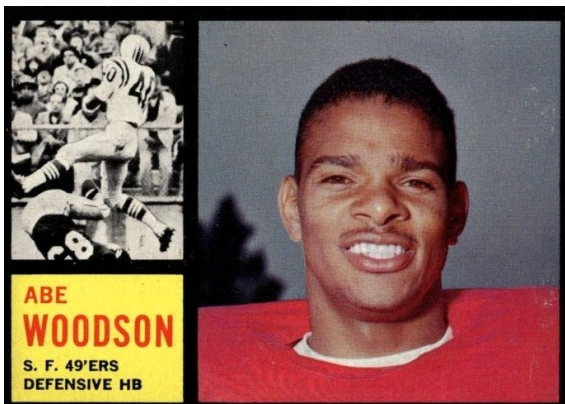


Abe Woodson

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

When Abe Woodson took the field he was difficult to contain. One play that defines his greatness was a 105-yard kick return he made as a member of the San Francisco 49ers in 1959 against the Los Angeles Rams.¹ Fielding the ball five yards deep in the end zone, he zoomed out to the far sideline, then cut back toward the opposite sideline, evading defenders with each step. Despite a few defenders launching at him for the tackle, Woodson went untouched the final 30 yards into the end zone. The score held up as the winning margin for the 49ers, 24-16. In response to the play, 49ers head coach Red Hickey said, “Woodson's run was a big one. I saw some pretty good blocks on the play but he can really fly.”² The return was and still stands as the longest in franchise history. Woodson recalls Hickey used to put the team's best blockers in to aid him on returns, but they were not always needed due to his natural instincts to evade defenders. Woodson recollected, “(Coach) Red Hickey used to put the All-Pros like Bob St. Clair on the kick return team. He put his best blockers out there. That had a lot to do with our success returning kicks. On some of those returns I was barely touched.”³



Woodson scored on the stat sheet as well. He averaged 28.7 yards per kickoff return for his career, that ranks in the top five all-time. Five of those kicks went back for a touchdown. He led the NFL twice (1963, 1964) in yards per kick return (31.3 and 32.2) and twice (1959, 1963) with the longest kickoff return (103 and 105 yards).⁴ Meanwhile, he averaged over seven yards per punt return. Woodson twice led the league in longest punt return, of 48 and 85 yards, respectively in 1960 and 1962. Former teammate John Brodie said, “Abe was just electric. Every time he touched the football you thought he might score.”⁵



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

Known for his prowess as a returner, he also was a stalwart in the defensive backfield at cornerback. Woodson was a five-time Pro Bowl honoree (1959 to 1963) and named to an All-Pro team in four distinct seasons (1959, 1960, 1961, 1962) by major selectors such as the Associated Press, *NY Daily News*, *Newspaper Ent Association*, and the UPI.⁶ In the mid-1950s, San Francisco was coming down off a high of success following the firing of head coach Buck Shaw. Shaw's record was 71-39-4 with a 64.5 % winning percentage. Hickey took over in 1959 following the resignation of Frankie Albert, after three mediocre campaigns. Hickey led the 49ers to three consecutive seven win seasons.⁷ Despite never finishing higher than second during Woodson's tenure, the 49ers defense was ranked in the top half in points allowed four straight seasons from 1959 to 1962. As a rookie in 1959, Woodson started opposite Jerry Mertens, who was coming off a Pro Bowl selection in 1958.⁸ The duo combined for six interceptions and four fumble recoveries, spending the next few seasons together.

A second round draft pick in the 1957 NFL Draft, Woodson was selected by the 49ers. He did not join the team until the 1958 season as a result of military service. Once he took the field, he was one of the franchise's most exciting and strongest players of the 1960s.⁹ Already fielding offensive stars in Y.A. Tittle, John Brodie, Hugh McElhenny, Billy Wilson, and R.C. Owens, among others, Woodson was arguably one of the team's top defenders.¹⁰ He nabbed 15 total interceptions, the most being four in 1959, when he earned Pro Bowl and consensus first-team All-Pro honors. That year, the 49ers finished 7-5, falling to a third place finish behind the division champion Baltimore Colts and the second-place Chicago Bears. San Francisco ended up losing both games to the Colts by

- 1 "San Francisco 49ers at Los Angeles Rams – November 8th, 1959," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [San Francisco 49ers at Los Angeles Rams - November 8th, 1959 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 Hession, Joe. "75 for 75: Dangerous Return Man," 49ers.com, November 16, 2021, [75 for 75: Dangerous Return Man \(49ers.com\)](#).
- 3 Hession, Joe. "75 for 75: Dangerous Return Man," 49ers.com, November 16, 2021, [75 for 75: Dangerous Return Man \(49ers.com\)](#).
- 4 "Abe Woodson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [Abe Woodson Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 5 Hession, Joe. "75 for 75: Dangerous Return Man," 49ers.com, November 16, 2021, [75 for 75: Dangerous Return Man \(49ers.com\)](#).
- 6 "Abe Woodson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [Abe Woodson Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 7 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 8 "Jerry Mertens," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [Jerry Mertens Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

margins of 31 and 20 points.¹¹ What did the team in was, despite a 6-1 start that demonstrated promise for the postseason, they lost four of their final five contests.

