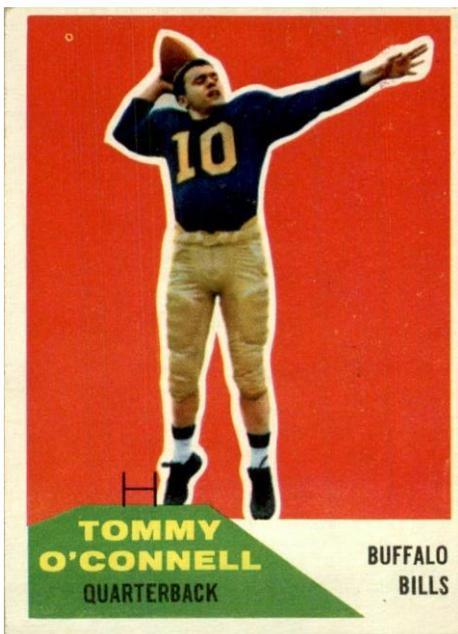


Tom O'Connell

This article was written by Budd Bailey

Tom O'Connell spent five years in pro football, and these days you'd call him "a game manager" as a quarterback. He wasn't good enough to single-handedly lead a team to victory. Even so, if you surrounded him with enough talent and took care of the football, he could do some damage. O'Connell might be best remembered for participating in a couple of big games – a Rose Bowl and an NFL championship – as well as a son who went on to a long career in professional hockey.



Thomas Bernard O'Connell was born on September 26, 1930, in Chicago, Illinois. It didn't take him long to become a standout in athletics in the Olympia Fields area of that city. He attended South Shore High School, and you could argue that either O'Connell or wide receiver Walter Stanley (1980s) is the best player to come out of that school in football. But when it comes to impact on the game of the school's alumni, Hall of Fame coach Marv Levy is top-ranked.

O'Connell showed his ability in high school, as he led the Tars to the championship game in the city playoffs in 1947. That senior season earned him a spot on a list done in 2012 as one of the greatest quarterbacks in Chicago's prep history. Let's see – where would a



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top high school football player from Chicago named O'Connell want to go to college? Notre Dame might be a very good guess. Sure enough, that's where he landed in 1948.

But he didn't stay there. O'Connell seems to have gotten stuck behind quarterback Bob Williams, who was a class ahead of him. Williams led Notre Dame to an undefeated season and a national championship, and was part of an amazing 46-0-2 run. Therefore, it was on to the University of Illinois for O'Connell, who moved into the starting lineup in the fall of 1951.

That may have been the best possible move for the college quarterback. O'Connell led the Illini to a spectacular season. The team was 8-0-1 in the regular season and won the Big Ten title. The blemish came in a 0-0 tie with Ohio State. Still, that was one of four shutouts by the Illini defense. On the other side of the ball, O'Connell memorably threw a touchdown pass through a snowstorm to Rex Smith with 1:12 left to beat Michigan, 7-0, on November 3. The quarterback was considered to be one of the top passers in the nation that season.

All of that was good enough to get Illinois to the Rose Bowl on January 1, 1952, against Stanford. This was the first nationally televised college football game in history, and the coast-to-coast audience probably didn't believe what it watched. Stanford was clinging to a 7-6 lead late in the third quarter, and a close finish seemed probable. Then Illinois scored 34 straight points, including 27 in the fourth quarter, to finish with a stunning 40-7 win. O'Connell must have handed the ball off well, because the Illini ran up 361 yards on the ground. The team's 9-0-1 record gave Illinois what was considered a share of the national title, even though it was ranked No. 4 entering the bowl games. By the way, to tell you something about the football of the day then, Princeton was ranked No. 6 after an unbeaten season.

That brings the story to the NFL Draft, which was held in New York on January 17, 1952. It was a pretty good year for talent, since four Hall of Famers – Les Richter, Ollie Matson, Hugh McElhenny, and Frank Gifford went in the first round. O'Connell was selected as a future pick by the Chicago Bears in the 18th round, No. 212 overall. Only two other players in that round played in a pro game – Stan Campbell and Bob Dee.

The 1952 season didn't go as well for coach Ray Eliot and his Illini. Illinois went 4-5 that season. The most memorable game probably was against Iowa in Iowa City. The visitors won, 33-13, but fans threw objects at the Illinois team and officials as they left the field. The teams declared a cooling-off period in the series, and they didn't play a game against each other until 1968. Illinois' best player that season was halfback J.C. Caroline, a consensus All-American a year later and future NFL player.



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As for O'Connell, his highlight was a five-touchdown day against Washington that led to a 48-14 win. For the season, he received a few minor national honors for his play – which had resulted in rewriting part of the record books of the school and the Big Ten. He led the team with 1,724 yards in total offense, a huge jump from his 1951 total of 700. In fact, no Illinois player had more total yards until 1980, when Dave Wilson piled up 2,960 yards. He set school records for passing yards in a season and in a career. Tommy scored two touchdowns in a 22-13 upset win over Michigan at Ann Arbor. From there it was on to appearances at the East-West Game (won offensive player of the game honors) and the Hula Bowl after the season.

