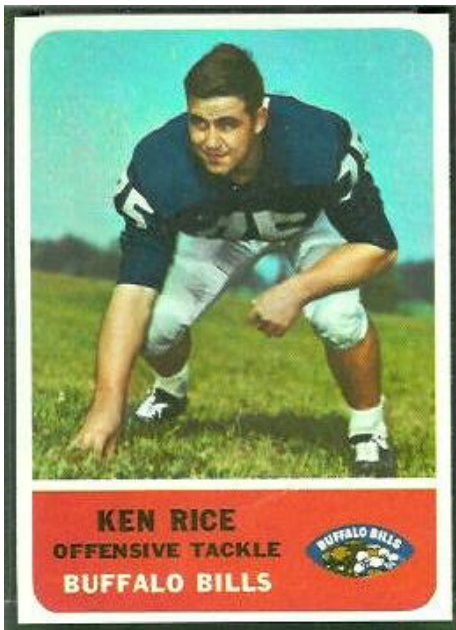




Ken Rice

This article is by **Budd Bailey**

Ken Rice's career in professional football didn't quite work out the way that he had planned. Injuries took care of that. However, those medical problems didn't stop him from having a long and happy life. Rice by all accounts was loved, respected, and admired by all he encountered over the years.



Kenneth Earl Rice was born in Attapulugus, Georgia on September 14, 1939. The name of this small town (current population is under 1,000) reveals something about the area. Attapulgitite is the name of a compound that is found in the clay soil of the area. A couple of mining companies in that part of very southern Georgia (Attapulgitite is not far from the Florida border) collect it from the ground and then refine it for medical purposes. It's part of a treatment for diarrhea.

At some point before his high school years, Rice moved about 13 miles up the road to the northwest and settled in Bainbridge, Georgia. Compared to Attapulugus, Bainbridge is a big city. The county seat's population settled around 12,000 in 1960, and the number has more or less stayed close to that figure ever since.

It certainly sounds as if the Bearcats wouldn't have had much of an athletic program in the 1950s had Rice not turned up. He won an incredible 16 letters during his time at



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Bainbridge. Ken played baseball, football, basketball and track (taking part in eight different events). Rice piled up a number of honors in high school. Ken led the basketball team in scoring and rebounding. In track he won the state shot put title three times, and the discus title once – making him a three-time all-state choice. Rice even ran in a few relays for the Bearcats. Ken also played catcher for the baseball team.

Yet his best sport was football. Rice anchored the offensive line and apparently was quick enough to play in the secondary on defense. That led to him receiving plenty of college scholarship offers, including ones from Tennessee, Georgia Tech and Florida State. But the winner turned out to be Auburn, which worked out well for both sides.

The Tigers were coached during Rice's time by Ralph "Shug" Jordan, one of the legendary names in Auburn's athletic history. Jordan played football and basketball from 1928 to 1932. After graduation, he became the Tigers' basketball coach for more than a decade. Shug turned up at Georgia for a while, but came back to Auburn as the head coach in 1951 – and won more games (176) than any other football coach there. When Rice arrived on campus as a freshman in 1957, he saw one of the Tigers' greatest teams in their history. Auburn won 10 straight games and captured the Associated Press' poll as national champions.

Rice came relatively close to not playing for Auburn. The problem: the university's size. "I had never been away from home," he told author Mark Murphy. "It was very tough on a country boy to come over to the big city and be around all of these folks. The first year was really an adjustment period. In fact, twice I quit and went home. The first time before I got there, coach (Dick) McGowen was already at my home waiting for me. The next time he just called ahead to my dad and told him that I was on my way and to send me back. It was a tough adjustment for me."

Once settled, Rice had three very good years on the varsity. He was named to the all-sophomore team for the Southeastern Conference in 1958. Ken took it up a notch as a junior, as he was an All-American selection as an offensive lineman. That honor came with a little gravy for someone who hadn't seen many bright lights of a big city before.

"It was probably the greatest day in my life other than the one I got married (June 20, 1959)," he told Murphy. "We were going up to Birmingham to play Alabama, and in those days we would take the train up the day of the game. The game was on Saturday and I was going to be on *The Perry Como Show* on Sunday in New York City. Somehow, I had to get from Birmingham that Saturday afternoon to New York that night so I could be on television. For a country boy from South Georgia, that was a long stretch. Billie Ann (his wife) and I drove from Birmingham to Atlanta. I took the plane that night and I



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was on the show the next day. Staying up there in the big city and being on national television, that was really a thrill.”

And he topped all of that as a senior. Ken repeated his All-American status in 1960 as an offensive lineman. Rice also was named the offensive lineman of the year in the SEC ... and the defensive lineman of the year in the SEC. You’ll never see that again.

Rice once said one of his best moments came as a senior. The Tigers were facing Georgia in their annual game, and Auburn had to come to his team’s rescue. In a 2007 interview with “Smoke Signals,” Rice said, “Most years, Auburn played Georgia in Columbus [Ga.] but in 1960, our team took on UGA at Auburn. With less than a minute to go, Auburn kicked a field goal for a score of 9 to UGA’s 6. When Auburn kicked to Georgia, the UGA kick return player ran the ball up the field. I tackled the player on the eight-yard line with seconds to go and saved the game for Auburn.”

