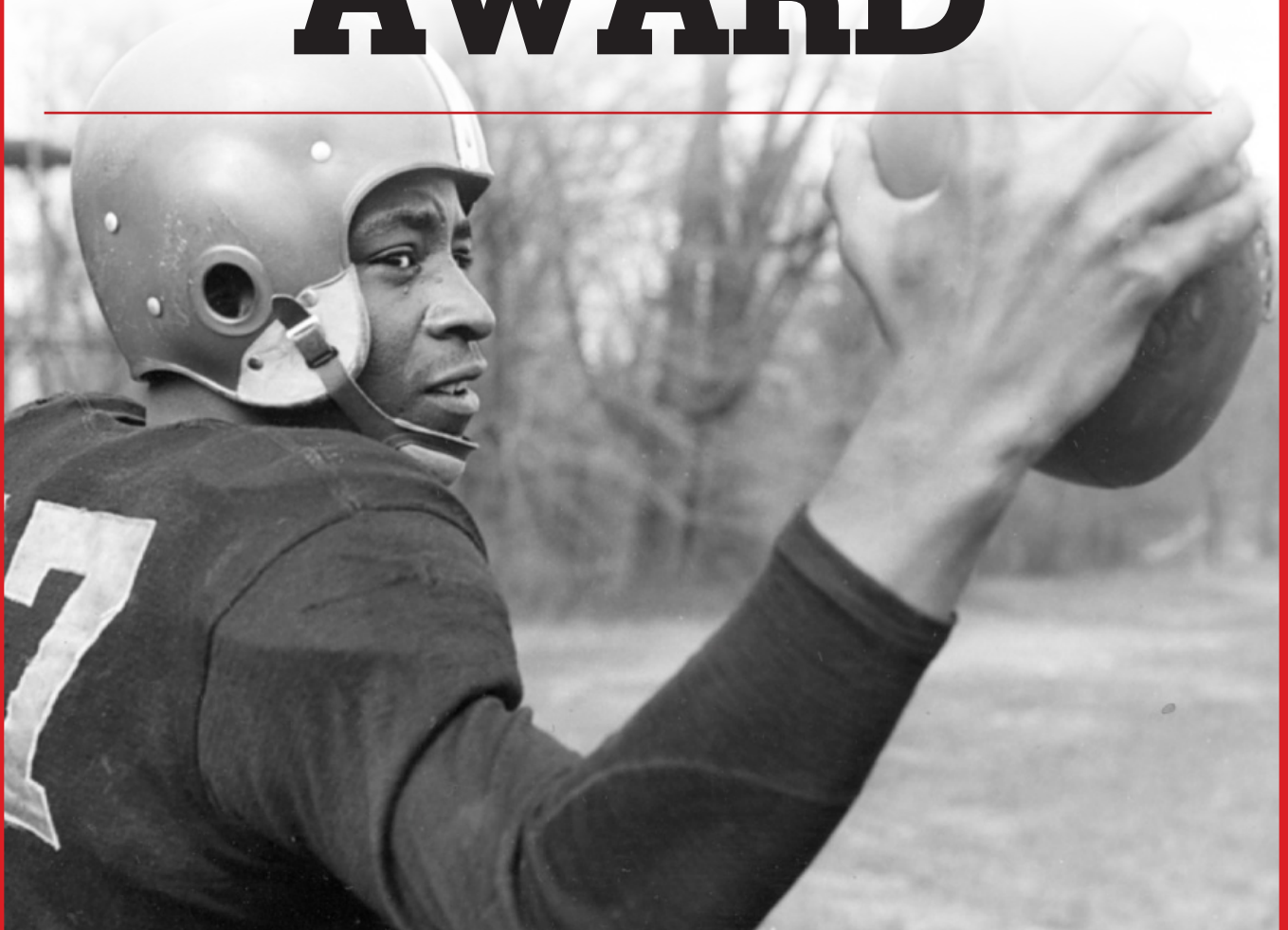


**THE 2023** — **FOURTH ANNUAL**

# **WILLIE THROWER AWARD**



**APRIL 6, 2024**

**PRESENTED BY:**

**THE WILLIE THROWER  
AWARD FOUNDATION**



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# **DEAR COMMUNITY PARTNERS, FRIENDS, AND FAMILY,**

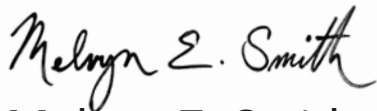
It gives me great pleasure and consistently puts a smile on my face when I think of the support the Willie Thrower Award Foundation (WTAF) has received from you over the past several years. Just as important is my excitement about the growth of the organization, and our Board of Directors as well as the Thrower Family stands with me as we remain inspired about our future.

