

= Len Ford =

Leonard Guy Ford , Jr . ( February 18 , 1926 ? March 14 , 1972 ) was an American football player from 1944 to 1958 . He played college football for the University of Michigan and professional football for the Los Angeles Dons , Cleveland Browns and Green Bay Packers . He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1976 and the University of Michigan Athletic Hall of Honor in 1996 .

Ford was an all @-@ city athlete at his high school in Washington , D.C. , and attended Morgan State University after graduating in 1944 . After a brief stint in the U.S. Navy the following year , he transferred to Michigan , where he played on the Michigan Wolverines football team as an offensive and defensive end . He played for Michigan from 1945 to 1947 and was a member of the undefeated 1947 team that has been selected as the best team in the history of Michigan football .

Ford was passed over in all 32 rounds of the 1948 NFL Draft , but was selected by the Los Angeles Dons of the rival All @-@ America Football Conference ( AAFC ) , where he played for two seasons as an offensive and defensive end . After the AAFC dissolved in 1949 , Ford played eight seasons as a defensive end for the Cleveland Browns . During those eight seasons , the Browns advanced to the NFL championship game seven times , won three championships , and allowed the fewest points in the NFL six times . Ford was one of the dominant defensive players of his era , having a rare combination of size and speed that helped him disrupt opposing offenses and force fumbles . He was selected as a first @-@ team All @-@ NFL player five times and played in four Pro Bowls .

Ford was traded to the Packers in 1958 , but played there just one season before retiring . He worked for the Detroit recreation department from 1963 to 1972 . He suffered a heart attack and died in 1972 at age 46 .

= = Early years = =

Ford was born in Washington , D.C. , in 1926 . His father , Leonard G. Ford , Sr. , was a Virginia native who was employed as a " skilled laborer " by the federal government in 1920 and as a printing operator at the Government Printing Office in 1940 . His mother , Jeraldine , was also a Virginia native who worked as a social worker in a settlement house in 1940 . Ford had an older sister , Anita , and a younger brother , Claude .

As a teenager , Ford attended Armstrong Technical High School , where he played football , basketball and baseball . As a high school athlete , he aspired to play fullback in football , but he later recalled , " I started to grow , and I grew right out of the backfield . " He was chosen by local sportswriters as an all @-@ city athlete in all three sports in his senior year , and he served as captain of all three teams for one season each .

After he graduated in 1944 , Theodore McIntyre , Ford 's high school football coach , suggested he attend Morgan State University , a historically black college in Baltimore , Maryland . Ford played for the Morgan State Bears football team for one year under head coach Edward P. Hurt , while also starring as the center on the school 's basketball team . The basketball team won its league 's championship in 1944 . Ford left Morgan State and joined the U.S. Navy in 1945 , but stayed in the service only briefly as World War II came to an end .

= = University of Michigan = =

After the war , Ford transferred to the University of Michigan to play football in a bigger program than Morgan State 's . He wanted to " get a shot at playing in the Rose Bowl one day " , he later said . While attending Michigan , he was a member of Omega Psi Phi , an all @-@ black fraternity whose membership also included Bob Mann , another Michigan end who went on to play in the NFL .

= = = 1945 and 1946 seasons = = =

In 1945 , Ford was Michigan 's tallest player at 6 feet 5 inches ( 196 cm ) and 190 pounds . Ford

played as a backup at the left end for the 1945 Michigan football team that compiled a 7 ? 3 win ? loss record under head coach Fritz Crisler . When Ford caught a pass from Wally Teninga in Michigan 's 26 @-@ 0 victory over Minnesota in early November 1945 , The New York Times took note and referred to Ford as " a six @-@ foot , five @-@ inch giant . "

As a junior in 1946 , Ford had gained 16 pounds and weighed 206 pounds . That year , he shared the left end position with his fraternity brother Bob Mann , with Ford starting four games and Mann two . With Ford and Mann at the end position , the 1946 Michigan team finished with a 6 ? 2 ? 1 record . During the 1946 season , Ford established himself as a tenacious tackler on defense and was also a receiving threat as an end on offense . In the first game of the 1946 season , a 21 @-@ 0 victory over Indiana , Ford recovered an Indiana fumble and then scored the game 's second touchdown on a 17 @-@ yard pass from Pete Elliott . Later in the season , he scored a touchdown against Wisconsin on an end @-@ around , a play Michigan employed frequently with Ford .

