

WAYNE MILLNER

'Money Player' Was One of NFL's First Great Receivers

By Michael Richman

End, #40, Notre Dame

NFL Career: 1936 – 1941, 1945 (7 seasons)

Redskin Years: 1936 – 1941, 1945

HOF Induction: 1968 Member of NFL 1930s All-Decade Team

Born: Jan. 31, 1913 (Roxbury, Mass.) Died: Nov. 19, 1976 (Arlington, Va.)

They called him “The Money Player.” When the stakes were highest, Wayne Millner had an uncanny knack for delivering.

Consider his two touchdown catches in the final two minutes of Notre Dame’s come-from-behind 18-13 victory over Ohio State in 1935, a mythical “Game of the Century.” Or his nine catches for 179 yards and two touchdowns in the Redskins’ 28-21 win over Chicago in the 1937 championship, then the finest single-game receiving performance in NFL post-season history.

The win over the Bears was Millner’s signature game in a seven-season NFL career that defined him as one of the league’s first great receivers. He played end for the Redskins from 1936 to 1941 and, after a three-year break in the U.S. military in World War II, he returned for a final season in 1945. His totals of 124 catches for 1,578 yards and 12 touchdowns, paltry by today’s standards, were all-time franchise records when he retired, and contributed to Redskin squads that played in four NFL championship games, winning once.

But Millner not only caught passes. The 6-foot, 190-pounder was a punishing blocker and tackler in the era of single-platoon football. His diverse talents and feats earned him induction in 1968 into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, which described him as a “great two-way player, a rock-em, sock-em performer on defense and a smooth, sure-fingered receiver when the Washington Redskins had the ball.”

When the Redskins had possession, Millner was the favorite target of the team’s legendary passer, Sammy Baugh. “He was not what you called a big end,” Baugh once said. “[But] he was so quick, while he always was blocking his man. I always thought he did the best job of all the two-way ends of our time.”

Redskins halfback Cliff Battles, who played with Millner in 1936 and 1937, and entered the Hall of Fame the same year as his teammate, once said: “I always knew if I could get out into the open, Wayne would be there to throw a block for me. He would swing over from the weak side after making his initial block and hit a defensive back. Wayne’s blocks determined whether or not I would get away for a long run.”

And, of course, Millner had those big-play instincts, which were on display shortly after Notre Dame recruited him in 1933. That season, he blocked a punt and recovered it for a touchdown in the Fighting Irish’s dramatic one-point victory over Army. Two years later, the 5-0 Irish trailed unbeaten and heavily favored Ohio State, 13-6, with less than two minutes left. After Millner’s touchdown reception created a 13-12 game, the Irish recovered a Buckeyes fumble, and Notre

Dame halfback Bill Shakespeare hit Millner in the end zone with 30 seconds left. The win helped build the Notre Dame mystique. (Millner, a two-time All-American at Notre Dame, was voted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1990).

The Redskins selected Millner in the eighth round in 1936, allowing the Massachusetts native to play for a team close to home. Thrilled about acquiring him, Redskins coach Ray Flaherty sent a note to team owner George Preston Marshall that said in part: "If we don't win the championship with that big Yankee playing end ..."

The Boston Redskins fell short, losing to Green Bay in the 1936 championship game, before moving to Washington in 1937. Millner caught two TD passes in the Redskins' 49-14 rout of the Giants for the 1937 Eastern Division crown. In the championship game, the Bears built a 14-7 lead in the third period.

Welcome Millner time.

With the forward pass an evolving weapon in pro football, Millner caught a ball from Baugh in the flat and outraced defenders on Wrigley Field's frozen surface for a 55-yard touchdown play. Chicago regained the lead, 21-14. But Baugh connected with Millner on a similar play, and he again outran the defense on a 77-yard scoring pass to tie the game. The Bears' defense began double- and triple-teaming Millner, so Baugh used him as a decoy and passed to fullback Ed Justice for the winning score in the fourth quarter. A sportswriter later asked Millner, who lacked blazing speed, how he ran so fast on his two scoring catches. "You'd run fast, too, if you had those big devils chasing you," he said, referring to Chicago's major size advantage.

Millner continued to be a key target for Baugh, and other Redskin passers, in the coming seasons. (The team then used the single-wing formation, and multiple players in the backfield threw the ball.) He posted career-highs of 294 receiving yards in 1939 and 22 catches in 1940. After the Redskins beat the Chicago Cardinals, 28-21, on Oct. 13, 1940, one sports reporter wrote:

"Wayne Millner, all-professional end, played a marvelous game. His catching of Baugh's pass to tie the count was a masterful piece of work. Wayne cut to the far side of the gridiron, and then zig-zagged his course behind the Cardinals' defense to catch the ball in the 'money-zone.' But on receiving the leather, Wayne did the 'Thurston the Magician' juggling act,' and the spectators' hearts leaped every time the ball bounced, until he finally made the pay-off stab that tied the score."

After the 1941 season, his sixth year in the league, Millner began serving in the U.S. Navy. He missed the '42, '43 and '44 seasons but returned in 1945 as a player-coach, then retired. In later years, he served as an assistant coach for the Redskins, Eagles, Baltimore Colts, Catholic University in D.C., and the University of Maryland. He was also the Eagles' head coach for the last 10 games of the 1951 season.

"He was one of the best," said Ace Parker, a Hall of Fame quarterback who played for the Brooklyn Dodgers during Millner's era. "He played offense and defense and could do everything. He was a good receiver."

MILLNER'S PASS RECEIVING

Year	Team	G	No	Yds	Avg	TD
1936	Boston	12	18	211	11.7	0
1937	Washington	11	14	216	15.4	2
1938	Washington	11	18	232	12.9	1
1939	Washington	11	19	294	15.5	4
1940	Washington	10	22	233	10.9	3
1941	Washington	11	20	262	13.1	0
1942-44				----- Military Service -----		
1945	Washington	10	13	130	10.0	2
Total		76	124	1578	12.7	12

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