Willie Thrower's life and legacy woven throughout WTAF's mission is a true catalyst for bringing communities together and uplifting our youth. In fact, over the past five years, we have interacted with 120 high schools in southwestern PA, connected with dozens of high school administrators and Coaches, and engaged with over 60 premier student athletes through our events, skills camps, and recognition ceremonies.

But I would be remiss in my thanks to you if I did not point out our extraordinary 70th Anniversary Celebration in October 2023 of Willie taking that historic first snap as a NFL Quarterback. We had no idea that you would embrace the four-day event by naming the annual Valley High School Homecoming Parade after Willie Thrower; that you would invite his sons and widow to lead the parade; that you would strengthen his national reputation as a great athlete and invite Good Morning America, The Chicago Tribune, KDKA, WGN-TV, and the Chicago Bears into our community to learn more about Willie Thrower and his accomplishments; that you would hold a "Community Day" featuring youth skills camps, a Children's Corner, food, music, arts and crafts, and area businesses to recognize Willie's skills as a change agent and leader; and that you would raise over \$1,000 at the first annual Thrower Heart Walk.

You have given new meaning to the adage that without you, we are nothing, but with you, WTAF is everything! On behalf of the WTAF organization please accept my sincere gratitude and hope that we will continue to work together to honor this "giant" by the name of Willie Thrower, Sr.

Sincerely,



**Melvyn E. Smith**

PRESIDENT

WILLIE THROWER MEMORIAL AWARD



**THE WILLIE THROWER  
MEMORIAL AWARD LUNCHEON  
KNEAD COMMUNITY CAFÉ  
SATURDAY, APRIL 6, 2024**

<b>NOON</b> Opening Remarks and Introduction of Program Host.....	Melvyn Smith – Board President
Welcome .....	George Guido – Board Member & Program Host
Pledge of Allegiance.....	Kim Johnson – Athletic Director, Valley High School
City of New Kensington Salutation.....	Mayor Thomas Guzzo – Board Member & Mayor of New Kensington
Invocation.....	Pastor Dean Ward – The River Community Church

BRUNCH BUFFET AND VIDEO PRESENTATIONS

<b>1:00 pm</b> Foundation Board Members and Distinguished Guests Introductions & Finalists Announced ....	George Guido
Introduction of Nolan DiLucia by Peters Township Assistant Coach Moe Richardson – Address by <b>Nolan DiLucia</b>	
Introduction of Julian Dugger’s Grandmother, Annette Dugger, by Board Member, Jimmy Lee Santorella – Jimmy Lee Santorella previews a video address by <b>Julian Dugger</b>	
Introduction of Logan Kushner by North Allegheny Assistant Coach Matt Butler – Address by <b>Logan Kushner</b>	
Introduction of Matt Sieg by Fort Cherry Coach Tanner Garry – Address by <b>Matt Sieg</b>	
Introduction of Payton Wehner by Central Catholic Coach Ryan Lehmeier – Address by <b>Payton Wehner</b>	
Introduction of Jake Wolfe by Montour Coach Lou Cerro – Address by <b>Jake Wolfe</b>	
Keynote Speaker.....	“Definement”, Michael Warfield – Aliquippa High School, Head Football Coach
2023 Willie Thrower Award Recipient Announcement.....	George Guido
Closing Remarks.....	Tom Guzzo

# **WILLIE THROWER AWARD FOUNDATION VISION STATEMENT**

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The Willie Thrower Memorial Award, beginning with the 2020 season, will annually honor the best high school quarterback in Southwestern Pennsylvania to memorialize Willie Thrower for being the first Black Quarterback in professional football history.

We want to recognize and pay tribute to the fact that in the storied history of professional sport's most dominant league (NFL) that it was a black quarterback who hails from Southwestern Pennsylvania who broke through that barrier.

The individual selected to receive this award will be determined by the voting of a panel comprised of high school football coaches representing each of the conferences from the WPIAL and City League along with a panel of sports broadcasters and sports writers who cover high school football on a regular basis in the ten-county area of Southwestern Pennsylvania.

