



**PRO FOOTBALL HALL OF FAME**  
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## **NEWS RELEASE**

### **Cleveland Browns Hall of Famer Bill Willis to be Recognized by Ohio General Assembly**

**Canton, OH** – On May 9, 2006, the Ohio General Assembly will honor Bill Willis a former Cleveland Browns player and member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, with a Commendation by the House of Representatives and Senate. The Commendation is in recognition Willis' historic role in the re-integration of professional football in America in 1946. This year marks the 60th anniversary of that historic event.

In 1946, four players – Willis, Marion Motley, Kenny Washington and Woody Strode – broke pro football's "color barrier" by signing contracts to play professional football. Willis and Motley signed with the Cleveland Browns of the newly organized All-America Football Conference, while Washington and Strode signed to play for the Los Angeles Rams of the National Football League. Willis is the only surviving member of this pioneering quartet.

These historic signings occurred one year prior to the more publicized signing by Jackie Robinson to a baseball contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

While Washington played only three seasons with the Rams and Strode just one, Willis and Motley had long and distinguished careers in both the AAFC and NFL. Both eventually earned pro football's highest honor, election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

#### **Bill Willis Biography**

Bill Willis, at 6-2 and 210 pounds, was small by pro football standards in 1946, yet he performed in a class by himself, particularly on defense. In the eight years he played for the Cleveland Browns from 1946 through 1953, he was a first-team All-League selection seven times and a second-team choice once. He also played in three NFL Pro Bowls.

Bill came to his first pro training camp as a comparatively small man seeking a job in a big man's sport that had, for about 15 years, been a whites-only game. Lined

up as the middle man on a five-man defensive front, Bill overwhelmed the center four straight times, each time crashing into quarterback Otto Graham.

Bill's charge was so quick that the coaches felt he had to be offside. But head coach Paul Brown, who had coached Bill at Ohio State, made a personal check and found that his recruit hadn't been offside at all, just exceptionally fast and agile in his defensive charge. That very night, Brown signed Willis to his first pro contract, helping to permanently break pro football's "color barrier" a full year in advance of Jackie Robinson doing the same in major league baseball with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Bill played both offense and defense for the Browns but it was at the middle guard position that he earned lasting admiration and acclaim. Lightning quickness was his constant trademark but opponents remember he was a solid blocker and devastating tackler as well. It was Bill's touchdown-saving tackle in a playoff game against the New York Giants that enabled the Browns to continue their quest for the 1950 championship their first year in the NFL after four dominating seasons in the All-America Football Conference.

### **Commendation from the Members of the Ohio House of Representatives and Senate**

On behalf of the members of the Senate of the 126th General Assembly of Ohio, we are pleased to extend special recognition to William Karnet Willis on the Sixtieth Anniversary of your signing a professional football contract.

You are a remarkable individual, and your legacy as one of pro football's African-American pioneers serves as a source of inspiration for many. Your signing of a professional football contract helped to end segregation in professional sports. Commencing with your career with the Cleveland Browns of the former All-America Football Conference in 1946, you helped your team win several AAFC and National Football League titles while earning all-league recognition seven times. Also appearing in three NFL Pro Bowls, you were named an inductee of the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1977, and your ability to overcome social and racial boundaries and excel in your sport is worthy of emulation.

Your accomplishments are a justifiable source of pride and an excellent reflection not only on you but also on your family, your community, and the historical integrity of the NFL. You are truly deserving of high praise, and we are certain that your groundbreaking contributions to the game of professional football will continue to create opportunities for countless others.

Thus, with sincere pleasure, we commend you on your personal success and salute you as one of Ohio's finest athletes.

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The Pro Football Hall of Fame is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit educational institution whose mission is to promote and commemorate public understanding of the origin, development, and growth of professional football as an important part of American culture, to educate and enhance public understanding of the positive values of football, and to honor individuals who have made outstanding contributions to the sport.