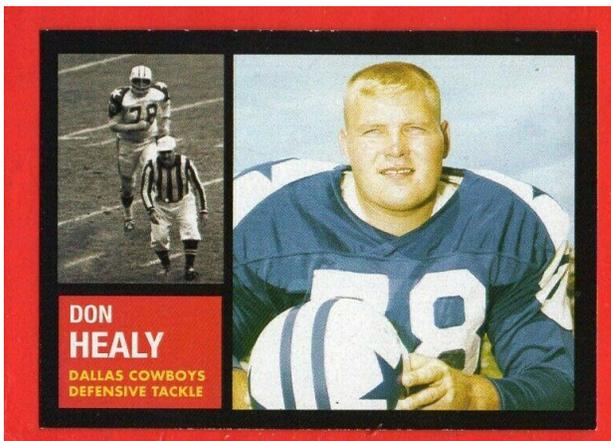


## Don Healy

This article was written by Budd Bailey.

If a Dallas Cowboys fan was asked what player had held a team record for the longest period of time, he or she might guess someone like Don Meredith or Don Perkins. That fan would be wrong.

The correct answer is Don Healy, an original Cowboy who played on the defensive line in the team's first two years. As you'll see, he had a knack for finding the football during his Dallas career, which was a highlight of a relatively brief stay in the pros.



Michael Donald (“Don”) Healy Jr. was born on August 28, 1936, in Rome, New York. He was the son of Michael Donald Healy Sr. and Dorothy (Gifford) Healy – and was right in the middle of their three children. Rome is about 50 miles east of Syracuse in upstate New York, and 15 miles northeast of Utica. The town’s prosperity has been connected to water since 1796, when the Rome Canal connected Lake Ontario to the north with the Mohawk River – which ran east to the Hudson River and thus to New York City. Therefore, it was a key part of the water transportation system between the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean, and that remained true when the Erie Canal came along in the 1820s. Rome was the literal high point of the man-made waterway. Its most famous sports natives might be baseball commissioner Rob Manfred and basketball player-coach-executive Pat Riley.

Don attended Rome Free Academy, one of three NFL players to come from there. Tom Myslinski was the standout of the bunch, playing 60 games mostly in the 1990s. The other was Charlie Melford, who played 13 games with the Frankfort Yellow Jackets in 1930. Healy showed during his time at RFA that he was a fine all-around athlete. He



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lettered in football, hockey and baseball for the Black Knights. While the football team's records during Healy's tenure aren't easily available, he obviously had an impact as he was inducted into the Rome Sports Hall of Fame in 1978; that was only the second yearly class for that organization.

The impact of those days stayed with Healy for the rest of his life. "The guy who really had the most influence on me was my high school coach, a guy named Rick Fornell," Healy said to the Naples (Fla.) News. "I was a rough child. He was sort of like a father to me. He took me off the streets. He was nasty to me. Nasty, nasty, nasty. I always wanted to punch him one. But he was a little guy.

"One time when high school football was over, when it was the last day of practice and we went in to get our gear checked in, well, he picked me up on the way home. I know he was waiting for me, I know he was. I sat in the back seat of the car because I didn't want to sit up front with him. He really was nasty to me. But he said, 'I want you to know, Don, I love ya. I know you think I really hate ya. But I want you to know that everything I did was to help you to be a better football player. By the time you are 21, you'll be an All-American.' It was a revelation. I was thinking, 'Wow, this guy thinks I'm pretty good. Why didn't he tell me when I was playing?' But he had the most influence on me ever."

Healy had his choice of college football scholarship offers after graduating in 1954. At that point in the sport's history, it must have been difficult to turn down an offer from the University of Maryland. Jim Tatum had put together one of the elite programs in the nation at that time. The Terrapins had won the national championship in 1951, and a year later they were in the top five before losing their last two games (at Mississippi and Alabama). Maryland rebounded in 1953 with a perfect 10-0 regular season in which it gave up a total of 31 points and scored 298 points. Oklahoma spoiled the perfect season with a 7-0 win in the Orange Bowl. Still, the Terps were a powerhouse, and Healy agreed to go there.