Rice simply made a huge impression on people while he was at Auburn. “Ken was probably the best lineman ever to come out of Auburn, maybe the best football player ever,” former Auburn assistant coach George Atkinson said. “He was an easy-going kid off the field, hard playing on it, the speed of a back at 6-3, 250. He was unusually strong, good stamina, the guy who was first down the field on kicks. He had everything a great athlete needed. He was very intelligent, could do just about anything he wanted to do.”

Even an opposing player who went on to be the head coach of the Tigers noticed. Pat Dye matched up against Rice on the field in that era. “I played against Ken for four years, and there is not a more deserving player who ever played in the SEC to be in the (College Football) Hall of Fame,” he said. “He was big and fast – just a great player on both sides of the football. On top of that, he is an even better person than a player.”

There’s no doubt that Rice loved his years at Auburn; his basement in his later years of life were said to be something of a shrine to the school. Still, it was time for Rice to start to think about the next step – and this is where the story becomes briefly confusing. The American Football League had arrived during the fall of 1960 and managed to survive, so it was time to start planning for 1961. The AFL draft was held in November 1960, while the NFL waited for about a month to go by to pick players. Rice clearly was considered a top prospect.

The Buffalo Bills took Rice with their first-round selection. It is listed as the first choice overall in some research sources. However, in others the Denver Broncos used the top choice on Bob Gaiters, a halfback out of New Mexico State, while Rice went third to the Bills. The drafting order for new leagues often is close to irrelevant when it comes to judging players’ talents, since teams sometimes only would draft players they thought



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they could sign. Often such leagues make up the rules as they go along. In any case, the St. Louis Cardinals of the NFL took Rice with their first round pick, eighth overall. Buffalo used the drafting strategy of trying to take players that didn't play college football close to an NFL team – which in those days meant to load up on players from the Southeastern Conference and the Atlantic Coast Conference. They believed they'd be easier to sign.

No matter what went on during the draft, Rice eventually signed with the Bills. Even so, he wasn't exactly rich by most standards – except his. “After being the first player drafted in 1961, I got the real big money,” he said later. “I got a signing bonus of \$2,500 and the salary was \$12,500, so I got \$15,000 for a year of playing football. ... For a kid from South Georgia, that was big bucks, but in this day and time that is nothing. They throw away more than that on a weeknight. With the two leagues, I had a choice. With the American League being the new league, I thought I would have an opportunity to play quicker in Buffalo. And I did. They made me the starting left tackle.”

Rice wasn't the only offensive lineman the Bills took that year. They selected Billy Shaw from Georgia Tech in the second round, and he went on to become a Hall of Famer. In the fourth round Buffalo grabbed tackle Stew Barber.

Ken played in the Coaches' All-American game in Buffalo in the summer of 1961, started, and then took part in the College All-Star Game against the Philadelphia Eagles in August in Chicago. Then it was on to Buffalo for training camp with the Bills. That team was coached by Buster Ramsey, who had been the defensive coach for some excellent Detroit Lions teams in the 1950's. The Bills were coming off a 5-8-1 season. Ramsey greeted Rice and the three other rookies who had been in Chicago by saying, “Oh, the saviors have arrived!” Shaw and Rice didn't need much time to enter the starting lineup. After the first preseason game, Ramsey is quoted in the team's media guide as saying, “The line opened more and bigger holes for my backs than I saw all last season.”

Playing time turned out not to be an issue for the 6-foot-2 rookie. “In those days we only had 32 players on the team, which was a league rule,” he told Murphy. “We only had one extra offensive lineman and one extra defensive lineman. During the season one offensive lineman got hurt, so there was no coming out. Then two defensive guys got hurt and they came to me and said, ‘Can you play defensive end.’ I said, ‘I played both ways in college, so I can do it.’

“The last four games, I was the starting left offensive tackle and I was the starting right defensive end. I was also on the punting team, the kickoff team, and the field goal team. When they blew the whistle, I played. When they stopped blowing the whistle I was still there. I went into that season at 255 pounds and I came home at 228. I was in the best



shape I had ever been in during my life. That was my indoctrination into the pros. It was a real eye-opener, but it was fun.”

Someone noticed what Rice was doing in that season. When it was done, he was picked for the AFL All-Star Game and was a second-team all-league selection. The 1962 media guide became a bit caught up in Rice’s playing, writing that he “figures to improve over next couple of years to the point where he will be considered one of pro football’s all-time greats.” Ken couldn’t do much for the Bills’ record that season, as they were 6-8 – still quite mediocre. It cost Ramsey his job, as he was replaced in the offseason by Lou Saban.

