

The Clerk's Black History Series

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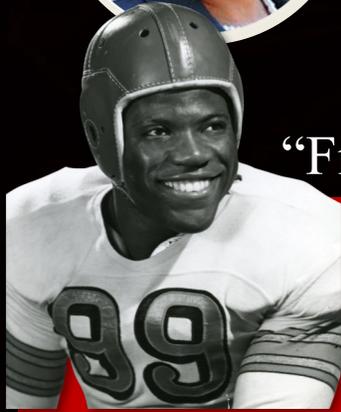
DeKalb County



William "Bill" Karnet Willis

(October 5, 1921 - November 27, 2007)

"First Black Player to Reintegrate Professional Football"



William "Bill" Karnet Willis was born in Columbus, Ohio on October 5, 1921, to Clement and Willana Willis. Bill's father died of pneumonia when he was just 18 months old and Bill was raised by his mother and grandfather. Bill attended East Side High School and excelled at football and track. Seeing his potential, the East High football coach reached out to Paul Brown, the Football Coach at Ohio State University (OSU), and encouraged him to recruit Bill. Although Bill was considered too small for a defensive lineman - at 6'2" and just over 200lbs, his quickness and determination was unmatched. Bill joined the Ohio State Football Team as a sophomore in 1942. At season's end, the 9-1 Buckeyes won the 1942 Western Conference (Big 10) championship and were voted the number one college team in the country by the Associated Press. In 1943 and 1944, Bill received All-American honors, making him the first Black All-American from Ohio State.

When Bill graduated from Ohio State in 1944, he accepted a coaching position at Kentucky State University, a black college, for a season. At that time, there were no black professional football players in the NFL - nor had there been in more than a decade. Although the National Football League (NFL) did not officially exclude Black players, there was a culture among team owners that effectively banned them from the game. Bill then verbally agreed to play football for a Canadian Football Team, the Montral Alouettes. Meanwhile, Paul Brown, Bill's former coach, had become the co-founder and head coach of a new NFL team, the Cleveland Browns (named after Paul Brown). Coach Brown asked Bill to attend the Browns training camp as a free agent prospect. He reported to Bowling Green and in a single practice session, earned the starting defensive tackle position - with a \$4,000 contract.

Bill's explosive speed up the middle of the defensive line would eventually change the way quarterbacks begin their stance under center. Originally, the QB's feet would be parallel to the line of scrimmage. But the Browns' starting signal caller was instructed by Coach Brown to place his right foot slightly behind the left foot so that he could push off and move away from the line easier. This staggered stance is now the norm with every quarterback at every level.



Bill Willis & Marion Motley

Shortly after, Coach Brown contacted Marion Motley, a black fullback that played for him earlier, and asked him to tryout. Bill and Marion re-integrated professional football. Three weeks later, two other black football players, Kenny Washington and Woody Strode, took the field for the NFL's Los Angeles Rams. Their entry in the NFL was the inspiration for Branch Rickey, a baseball manager and team owner, to bring Jackie Robinson, the first black professional baseball player, up from the minor league.

While Bill and Marion endured racism and discrimination from those outside of the team, Paul Brown made it clear to his team - if any player couldn't treat the two with respect, they would be removed from the team. But he couldn't control the outside world. In the last game of the 1946 season on the road against Miami, the State of Florida had a law that Whites, Hispanics, and Negroes could not compete on the same playing field during sporting events. Both Bill and Marion were left in Cleveland for that road game. In 1950, Bill was one of seven Browns players chosen for the first-ever Pro Bowl. Both Bill and Marion would end up with four AAFC Championships, one NFL title, named to the NFL 1940s All-Decade Team and became members of the Cleveland Browns Ring of Honor. Both Bill and Marion retired after the 1953 season. After retirement, Bill became the Assistant Commissioner of Recreation in Cleveland, working with youth. He returned to Columbus where he served for two decades in the Ohio Department of Youth Services, until his retirement as director in 1983.

In 1971, Bill was inducted into the College Hall of Fame and in 1977, he was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. In 2020, Ohio State designated the #0 jersey (the Block O jersey) to be worn by a new player each season, in honor of Willis. Bill's official OSU uniform number, #99, was retired in 2007, just months before he died. On November 27, 2007, at the age of eighty-six, Bill Willis died from complications of a stroke. The book "The Forgotten First", chronicles the four black pioneering NFL players, Bill, Marion, Kenny, and Woody, who played a crucial role in re-integrating the NFL.

