

Tim Pyle

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are the defending conference champions. Future Hall of Fame center Patrick Ewing is still out with a partially torn Achilles tendon and could be until January, but the Knicks made it all the way to the Finals without him last postseason.

Other contenders include: the Indiana Pacers, getting older by the minute with often-injured center Rik Smits and sweet-shooting guard Reggie Miller; the Charlotte Hornets, a favorite darkhorse featuring guard Eddie Jones and possibly rookie point guard Baron Davis out of UCLA; the Philadelphia 76ers, who have little to team with defending scoring champion Iverson; and the Milwaukee Bucks, who boast a potent pair in guard Ray Allen and forward Glenn Robinson.

The West

The Blazers' toughest nemesis will again be the Spurs and their formidable inside. Seven-footers Tim Duncan and David Robinson make the key practically impenetrable to opponents. Meanwhile, they also key San Antonio's efficient offense.

Down in Los Angeles, the Lakers still have the talented tandem of Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant, at least once Bryant recovers from a broken right hand. They also have former Bulls coach Phil Jackson.

Elsewhere, John Stockton and Karl Malone will continue to pick-and-roll in Utah, Kevin Garnett will continue to improve in Minnesota, Jason Williams and Chris Webber will keep entertaining in Sacramento and Jason Kidd will still be dishing in Phoenix.

The Pick

Look for the Blazers to get past the Spurs thanks to superior depth and perimeter play and then dispose of upstart Charlotte in the Finals.

The season may not end up fitting, but it will be great nonetheless thanks to Portland's first championship since 1977.

All-time rushing king Payton dies at 45

By Nancy Armour
The Associated Press

CHICAGO — 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 was diagnosed earlier this year with primary sclerosing cholangitis, a rare liver disease. His only hope for survival was a transplant and he had been on a waiting list since February.

Payton rushed for 16,726 yards in his 13-year career, one of sport's most awesome records. 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."

"It's sad to me because he had a lot greater impact on me than I had on him," Ditka said.

"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 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 long-standing rushing record of 12,312 yards.

After carrying mediocre Chicago teams for most of his career, the Bears finally made 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 illness at an emotional news conference in February, he 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 appearances after that and his son, Jarrett, who plays for the University of Miami, was called home Wednesday night.

Reports of how sick Payton was first surfaced Sunday, with at least two East coast radio stations reporting prematurely that he had died. One newspaper columnist wrote that he wasn't expected to live through the weekend.

On Monday, in the hours after the announcement of Payton's death, the Bears' blue and orange flag was lowered to half staff at the team's headquarters in Lake Forest, Ill.

Born July 25, 1954 at Columbia, Miss., Payton played his 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 was somewhat undersized for a power running back, something Minnesota Vikings coach Dennis Green remembered Monday.

"He set a standard for going all out," Green said. "He wasn't as big as some of your other backs that play the game, but he could outwork anybody and he always gave 100 percent. And that was 100 percent to his family, to his friends, to the game of football and so is a guy that is really going to be missed."

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 a stiff-armed style that belied his size.

Payton retired after the 1987 season, and the Bears immediately retired No. 34.

Payton was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1993, his first year of eligibility.

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," Tagli-

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Michael Jordan
Former Chicago Bull

abue said.

Following retirement, Payton tried his hand at auto racing and became co-owner of an Indy-car team.

A month after he announced his illness, all the cars in a CART race carried decal on the cockpit area near the driver's helmet. It reads: "Get Well Sweetness" and was accompanied by a football helmet with No. 34 on the side.

Payton also served on the Bears' board of directors, and became part-owner of an Arena Football team after unsuccessful efforts to buy an NFL franchise. He also ran a restaurant and other businesses in the Chicago area.

At the Hall of Fame ceremony, he chose his 12-year-old son, Jarrett, to present him for induction.

"Not only is he a great athlete, he's a role model — he's my role model," Jarrett said.

Payton is survived by his wife, Connie, and their two children, Jarrett and Brittney.

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