Willie played for the former New Kensington High School which has since merged with Arnold High School to form Valley High School. Thrower was known as "Mitts" because of his large hands and arm strength which stood in contrast to his 5'11" frame.

He was part of a 2-time WPIAL Championship team and 1-time WPIAL runner-up squad.

Collegiately, he played at Michigan State University under legendary Spartans head coach Clarence Lester "Biggie" Munn and was a member of the 1952 Michigan State University Division One National Champions. In 1953, after signing as a free agent with the NFL's Chicago Bears, he made his groundbreaking debut against the San Francisco 49ers on October 18, 1953.

The recipient of this award will receive a bronze replica statue of Willie Thrower just like the one that is on display at the entrance to Valley High School's football stadium in New Kensington, Pennsylvania.



***"Anything you do, always be... a GIANT."***

—Willie Thrower, Sr.

**WILLIE THROWER AWARD HONORING THE BEST HIGH SCHOOL  
QUARTERBACK IN SOUTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA**

# **HOW THE WINNER WILL BE DETERMINED**

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The selection process will be comprised of a panel of high school football coaches representing each of the conferences from the WPIAL and City League along with a panel of sports broadcasters and sports writers who cover high school football on a regular basis in the ten-county area of Southwestern Pennsylvania.

The award will be given to an outstanding high school football quarterback who is a leader both on and off the field. The recipient will be a very talented signal-caller who like Willie Thrower was, is dangerous with both his arm and his legs and makes opposing defensive staffs stay up late at night trying to devise schemes to slow him down.

The recipient must be a dependable and respected teammate and be of good character.

Each participating panel member will at the conclusion of the regular season submit their nominees via email or postal mail to the Willie Thrower Award Committee.

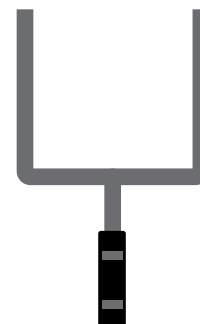
Each participating panel member will rank their top 5 high school quarterbacks that they have either played against, watched play or read about their accomplishments during that regular high school football season. It is recommended that the panel members make themselves aware of their 5 nominees' statistical achievements from the season. For example, passing yards, rushing yards, completion percentage and touchdowns passing and rushing.

Each participating nominator will rank their top 5 high school quarterbacks on the following scale: Their number 1 ranked nominee will receive (10) points, number 2 (8) points, number 3 (6) points, number 4 (4) points and number 5 (2) points.

The top 5 nominees who earn the most points will be invited to an awards banquet in March/April in which they will be recognized and the eventual winner will be announced. The winner will receive a bronze replica statue of Willie Thrower just like the one that is on display at the entrance to Valley High School's football stadium in New Kensington, Pennsylvania.

Additional Criteria for Nominators to Consider in Determining their 5 Nominees:

- A. *Clearly a difference maker* for his team when he is on the field.
- B. Rises to the occasion when his squad *really* needs it most.
- C. Mentally and physically strong.
- D. Wants to win every game but more importantly *"hates to lose"*.
- E. Possesses an exemplary work ethic.
- F. Sets the bar for his team in terms of demonstrating *"good sportsmanship"*.



# BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIE "THE PRO" THROWER

by Melvin & Willie Thrower Jr.

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**WILLIE THROWER** was born March 22, 1930 in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Willie Thrower went to Ken High in 1945-1949, known today as Valley High School, in New Kensington, PA There he helped lead his team the Ken High Raiders to 2 WPIAL Championships in 1946 and 1947, they also were the WPIAL runner-up in 1945.

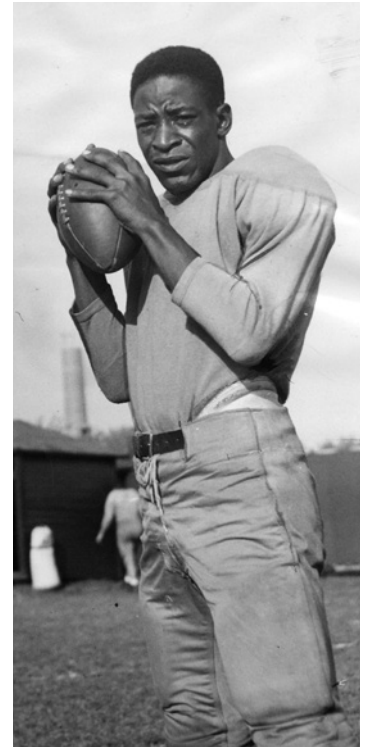
After graduating high school, Willie Thrower went to Michigan State from 1949 - 1952 where he helped lead the Spartans to win their first National Championship in 1952 beating Notre Dame.

