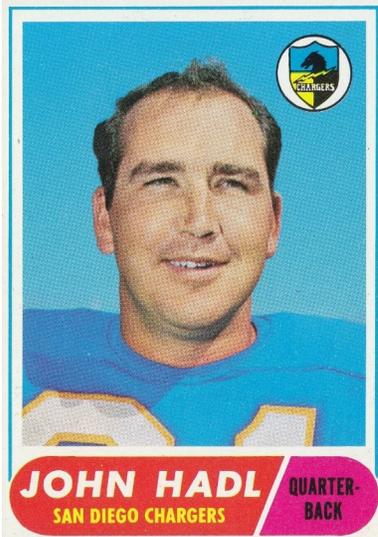


John Hadl

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

It's not ironic that John Willard Hadl (b. February 15, 1940) was a record-setting quarterback. At the time of his retirement in 1977, he ranked sixth all-time in wins, tenth in passing touchdowns, and won more games than several of his peers - Sonny Jurgenson, Joe Namath, and George Blanda – all of whom are enshrined in Canton.¹ Nearly every team he played for experienced success, from his school days at Lawrence High School, to his AFL years with the San Diego Chargers. It is ironic, however, that Hadl could not avoid wearing a blue uniform for most of his playing days: the Chargers, Los Angeles Rams, Houston Oilers, and the University of Kansas all embodied a shade of blue in their color scheme.



A true Kansan, born in Lawrence, KS, Hadl attended Lawrence High School, where he was a regular on the football and baseball teams. The all-state running back and center fielder recalled, “When I was growing up, playing football at LHS was the thing. You grew up wanting to play at Lawrence High.”² The Lawrence High Chesty Lions won the KSHSAA state championship during his senior season, when the school was ranked No. 1 in the final poll.

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- 1 “State Your Case: Is John Hadl Hall-of-Fame worthy?,” SportsIllustrated.com, June 20, 2017, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/nfl/state-your-case-is-john-hadl-hall-of-fame-worthy>.
 - 2 “LHS Football,” Twitter.com, May 2, 2021, https://mobile.twitter.com/Football_LHS/status/1388912176430211073.



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Hadl's natural athletic ability, and desire to stay close to home saw him enroll at the University of Kansas.³ His track record of winning fit right in with turning around the Jayhawks, who were mired in a rut of mediocrity. The football team had not won more than five games in nearly a decade (1948). In his first year of eligibility, Hadl led the team in receiving with 126 yards in 1959.⁴ The team finished 5-5, but the next season saw an improvement to 7-2-1 that included wins over No. 11 TCU and a 41-0 blowout of rival Kansas State. It was the first outright conference title for the Jayhawks since 1930, second ever ranked finish, and the first since 1947.⁵ Hadl switched from halfback to quarterback, which fueled the spark for increase in offensive output. He also undertook the punting duties, punt return role, and roamed the field as a defensive back.

The Jayhawks 1961 season was another banner year for the football team. Hadl led the way at quarterback. After starting a disappointing 0-2-1, Kansas reeled off six-straight victories, earning a berth in the Bluebonnet Bowl against Rice.⁶ The Jayhawks won convincingly, 33-7, clinching the first bowl victory in school history.⁷ Hadl finished seventh in the Heisman Trophy voting, accounting for over 1,000 total yards during the season.⁸

He was a two-time first-team All-American (1960, 1961) and two-time first-team All-Big Eight (1960, 1961) for his career as a Kansas Jayhawk. Hadl still holds the school record for longest punt (94 yards) and shares the mark for the longest interception return (98 yards).⁹ Primed for the NFL, Hadl was the MVP of the annual East-West Shrine Game and the College-All Star Games in 1961.¹⁰

3 Morrell, Dylan. "Kansas football: John Hadl a star both in college and in the pros," Throughthephog.com, accessed January 23, 2022, <https://throughthephog.com/2020/05/26/kansas-football-john-hadl-star-college-pros/>.

