

With his work ethic, Payton captured soul of 'City of Big Shoulders'



CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTO

Walter Payton strides into the end zone during a game against the Cleveland Browns in 1985. The Hall of Fame running back and National Football League's all-time rush leader died Monday from a rare liver ailment.

by Don Pierson
Chicago Tribune
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CHICAGO -- If sports provides metaphors for life, nothing rings truer than football's running back, carrying the ball, struggling to get ahead, needing the help of friends, overcoming obstacles and enemies, striving for goals, getting knocked down, bouncing up again and again until reaching the end zone, triumphant.

Nobody ever ran a football better

than Walter Payton, who died of cancer Monday at 45.

Because he did it for 13 years for the Chicago Bears, Payton's grip on Carl Sandburg's City of Big Shoulders was as strong as his handshake. His death makes the shoulders slump.

Because his exploits set magnificent athletic standards, his death seems all the more unbelievable. Indestructibly reliable on the field, how could he be so human and vulnerable away from it?

Payton was Chicago's first hero of the superstar era, when the media spot-

light first expanded athletic reality into 24-hour fantasy. He followed Ernie Banks and Bobby Hull and Gale Sayers and Dick Butkus and preceded Michael Jordan, who took fantasy to yet another level of imagination.

Payton stayed much closer to earth, by trade and personality. He captured the soul of a city with work habits and results that made steelworkers and hog butchers and ditch diggers proud.

Teammates remember not only his production, but his practices. No man ever played football harder and no child ever enjoyed it more. Often moody, more often playful, sometimes selfish, more often selfless, Payton never was absent. In 13 years he missed only one game, and went to his death unhappy about it because he believed his coaches underestimated his determination to ignore a painful ankle. He was only a rookie who would never again allow others to keep him from work.

Relentless in both his running and living styles, Payton's premature death shocks yet somehow fits his penchant for doing absolutely everything in a hurry.

His parents in Columbia, Miss., didn't allow him to play football until he reached high school, so he was content to play in the band. But he quickly caught up.

At Jackson State, Payton set collegiate records that no one quite appreciated because of the suspect nature of small-college competition. But when the Bears took him with the fourth pick

of the first round in the 1975 NFL draft, he had few doubters even though he became a pro at the tender age of 20.

Despite an ordinary rookie season in which he was slowed by an elbow injury, Payton quickly established himself as the Bears' primary and often only weapon. His stature as football's career rushing leader is enhanced by the memory of defenses stacked to stop him. When he was unable to run around or through tacklers, he jumped over them. In a 7-0 victory over Buffalo in 1979, he launched himself so high over the defensive line for the game's only touchdown that Buffalo defender Fred Smerlas felt as if he were trying to swat a fly.

Payton was nicknamed "Sweetness," but he exuded toughness. No football player ever ran more times for more yards for more years. In the tradition of George Halas and Bronko Nagurski and Bulldog Turner and Bill George and Mike Ditka and Dick Butkus and Mike Singletary, there was nothing sweet or pretty about the way Payton played. If no running back ever absorbed more hits, none ever delivered more blows with forearms the envy of Popeye.

"I love the contact," he said.

Likewise, he connected with fans by rarely sounding cocky. He measured his words and rarely sought the cameras, although he certainly didn't mind the attention. Neither sullen like Jim Brown nor glib like O.J. Simpson, the great running backs whose records he broke,

Payton let his performance speak for itself. Yet he expressed anger recently when ESPN ranked San Francisco receiver Jerry Rice ahead of him on the list of the century's top athletes. Payton's cat-and-mouse treatment of reporters amused him but remained consistent with his constant motion on and off the field.

Never a breakaway runner with classic sprinter's speed, Payton nevertheless was so fast off the mark that he believed he burned energy the way a dragster burns fuel. So his most memorable runs are short, attacking bursts. He ran the way a jackhammer approaches concrete, inexorably and indefatigably.

