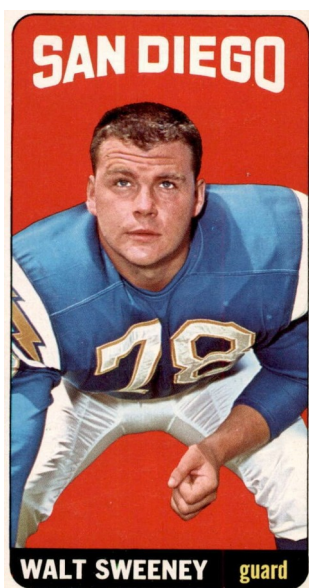




## Walt Sweeney

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

You could practically cut and paste Walt Sweeney to fit in any position on the offensive line due to his versatility, size, and agility. At 6'4" and 256 pounds, his strength was combined with a rare quickness for an offensive lineman. Former Los Angeles Rams Hall of Famer Merlin Olsen despised going up against Sweeney to the tune of, "If I had to play against Sweeney every day, I'd rather sell used cars."<sup>1</sup>



Drafted second overall in the 1963 AFL draft by San Diego, Sweeney embarked on a stellar pro career. He spent 11 of his 13 seasons with the Chargers.<sup>2</sup> In his years on the west coast, Sweeney teamed with Hall of Fame tackle Ron Mix to protect quarterbacks John Hadl, Johnny Unitas, and Dan Fouts. His monstrous strength opened running lanes for backs Paul Lowe, Mike Garrett, and Keith Lincoln. Sweeney was named to nine consecutive All-Star games from 1964 to 1972: six AFL-All Star Games and three Pro Bowls.<sup>3</sup> Of his talent, teammate Lance Alworth remarked, "He was one of the most talented guys to play the game. He was a great guard, but I always felt he was put in the wrong place. He would have been one of the great middle linebackers of all time."<sup>4</sup>

Several of the 1960s Chargers teams were among the highest scoring of all-time in AFL history. They led the AFL in points scored (1963, 1965), yards gained (1963, 1965), while the team won five AFL West Division titles.<sup>5</sup> From the get-go, Sweeney became an asset to the club.



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The 1963 team is arguably the greatest in franchise history. San Diego finished 11-3 in the regular season, boasting the league's top ranked offense, having scored 399 points.<sup>6</sup> The Chargers beat down the Boston Patriots, 51-10, for the AFL title, in a year where Sweeney mostly played special teams.<sup>7</sup> Coach Sid Gillman utilized Sweeney's quickness to rush down the field and go for the tackle on returns. The win marked the first of three consecutive title game appearances – San Diego lost in both 1964 and 1965 to the Buffalo Bills.<sup>8</sup>

Sweeney became a full-time starter at guard starting in 1964. He played left guard exclusively in 1964, switching to the right side in 1965.<sup>9</sup> In his AFL days with the Chargers, Sweeney was a two-time second-team all-AFL choice (1965, 1969) by the *NY Daily News* and Associated Press. He made the first-team twice as well in 1967 and 1968.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, following the AFL/NFL merger, San Diego finished no higher than third in the AFC West Division from 1970 to 1973. San Diego's strengths on offense were often off-set by weaker defenses.<sup>11</sup> The Chargers ranked in the bottom half of the NFL in total defense during that span. In 1974, Sweeney was traded to Washington for three future draft choices.<sup>12</sup> He was idolized by Washington coach George Allen. Sweeney joined the “Over The Hill Gang,” that included the likes of Deacon Jones, Billy Kilmer,

- 1 Borges, Ron. “State Your (Sad) Case: Walt Sweeney,” SportsIllustrated.com, January 27, 2015, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/nfl/state-your-sad-case-walt-sweeney>.
- 2 “Walt Sweeney,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 19, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/S/SweeWa00.htm>.
- 3 “Walt Sweeney,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 19, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/S/SweeWa00.htm>.
- 4 Canepa, Nick. “Canepa: Sweeney lived and died an addict,” *The San Diego Union Tribune*, February 7, 2013, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sports/chargers/sdut-canepa-sweeney-lived-life-as-addict-2013feb07-story.html>.
- 5 “Los Angeles/San Diego Chargers Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 19, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sdg/>.
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- 7 “Championship – Boston Patriots at San Diego Chargers – January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1964,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 19, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/196401050sdg.htm>.
- 8 “Los Angeles/San Diego Chargers Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 19, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sdg/>.
- 9 “Walt Sweeney,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 19, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/S/SweeWa00.htm>.
- 10 “Walt Sweeney,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 19, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/S/SweeWa00.htm>.