Willie Thrower graduated with a degree in Psychology from Michigan State University. Later on, he went undrafted to the Chicago Bears in 1953 for just one season. Willie then went on to play for the Winnipeg Blue Bombers 1954-1956.

Willie ended his career at the age of 27 due to a shoulder injury. He married Mary Rowe (THROWER) in 1964 at St. James A.M.E church in New Kensington where they became the church's first African American couple to get married. From this union they had 3 boys: Willie Jr., Jason and Melvin Thrower.

Willie Thrower was not only a pioneer who broke the color barrier for quarterbacks, he was a great man who loved his family, community and was loved by many that looked up to him. He was a tremendous inspiration, mentor, and advocate, most especially to those in his community. The famous line he would tell kids when he mentored them was, "Anything you do, always be a Giant."

Willie Thrower passed away February 20, 2002.

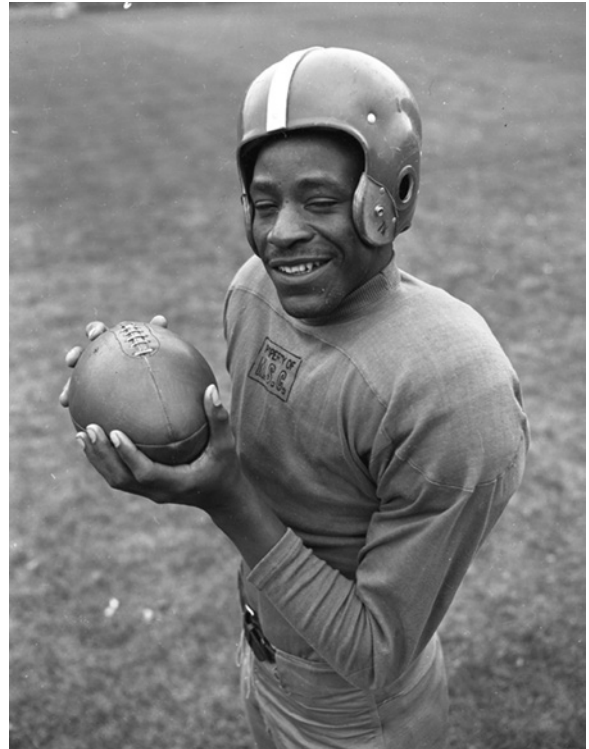


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## ACCOMPLISHMENTS & AWARDS

- Allegheny-Kiski Valley Sports Hall of Fame
- W.E.B DU BOIS AWARD N.A.A.C.P (W.E.B. DU BOIS Exhibited Great Courage in His Fight of Social Justice and Equality)
- WPIAL HALL OF FAME - 2011 Athlete/Heritage Award.
- Featured in the ESPN Sports History book: *THIRD AND A MILE - THE TRIALS AND TRIUMPHS OF THE BLACK QUARTERBACK.*
- RIPLEY'S BELIEVE OR NOT: Known for the world's largest pro football hands.

**Willie Lee Thrower** (March 22, 1930 – February 20, 2002) was an American football quarterback. Born near Pittsburgh in New Kensington, Pennsylvania, Thrower was known as “Mitts” because of his large hands and arm strength, which stood in contrast to his 5’ 11” frame. He was known to toss a football 70 yards. Thrower was a part of the 1952 Michigan State Spartans who won the national championship. He became one of the first National Football League (NFL) African American quarterbacks in the modern era, playing for the Chicago Bears in 1953.



### Early life

Thrower played halfback in the single-wing formation for New Kensington High (present-name: Valley High School) as a freshman just after the end of World War II in 1945. Single wing halfbacks received a direct center snap, and then had run, handoff, or pass options. The team lost 2 games. In subsequent seasons head coach Don Fletcher installed the T formation and moved Thrower to quarterback. From his sophomore to senior years, New Kensington won 24 straight games, including the 1946 and 1947 Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League (WPIAL) Class AA championships. He would only lose one game in his career. As a dual-threat quarterback, Thrower was also an All-WPIAL and all-state first team honors, and he was named captain for an All-American scholastic selection covering the nation east of the Mississippi River. His final high school record was 35–3–1. Despite his accomplishments, Thrower still experienced racism. In 1947, the Miami, Florida Peanut Bowl, featuring top high school teams around the country, rescinded the invitation it had extended to Ken High to play in the annual prep classic game when organizers saw a photograph of its star. In addition, many colleges opted not to extend Thrower a scholarship when they discovered his ethnicity.