4 "1959 Kansas Jayhawks Stats," SportsReference.com, accessed January 17, 2022, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/kansas/1959.html>.

5 "1960 Kansas Jayhawks Schedule and Results," SportsReference.com, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/kansas/1960-schedule.html>.

6 "1961 Kansas Jayhawks Schedule and Results," SportsReference.com, accessed January 16, 2022, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/kansas/1961-schedule.html>.

7 "1961 Kansas Jayhawks Schedule and Results," SportsReference.com, accessed January 16, 2022, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/kansas/1961-schedule.html>.

8 "1961 Kansas Jayhawks Stats," SportsReference.com, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/kansas/1961.html>.

9 "Hometown legend John Hadl retires from Williams Education Fund," Kansasathletics.com, September 28, 2018, <https://kuathletics.com/general-hometown-legend-john-hadl-retires-from-williams-education-fund/>.

10 "Hometown legend John Hadl retires from Williams Education Fund," Kansasathletics.com, September 28, 2018, <https://kuathletics.com/general-hometown-legend-john-hadl-retires-from-williams-education-fund/>.



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Standing at 6'1" and 214 pounds, Hadl was drafted by the AFL's San Diego Chargers No. 24 overall in the 1962 AFL Draft, and No. 10 overall by the NFL's Detroit Lions in the NFL Draft.¹¹ Hadl elected to play for the Chargers. In his 11-year career with San Diego, Hadl played in 154 contests, starting 122. He earned 59 wins against 54 defeats with nine ties. He led the AFL in passing three times (1965, 1968, 1971).¹² Hadl also took on the primary punting duties in 1964 and 1965, averaging nearly 40 yards per boot.¹³

The Chargers made three consecutive appearances in the AFL title game, winning in 1963, a 51-10 rout of the Boston Patriots.¹⁴ In the contest, Hadl completed 7 of 11 passes for 132 yards, passing and rushing for one touchdown apiece.¹⁵ San Diego did not have as much luck attempting to repeat, losing both the 1964 and 1965 title games to the Buffalo Bills.

The 1963 team was significant, as it is the city's only major professional sports championship, to date. Many of the locals feel since that time there has been a curse on the city's sports franchises – Major League Baseball's Padres have never won a World Series; the San Diego Clippers never won an NBA Championship and the Chargers along with the Clippers have since relocated to Los Angeles. Hadl earned the full-time starting quarterback duties in 1965. His first three seasons in the AFL saw him either split duties or play in a reserve role.¹⁶

Once the full-time starter he led San Diego to winning seasons the next four years, winning 9, 7, 8, and 9 games, respectively, keeping the Chargers in contention.¹⁷ Despite the high win total, San Diego only won a single division title in the ultra-competitive AFL West Division.¹⁸ Hadl's production was on the rise, having back-to-back 3,000+ passing yard campaigns in 1967 and 1968. He set an AFL record 19 consecutive games

1 1 “John Hadl,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HadlJo00.htm>.

1 2 “John Hadl,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HadlJo00.htm>.

1 3 “John Hadl,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HadlJo00.htm>.

1 4 “Los Angeles/San Diego Chargers Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 14, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sdg/>.

1 5 “Championship – Boston Patriots at San Diego Chargers – January 5th, 1964,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 14, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/196401050sdg.htm>.

1 6 “John Hadl,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HadlJo00.htm>.



