Walter Payton

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Payton scored an NCAA record 66 touchdowns in college and was a major priority for nearly every scout in the NFL, but the draft was of little concern to him . . . at first. He was prepared to pursue a career in special education — audiology, but after appearing in the 1975 Senior Bowl and East - West Shrine All - Star games, in addition to talking with several pro players and other NFL people, his notions for retirement took an abrupt turn.

He was the fourth player picked in the entire draft that year, and it wasn't long after that when Chicago unveiled another breakaway threat in its backfield.

"Yes, I did change my mind then," Payton added. "As a kid, I had all those dreams of playing professional football too, but it isn't my whole life. God has a lot more in store for me than just football. The game is merely a stepping stone to what I'm going to do the rest of my life."

Payton, only 25, hasn't become disenchanted with football yet. He still loves to play very much and commands the respect of everyone connected with the game, as they watch him shed tacklers, never ceasing to pump his powerful legs until he meets the ground.

He's also one of the most sought - after athletes ever to play in Chicago, which likes to worship its superstars with all types of public appearances and promotional endorsements.

If Payton decided to hang up his cleats tomorrow, he wouldn't have much trouble surviving when the payments stop coming on his $400,000 - plus yearly salary, the highest ever for a Bear player in the team's illustrious history.

During the football season, Payton's attention is directed entirely to the sport, but in the off season, his gentle personality and quiet manner make it hard for him to say no to certain offers.

"This is one reason why I might retire early," he pointed out.

"There's not much time for other things during the season, and even when we're through playing, my spare time is limited. My wife (Connie) and I want to raise a family someday, but that takes full devotion. I wouldn't be able to give the necessary attention to my family if I'm playing football all the time. I've got to start preparing for my own future."

Just hearing Payton express his views makes one believe he should be a choir boy (or something), instead of subjecting his body to the brutalities of pro football. He doesn't possess the deep, "Macho - type" voice that is characteristic of most football players. Yet, the soft sounds he projects are easily heard when he discusses the Spiritual influence in his life.

Maybe it was his religious faith that persuaded him to turn down a commercial offer by Happy Days Copenhagen chewing tobacco. The nationwide advertisement features former Dallas Cowboys running back Walt Garrison and Houston Oilers sensation Earl Campbell.

"It was just against my nature to do a commercial of that type," said Payton, who preferred not to put "a little 'peench' between his cheek and tongue." "There was something about it that just didn't agree with me."

This venture represented one of the few times Payton has not given his stamp of approval, even though it was a major step up from the numerous local Chicago - area endorsements that use his name. But the Columbia, Miss., native hardly is aching for exposure and publicity.

He has demonstrated to the nation on a number of Sunday afternoons (and an occasional Monday night) that he's a running back in a class by himself. Payton personally owns three NFL records, including most yards gained in a single game (275), and 16 individual Bears records.

The Bears played the Cowboys in the third game of this season, and before it was over, Payton became the Bears' all-time leading rusher. It took ex-Bear fullback Rick Casares 10 seasons to set the team's all - time rushing mark of 5,657 career yards. Payton didn't quite take as long.

Since the Bears' offense depends on Payton like cars depend on gasoline, it's understandable why he broke the record so soon. He is given the opportunity to run the football more than any other back in the league, a chore he gladly accepts, but takes a heavy toll on his 205 - pound frame.

One of his NFL records was set in 1978, when he carried the ball 383 times. That's an average of 24 carries a game, and another reason for Payton to lay claim to an early retirement.

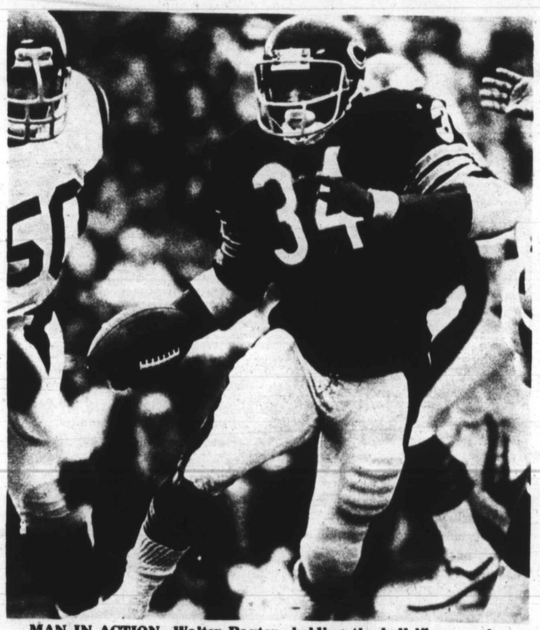
"Even though I try to keep myself in top physical condition," he says, "I realize running backs have short careers anyway due to the punishment we take. Setting all kinds of records doesn't mean much to men. I just want to be healthy when I leave the game."

A trip to the Super Bowl is about the only thing that will satisfy Payton's great career. It coninues to be his ultimate goal, not scoring the most touchdowns or gaining the most yards in NFL history. He just wants to do whatever is necessary to win football games for the Bears, who unfortunately, are several long steps from going to the Super Bowl.

If Payton decides to leave the game early, he may never make it to the NFL championship contest because the Bears certainly have no plans for trading him. Of course, there are many great players who never felt the glitter and glamour of the Super Bowl, so he won't be alone.

"If the Super Bowl is out of my reach when I do decide to retire," Payton said, "I just want people to remember me as a football player who always gave 100 percent on the field. That's all that really matters to me."

Chalk one up for modesty!



MAN IN ACTION—Walter Payton, holding the ball like a melon, nevertheless slashes through a hole for a big gain.

Bar cookies can be frozen in serving sized blocks after cutting. Remove them from the pan in which they were baked to foil - covered cardboard or shallow aluminum pans. Wrap in freezer wrapping, label and place in the freezer. Remove the number of packages needed and thaw for serving.

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