Maryland took a small step back during Healy's freshman year in 1954. The Terrapins had a slow start (2-2-1) and fell out of the Top 20. But they closed with five straight wins including a 74-13 romp over Missouri that set an Atlantic Coast Conference scoring record that lasted for more than a quarter-century. In 1955, sophomore Healy saw Maryland almost duplicate its 1953 season, going 10-0 in the regular season but losing to Oklahoma again in the Orange Bowl.

Soon after that postseason loss to the Sooners, Tatum was gone – off to coach at North Carolina. Tommy Mont took over as the head coach for 1956, but couldn't duplicate Tatum's magic. Maryland lost to Syracuse (led by a running back named Jim Brown) in the opener, as Healy returned the game's opening kickoff by Brown. The Terps beat



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Wake Forest, and then dropped five straight games. The Terrapins finished 2-7-1, with a 0-5 record out of the conference.

The situation was a little better for Healy and Maryland in 1957. After three opening losses, the Terps beat Wake Forest and then welcomed Tatum back when North Carolina played in Byrd Stadium. The game, though, is best remembered for a special spectator. Queen Elizabeth of Great Britain was visiting the United States and expressed an interest in seeing American football. This was the game she saw – a 21-7 win over the 14<sup>th</sup> ranked Tar Heels. Maryland won its last two games to get to 5-5 for the season.

Healy had won varsity letters in his three seasons with the Terrapins. He also won the Anthony C. Nardo Trophy in 1957 as Maryland's best lineman. Don played in the East-West Shrine Game and the Senior Bowl, and then waited to see where he might go in the NFL Draft. The wait was a relatively short one. Healy went in the last pick in the third round to the Chicago Bears. By the way, there was no second-guessing from the team that went before the Bears in that round. The Green Bay Packers took Ray Nitschke, who is in the Hall of Fame. The Packers took another Hall of Famer, Jerry Kramer, two picks after the Bears took Healy. Green Bay also grabbed Jim Taylor in the second round, so it ended up taking three players who ended up in Canton in one season – one of the great drafts in football history.

Before reporting to the Bears for the start of the 1958 season, Healy had some business first in the form of playing in the College All-Star Game. That was the annual matchup between the NFL's defending champions and the top seniors coming out of college. Wins by the rookies were relatively rare, but this group handled the champs easily in a 35-19 win. Bobby Mitchell of Illinois and Jim Ninowski of Michigan State were the co-MVPs.

The 6-foot-3, 259-pound Healy then joined the Bears with a freshly signed contract that was worth \$7,500 for the season with a \$750 bonus. He soon saw that Chicago had a veteran defensive line. The four starters were all in their 20s, and the best of the bunch was standout Doug Atkins. Healy also could play offensive guard, but playing time at any position was at a premium for him. Don received two starts from legendary coach George Halas. As a team, the Bears finished 8-4 – a game behind the Baltimore Colts in the NFL West. The Colts, as most know, went on to beat the New York Giants for the championship in a famous overtime contest.

Healy came back in 1959, but his number of starts dropped to zero. The season was a familiar one for the Bears, who played the bridesmaid to the Colts' bride. Chicago was again 8-4, again a game back of the Colts, and again watching Baltimore win a title. At this point, Healy had to be thinking about what his pro football future might look like ... when an unexpected lifeline arrived. The NFL decided to expand by one team for the



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1960 season, putting a franchise in Dallas. The new Cowboys took three players from the Bears' roster – Healy and defensive backs Jack Johnson and Pete Johnson. It was off to Texas.

The NFL wasn't too generous when it came to stocking the Cowboys' roster. Still, Healy was happy to earn a starting job on the defensive line. He was in the lineup for all 14 games by Dallas, and recovered three fumbles to top the team. Otherwise, it was a long season for the new Cowboys. They finished 0-11-1 under coach Tom Landry.

