AAFC Player Profile: Bill Willis

William Karnet Willis (October 5, 1921 – November 27, 2007) was an American professional football player who was a middle guard and guard for eight seasons with the Cleveland Browns of 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 one of the first two African Americans to play professional football in the modern era, signing with the Browns and playing a game in September 1946 along with Marion Motley, a contest which took place months before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in the Major League Baseball (MLB) with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Born in Georgia but raised 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.

1946 -1948 AAFC.

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. [16] 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 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.