= = = 1947 season = = =

By 1947 , Ford had grown to 215 pounds , 25 pounds heavier than he had weighed in 1945 . Led by All @-@ American halfbacks Bob Chappuis and Bump Elliott , the undefeated 1947 Michigan team has been selected as the best team in the history of Michigan football . Nicknamed the " Mad Magicians " , the Michigan squad finished with a 10 ? 0 record , capped by a 49 ? 0 victory in the Rose Bowl over USC on New Year 's Day . Ford started only one game in 1947 , as Bob Mann was the starting left end in eight of Michigan 's 10 games . Even with reduced playing time , Ford caught a 35 @-@ yard touchdown pass in the first game of the season and had two receptions for 82 yards in the 55 ? 0 win over Michigan State . He scored again in a game against Pitt . Ford 's defensive performance was credited with shutting down Ohio State in the final game of the 1947 season . After the Wolverines ' 21 @-@ 0 victory over the Buckeyes , The Michigan Daily wrote :

" For the defense it was big Len Ford , who sparked a forward wall that never let the Bucks threaten . His end was practically impregnable . He smashed Ohio interference time and again , he continually harassed Dick Slager and Pandel Savic , the Ohio passers , and he made life miserable for Pete Perini , blocking one punt and rushing the Buckeye punter on nearly all of his kicks . "

Michigan finished first in the AP Poll and won the 1947 college football national championship , sharing the honor with Notre Dame , which had been first in the polls before the Rose Bowl . After the 1947 season , the Associated Press ( AP ) selected Ford as a third @-@ team All @-@ American end and named teammate Bob Mann as a second @-@ team All @-@ American end . The AP also named Ford a second @-@ team all @-@ Big Nine Conference end . In the summer of 1948 , he accepted an invitation to play for the college team in the College All @-@ Star Game , a now @-@ defunct annual matchup between the champion of the professional National Football League ( NFL ) and a selection of the country 's best college players .

= = Professional career = =

= = = Los Angeles Dons ( AAFC ) = = =

Despite his accomplishments in college , Ford was passed over in all 32 rounds of the 1948 NFL Draft during a time when most professional teams did not employ African @-@ Americans . ( The following year , George Taliaferro became the first African @-@ American to be selected in an NFL draft . ) He was selected , however , by the Los Angeles Dons of the rival All @-@ America Football Conference ( AAFC ) in the third round of its 1948 draft . He signed with the Dons in April 1948 .

Playing as a right end opposite Joe Aguirre , Ford had 31 catches for 598 yards and seven touchdowns in 1948 . As was the case at Michigan , Ford also worked on defense and was one of the AAFC 's most successful pass @-@ rushers . The Dons , meanwhile , finished the regular season with a 7 ? 7 record , good for third place in the AAFC West . Ford played basketball in the off @-@ season for the New York Renaissance , an all @-@ black professional team in the National

Basketball League . He did not play basketball at Michigan , the Big Ten Conference having maintained racial segregation of basketball until 1950 .

Ford had 36 catches for 577 yards and one touchdown in 1949 , while the Dons fell to 4 ? 8 . The AAFC struggled financially during Ford 's time with the Dons . Its teams competed with NFL franchises for fans ' attention and player talent ? the Dons shared a city with the NFL 's Los Angeles Rams . By late 1949 , team owners came to an agreement under which the Cleveland Browns , San Francisco 49ers and Baltimore Colts joined the NFL and the rest of the league 's teams , including the Dons , folded .

= = = Cleveland Browns = = =

= = = = 1950 season = = = =

After the AAFC disbanded , the Browns selected Ford in the second round of the 1950 AAFC dispersal draft , created to reallocate former Dons , Buffalo Bills and Chicago Hornets players . Ford signed with the Browns in July 1950 .

Cleveland head coach Paul Brown converted Ford into solely a defensive end as two @-@ platoon systems gained popularity after 1950 . Ford bulked up to 260 pounds and quickly became a fixture of Cleveland 's defense alongside linebacker Bill Willis and defensive back Warren Lahr . He was one of five black players for Cleveland ? the others were Willis , punter Horace Gillom and fullbacks Emerson Cole and Marion Motley ? at a time when many other teams had never signed a black player . The Browns , in fact , had roughly a third of the black players in the NFL on their roster . Cleveland sports writer Chuck Heaton later recalled that Ford was " a leader , particularly with the black players on the squad . "

Led by an offense that featured Motley , quarterback Otto Graham and ends Mac Speedie and Dante Lavelli , the 1950 Browns finished the regular season with a 10 ? 2 record and won the 1950 NFL Championship Game over the Los Angeles Rams .