The 5-foot-11, 187-pound O'Connell made a stop at the College All-Star Game, won by the Detroit Lions, 24-10, before more than 93,000 fans. Then it was on to the Bears' training camp to compete for a job. The starting spot belonged to George Blanda, who had joined the Bears in 1949 and who remarkably would still be playing in the NFL in 1975. O'Connell at least squeezed into a backup role, and did some relief work of Blanda. Tommy finished 33 for 67 for 437 yards, with one touchdown and four interceptions.

O'Connell had to go into the Army at that point for the next two seasons. The Bears must have known that was coming, because they drafted quarterback Zeke Bratkowski in the second round of the 1953 draft. Bratkowski split the starting job with Blanda for a season, and then himself went into the Air Force for two years. That allowed Ed Brown to gain some playing time, and he was ready to take over as the starter in 1956.

With Brown and Blanda around, the Bears didn't need O'Connell on their roster. They cut him, and the Browns added him to the roster during the 1956 season when they were in need of a quarterback. Tom couldn't have asked for a better opportunity under the circumstances. The Browns had been led by Otto Graham for the previous decade, and he put Cleveland in the playoffs for all ten of those seasons. In fact, the Browns went 9-3 with Otto at quarterback in the postseason. But Graham was gone to retirement now, and Cleveland had a huge opening at the position.

George Ratterman and Babe Parilli took turns in the early going at quarterback, and neither was particularly effective. Then Ratterman injured his knee so badly that his season and his career came to an end. O'Connell played in his first game as a Brown on November 4, throwing one incomplete pass in a win over the Packers. Eventually he took over as the starter when Parilli was hurt. The Browns used a very conservative game plan most of the time. O'Connell started the final five games, and only threw more than 18 passes in one of them. He finished the season 42 for 96 for 551 yards with four touchdowns and eight interceptions. The Browns finished 5-7 and missed the playoffs for the first time in team history.



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A losing season went over with coach Paul Brown as well as you might think it did. He was used to winning. He demanded excellence. It was time for changes. The first one was relatively easy. Running back Jim Brown simply fell into his lap in the first round of the draft. The running game was instantly in good hands for 1957 and beyond. Brown also changed the quarterback situation. Ratterman and Parilli were out, O'Connell was still around, and Milt Plum was brought in.

Along the way, Tom became an answer to a trivia question. "I was the first (pro) quarterback who ever handed the ball to Jimmy Brown," O'Connell told The Palm Beach Post well after retirement. "We were playing an exhibition against the Pittsburgh Steelers and (coach) Paul Brown told me, 'I'm going to put Jimmy in with you. You help him out if he needs help. I'm just going to call a couple of draws or something like that.' So, in comes Jimmy, and Paul Brown sends in a draw, and Jimmy gets hit right about the line of scrimmage, but he bounces off a guy and runs 75 yards for a touchdown. I don't think I've ever seen a better running back. Jimmy was awesome."

O'Connell got the opening day start, but didn't have much to do. He was 4 of 8 in passing for 46 yards. At least the Browns beat the Giants, 6-3, that day. The next week, O'Connell went 10 for 17 in a second win. On October 13, Tommy was 5 for 7 for 110 efficient yards and a touchdown. On October 20, O'Connell and the offense struggled in a loss to the Eagles, and Plum saw significant playing time for the first time. The Browns ran the ball 50 times in a win over the Cardinals, and 58 more in beating the Redskins. O'Connell was 7 for 11 as the Browns knocked off the Steelers. It wasn't pretty from a passing viewpoint, but the Browns were 6-1 at that point.

Next was a game that broke the pattern, a 30-30 tie with Washington. Tom was 16 for 24 for 349 yards and two touchdowns. But on Nov. 24 against the Rams, O'Connell started the game 0 for 4 with two interceptions and exited in favor of Plum, who was smart enough to hand the ball to Brown (237 yards rushing) in a 45-31 win. O'Connell threw two touchdowns in a 31-0 romp over the Cardinals, but was injured around that time. He was suffering from three hairline fractures of the fibula. Plum started the rest of the regular season games, as the Browns finished 9-2-1 on the season – NFL East champions.

That meant Cleveland would take on the Detroit Lions for the NFL title on Dec. 29 – in Detroit. Brown decided to start O'Connell after three weeks off and see how it went. As it turned out, Johnny Unitas wouldn't have been much help. The Lions jumped out to a 17-0 lead before the first quarter was over, and had a 31-7 lead at halftime. O'Connell (4 of 8 for 61 yards, two interceptions) and Plum (5 of 12 for 51 yards, two interceptions) couldn't do a thing, and the Lions won by a stunning score of 59-14.



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Still, O'Connell must have felt a little satisfaction in his team going 7-1-1 in the regular season games he started, which earned him a trip to the Pro Bowl. He took home team honors as the Browns' Most Valuable Player. Tom also led the league in passing yards per attempt, an astonishing 11.17. No doubt he was looking forward to the 1958 season. But Brown probably was thinking that he needed a more balanced offense to take that last step in the rebuilding plan.