Healy may have made his greatest contribution to the Cowboys in 1961 before the season even started. He told the Dallas front office that he had played with a reserve linebacker in Chicago in 1959 who might be able to help the Cowboys. The team gave up a second- and ninth-round pick to the Bears for a linebacker from West Virginia who had missed all of the 1960 season with a knee injury. Chuck Howley turned out just fine in Dallas, becoming an anchor of several great defenses down the road.

On the field, Healy again started all 14 games at defensive tackle. He had a new teammate on the defensive line that season – Bob Lilly, the team's first-round draft pick. As we know now, Lilly needed virtually no time at all that he was on his way to becoming one of the greats in pro football history. Healy had the only interception of his career in that season, and it came at a good time. It helped the Cowboys stun the eventual NFL East champions, the New York Giants, 17-16. The lineman somehow had backed up well away from the line of scrimmage, picked off a pass, and returned it 11 yards to stop a late New York drive.

That game turned out to be memorable for Healy for another reason, as his high school coach was watching. “(Rick Fornell) came to a New York Giants game. We beat 'em that day. ... I had a tremendous day. I had an interception. I had two fumble recoveries and made a lot of individual tackles. When the game was over, I brought (Fornell) back into the dressing room and introduced him to the coaches and guys. ... I got the game ball and the guys sang ... like they always did. When he walked into that dressing room, he started crying. And when he walked out, he was still crying. He gave me a big hug and said, 'This is why I coached.' “

Healy recovered five fumbles that season, setting a Dallas record that was still standing as of 2020. Dallas started that season 4-3, but couldn't maintain that level of improvement and finished the year at 4-9-1.

If nothing else, Healy certainly got to see a couple of football coaching legends from close range during his NFL days. “Tom Landry was an absolutely beautiful guy - one of the most religious, upright, straight guys I've ever known,” Healy told the Naples News



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in 2006. “Halas was the same way, but Halas had a bad mouth. I don't mean it in a negative way. But he was just more of a street talker. He would cuss at you a little bit, whereas Landry wouldn't cuss at you no matter what happened, even if you were biting his leg.”

Landry was starting to find the pieces that would come together to form the talented teams of the late 1960s. Some of them came to play on the defensive line, which was not good news for Healy. The Cowboys started three rookies and Lilly for much of the 1962 season. They also completed a trade with the Rams for defensive tackle John Meyers. Healy was let go when that transaction was completed on September 2, and the NFL portion of his career was over.

But the American Football League, now in its third year, was always looking for talent. The Bills signed Healy as a free agent. However, his contribution was small. He only appeared in one game before an injury apparently ended his season, and his career. It even took Don a little time to turn up in the Bills' annual media guide as a former player, as he wasn't listed in the 1963 edition. That solitary game put a bow on Healy's career. He finished with 51 games played, 28 starts, and 10 fumble recoveries.

It was time for Don to get on with the rest of his life. He had married Genevieve Shea in 1960, and they eventually had four children. Healy worked in agriculture chemical sales in the Midwest and South, and eventually moved into the auto parts industry. Don remained interested in athletics, as he took part in regional and national competitions in handball and worked in youth sports as a volunteer. In 1971, Indianapolis mayor Richard Lugar proclaimed a day in November to be “Don Healy Day” to celebrate Don's work with children.

Healy stayed in Indianapolis long enough to become a fan of the Colts, especially after an action taken by Cowboys' owner Jerry Jones.

“I have to be honest,” he said. “I lived in Indianapolis for 35 years. And when the Colts came, I automatically became a Colts fan. Before that time, I definitely was a fan of the Dallas Cowboys. But when Jerry (Jones) fired Tom Landry, that was when I stopped being a fan of the Dallas Cowboys. Now, I've met Jerry and talked to him. He's a nice guy, so on and so forth. He made a business decision. But I can't help the way I feel. He recognizes that.”

Healy retired in 1995 and headed to Naples, Florida. There he went back to school to pick up a graduate degree in theology. It was a necessary step in one of his life's goals. Healy became a Deacon in the Catholic Church in 2006 at the age of 70.



The end of the story is becoming increasingly commonplace for football players. Healy suffered from CTE, and apparently spent his final years in a nursing home. He died from complications of that illness on April 2, 2020.

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