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Ron McDole, and Pat Fischer.<sup>13</sup> The move paid off as the Redskins were the fourth ranked offense, scoring 320 points. The team finished 10-4, losing in the divisional playoff against the Los Angeles Rams.<sup>14</sup> Sweeney's final season in 1975 saw the Redskins suffer four losses in its final six games to miss the playoffs, posting an 8-6 record.<sup>15</sup>

In 13 seasons, Sweeney missed just one contest, playing in 181 of 182 games and starting 167.<sup>16</sup> In 1970, he was named to the second-team AFL all-time team. In 1981 he was inducted into the Los Angeles Chargers Hall of Fame and selected as a member of the Chargers' 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Team in 2009. In the same year, Sweeney was elected to the Professional Football Researchers Association's Hall of Very Good.<sup>17</sup> Many feel he ought to be a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Lance Alworth agreed saying, "Walt Sweeney belongs in the Pro Football Hall of Fame."<sup>20</sup> For as much as Sweeney gave to the game and all the accolades, awards, and honors he received, a valid argument exists.

Walter Francis Sweeney was born on April 18, 1941.<sup>21</sup> Among all the bright moments throughout his career, there was a shroud of darkness that hid in the background. For years, he battled rampant alcohol and drug abuse that he tied to his football career. In a memoir he wrote, "My drug addiction is directly related to this game. It was the San Diego Chargers' trainers and doctors who gave pregame amphetamines to rev me up, postgame sedatives to bring me down, pain killers as 'needed' and steroids, said to be vitamins, for better health. I considered taking drugs as normal for game-day preparation as putting on my game face."<sup>22</sup> It did not help the matter that Sweeney had an addictive

1 1 "Los Angeles/San Diego Chargers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 19, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sdg/>.

1 2 "Sweeney," ProSportsTransactions.com, accessed June 19, 2022, [prosportstransactions.com/football/Search/SearchResults.php?Player=sweeney&Team=&BeginDate=&EndDate=&PlayerMovementChkBx=yes&submit=Search](https://prosportstransactions.com/football/Search/SearchResults.php?Player=sweeney&Team=&BeginDate=&EndDate=&PlayerMovementChkBx=yes&submit=Search).

1 3 "1974 Washington Redskins Statistics & Players," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 19, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/was/1974.htm>.

1 4 "1974 Washington Redskins Statistics & Players," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 19, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/was/1974.htm>.

1 5 "1974 Washington Redskins Statistics & Players," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 19, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/was/1974.htm>.

1 6 "Walt Sweeney," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 19, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/S/SweeWa00.htm>.

1 7 "Class of 2009," ProFootballResearchers.org, accessed June 19, 2022, <https://www.profootballresearchers.org/hall-of-very-good-2009.html>.

2 0 Canepa, Nick. "Canepa: Sweeney lived and died an addict," *The San Diego Union Tribune*, February 7, 2013, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sports/chargers/sdut-canepa-sweeney-lived-life-as-addict-2013feb07-story.html>.

2 1 "Walt Sweeney," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 19, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/S/SweeWa00.htm>.

2 2 Borges, Ron. "State Your (Sad) Case: Walt Sweeney," *Sports Illustrated*.com, January 27, 2015, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/nfl/state-your-sad-case-walt-sweeney>.



