

DOUG ATKINS

By Don Smith

Doug Atkins was a 6-8, 275-pound defensive end who wreaked havoc for 17 years and 205 games on National Football League quarterbacks.

For most of his long career that began with the 1953 Cleveland Browns and continued with first the Chicago Bears and then the New Orleans Saints, opposing players faced him with just one thought in mind: "Don't make him mad!"

Everyone knew that holding or tripping Doug was an absolute no-no, something akin to committing suicide. When angered, his contemporaries remember, Atkins inflicted the kind of devastation upon enemy lines and quarterbacks that seldom, if ever, has been equaled on any football field.

Even when he was playing at this natural "easy-going" pace, the monstrous Tennessean did his job so well that he is still respected today, 13 years after his retirement, as a classic defensive end.

The Saints' head coach, Tom Fears, summed it up during Atkins' final 1969 season: "They threw away the mold when they made Doug. There'll never be any other like him."

The Pro Football Hall of Fame's Board of Selectors remembered Atkins that way, too, and elected him for membership with the 1982 class of enshrinees.

Like many who attain greatness in one sport professionally, Doug's initial athletic interest was in another game -- basketball. He was, in fact, playing with the Detroit Vagabonds professional basketball team when Cleveland Browns' coach Weeb Ewbank found him to offer a pro football contract.

Atkins' basketball interest came naturally enough, for it was THE high school sport in his home town of Humboldt, Tenn., where he was born on May 8, 1930. Only 5-2, 118 pounds his first year in high school, Doug grew rapidly and, as a senior, was an all-Tennessee star.

He went to the University of Tennessee on a basketball scholarship and immediately did well, scoring 38 points in one freshman game. An all-around fine athlete, Doug also filled in one year on the track team and won the Southeastern Conference high jump title with a 6-6 leap. He later would use this ability to leap-frog over blockers in his mad rush to get at NFL passers.

General Bob Neyland, Tennessee's football coach and athletic director, spotted Atkins on the basketball court and marveled at the way a man so big could move so well. He knew he had to have Atkins on the Volunteers' football team. "I enjoyed basketball, I was gonna forget all about football," Doug reminisces. "But they wouldn't let me."

So he gave college football a try and did well enough to become an all-America tackle as a senior. Still, Doug paid little attention when he heard the news the Browns had made him their No. 1 pick in the 1953 NFL draft. He turned instead to his first love -- basketball.

"Atkins was the most magnificent physical specimen I had ever seen," Ewbank says of his first meeting with Doug. "Paul Brown told me I could go as high as \$10,000 to sign him but he was really worth much more."

Depending on the source, the figure varies, but Atkins signed for something between \$5000 and \$6800. Both sides agree, however, that Weeb threw in a special "bonus" -- eight beers and two hamburgers.

Atkins immediately became an important factor on the Browns' defensive team. The Browns won the divisional title in 1953 and the NFL championship in 1954. But before 1955 rolled around, Doug was traded to the Bears.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 4, No. 6 (1982)

It was in Chicago for the next 12 seasons that Atkins laid the foundation for his claim to pro football immortality. The Bears of that era produced overpowering defensive units and Doug quickly became one of the ringleaders. He won all-NFL honors in 1960, 1961 and 1963 and all-Western conference acclaim seven years in the 1958-65 span. He was a starting defensive end in the Pro Bowl eight of the last nine years he was a Bear and the Most Valuable Lineman in the 1959 classic.

Atkins' brilliance was never more evident than in 1963, when the Bears interrupted Green Bay's championship string with one of their own. The defense allowed only 10 points a game -- by far the lowest yield in the NFL -- as the Bears battled to an 11-1-2 record. Then in the 14-10 upset of the New York Giants for the NFL title, Chicago intercepted five passes as the Giants' great quarterback, Y.A. Tittle, absorbed a merciless pounding from the Atkins-led pass rush.

By everyone's admission, Atkins never was one to keep his opinions, no matter how controversial they might be, to himself. Thus, through much of his time in Chicago, Doug and the Bears' boss, George Halas, were at constant odds on a variety of subjects. Before the 1967 season, Doug asked for a trade. Halas obliged by sending him to the New Orleans Saints.

The Saints were an expansion team that year and departed from their avowed youth movement in obtaining Atkins because, as Coach Fears put it: "We need some defensive stability and I think Doug can give us at least one good year."

It turned out that Atkins gave the Saints three outstanding years. Happy in fresh surroundings, he played with the zest of a rookie but with the knowledge of a hardened veteran. He was enjoying his finest season ever at the age of 38 in 1968 when he suffered a broken leg late in the season. As it was, he did make the all-NFL second team.

When Doug retired after the 1969 campaign, he had played longer as a scrimmage-line regular than any player up to that time. He had always looked on pro football strictly as a job that carried with it the primary responsibility of making life miserable for quarterbacks. In the collective minds of the passers of his day, he did this with monotonous regularity.

"He is the strongest man in football and also the biggest," 18-year veteran quarterback Fran Tarkenton once said. "When he rushed the passer with those oak tree arms of his way up in the air, he is 12 feet tall. And if he gets to you, the whole world suddenly starts spinning."

"One of his favorite tricks," long-time rival Johnny Unitas remembered, "was to throw a blocker at the quarterback."

Two of Unitas' chief protectors on the Colts' offensive line, Bob Vogel and Jim Parker, added to the Atkins legend.

"Doug was so strong he could throw me 10 feet," Vogel admitted.

"I considered myself the best guard of this century and I played against some mean ones," Parker went a step further, "but I never met anyone meaner than Atkins. After my first meeting with him, I really wanted to quit pro football. Finally, my coaches convinced me not every pro player was like Atkins."

Then there is the story about the veteran tackle of the Los Angeles Rams who ordered a rookie guard who had just held Atkins to go to him and apologize.

"I've got to play against him the rest of the day," the veteran demanded. "Now you go apologize."

Even players who had good days against Doug didn't want to admit it. "I don't want Atkins mad at me," one tackle told a sportswriter. "You put something in the paper about me handling him and he's liable to kill me the next time."

For all his intensity on the scrimmage line, Doug was not one to celebrate wildly in the dressing room after important victories. This trait may have helped to fan the theory held by some that Doug dogged it on the practice field and was not always ready to play on Sunday.

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Atkins felt that was a "bum rap" that stemmed from a game against Green Bay when he was asked to play even though he had two bad ankles. Doug calls his performance that day "not spectacular but not disastrous either." However, on viewing the game films, someone spotted Doug taking it easy and thus the reputation was born.

"After that, I decided if I was really hurt -- I mean with major injuries -- I wouldn't practice," Doug concluded his defense.

During his 17 campaigns, Atkins had enough injuries to know which were major and which were not. The list includes tow damaged knees, a torn bicep, numerous cracked ribs, a broken collarbone, two hands broken twice each, both ankles sprained, a ripped groin muscle and finally the broken leg in 1968.

In view of the admitted and constant Halas-Atkins confrontations, it would not be surprising if the venerable Bears leader was less than enthusiastic about Atkins as a player. Yet when one of the Hall's selectors approached Halas for his evaluation of Doug as a player and a potential Pro Football Hall of Fame member, George's response was unhesitating:

"He absolutely belongs. There never was a better defensive end!"