In a mid @-@ October game against the Chicago Cardinals , an elbow by Pat Harder broke Ford 's nose , cheekbone , and maxilla ( upper jaw ) , knocked out two teeth , loosened several teeth and chipped another . Ford , who had been fighting with Harder throughout the game , punched him following the play , resulting in a penalty , his ejection from the game and a \$ 50 ( \$ 492 in 2016 dollars ) fine . NFL commissioner Bert Bell withdrew the fine when the damage to Ford 's face was revealed . Ford 's facial injuries were so severe that a plastic surgery was required , " virtually rebuilding the big end 's face . " The Browns ' long @-@ time team doctor , Vic Ippolito , described Ford 's injuries as " a sickening sight . "

Because of the injury , Ford started only four regular season games in 1950 . However , he asked to be reinstated for the 1950 NFL Championship Game . Head coach Paul Brown agreed to allow Ford to suit up after receiving approval from the team doctor and arranging for a special mask to be built to protect Ford from further injury . Ford had been on a liquid diet until late November and dropped from 240 to 215 pound , though he was back up to 223 pounds shortly before the championship game . As the championship game got underway , Ford sat on the bench as the Rams moved the ball 82 yards down the field for a touchdown . Browns head coach Paul Brown knew the defense had to tighten , and he called on Ford to enter the game . The Cleveland Plain Dealer later called this " one of Len Ford 's great moments . " Paul Brown stated that Ford " showed me that day he really was a man . " Brown later recalled that Ford was the team 's " only real hope of plugging a hole " and recalled one sequence as a defining moment in the game :

I 'll always remember one three @-@ play sequence where he threw Vitamin Smith for a 14 @-@ yard loss on a reverse , sacked [ Bob ] Waterfield for another big loss and finally smothered Glenn Davis on an end run . That turned the game around for us .

The Browns ' defense held the Rams scoreless in the fourth quarter , and the Browns won the championship game by a 30 @-@ 28 score in their first season in the league .

===== 1951 season =====

Ford continued to excel as a pass @-@ rusher in 1951 , when the Browns again advanced to the NFL Championship Game but lost to the Rams . He recovered four fumbles during the season and was named a first @-@ team All @-@ Pro by both the Associated Press ( AP ) and the United Press International ( UPI ) . He was also named to the Pro Bowl , the NFL 's all @-@ star game . Ford 's dominating play allowed Brown to assign him to two offensive linemen , giving Cleveland the latitude to put four men on the line and use three linebackers in what is now known as the 4 ? 3 defense . Cleveland 's defensive coach Blanton Collier later recalled the thinking behind moving Ford : " We knew we had to get him in closer where his talents as a pass rusher could best be utilized . So we moved both tackles in and dropped the linebackers off the outside . It may have been the beginning of today 's 4 ? 3 defense . " Collier also noted that " Len was very aggressive and had that touch of meanness in him that you find in most defensive players . "

===== 1952 season =====

The 1952 Browns had eight regular @-@ season wins and won the NFL 's East Division , but lost to the Detroit Lions in the 1952 NFL Championship Game . Ford , meanwhile , extended his run of dominance against opposing offenses in an era before the quarterback sack was a recorded statistic . For the second consecutive year , he was named a first @-@ team All @-@ Pro by both the AP and UPI and was selected for the Pro Bowl .

===== 1953 season =====

The 1953 Browns compiled an 11 @-@ 1 record and again advanced to the NFL Championship Game , losing to the Detroit Lions . For the third consecutive year , Ford was named a first @-@ team All @-@ Pro by both the AP and UPI and was selected for the Pro Bowl .

===== 1954 season =====

Willis and Motley retired after the 1953 season , but Ford and Don Colo continued to anchor the defense alongside Lahr in the secondary . The 1954 Browns lost two of their first three games , but finished the season with a 9 ? 3 record and returned to win the 1954 NFL Championship Game over the Lions . Ford had two interceptions in the Browns ' 56 ? 10 win over the Lions , including one which he returned 45 yards to set a new NFL playoff record . Ford recovered a career @-@ high five fumbles in 1954 , and he was selected as a first @-@ team All @-@ Pro by the AP and UPI for the fourth year in a row . He was also selected to play in his fourth consecutive Pro Bowl .