There was greater optimism for the 1960 season due to the strength of the defense. The unit ranked first in scoring, allowing just over 17 points per contest, featuring Pro Bowl caliber players in Woodson, Leo Nomellini, and Charlie Krueger.¹² Their 205 points allowed was impressive, but evermore so, the starters in the secondary totaled an impressive 17 interceptions, led by safety Dave Baker's 10. It was not enough to overcome the team's overall inconsistent play.¹³ After a narrow, 21-19 defeat to the New York Giants in the season opener, a game the 49ers lost the lead in the fourth quarter, San Francisco split its next six contests. But four losses proved to be too much, especially being swept by Vince Lombardi's Green Bay Packers. The 49ers finished third once again, behind the Detroit Lions, whom they split the regular season series, but losing the tiebreaker due to a smaller point differential.¹⁴ Green Bay was tops in the division and ended up playing the Philadelphia Eagles for the NFL title. The 49ers lost the tiebreaker to the Lions which meant that San Francisco missed out on the Playoff Bowl, the game that decided the third place finisher in the league standings. The Lions edged the Browns, 17-16. However, Woodson demonstrated why he was one of the team's premier performers with his second consecutive consensus All-Pro selection. He led the NFL with 174 punt return yards and a long return of 48 yards.¹⁵

In 1961, San Francisco had three number one draft picks, one of which they used on defensive back Jimmy Johnson, a future Hall of Famer. Johnson reeled in five interceptions, second to Baker's team lead of six. San Francisco's defense ranked in the top half of the league in scoring, but did not resemble its form from 1960.¹⁶ Woodson's focus was mainly on special teams, as he returned both a punt and a kickoff for a

9 "Abe Woodson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [Abe Woodson Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 0 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 1 "1959 San Francisco 49ers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [1959 San Francisco 49ers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 2 "1960 San Francisco 49ers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [1960 San Francisco 49ers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 3 "1960 San Francisco 49ers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [1960 San Francisco 49ers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 4 "1960 San Francisco 49ers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [1960 San Francisco 49ers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 5 "Abe Woodson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [Abe Woodson Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

touchdown, and led the NFL in all-purpose yardage (954). He was one of only a few players to return a punt and kickoff for a touchdown.

Over the next two seasons, he was also a Pro Bowl player, setting a career high with 179 punt return yards, and topping the NFL in kickoff returns (37) and yardage (1157) in 1962. Woodson also averaged an astounding 31.3 yards per kick return.¹⁷ In 1963 he returned three kicks for touchdowns, averaging 32.3 yards per return, also an NFL best. The 1964 season would be his last donning a 49ers uniform.

On February 8, 1965 he was traded to the St. Louis Cardinals in exchange for the versatile back John David Crow.¹⁸ In four seasons with San Francisco, Crow would make just one Pro Bowl appearance. For St. Louis, Woodson was the team's kickoff return specialist and played steadily at defensive back, starting 13 of 27 games in 1964 and 1965.¹⁹ The Cardinals struggled to a 5-9 record in 1965, but bounced back in 1966 with an 8-5-1 record. St. Louis boasted the NFL's top scoring defense. There was not a doubt the secondary was the unit's strength. Joining Woodson was cornerback Pat Fischer and safeties Jerry Stovall and future Hall of Famer and All-Pro Larry Wilson.²⁰ The quartet recorded a combined 18 interceptions. Wilson led the team with 10, while Woodson's four ranked second. The Cardinals raced out to a 5-0 start that included a sweep over the Philadelphia Eagles (who finished in second place). After a 10-10 tie with the Dallas Cowboys, the Cardinals suffered their first loss at the Washington Redskins.²¹ The Cardinals led 13-12 in the third quarter, but Sonny Jurgenson connected twice on scoring plays of 15 and 44 yards with receiver Bobby Mitchell to seal the game away for Washington. The Cardinals won their next two, but suffered a baffling, 30-9 drubbing by the Pittsburgh Steelers, a team that finished 5-8-1. They rebounded to beat Pittsburgh, 6-3, the next week in a game where the Cardinals offense achieved just 29 net passing yards. The stage was then set for the team to possibly make the playoffs, needing to win at least two of its final three games.²² The Cardinals already owned the tiebreaker with

1 6 “1961 San Francisco 49ers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [1961 San Francisco 49ers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sf/1961-rosters.htm).

1 7 “Abe Woodson,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [Abe Woodson Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WoodsoAbe.htm).



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

the Eagles and previously defeated the Cleveland Browns. Instead, St. Louis lost all three contests. They were soundly defeated by the Cowboys, 31-17, then lost to a 3-11 Atlanta Falcons team, and were drubbed by the Browns, 38-10, in the season finale. Those losses, which dashed their playoff hopes, sent the team to a third place finish in the NFL Eastern Division.²³ It was Woodson's final season.