He drove cars the same way, as fast as he could, faster than his passengers would dare. He became a race driver, but tried to drive even fast cars too fast. As a businessman, he bounced from project to project, always attracted to the action. As a family man, he had great pride in a son and a daughter and enjoyed pointing out his son was bigger and his daughter might be faster than their dad.

The enduring image even as he struggled against a fatal disease is of Walter Payton reaching out, sometimes when the referee wasn't looking, usually after the whistle had blown, from under the pile, his hand emerging with the ball, stretching for that last extra yard.

Walter
Payton

Sweetness

NFL's
All-time
leading
rusher

16,726

career
rushing yards



NBA teams still have work to do, wooing fans back

by Paul Doyle
The Hartford Courant

BOSTON - In the post Magic Johnson-Larry Bird era, Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley were among the biggest names in the NBA. Their personalities transcended their sport, and their celebrity grew beyond basketball.

By the end of this season, if you can believe Barkley, they will both be retired. As the NBA starts Year 2 of the post-Jordan era, Barkley has announced - yet again - this will be his final season.

But the transition has just started. Other stars from the Barkley-Jordan generation may soon be fading: Karl Malone is 36, David Robinson 34, Hakeem Olajuwon 36, Scottie Pippen 34, Patrick Ewing 37.

"Once these guys all retire and they're gone, it'll hurt the NBA," Bird said. "But it seems like there's always someone to step in and take their place."

That process has already begun - Spurs forward Tim Duncan is the pre-

season favorite for MVP, while 76ers guard Allen Iverson has a scoring title on his resume. And Lakers swingman Kobe Bryant could be the most marketable player in the league.

But no matter how exciting Duncan, Iverson, Bryant, Timberwolves forward Kevin Garnett or Pistons forward Grant Hill are on the court, the health of the NBA may be more tied to their conduct off it. In the wake of last year's labor dispute - which came on the heels of Jordan's retirement - players have been instructed to sign more autographs, interact with fans and simply smile more often.

Before the Celtics-Wizards game Thursday in Springfield, Pervis Ellison thanked fans for attending the game when he addressed the crowd.

Expect the same sort of groveling all over the league.

"I think there's a bit of an identity crisis going on right now, perhaps, in the NBA," Lakers Coach Phil Jackson said. "But I think that they're addressing the problem ... with a much more player-friendly orienta-

tion."

As the season begins Tuesday, the top five or six teams may be in the Western Conference. Besides the defending champions Spurs, the conference includes title favorites such as the Lakers, Trail Blazers, Jazz and Rockets.

The Suns have Penny Hardaway teamed with Jason Kidd for the best backcourt in the league, but they may struggle to break into the elite of the conference. If they played in the East, Phoenix might be the conference favorite.

"The West is top-heavy," Warriors Coach P.J. Carlesimo said. "But the real problem is when you get down to spots seven, eight, nine and 10. Those last couple of playoff spots will be real hard to come by."

That also could result in playoff upsets, because the bottom seeds will be dangerous.

"There are a lot of great teams," San Antonio coach Gregg Popovich said. "I think the team that comes out of the West will be a pretty well-tested group."

When Jackson stacks his Lakers against other contenders in the West, he sees one matchup problem: power forward. In a conference that includes such rebounding forwards as Duncan, Garnett, Malone, Sacramento's Chris Webber, Phoenix's Tom Gugliotta and Seattle's Vin Baker, the Lakers counter with A.C. Green, 36. And Green's backup is Travis Knight.

So where are Jackson's rebounding fantasies taking him? Probably the Las Vegas strip.

"I've heard from Dennis (Rodman)," Jackson said. "I've yet to have person-to-person contact with him, but indeed I have (heard from him)."

Jackson tried and failed to land Pippen before adding Bulls castoff Ron Harper. So in his effort to perhaps recapture the magic he found in Chicago, Jackson is considering the best available former Bull.