The Browns drafted Jim Ninowski in the fourth round, and Brown picked him to back up the new full-time starter, Plum. O'Connell was cut from the squad. He became the first quarterback ever to start a championship game in one season, and then be cut from the squad before opening day in the next season. Tom opted not to try to continue his career in pro football at that time. He returned to the University of Illinois campus to serve as an assistant coach. The Illini finished 4-5 that season, in the middle of the Big Ten standings.

O'Connell's next stop, then, had to be something of a surprise. He accepted the job as head coach of Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. The Bulldogs were coming off a 2-9 season and thought the then 28-year-old could turn the situation around. That was a lot to ask, especially considering O'Connell's lack of experience as a coach. The team went 2-9 again in 1959; the last game was a 62-2 loss to North Texas State.

That sort of season can make someone think about his long-term employment prospects. O'Connell had something else to think about when he was visited in Iowa by Dick Gallagher, the general manager of the Buffalo Bills in the brand-new American Football League. Gallagher had been the director of player personnel with the Browns in the 1950s, and therefore already knew Tom. Gallagher apparently convinced O'Connell to give pro football one more chance. Tommy accepted a contract offer and was out of the coaching business ... for good, as it turned out.

O'Connell won the starting job and was the first quarterback in the first game in Bills' history. It took place on September 11, 1960, in the Polo Grounds against the New York Titans. From a personal and team standpoint, it couldn't have gone much worse for O'Connell. He was 2 of 10 for 37 yards, and was replaced by Bob Brodhead. Tom also took a hit on a muffed reverse and had to exit the game for a while. The Bills lost the game, 27-3.

"It should be remembered that we have 13 games to go," O'Connell said afterwards. "We have to get meaner and throw caution to the wind."

Tom was better in the next game – 13 for 23 for 218 yards with two touchdowns but with five interceptions. The Broncos won that one, 27-21. "As I see it, I was the goat of the



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game. I had that pass intercepted late in the game when we were leading and it led to the winning touchdown for the Broncos,” O’Connell said. He cut down on the interceptions in game three, going 6 for 16 for 131 yards with one touchdown and one pick. That was enough, as the defense pitched a shutout against the Boston Patriots in a 13-0 win – the first in team history.

“The victory belongs, of course, to our defense,” O’Connell said. “This was the first time in our league (that) a team was shut out, in exhibition or league play. ... Our team was alert and played sharp football for 60 minutes.”

O’Connell made it through the season, playing in 11 games and starting in six of them. He finished 65 for 145 for 1,033 yards with seven touchdowns and 13 interceptions. Johnny Green, Bob Brodhead and Richie Lucas also did some throwing for Buffalo that season, and Green probably was the best of the bunch. The team finished with a 5-8-1 record. On February 2, 1961, O’Connell announced his retirement from football and was named an assistant coach. However, injuries forced the Bills to reactivate him on August 23.

He started the season’s first game against Denver (a 22-10 loss) because Green was out with an injury. O’Connell was 1 of 5 for 11 yards with one interception, and then was knocked out of the game. Lucas saw the rest of the playing time at QB from there. “Let’s face it, quarterback is the biggest part of your offense. No quarterback, no offense,” coach Buster Ramsey said after the game. “We’ve lost our starting quarterback (O’Connell). The quarterback is the leader and when he went out, it demoralized the club. I’m going home and calling six National League coaches to see if I can round up some players.”

Buffalo signed Warren Rabb later that week. Meanwhile, that game was it for Tom; he retired from playing soon afterwards and went back to coaching for the rest of the season. O’Connell finished his five-year pro career by completing 204 of 423 passes (48.2) percent for 3,261 yards with 212 touchdown downs and 34 interceptions. His record as a starter was 11-8-2.

“I never really understood why Tommy wasn’t a better football player,” former teammate Mack Yoho told author Jeff Miller later. “At the time he came into the league, I thought he was a much better (play-caller) than George Blanda. I don’t think he had a lot of mobility – and I think we probably didn’t pass block very well for him – but of all that group, Tommy O’Connell was the one that really surprised me most that he just never turned out to be a successful quarterback.”



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That turned out to be it for football for O'Connell. He moved his family to Boston and worked in finance. Paul Brown tried to lure him back to football when Brown became the first coach of the Cincinnati Bengals for the 1968 season, offering him the job of offensive coordinator. O'Connell turned him down, and Brown hired Bill Walsh for the job. But Tom did have one unusual legacy about his time in Buffalo. He joined with teammates Richie Lucas and Don Chelf around 1960 to open a men's clothing store in Buffalo. The business was purchased by others soon after its opening, but the new owners didn't change the name right away. In fact, it's now known as O'Connell's, and it's still in business as of 2020.

O'Connell continued to be involved in athletics in Massachusetts. He helped in the planning and construction of three skating rinks in the Boston area, and he enjoyed sailing, skiing, and golf. Tom was married to Jean and had five sons. Tim and Mike both played pro hockey. Mike also became the general manager for the Boston Bruins as well as the director of player development for the Los Angeles Kings.

O'Connell died on March 20, 2014, in the area of Delray Beach, Florida.



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