===== 1955 season =====

The 1955 Browns compiled a 9 ? 2 ? 1 record in 1955 and won the 1955 NFL Championship Game against the Los Angeles Rams , helped by a strong defensive effort and six interceptions of quarterback Norm Van Brocklin . Ford was selected as a first @-@ team All @-@ Pro by the UPI , The Newspaper Enterprise Association ( NEA ) and the New York Daily News . He was named a second @-@ team All @-@ Pro by the AP .

===== 1956 and 1957 seasons =====

Graham and many of the players that had helped propel the Browns to a series of championship game appearances retired before the 1956 season . The 1956 team finished 5 ? 7 that year , its first @-@ ever losing record .

By 1957 , there was speculation that Ford , then age 31 , might not make the Browns ' roster . Ford arrived at training camp well above his playing weight , and rookie Bob Mischak was given Ford 's

spot in August . When Mischak withdrew from the team , the spot was awarded to another rookie , Paul Wiggin . Ford worked to shed pounds during training camp and worked to train the young defensive players , including Wiggin and Bill Quinlan . Rookie running back Jim Brown recalled that Ford pulled him aside during the 1957 training camp and gave him advice on dealing with the Browns ' head coach Paul Brown . Ford advised the rookie to keep his mouth shut and do as the coach set during practice and waiting until game day : " Run it your way in the game and hope it works , and if it does , don 't say anything . Just make your yardage and act like it was a mistake . "

Brown was slowed for several weeks during the 1957 season by a severely bruised shoulder , but the Browns , led by Jim Brown , reached the 1957 NFL Championship Game , losing to the Lions . Cleveland 's defense allowed the fewest points in the NFL in six of Ford 's eight seasons with the team .

== Green Bay Packers ==

In May 1958 , the Browns traded Ford to the Green Bay Packers in exchange for a draft choice . Green Bay coach Ray McLean said at the time that he acquired Ford for his talent at putting pressure on the quarterback and noted that " he 's one of the toughest guys in the league to block because of his speed , size and agility . " The 1958 Green Bay team won just one game in Ford 's lone season there . Ford suffered multiple broken fingers before the last game of the 1958 season , and , because he was unable to play , the Packers refused to pay Ford the final \$ 916 @. @ 66 due on his contract . In 1961 , Ford sued the Packers in Wayne County Circuit Court in Detroit to collect the \$ 916 @. @ 66 plus \$ 10 @, @ 000 for alleged damage to his reputation caused by the Packers ' releasing him .

== Career statistics and legacy ==

Ford had 20 career fumble recoveries at the time of his retirement . Ford was successful in part because of his combination of quickness and size . Few players of his era who were as tall and big as he was could move as fast ; only Larry Brink of the Rams was close to him in proportions .

== Family and later years ==

In 1951 , Ford married Geraldine Bledsoe Ford ( 1926 ? 2003 ) , who was a lawyer in the 1950s , and in the mid @- @ 1960s became the first African @- @ American woman to serve as a judge in Michigan . They had two daughters , Anita and Deborah , and divorced in 1959 .

While playing in the NFL , Ford worked during the off @- @ season in a Detroit real estate office . He developed a reputation for being " cagey with the dollar " and told Jet magazine in 1955 : " In what other sport can a boy just graduated from college make \$ 5 @, @ 000 in his first six months , then have a half @- @ year left to make more money ? " After retiring from football , Ford attended the Detroit College of Law for a year @- @ and @- @ a @- @ half , but never received a law degree . From 1963 until at least December 1970 , Ford worked as the assistant director at Considine Recreation Center , the largest recreation center in Detroit . At the time of his death 16 months later , he was described in obituaries as the assistant recreation director for the City of Detroit .

Sports writer Chuck Heaton wrote that Ford 's life was " pretty much down hill " after he retired from professional football . Heaton recalled that , in his later years , Ford seemed in poor physical condition , " only a shadow of the mighty end he once was . " Ford still aspired to obtain his law license , but , according to Heaton , " appeared to have lost the drive which made him such a great football player . " Don Newcombe , who became good friends with Ford , was more blunt . Interviewed in 1980 , Newcombe said that Ford 's life was " decimated " because of alcohol . Newcombe added : " He became a wino , stumbling around in alleys . He gave up his life for alcohol . "

Ford suffered a heart attack in early March 1972 and died the following week in a Detroit hospital . He was age 46 at the time of his death . He was posthumously inducted into the Pro Football Hall of

Fame in 1976 and into the University of Michigan Athletic Hall of Honor in 1996 .