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with a touchdown pass, starting in October 1966, spanning to November 1967.¹⁹ He set personal career highs in pass attempts (208), completions (440), yards (3,473), and touchdowns (27) in 1968, while leading the league. It was one of four seasons in which he was named an AFL All-Star (1964, 1965, 1968, 1969).²⁰

Lance Alworth was one of Hadl's favorite targets, who caught nearly everything thrown in his direction. Alworth said of his former gunslinger, "Everywhere John went, he won ... and he is probably in the top five or six, if you look at the stats. He didn't win a Super Bowl, but he won everything else. He was a tremendous football player and leader."²¹

Sid Gillman his former head coach of eight seasons, said, "I wouldn't trade Hadl for any other quarterback in pro football."²² That is quite a strong statement, as Hadl's best season was undoubtedly 1971, when he again led the league in passing, topping 3,000 passing yards for the second time in his career.²³

Hadl was just one of two quarterbacks in history to lead two different leagues in passing. As a result, he was the recipient of the NFL Man of the Year award, and received consideration in the MVP race.²⁴ What made John Hadl the strongest of men in March of 1971, prior to the season, was that he overcame a personal injury that nearly cost his life. During a horse riding incident, he suffered a fractured skull and several facial fractures, resulting from being thrown into a tree.²⁵ To return not only to the gridiron, but to compete in top form, is quite remarkable.

It turned out that 1972 was Hadl's final season in San Diego. Early in 1973, he was traded to the Los Angeles Rams for Bob Thomas and Coy Bacon.²⁶ Hadl powered the Rams to a 12-2 record, playoff appearance, and NFC Player of the Year award. Midway through the

1 7 "John Hadl," ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HadlJo00.htm>.

1 8 "Los Angeles/San Diego Chargers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 14, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sdg/>.

1 9 "John Hadl," ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HadlJo00/gamelog/>.

2 0 "John Hadl," ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HadlJo00.htm>.

2 1 "State Your Case: Is John Hadl Hall-of-Fame worthy?," SportsIllustrated.com, June 20, 2017, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/nfl/state-your-case-is-john-hadl-hall-of-fame-worthy>.

2 2 "State Your Case: Is John Hadl Hall-of-Fame worthy?," SportsIllustrated.com, June 20, 2017, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/nfl/state-your-case-is-john-hadl-hall-of-fame-worthy>.

2 3 "John Hadl," ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HadlJo00.htm>.

2 4 "John Hadl," ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HadlJo00.htm>.

2 5 "Hadl's Skull Fractured In Horse-Riding Spill," *The New York Times*, March 29, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/03/29/archives/hadls-skull-fractured-in-horseriding-spill.html>.



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1974 season, he was again traded, this time to the Green Bay Packers in a big time deal.²⁷ In return for Hadl, the Rams received five draft picks total: two first-round (1975, 1976), two second-round (1975, 1976), and a third round draft choice (1975).²⁸ Head coach Dan Devine thought Hadl was the missing piece the team needed to return to prominence. However, the trade did not work out well for the Packers, as Green Bay struggled to a 6-8 record in 1974, further regressing to 4-10 in 1975.²⁹ Hadl was then shipped to Houston as part of a deal that returned Lynn Dickey to Green Bay.³⁰

In his final two seasons with the Oilers, Hadl worked in a backup role, mentoring Dan Pastorini. He made just six starts in 1976 and 1977 before retiring as a player.³¹

The next year, Hadl returned to the football ranks as a coach in 1978. Recruited by Bud Moore to work with the quarterbacks at his alma mater, Hadl was promoted to offensive coordinator in 1979, a position he held thru 1981.³² The Rams hired him back to the NFL ranks in 1982 as an assistant coach. In 1983 he skipped over to Denver as the quarterbacks coach to work with John Elway. Hadl jumped to the USFL in 1984, accepting the head coaching role for the Los Angeles Express for the 1984 and 1985 seasons. The Express went 13-23 under Hadl, including a 1-1 postseason mark.