For his career he played in 116 career games and made 89 starts. Woodson gained 6,850 all-purpose yards in his nine-year NFL career and seven combined kick and punt return touchdowns. At the time of his retirement, he was the all-time kickoff return yardage leader.²⁴ According to Eric Branch of SFGate.com, Woodson "... is the only player in NFL history to lead the league in yards per kickoff return in three seasons (1959, '62 and '63)."²⁵ In 2021, he was inducted into the Professional Football Researcher's Association's Hall of Very Good.

Born Abraham Benjamin Woodson on February 15, 1934 in Jackson, MS, he moved to the state of Illinois in his youth. He played football for Austin High School in the Chicago area. Staying in-state, Woodson attended the University of Illinois where he was a track and football star.²⁶ As a sprinter he was a two-time Big Ten champion. Fightingillini.com wrote on his achievements, "He twice tied the 50-yard indoor high hurdle world record and narrowly missed an Olympic berth in 1956 when he finished fourth at the trials."²⁷

- 1 8 "Abe Woodson," prosportstransactions.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [Football Transactions Search Results \(prosportstransactions.com\)](#).
- 1 9 "Abe Woodson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [Abe Woodson Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 0 "Chicago/St. Louis/Phoenix/Arizona Cardinals Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [Chicago/St. Louis/Phoenix/Arizona Cardinals Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 1 "1966 St. Louis Cardinals Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [1966 St. Louis Cardinals Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 2 "1966 St. Louis Cardinals Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [1966 St. Louis Cardinals Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 3 "1966 St. Louis Cardinals Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [1966 St. Louis Cardinals Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 4 "Abe Woodson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 31, 2023, [Abe Woodson Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 5 Branch, Eric. "Abe Woodson, 1934-2014: Kick returner named to 5 Pro Bowls," sfgate.com, February 12, 2014, [Abe Woodson, 1934-2014: Kick returner named to 5 Pro Bowls \(sfgate.com\)](#).
- 2 6 "Illini Legend Abe Woodson Passes Away at 79," fightingillini.com, February 12, 2014, [Illini Legend Abe Woodson Passes Away at 79 - University of Illinois Athletics \(fightingillini.com\)](#).
- 2 7 "Illini Legend Abe Woodson Passes Away at 79," fightingillini.com, February 12, 2014, [Illini Legend Abe Woodson Passes Away at 79 - University of Illinois Athletics \(fightingillini.com\)](#).



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

On the gridiron, Woodson's best season was in 1956. Despite Illinois not fielding a strong football team during this time, the Fighting Illini defeated the visiting top ranked Michigan State Spartans on October 27, 1956 at Memorial Stadium. Paul Adams, who played for Illinois in the game recalled, "They were laughing. They kept asking us if we were going to show up or if we were going to take the day off. That kind of got to us. Coach Eliot, who was quite a motivator, made us aware about the (point) difference. He let us know how bad people thought we were and how we were going to get beat."²⁸ Woodson even said, "At that time, we were nowhere. We were like the dog of the league."²⁹ Michigan State staked itself to a 13-0 lead by halftime. It seemed all but certain the 40-point favorite Spartans would take care of business. According to Eliot, he devised a masterful game plan that included a heavy dose of Woodson on offense. In response, Woodson scored three touchdowns in the second half that propelled Illinois to a 20-13 upset. On the winning score, he caught an 82-yard screen pass recalling, "When I got to the end zone, those bleachers just exploded."³⁰ Woodson also had a memorable game against the California Golden Bears in the opening game. Down 20-0, Woodson recovered teammate Ray Nitschke's fumble for a touchdown to put the Illini on the board. The play sparked an Illinois comeback victory, 32-20. For his efforts that year he earned first-team All-Big Ten honors.³¹

After playing in the NFL, Woodson worked as an insurance agent for greater than three decades before moving on to ministry. While working as a prison minister in Nevada, he passed away on February 8, 2014 at the age of 79.

-
- 2 8 Asmussen, Bob. "56 Illini enjoyed last upset of No. 1," news-gazette.com, October 9, 1998, ["56 Illini enjoyed last upset of No. 1 | Illini football news | news-gazette.com"](#).
 - 2 9 Asmussen, Bob. "56 Illini enjoyed last upset of No. 1," news-gazette.com, October 9, 1998, ["56 Illini enjoyed last upset of No. 1 | Illini football news | news-gazette.com"](#).
 - 3 0 Asmussen, Bob. "56 Illini enjoyed last upset of No. 1," news-gazette.com, October 9, 1998, ["56 Illini enjoyed last upset of No. 1 | Illini football news | news-gazette.com"](#).
 - 3 1 Condon, David. "Illini's 3d Period Rally Stuns California 32 to 20," *Chicago Tribune*, September 30, 1956, 45, [Illini's 3d Period Rally Stuns California 32 to 20 – Newspapers.com](#).