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personality, as described by Ron Mix, “Walt was an excessive personality. If you were told to take one amphetamine, he'd take five. After one game he was almost comatose. ...”<sup>23</sup> Jerry Magee, who covered San Diego sports for over 50 years elaborated, “Walter came from a long line of alcoholics and I think he felt incumbent to follow the tradition. He never could separate himself. He couldn't get away from it, and he really got a raw deal from the NFL. ... He had the best speaking voice I've ever heard. He was quite a guy and a helluva player. He never really caused any problems – except to himself.”<sup>24</sup>

Years after his retirement he remained bitter toward the NFL, filing a lawsuit against them in the 1990s stating he was, “unemployable and totally and permanently disabled.”<sup>25</sup> He was originally awarded a \$1.8 million judgment in 1997, though it was overturned in an appeals court, due to a lack of definitive evidence.<sup>26</sup> Sadly, the addiction raged on, creating hellacious personal life consequences that resulted in two divorces, bankruptcy, lost jobs, and rehab stints. Finally, he reached sobriety, writing, “I wish it was some sort of spiritual awakening but the fact of the matter is that I just got tired of fighting it.”<sup>27</sup> There is no doubt the addiction to drugs ruined Sweeney's life. He also firmly believes it cost him a chance for enshrinement in Canton, despite the support from former teammates, fans, and the endless awards and achievements he earned on the field.

On February 2, 2013 Sweeney passed away at the age of 71 from pancreatic cancer at his apartment in San Diego.

Despite all the negativity, Walt gave everything he had to his team and his teammates. Alworth spoke to it by saying, “He really hated to play guard. But that was Walt; he loved to play the game so much he'd do whatever he was asked to do. Everybody loved him. He was a special person.”<sup>28</sup> Sweeney learned this attitude in college at Syracuse from 1960 to 1962 under legendary coach Ben Schwartzwalder. Coach played him at a

2 3 Canepa, Nick. “Canepa: Sweeney lived and died an addict,” *The San Diego Union Tribune*, February 7, 2013, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sports/chargers/sdut-canepa-sweeney-lived-life-as-addict-2013feb07-story.html>.

2 4 Canepa, Nick. “Canepa: Sweeney lived and died an addict,” *The San Diego Union Tribune*, February 7, 2013, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sports/chargers/sdut-canepa-sweeney-lived-life-as-addict-2013feb07-story.html>.

2 5 Borges, Ron. “State Your (Sad) Case: Walt Sweeney,” *Sports Illustrated.com*, January 27, 2015, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/nfl/state-your-sad-case-walt-sweeney>.

2 6 Borges, Ron. “State Your (Sad) Case: Walt Sweeney,” *Sports Illustrated.com*, January 27, 2015, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/nfl/state-your-sad-case-walt-sweeney>.

2 7 Perry, Tony. “Walt Sweeney dies at 71; offensive guard for the San Diego Chargers,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 6, 2013, <https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-walt-sweeney-20130207-story.html>.

2 8 Canepa, Nick. “Canepa: Sweeney lived and died an addict,” *The San Diego Union Tribune*, February 7, 2013, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sports/chargers/sdut-canepa-sweeney-lived-life-as-addict-2013feb07-story.html>.



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variety of positions that ranged from end, guard, defensive line, and tight end – wherever the legend needed him.<sup>29</sup> Sweeney was named to the school's All-Century team in 1989.

In his three seasons, the Orangemen compiled a 20-10 record, that included a win over Miami (FL) in the 1961 Liberty Bowl. In his senior season, Sweeney played in the North-South Game and the College All-Star Game, that led him to being selected in the first round of the 1963 AFL draft.<sup>30</sup> He was also chosen by the Cleveland Browns in the eighth round of the NFL draft that year.<sup>31</sup>

End Notes:

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- 2 9 Bierman, Brad. "Orange Watch: Syracuse star Walt Sweeney should be Hall of Fame semifinalist," sujuiceonline.com, December 31, 2019, <https://sjuiceonline.com/2019/12/31/orange-watch-syracuse-star-walt-sweeney-should-be-hall-of-fame-semifinalist/>.
  - 3 0 Bierman, Brad. "Orange Watch: Syracuse star Walt Sweeney should be Hall of Fame semifinalist," sujuiceonline.com, December 31, 2019, <https://sjuiceonline.com/2019/12/31/orange-watch-syracuse-star-walt-sweeney-should-be-hall-of-fame-semifinalist/>.
  - 3 1 "Walt Sweeney," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 19, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/S/SweeWa00.htm>.