

Flanagan Bloomed To NFL Standout

By Jim Lane
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Call him a late bloomer or a plunger, but Ed Flanagan is one of those guys who proved that if you want something badly enough, it's worth the wait.

"I was never a star. I never started until my senior year in high school. I guess it just shows that it's never too late," Flanagan said.

Being an offensive center usually means little or no recognition. It's often said that aside from his friends and relatives, an offensive center is unfamiliar to the average football fan.

However, Ed Flanagan is being modest when he says he wasn't a star. He toiled in obscurity for many of his playing days in high school, college, and the pros, but his peers recognized his performance, particularly during his NFL career.

A fullback at Our Lady of Lourdes and at Keith Junior High School, Flanagan was switched to the line when he reached Altoona High School.

Altoona Coach Earl Strohm apparently knew what he was doing. Although he didn't win a starting job until his senior year, Flanagan earned honorable mention all-state honors in 1960 and won a scholarship to Purdue.

"Ed wanted to be a fullback. He didn't have that much speed so we put him on the line," Strohm recalled. "Ed was a very dependable player. Very steady. You could depend on Ed to do his job."

His career at Purdue followed the same pattern as his high school career. After two letter-winning years, Flanagan capped his college career with an outstanding senior year.

Flanagan was chosen on the All-Big Ten second team and earned honorable mention All-American honors. In recognition of his outstanding play during the year, Flanagan was elected honorary captain by his Purdue teammates.

"You name what you want done and Ed can do it. He's a steady player and a darned good one," Purdue Coach Jack Mollenkopf once said.

Flanagan was picked to play in the post-season Blue-Gray and Senior Bowl classics, then became a fifth-round choice of the Detroit Lions in the pro draft of 1964.

The Lions were well-stocked with veterans, but Flanagan had an impressive camp and won the starting job. It was the beginning of what was to become an outstanding professional career.

Flanagan was named to the NFL's all-rookie team in 1965. He played 10 seasons in Detroit and started 139 of 140 games. He also compiled a consecutive streak of 129 games during that time and led the



Lions in minutes played almost every year.

Detroit coaches were always impressed with the work ethic of Flanagan.

Prior to the 1968 draft, Lion coach Joe Schmidt was asked if he was going to draft a center. "We already have the best and I don't think we'll be needing any."

Chuck Knox, the Lions' offensive line coach at the time, predicted greatness for Flanagan.

"When the Lions start to win, Ed Flanagan is going to receive the recognition he deserves. We expect him to be all-pro."

Knox was right. The Lions started to win and Flanagan started to be recognized throughout the league. He was an all-pro selection in 1969 and in 1970 he was the consensus choice as the NFC's all-pro center.

Flanagan, the Lions' co-captain from 1969 through 1974, also won all-pro honors in 1971. Not even a serious back operation after the 1971 season could put Flanagan on the sidelines. He came back to win all-pro honors in 1973.

Knox, the current head coach of the Seattle Seahawks, recalls Flanagan as "the cornerstone of Detroit's offensive line."

"He called all the blocking adjustments. He was a pro bowl center and was a member of what was regarded as the best offensive line in the NFL at the time."

"He was an outstanding center. He had been a wrestler in high school and college and had good balance. Plus, he was tough and smart," Knox said.

Flanagan left Detroit after the 1974 season and signed as a free agent with the San Diego Chargers. He played two

seasons with the Chargers before he retired and went into the printing business.

After a few years in the printing business, he sold out and went to San Bernardino where he became a sales manager for a burglar alarm company.

However, Flanagan got itchy to return to football, so he called Knox, his old coach and friend, who helped him land a job as offensive line coach for the Oakland Invaders of the USFL.

When the USFL suspended play in 1986, Flanagan returned to San Bernardino where he joined his brother-in-law in the paving business.

"It's a lot of fun, but it's a different world for me," he said. "These guys like to get up early, but I get out there and work with them. One day I shoveled 17 tons of blacktop off the back of a truck."

Ed Flanagan thinks he's found his life's work. He doesn't foresee a return to coaching.

"I had an opportunity to go to the Canadian League, but the coaching profession is a tough business. The average coach moves about every three years and I don't want that," he said.

Ed and his wife Ninetta have three children - Ed, 21; Amy, 14; and Megan, 4. He still follows the game of football closely.

"After I first retired from playing, I didn't watch too much. But, now I'm back into it. I enjoy watching it."

"The techniques haven't changed. There's only one way to block and tackle. If you've got good techniques, you can play anywhere."