Saban didn’t have much time to get to know Rice that season. Around August 1, Ken suffered a serious knee injury during a scrimmage. While the initial report had him missing a couple of months, he ended up sitting out the entire 1962 season. The team’s 1963 media guide reported that Rice had worked hard on rehabilitation during the offseason and would be ready to play. However, in hindsight it certainly looks as if Rice’s knee and career were never the same after that. The team climbed over the .500 mark in 1962 with a 7-6-1 record, thanks in part to the arrival of such players as Jack Kemp and Cookie Gilchrist.

In 1963, Rice reclaimed one of the starting tackle spots, moving over to the right side as Stew Barber played left tackle. Ken started in 13 of the 14 games. The Bills again went 7-6-1, which in an odd season was good enough to tie Boston for the division title. However, the Patriots won that playoff game for the right to go to San Diego for the AFL championship game.

Better days seemed ahead for the Bills, but Rice didn’t get to see them. On May 30, 1964, the offensive lineman was traded to the Raiders for halfback Leroy Jackson. We need to take a little detour to explore what Buffalo obtained in the deal – because Jackson has quite an interesting story to tell.

Jackson was a standout for Western Illinois as a college runner, and was taken in the first round of the 1961 NFL draft by the Cleveland Browns. But he was immediately dealt to the Washington Redskins with Bobby Mitchell for the rights to Ernie Davis, the Syracuse running back and Heisman Trophy winner who went first overall. The Washington Redskins had never used an African American player through 1961. When Mitchell and Jackson arrived in Washington, they integrated the team along with guard John Nisby. Jackson saw spot duty in 1962 and early in 1963, but then was released by the Redskins – which seemed to take some of his love for the game. The Raiders eventually signed him after the season, but only kept him long enough to trade him to the Bills. Jackson didn’t make it out of Buffalo’s training camp, as he was waived and never played pro football



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again. Jackson wasn't even tracked down and interviewed about his role in integrating the Redskins until 2013.

Rice joined the Raiders for the 1964 season. They were coached by one of the sport's larger-than-life figures, Al Davis. Oakland had gone 10-4 in 1963, but it lost its first five games in 1964. The Raiders ended up 5-8-1 and well out of the playoff hunt. At least Rice remained a starter in his new location, as he played 11 games at right tackle that season.

Rice was a long way from the Deep South at that point, and after the 1964 season he announced his retirement from pro football at the age of 25. But it didn't keep, and he returned to the Raiders for the 1965 campaign. Oakland had a couple of rookie tackles in place in Bob Svihus and Harry Schuh, so Rice moved into the left guard spot. He didn't miss a game as the Raiders bounced back with an 8-5-1 record.

Before the following season started, Rice was on the move again. Oakland exposed him in the expansion draft, and the new Miami Dolphins took him. He was one of three veteran guards (Billy Neighbors of Boston and Ernie Park of San Diego were the others) who figured to battle for a starting job. Rice was the odd man out, starting in only four games in 1966 during the Dolphins' inaugural season that finished 3-11. Rice was not listed in Miami's media guide for the 1967 season, so it's easy to guess that he retired at some point in that offseason. But he did pop up on the roster during that season, playing nine games and starting three for a 4-10 Dolphins' squad. However, Rice was suffering from a back injury by that point, and he retired for good after that 1967 season. He finished with 79 career games for three different teams, starting in 58 of those contests.

Life after football had plenty of rewards for Rice. He went into the construction business, and eventually owned his own company, the Kenneth E. Rice Construction Company. Ken ended up in Big Canoe, Georgia, a gated community about an hour north of Atlanta. In 1995, the Rice's bought the summit of Mount Oglethorpe, which at one point was the southern end of the Appalachian Trail. (The terminus was moved 13 miles to Springer Mountain in 1958.) Rice opened the mountain's peak to the public in 2014, donating the land to Big Canoe Chapel.



As you'd expect, Ken spent plenty of time receiving honors for his football work well after retirement. He was in the first class of the Decatur County Sports Hall of Fame in 2011. Ken joined his high school football coach, Spencer "Olive" Davis, in that opening group. "I am very humbled tonight," Rice said about induction. "The other awards and recognitions are great honors, but this is home and going into the Hall of Fame with coach Davis is really special. He is an outstanding man and role model for me and many others he has touched."

Ken loved Auburn for most of his life, and Auburn loved him back. The school presented Rice with the Walter Gilbert Award in 2010. That's the top honor for former athletes at Auburn. It's given in memory of the three-time All-American center. The university picked Rice for its All-Century team in 1992 and its "Team of the Sixties." The school hands out the Ken Rice Award to the best offensive lineman on the Tigers. Rice went into the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame in 1989, and the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame in 2002.

The Rice's had two daughters, Annette and Kathleen. Billie Ann, who was a student tutor for Ken at Auburn, died in 2014. Ken died from complications from several ailments at the age of 81 on October 14, 2020. A ceremony was held in his memory on October 24 on the top of Mount Oglethorpe.

"We just lost a good friend. He was one of the best guys you'd ever want to meet," said Dr. Lloyd Nix, who played with Rice at Auburn. "He could do it all. He did it at Auburn and in the pros."



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