Rodman could fill a valuable role for Jackson. But Rodman was a disaster in a 23-game stint for the Lakers last season, and Jackson knows better than anyone that his baggage

is daunting - which is why he is treading lightly.

"It's there, and it ultimately has to be addressed at some level," Jackson said. "But we hope it's not something that we have to jump into as a sign of desperation. ... I'm still in there trying to build a new team and trying to get established roles for players, and (help them) find their way together and do things in a harmonious way."

If the goal is harmony, it's unlikely Rodman will be added.

After weeks of trade speculation, the Knicks have decided to keep Latrell Sprewell. The guard - a free agent after the season - has agreed to a five-year, \$61.9 million contract extension. Original talks centered on a two-year, \$21.3 million extension. The bump in salary has earned Sprewell a new nickname, courtesy of teammate Marcus Camby. "Max," Camby said. "Because he's maxed out."

Among the Raptors' cuts last week: Percy Miller, known to the rap world as Master P. The rapper and president of No Limits Records is 0-for-2 in

NBA camps; - he tried out for the Hornets last year.

At least he has other ventures to fall back on: Besides running his record empire, Master P is an agent for a growing stable of athletes.

Washington Coach Gar Heard went through his first training camp without seeing his starting lineup on the floor together. Between injuries (Ike Austin and Mitch Richmond) and court dates (Rod Strickland), the Wizards have spent training camp giving their reserves too many minutes. "Maybe we'll be able to put 10 guys (in uniform) for the opener," Heard said. "It's been tough. I've yet to have the starting lineup together, so we don't know what to expect."

Postscript to Richard Hamilton's strong outings against the Celtics in consecutive nights last week: As a freshman, Hamilton scored 28 points against Kansas and he was guarded by Paul Pierce. He found himself matched against Pierce at times last week and had his best exhibition performances, scoring 19 points Wednesday and 17 Thursday.

1999-2000 NBA Preview: Part 1

by Matt Buser
staff writer

The 1999-2000 NBA season began this week, so it's time for my fearless prognostications. It looks as if the strongest teams in the league will come from the West in San Antonio, Portland, and the LA Lakers. Only Miami from the East appears to be able to challenge the big guns in the West. Look for a preview of the Eastern Conference and my playoff predictions in next week's Beacon.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Playoff Teams

1. San Antonio Spurs

The defending champs look strong again, with the twin towers setting the pace. Tim Duncan is arguably the best player in the game, and David Robinson has adjusted well to his role as second option. Avery Johnson and Mario Elie are smart, solid veterans. The loss of Sean Elliot leaves a hole at small forward, but will help prevent a letdown by providing an emotional rallying point. Their bench play will make or break them down the stretch.

Best player: Duncan, out to prove he's the NBA's best. On the rise: Duncan, who still hasn't peaked.

2. Portland Trail Blazers

Portland could be listed as 1a. They are the deepest team in the league, and with the additions of Scottie Pippen, Detlef Schrempf, and Steve Smith, come 322 games of playoff experience. If the team comes up with the right rotation, they could be the team to beat. They have the size to bang with the big teams, and the athleticism to run with the smaller ones.

Best player: Pippen, does everything and does it well. On the rise: Damon Stoudamire, look for his numbers to improve across the board with his supporting cast.

3. Los Angeles Lakers

Team chemistry is the big question. This team has the most talent in the league, and three of its biggest egos. Shaquille O'Neal, Kobe Bryant, and Glen Rice all prefer to be the first option in an offense. If Coach Phil Jackson can sell the "team first" philosophy along with his triangle offense, they will be hard to match. The additions of Ron Harper and A. C. Green will help infuse that philosophy. Watch out for Dennis Rodman rumors coming soon.

Best player: O'Neal, especially if Jackson is able to convince him that rebounding and defense matter. On the rise: Bryant, when he returns, should flourish in the triangle offense.