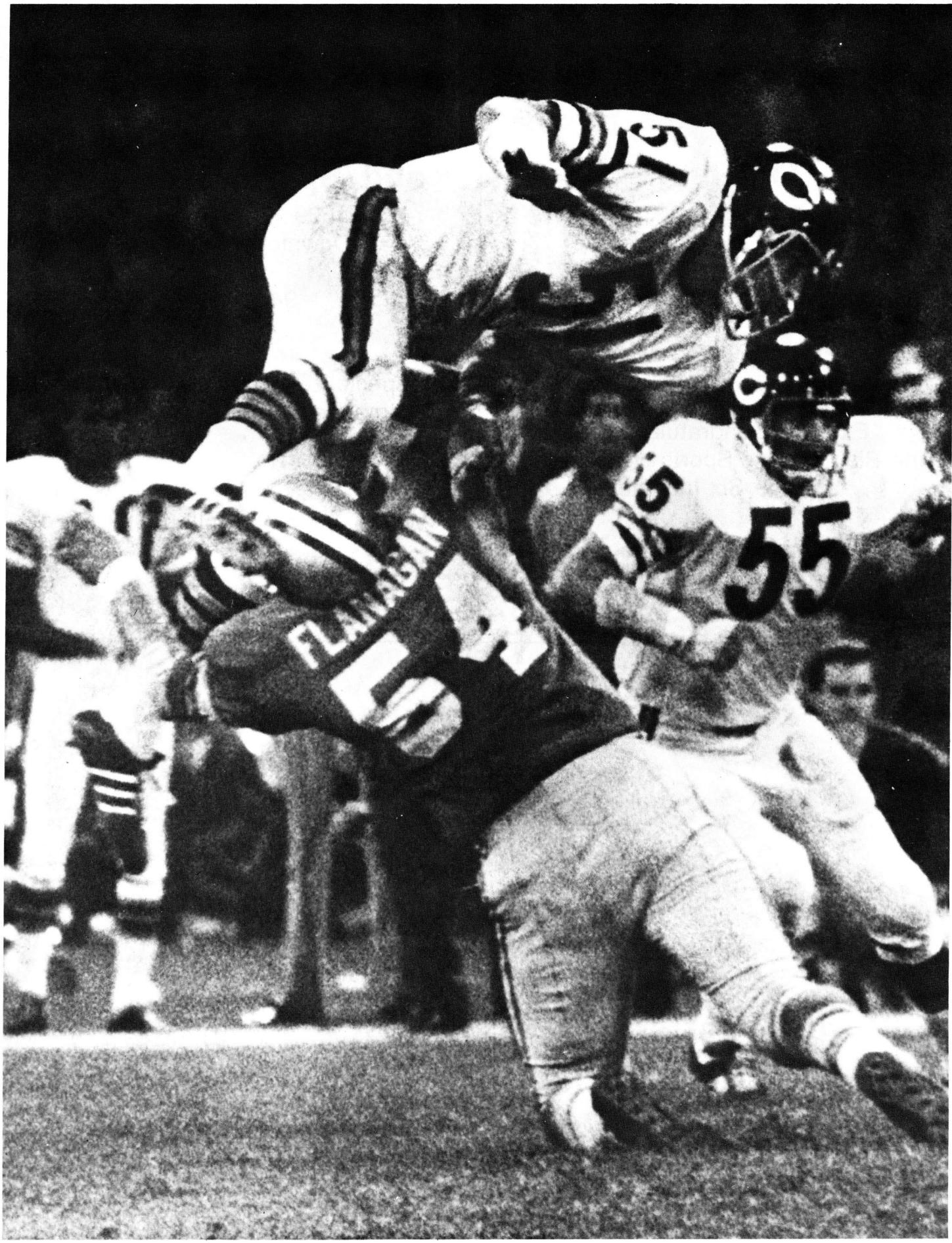
"When I coached at Oakland, the main thing I noticed was that the players were bigger and maybe a little smarter. But, they don't play hurt today. When I was playing, if you got hurt on the field, you crawled off and then crawled back on."

"But, I can't deny that there are better athletes today. My line at Oakland was 6-5 and 270 and the average benchpress was 400. That's phenomenal."

As a player, Ed Flanagan made his living blocking the likes of Dick Butkus, Ray Nitschke, Willie Lanier, and Tommy Nobis. He was reliable, consistent and durable. All that you could want in an offensive center.

On learning of his selection to the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame, he also was humble.

"It really surprised me - particularly to be selected the first year because there were so many great athletes from our little area," he said. "To me, it's a great honor. I never expected anything like it."



Ed blocking an old rival, former All-Pro linebacker Dick Butkus of the Chicago Bears.