

= Bill Willis =

William Karnet Willis (October 5 , 1921 ? November 27 , 2007) was an American football defensive lineman who played eight seasons for the Cleveland Browns in the All @-@ America Football Conference (AAFC) and the National Football League (NFL) . Known for his quickness and strength despite his small stature , Willis was one of the dominant defensive football players of the 1940s and early 1950s . He was named an All @-@ Pro in every season of his career and reached the NFL 's Pro Bowl in three of the four seasons he played in the league . His techniques and style of play were emulated by other teams , and his versatility as a pass @-@ rusher and coverage man influenced the development of the modern @-@ day linebacker position . When he retired , Cleveland coach Paul Brown called him " one of the outstanding linemen in the history of professional football " . Willis was also one of the first African Americans to play professional football in the modern era , signing with the Browns a year before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball with the Brooklyn Dodgers .

Born in Columbus , Ohio , Willis attended Ohio State University , where he joined the track and football teams . He was part of a Buckeyes football team that won the school 's first national championship in 1942 . After graduating in 1944 , Willis heard about a new AAFC club in Cleveland led by his old Ohio State coach , Paul Brown . He got a tryout and made the team . With Willis as a defensive anchor , the Browns won all four AAFC championships between 1946 and 1949 , when the league dissolved . The Browns were then absorbed by the NFL , where Willis continued to succeed . Cleveland won the NFL championship in 1950 .

Willis retired in 1954 to focus on helping troubled youth , first as Cleveland 's assistant recreation commissioner and later as the chairman of the Ohio Youth Commission . He remained in that position until his death in 2007 . Willis was inducted into both the College Football Hall of Fame and Pro Football Hall of Fame in the 1970s . He married Odessa Porter and had three sons , William , Jr . , Clement and Dan .

= = Early life = =

Willis was born in Georgia , the son of Clement and Williana " Anna " Willis . The family moved to Columbus , Ohio about 1922 . His father died of pneumonia on April 10 , 1923 , and he was raised by his grandfather and mother amid the financial hardships of the Great Depression . He ran dashes and threw the shot put on the track team and played on the football team at Columbus East High School . Worried about being compared to his older brother Claude , who had been an All @-@ State fullback at the same school a few years earlier , Willis eschewed the backfield to play tackle and end . He had a successful three years on the high school team , winning Honorable Mention All @-@ State honors as a senior . After graduating from high school , Willis took a year off and worked . Willis 's high school coach wrote to Paul Brown , the Ohio State University football coach , saying the school should recruit him because he matched the type of player Brown liked : large , but more importantly , quick . He enrolled at Ohio State in 1941 .

= = College career = =

Willis was small for a lineman at 202 pounds , and despite signing up to play for Brown he was initially expected to focus on track and the 60 @-@ yard and 100 @-@ yard dashes . Brown , however , brought him onto the football team as a sophomore in 1942 . Willis played middle guard , a defensive position opposite the center . That year , the Buckeyes posted a 9 ? 1 record and won the Big Ten Conference . The team was voted national champion by the Associated Press , a first for the school .

Before the following season , scores of Ohio State players left the school to join the military as American involvement in World War II intensified . Willis volunteered for the U.S. Army , but was classified as 4 @-@ F , or only available for service in case of a national emergency , due to varicose veins . With many stars gone , however , Brown fielded a team composed mostly of 17

@-@ year @-@ olds who were not yet eligible for military service . The " Baby Bucks " , as they were called , fell to 3 ? 6 , although Willis was named a first @-@ team All Conference selection in the Big Ten .

By the 1944 season , Brown had joined the military and was coaching a team at Great Lakes Naval Training Station outside Chicago . Under his substitute , coach Carroll Widdoes , the Buckeyes completed an undefeated season . Willis was named to the United Press International and Look magazine All @-@ America teams . He played in the 1944 College All @-@ Star Game at Chicago , and was named the game 's outstanding player .

= = Professional career = =

A professional football career was unlikely for Willis when he graduated from Ohio State in 1945 . While the exclusion of black players was not a written rule , no African @-@ American had played in the National Football League since 1933 . The gentlemen 's agreement had been in effect ever since segregationist George Preston Marshall entered the league as owner of the Boston Redskins . In his physical prime but with no real prospect of playing professionally , Willis took a job as the head football coach at Kentucky State College in the fall of 1945 . Kentucky State , an historically black school , played against other small black schools near its campus in Frankfort .

Willis , however , still wanted to play football . " My heart was not really in coaching " , he later said . He read that Paul Brown was coaching a team in the newly formed All @-@ America Football Conference (AAFC) , and he gave Brown a call . Brown said he would get back to Willis on a possible tryout . In the meantime , Willis was recruited by the Montreal Alouettes , a team in the Canadian Football League . Not hearing back from Brown , he planned to go play in Canada . Willis was about to leave for Montreal when Paul Hornung , a sportswriter for the Columbus Dispatch , called with a message from Brown . Hornung told Willis to go for a tryout in Bowling Green , Ohio , where the new team , the Cleveland Browns , was holding its training camp .