4. Utah Jazz

They are listed this high on reputation. They are old, and this IS their last run at a title. That being said, Karl Malone, John Stockton, and Jeff Hornacek will play inspired basketball this season. Veteran Olden Polynice will provide better play at center than Greg Ostertag ever could. The bench will have to step up during the regular season so there is still something left in the tank come playoff time.

Best player: Malone, still one of the best in the business. On the rise: Bryon Russell, who will be leaned on this season for scoring and defense more than ever.

5. Minnesota Timberwolves

The league's premier talent/personality is Kevin Garnett. He gives Duncan a run for his money as best player. Terrell Brandon is exceptional at point, but injury-prone. Joe Smith is looking to regain his form that made him the #1 overall pick in the 1995 draft. If Wally Szczerbiak and Radoslav Nesterovic, a seven-foot center from Europe, play to potential, they will be the team no one wants to face in the playoffs.

Best player: Garnett, man, is he fun to watch. On the rise: Szczerbiak, who should finish among the finalists for rookie

of the year.

6. Phoenix Suns

This team may move up this list in the near future. They have one of the best starting fives in the league with Jason Kidd, Penny Hardaway, Cliff Robinson, Tom Gugliotta, and...Luc Longley. The Suns need Longley to be more physical, or he will be their downfall. Their smallish bench also creates problems for them, but the combination of Kidd and Hardaway should make them an interesting team to track throughout the season.

Best player: Kidd, game averages last season: 17 points, 11 assists, 7 rebounds per; enough said. On the rise: Kidd, all three averages were career highs, can he top them?

7. Sacramento Kings

Jason Williams and Chris Webber help make the Kings the most exciting team in the league to watch. They scored the most points in the league last year, but also gave up the most. Nick Anderson has been a close friend of Williams' since his college days at Florida, and should help stabilize his game. Vlade Divac quietly makes big contributions at center. This team needs to learn how to play better defense before they can make the step up to the next level.

Best player: Webber, he's happy here and his play shows it. On the rise: Williams, he'll improve his shot selection, cut down on his turnovers, and keep making the highlight-reel plays.

8. Houston Rockets

This is not your older brother's Rockets team. Instead of methodical three-on-three play of Pippen, Charles Barkley, and Hakeem Olajuwon, they get fresh legs that can and want to run in Steve Francis, Shandon Anderson, and Walt Williams. Cuttino Mobley should continue his solid play of last years rookie campaign. Their weak bench will prevent them from winning a lot of games, but they will win some. Best player: Olajuwon, can still outplay most centers in

the low post. On the rise: Francis, lit it up in college, now has to prove he can hang with the big boys.

The Rest:

9. Seattle SuperSonics: Gary Payton needs help, and Vin Baker has to be that help.

Best player: Payton, "the glove" is "the man" on this team. On the rise: Baker, will improve this season.

10. Denver Nuggets: Antonio McDyess and company have offense, need defense.

Best player: McDyess, top 10 in NBA in scoring, rebounding, and blocks. On the rise: Ron Mercer, will be given a chance to shine.

11. Vancouver Grizzlies: Too young to win big right now.

Best player: Shareef Abdur-Raheem, NBA's fourth-leading scorer despite being focus of opposing defenses. On the rise: Mike Bibby, who had a better season than Jason Williams last year, but I bet you didn't know that.

12. Dallas Mavericks: Gary Trent's injury hurts. Not that they were very good before, though.

Best player: Michael Finley, a top-flight talent on a bottom shelf team. On the rise: Cedric Ceballos, broke both wrists last year, but it won't show this year.

13. Golden State Warriors: Mookie Blaylock will wish he still played for the Hawks.

Best player: Blaylock, good point guard, but he can't carry this team. On the rise: Antawn Jamison, will post good numbers as a starter.

14. Los Angeles Clippers: Good young starting five; horrible bench, coach, front office...

Best player: Lamar Odom, trust me on this one. On the rise: See "Best player."

What are your predictions for the 1999-2000 NBA season? WE WANT TO KNOW! Email the Beacon at behrcoll5@aol.com with your prediction.