Hadl then returned to the University of Kansas in 1988. He retired from the University's Williams Education Fund, after nearly three decades, in 2018.³³ The contributions made by Hadl to the university were highly regarded. Former Kansas quarterback Frank Seurer,

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- 2 6 "John Hadl," ProSportsTransactions.com, accessed January 17, 2022, <https://www.prosportstransactions.com/football/Search/SearchResults.php?Player=hadl&Team=&BeginDate=&EndDate=&PlayerMovementChkBx=yes&submit=Search>.
 - 2 7 "John Hadl," ProSportsTransactions.com, accessed January 17, 2022, <https://www.prosportstransactions.com/football/Search/SearchResults.php?Player=hadl&Team=&BeginDate=&EndDate=&PlayerMovementChkBx=yes&submit=Search>.
 - 2 8 "John Hadl," ProSportsTransactions.com, accessed January 17, 2022, <https://www.prosportstransactions.com/football/Search/SearchResults.php?Player=hadl&Team=&BeginDate=&EndDate=&PlayerMovementChkBx=yes&submit=Search>.
 - 2 9 Goodpaster, Mike. "The Worst Draft Trades in NFL History," Thegruelingtruth.com, March 27, 2021, <https://thegruelingtruth.com/football/worst-draft-trades-nfl-history/>.
 - 3 0 "John Hadl," ProSportsTransactions.com, accessed January 17, 2022, <https://www.prosportstransactions.com/football/Search/SearchResults.php?Player=hadl&Team=&BeginDate=&EndDate=&PlayerMovementChkBx=yes&submit=Search>.
 - 3 1 "John Hadl," ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HadlJo00.htm>.
 - 3 2 "KU ALUMNI ASSOCIATION HONORS JOHN HADL WITH THE 2020 FRED ELLSWORTH MEDALLION," The University of Kansas, September 28, 2020, <https://news.ku.edu/2020/09/28/ku-alumni-association-honors-john-hadl-2020-fred-ellsworth-medallion>.
 - 3 3 "Hometown legend John Hadl retires from Williams Education Fund," Kansasathletics.com, September 28, 2018, <https://kuathletics.com/general-hometown-legend-john-hadl-retires-from-williams-education-fund/>.



Sr. recalled, “Coach Hadl gave me opportunities for which I owe him a great debt of gratitude. He coached and mentored me, and so many others, both at KU and professionally, and developed us as players and people. Kansas Athletics has never had, and never will have, a greater ambassador. He is loved and respected by everyone he's touched, and will be immensely missed in Jayhawk Nation.”³⁴ Director of the Williams Education Fund and KU senior associate athletics director Matt Baty, “As a student-athlete, as an alumnus and as a Williams Education Fund team member, John's contributions to Kansas Athletics and to the university are immeasurable.”³⁵ Hadl's number 21 is retired by the university, just one of three numbers to be retired by Kansas football.³⁶

With all the records set, it's no surprise Hadl racked up the number of achievements he did throughout his career. He was also a first-team all-pro selection in 1973 by the Associated Press, Pro Football Writers, and by Pro Football Weekly, a three time All-AFL choice (1965, 1966, 1968), and consensus All-AFC player (1973).³⁷ For his contributions to the Chargers organization, he was inducted into the team's Hall-of-Fame in 1983.³⁸ Hadl's 33,503 career passing yards still rank in the NFL's Top 40 today, as do his 244 touchdown passes.³⁹

3 4 “Hometown legend John Hadl retires from Williams Education Fund,” Kansasathletics.com, September 28, 2018, <https://kuathletics.com/general-hometown-legend-john-hadl-retires-from-williams-education-fund/>.

3 5 “Hometown legend John Hadl retires from Williams Education Fund,” Kansasathletics.com, September 28, 2018, <https://kuathletics.com/general-hometown-legend-john-hadl-retires-from-williams-education-fund/>.

3 6 “Hometown legend John Hadl retires from Williams Education Fund,” Kansasathletics.com, September 28, 2018, <https://kuathletics.com/general-hometown-legend-john-hadl-retires-from-williams-education-fund/>.

3 7 “John Hadl,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HadlJo00.htm>.

3 8 Hood, Lindsay. “Chargers Fun Fact: Team Hall of Fame,” NBCsandiego.com, October 15, 2010, <https://www.nbcсандiego.com/local/chargers-fun-fact-team-hall-of-famers/1842780/>.

3 9 “John Hadl,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HadlJo00.htm>.



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End Notes: