receiver in the draft for 1968, taking wide receiver Haven Moses first. That meant Masters was out of the starting lineup. He served as a backup to Costa at tight end, and only caught eight passes for 101 yards. Billy must have been miserable watching the Bills compile a dreadful 1-12-1 record for the year. Buffalo went through an unprecedented run of injuries at quarterback, causing the team to finish last in the AFL in points scored. Collier lost his job two games into the season; Harvey Johnson took over on an interim basis.

In 1969, the Bills had a couple of new faces in key roles. The horrible season resulted in the Bills receiving the first overall draft pick, and they used it on one of the biggest superstars in college football in the 20th century: O.J. Simpson. Meanwhile, the Bills lured Raiders coach John Rauch to their sideline. While the new boss didn't turn out to be popular with much of the roster, he did make one move that directly affected Masters. He turned Costa into an offensive tackle. That meant Masters was the starting tight end for the first time in his career.

The now third-year veteran responded with one of his best seasons. He caught a career-high 33 passes for 387 yards and a touchdown. The score came against Denver on September 28. The play was a six-yard pass from Kemp, and it capped a 21-point third quarter that wrapped up the game. Masters' longest catch went for 31 yards – one short of the team high for the season. On the minus side, Masters fumbled the ball away in Oilers territory during a loss to Houston. The Bills finished 4-10, a step up from awful.

It's tough to say what happened to Billy a season later in training camp. It's not as if the Bills were stacked at tight end. But they opted to trade Masters to the Broncos for a fifth-round draft choice. Austin Denney replaced Masters as the starter at tight end, and Denney had 14 catches for the year. Meanwhile in Denver, the Broncos had a completely new look at the position. They had traded the 1969 starter, Tom Beer, to the Patriots for Jim Whalen.

Denver coach Lou Saban made Masters the backup to Whalen, and Billy only had nine catches for 83 yards. Masters was part of a Broncos offense that had future Hall of Famer Floyd Little and not much else. The quarterbacks were Pete Liske and Steve Tensi. Denver finished 5-8-1.

Masters' luck changed in 1971. The Broncos gave Whalen a couple of games at the start of the season and then released him. Billy was the team's next man up. He caught 27



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passes for 371 yards and a touchdown, and even carried the ball seven times. Denver made some other changes, bringing in Steve Ramsey and Don Horn at quarterback. It didn't help; the Broncos stumbled to a 4-9-1 season. Saban exited in the middle of the season, and Jerry Smith replaced him on an interim basis.

John Ralston took over as the head coach of the Broncos for 1972. He brought in veteran Charley Johnson to be the starting quarterback, and he left Masters alone as the starting tight end. Billy caught 25 passes for 393 yards and three touchdowns. Rod Sherman was the only member of the Broncos to catch more than 30 passes that season, so Johnson clearly didn't have many great targets. Handing off to Little was usually the best approach.

Masters was backed up in 1972 by the team's No. 1 draft choice, Riley Odoms. Ralston thought he could be a star, and grabbed him while overlooking an obvious need at wide receiver. The rookie caught 21 passes that season, and he was ready for more duty in 1973. Odoms started in all 14 games for the Broncos, catching 43 passes for 629 yards. He became a fixture in the Denver lineup for almost a decade. That wasn't good news for Masters, who only caught five passes in the entire season. Odoms got even better in 1974, as he was a first-team All-Pro pick with 42 catches. Masters didn't catch a pass in the entire season. He must have wondered, "Is this it?"

It wasn't. The Broncos did him a favor in August, 1975, by dealing him to the Chiefs for past considerations. The deal completed a circle for Billy, since he was drafted by Kansas City. Masters replaced Morris Stroud in the starting lineup. Stroud is mostly remembered for his height. At 6-foot-10, he used to try to block long field goal attempts by jumping up above the crossbar of the goalpost and swatting them away. His talent at that led to a rule change that prohibited such actions by the defense.

Masters' pass-catching numbers enjoyed a revival in 1975. He had 24 catches for 314 yards and three touchdowns (tied for the team lead). There was no such revival for the Chiefs, who were undergoing the unsuccessful transformation of replacing quarterback Len Dawson with Mike Livingston. The Chiefs finished 5-9, the same as the 1974 season. Then in 1976, Masters split playing time at tight end with Walter White, a second-year player who had shown ability to catch the ball. Masters' production fell to 18 receptions for 269 yards and three touchdowns. The Chiefs were 5-9 for the third straight year.

As 32, Billy had squeezed out a good career for three teams over the course of most of a decade. But that was it. He finished with 132 games played in pro football, with 169 catches for 2,268 yards and 15 touchdowns.



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From there, Masters went into the transportation business. He continued to change locations in his new career, going from Denver (26 years) to Dallas (two years) to Kansas City, where he retired. He told Miller in 2007, “I have a wonderful wife, Georgia, and five children – a girl and four boys. I graduated five from college and I’m broke.”



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