Willis went to the camp and impressed Brown with his speed and reflexes , as he had at Ohio State . Brown lined him up against center Mo Scarry in practice on his first day . Willis beat him every time . Scarry complained that Willis was coming across the line before he snapped the ball . On one snap , Scarry stepped on quarterback Otto Graham 's foot as he backpedaled to handle Willis . Brown took a look himself : Willis was not offside . He was getting a jump by watching for the center 's fingers to tighten on the ball . " He was quick " , said Alex Agase , who later joined the Browns as a guard . " I don 't think there was anybody as quick at that position , or any position for that matter . He came off that ball with that ball as quick as anything you would want to see . "

Willis made the team , and 10 days later the Browns signed a second African @-@ American player , fullback Marion Motley . Willis played middle guard for the Browns , lining up opposite the center but often dropping back into coverage to defend the pass . He had a playing style and physique similar to that of the modern @-@ day linebacker . For Brown , signing Willis and Motley was nothing unusual . Brown had black players on his teams from the time he coached at Massillon Washington High School in Massillon , Ohio . The coach did not care about race one way or the other ; he wanted to field the best team he could . " I never considered football players black or white , nor did I keep or cut a player just because of his color " , Brown wrote in his autobiography . In joining the Browns in 1946 , Willis and Motley were two of four professional football players who broke the color barrier in 1946 , a year before Jackie Robinson became Major League Baseball 's first black player in the modern era . Brown later added other black players to the team , including Horace Gillom and Len Ford .

With the Browns , Willis became an anchor on defense as the team dominated the AAFC . The team won each of the league 's four championship games before the AAFC folded and the Browns , along with two other teams , were absorbed by the National Football League (NFL) following the 1949 season . Willis was named to all @-@ AAFC teams in every year of its existence .

While the team was a success , Willis and Motley contended with their share of racism . They were taunted , stepped on and insulted on the field . Off @-@ the @-@ field incidents also occurred . In their first season in 1946 , Willis and Motley did not travel to a game against the Miami Seahawks

after they received threatening letters and Miami officials said they would invoke a Florida law that forbade black players from competing against whites . Another time , a hotel where the team was staying asked Willis and Motley to leave . Brown threatened to move the entire team , and the hotel 's management backed down . Willis and Motley were forced to stay in a separate hotel for a 1949 AAFC all @-@ star game in Houston , Texas .

The Browns ' success continued when the team entered the NFL in 1950 . In a playoff game that year against the New York Giants , Willis caught up with running back Gene " Choo @-@ Choo " Roberts on a breakaway reception in the fourth quarter to prevent the touchdown and ensure a Browns victory . " I knew it meant the ball game " , he said . " I just had to catch him . " The Browns beat the Giants 8 ? 3 and went on to win the NFL championship in 1950 . Willis was one of seven Browns players chosen for the first @-@ ever Pro Bowl that year .

The 1951 and 1952 seasons were equally successful for Willis , although the Browns lost in the NFL championship to the Los Angeles Rams and Detroit Lions . He was an all @-@ pro selection and was named to the Pro Bowl in both years . In 1953 , when the Browns lost a third championship game in a row , Willis was named an all @-@ pro but did not make the Pro Bowl .

Both Willis and Motley retired after the 1953 season . Willis was 32 years old and had played eight seasons for the Browns , earning all @-@ pro honors every year he played . He was the best player on a strong defense that was crucial to Cleveland 's success in the AAFC and NFL . He was also the embodiment of what Brown looked for in his players : speed and intelligence instead of size . At around 210 pounds , he was small for a lineman , even in his era . Willis 's play as a powerful but quick middle guard influenced the development of the modern linebacker position . " In my opinion Bill ranks as one of the outstanding linemen in the history of professional football " , Brown said when he retired . " He certainly was the fastest and many coaches use his technique as a model in teaching line play . "

= = Later career and death = =

Willis retired because he wanted to concentrate on other activities ; he had become a popular figure in Ohio and worked with youth in Cleveland and Columbus . He accepted a \$ 6 @,@ 570 @-@ a @-@ year job as Cleveland 's assistant recreation commissioner . " This is the type of work I want to do , working with kids " , he said . By the late 1970s , he was the chairman of the Ohio Youth Commission , a state agency created to combat criminality among young people . He died in 2007 . He was married to Odessa Porter until her death in 2002 . The couple had three sons , William , Jr . , Clement and Dan .

= = Honors and legacy = =

Willis was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1971 . In 1977 he was inducted as a charter member of the Ohio State Varsity O Hall of Fame . He was elected the same year to the Pro Football Hall of Fame . Ohio State University honored Willis on November 3 , 2007 by retiring his # 99 jersey .