

NFL legend Payton loses cancer battle

■ **'Sweetness' is still the league all-time leading rusher, attaining 16,726 yards with the Bears.**

CHICAGO (AP) — Walter Payton, the NFL's greatest rusher whose aggressive style masked a playful temperament that earned him the nickname "Sweetness," died Monday at age 45.

Payton died of bile duct cancer that was discovered during his treatment earlier this year for primary sclerosing cholangitis, a rare liver disease.

Payton rushed for 16,726 yards in his 13-year career, one of sport's most awesome records. And Barry Sanders ensured it would be one of the most enduring, retiring in July despite being just 1,458 yards shy of breaking Payton's mark.

"I want to set the record so high that the next person who tries for it, it's going to bust his heart," Payton once said.

Payton was coached for six years by Mike Ditka, now coach of the New Orleans Saints, who called him "the best football player I've ever seen."

"And he led by example on the field. He was the complete player. He did everything. ... He was the greatest runner, but he was also probably the best blocking back you ever saw."

Payton disclosed in February that he was suffering from primary sclerosing cholangitis and needed a liver transplant.

His physician, Dr. Greg Gores of the Mayo Clinic, said Payton was subsequently diagnosed with cancer of the bile duct, a vessel that carries digestive fluids from the liver to the small intestine.

"The malignancy was very advanced and progressed very rapidly," Gores said at a news conference. Because the cancer had spread so rapidly outside his liver, a transplant "was no longer tenable," the doctor said.

Gores declined to say when the cancer was diagnosed.

"Walter was the kind of individual who refused to think, 'Why me, why now?'" He just continued to look forward," said Mike Singletary, his teammate from 1981-87 and a close friend.

Even in his final days, Singletary said Payton never talked about dying.

"He had dealt with that, but he didn't want to talk about that," he said.

Payton was widely celebrated in Chicago, the city's highest-profile athlete in the years after Cubs' Hall of Famer Ernie Banks retired and before Bulls' superstar Michael Jordan emerged.

"Walter was a Chicago icon long before I arrived there," Jordan said in a statement issued after Payton's death. "He was a great man off the field, and his on-the-field accomplishments speak for themselves. I spent a lot of time with Walter, and I truly feel that we have lost a great man."

A two-time Little All-American, Payton finished fourth in voting for the Heisman Trophy in 1974 and was

picked fourth overall by the Bears in the 1975 NFL draft. He rushed for 679 yards and seven touchdowns in his rookie season and the next year had the first of what would be 10 1,000-yard seasons, rushing for 1,390 yards and 13 touchdowns.

In 1977, just his third year in the NFL, Payton won the first of two MVP awards with the most productive season of his career. He rushed for 1,852 yards and 14 touchdowns, both career highs. His 5.5 yards per carry also was the best of his career.

Against Minnesota, he ran for 275 yards, an NFL single-game record that still stands. And in 1984, he broke Jim Brown's longstanding rushing record of 12,312 yards.

After carrying mediocre Chicago teams for most of his career, Payton saw the Bears finally make it to the Super Bowl in 1985. Payton rushed for 1,551 yards and nine touchdowns as the Bears went 15-1 in the regular season, and also caught 49 passes for 483 yards receiving and two TDs.

Chicago beat New England 46-10 in the Super Bowl, but Payton didn't score in the game.

When he disclosed his liver disease at an emotional news conference in February, the Hall of Famer looked gaunt and frail, a shadow of the man who gained more yards than any running back in the history of the NFL.

"Am I scared? Hell yeah, I'm scared. Wouldn't you be scared?" he asked. "But it's not in my hands anymore. It's in God's hands."

Payton made few public appear-

ances after that and his son, Jarrett, who plays for the University of Miami, was called home Wednesday night.

"From the day in February when my dad told the world of his liver disease, the outpouring of love, support and prayers from around the world astounded even him," Jarrett Payton said, holding back tears as he read a statement at the Bears' headquarters in Lake Forest, Ill.

WALTER PAYTON
NFL running back, before his death

Born July 25, 1954, in Columbia, Miss., Payton played college football at Jackson State, where he set nine school records, scored 66 touchdowns and rushed for 3,563 yards. He once scored 46 points in one game. He led the nation in scoring in 1973 with 160 points, and his 464 career points was an NCAA record.

Payton's nickname of "Sweetness" was a tribute to his personality more than his running style. He was an elusive runner but often took on tacklers with an aggressive, stiff-armed style that belied his size.

"As a person, he was a bright spot for any darkness that appeared," Singletary said.

Even as he was dying, Payton continued to play pranks on his friends. Last week, he purposely sent former Bears running back Matt Suhey to wrong addresses on a trip to Singletary's house, and then had him hide a hamburger and a malt in Singletary's garage.

Payton retired after the 1987 season, and the Bears immediately retired No. 34. He was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1993, his first year of eligibility.

"This is a great loss. Walter Payton was an inspiration to me by the way he carried himself on the field and off the field," said Dallas' Emmitt Smith, who with 13,174 yards is the NFL's active rushing leader and No. 4 on the list, 3,552 behind Payton.

NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue called Payton "one of the greatest players in the history of the sport."

"Walter was an inspiration in everything he did. The tremendous grace and dignity he displayed in his final months reminded us again why 'Sweetness' was the perfect nickname for Walter Payton," Tagliabue said.

UT on high after key win over Clones

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season is over, if he keeps playing like he is, he ought to be up to any award that is available to a quarterback."

UT fell out of the national race with a season-opening loss to North Carolina State, but, other than a setback to Kansas State, it has shown it is among the elite in the conference. It has also shown poise that has allowed it to stay alive in close games.

Whether the Longhorns were down 17-0 to Oklahoma, battling with Nebraska or tied with less than three minutes remaining against Iowa State, they have shown poise and a confidence in their ability.

"I said before the game that Texas is a better football team this year," McCarney said.

NU fine-tunes playcalling routine against Jayhawks

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requires the Huskers to use most of the 25-second clock.

"If you're running our offense, when you're asking our quarterback to do an awful lot at the line of scrimmage, you are going to have the clock running down to five seconds, four seconds, three seconds," Solich said.

As for how a play actually is sent into the game, Davison said a typical down goes as follows:

Solich makes the play on the sideline, and there are two or three guys standing there. Usually there are two or three subs on every play, and one will run to Crouch with the play.

They raise their hand on the way in so Crouch knows who to look for.

Once the play gets inside the

huddle, Crouch relays it to everyone and goes to the line of scrimmage.

Before a play can get to the line of scrimmage, a relay man must remember the play.

Both Davison and Wistrom confessed that when they first brought plays into the game, they were nervous and had to think twice about plays.

"By the time I got out there, I thought I was going to switch it about three different times," Wistrom said. "You have to keep running it through your head. You do it more and more, and you get used to it and feel more comfortable."

Remembering the plays is no longer an issue. Getting them in quickly is.

"We must sprint them in every time," Davison said. "That way Eric has plenty of time."

Gaskins: Huskers hit their stride just like Pettit predicted earlier

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has made about his lineup and game plan, and even Pettit has admitted he's taken risks.

For one thing, he yanked junior setter Jill McWilliams — who was groomed for two years to take over for All-American and the heart and soul of last year's team, Fiona Nepo — out of being the team's leader as the setter in the traditional 5-1 offense and implemented a 6-2 offense where she rotated with a freshman, Lindsey Wischmeier, who, before she became a part of Div. I volleyball, was setting at Class D-2 Lewiston a year ago.

He yanked senior Tonia Tauke — who set nearly every freshman blocker record three years ago and is one of the vocal leaders of the team — in favor of freshman Amber Holmquist and sophomore Jenny Kropp.

He tinkered with starting lineups, rotations and offensive attacks more than O.J. Simpson tinkers with alibis.

And while we watched him do all of this and Nebraska uncharacteristically lose five matches, three at home, we should have seen Saturday night coming. The tinkering and gathering up a consistent attack for two months came to a climax before Saturday night. That's when the mother lode dropped.

We should have known, like Pettit's been telling us all along, that the Huskers were due.

Due for a win over a high-caliber opponent. Due for a breakout performance from Angie Oxley, who for a while had been off the radar blip of Husker playmakers. Due to prove to Kansas State — which shocked the Huskers a month before at the Coliseum for its first win over NU in school history — that Nebraska is still Nebraska and Kansas State is still Kansas State.

The bears came out of hibernation at just the right time. Things had already begun to fall into place

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for Nebraska, thanks to what Pettit called the "Wednesday Massacre," in which, three nights before, conference leaders KSU and Texas both lost to pull NU one match closer.

Suddenly, after two months of watching a team struggle to live up to the ungodly expectations cemented each year on being a national powerhouse, this team of young players looked like the Husker teams of old.

And a Big 12 trophy that seemed unattainable is well within reach. The Huskers hit their stride this weekend. The schedule is favorable — Nebraska has its toughest road matches out of the way, and it gets Texas at the Coliseum in the last match of the season. Things seem to be falling into place.

But let's not get carried away. Despite the mass celebration around him from his players after the K-State match, Pettit remained cautious.

Yes, it was a huge win. No, the title crown isn't NU's for the taking yet. After all, the Huskers are still in second place. They still have 10 matches left. They still have to play an improved Kansas team Wednesday night in Lawrence. Every match is important.

But some games, like Saturday's, are just more important than others. See you in December.

John Gaskins is a junior broadcasting major and a Daily Nebraskan staff writer.

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