### College football

After graduating, Thrower chose to play collegiate football for the Michigan State Spartans alongside some of his high school teammates William Horrell, Joseph Klein, Renaldo Kozikowski, Vincent Pisano, and the Tamburo brothers, Harry and Richard. He would remain in East Lansing from 1949–1952, competing for playing time at quarterback with All-Americans Al Dorow and Tom Yewcic. Under head coach Clarence “Biggie” Munn Thrower



became the first black quarterback to play in the Big Ten Conference in 1950 in his first year of varsity eligibility (NCAA rules dictated no freshman on varsity preventing Thrower, who was a freshman in 1949, to play) although during the first two years of his varsity career, he had only attempted 14 passes.



During the 1952 championship season, Thrower was an integral part of the title run, completing 59 percent of his passes (29-of-43) for 400 yards and five touchdowns. In a crucial game with Notre Dame, Thrower stepped in for an injured Tom Yewcic and threw a touchdown in a 21–3 win. In his final game in a Spartan uniform, Thrower completed seven of his 11 attempts for 71 yards and a touchdown, and added a rushing touchdown in a dominating 62–13 win over Marquette that sealed the nation’s Number 1 ranking, and championship, for Michigan State. Professional career

### **National Football League (1953)**

In the 10th minute of the period, (Joe) Perry fumbled and (Dick) Hensley recovered on the 49ers’ 16. Willie Thrower, former Michigan State Negro quarterback star making his major league debut, passed 12 to (Jim) Dooley, putting the ball on the 4. (George) Blanda and (Fred) Morrison came into the game with a resounding razzberry. They wanted Willie to put it over. But Morrison did it on a blast off tackle. The boos changed to cheers. Although Thrower was not drafted in 1953, he was offered one year, \$8,500 contract with the Chicago Bears. He became the backup quarterback and roommate to future Pro Football Hall of Famer George Blanda. He did not play until October 18, 1953 against the San Francisco 49ers. Bears coach George Halas was unhappy with Blanda’s play and pulled him, sending in Thrower. He moved the team to the 15-yard line of the 49ers, but was denied a chance to score a TD when Halas put Blanda back into the game. The Bears eventually lost the game 35–28. Thrower completed 3 out of 8 passes for 27 yards, and had one interception. He would only play one more game for the Bears, who released Thrower after the 1953 season.

### **Legacy**

In 1979, he was elected to the Westmoreland County Sports Hall of Fame. In 1981, he was inducted into AK Valley Hall of Fame. In 2003, an official state marker was dedicated to him in his high school. In 2011, he was inducted into the WPIAL Hall of Fame. Being the first African-American quarterback in the NFL, in 2002 Thrower told The Valley News Dispatch of Tarentum, Pa, “I look at it like this: I was like the Jackie Robinson of football. A black quarterback was unheard of before I hit the pros.”

### **Death**

He died of a heart attack in New Kensington on February 20, 2002, at the age of 71. His funeral was held at the Mount Calvary Missionary Baptist Church in New Kensington, where 150 people mourned. In 2006, a statue of Thrower was erected near Valley High School in New Kensington to honor his accomplishments. The statue was unveiled during a Valley High School football game in September attended by Pittsburgh Steelers owner Dan Rooney as well as Thrower’s family. Willie Thrower was also mentioned by former NFL quarterback Warren Moon in his Pro Football Hall of Fame acceptance speech. Moon thanked Thrower, among others, for giving him inspiration during a time when few African-Americans played the quarterback position in the NFL.



*Thrower’s Sons at Homecoming Parade*

# REMEMBERING THROWER'S CONTRIBUTIONS

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by: Len Pasquarelli    Thursday, Feb. 21, 2002 via ESPN.com

A dozen African-American quarterbacks started a combined 112 NFL games during the 2001 season. While those numbers represent all-time league highs, it is likely not a single one of those 12 QBs can correctly identify the first man of color to take a snap in a modern-day NFL game.

Then again, no one could blame Donovan McNabb if he never heard of Willie Thrower. Ditto Steve McNair, Michael Vick, Aaron Brooks, Daunte Culpepper, Charlie Batch, Quincy Carter or Tony Banks.

And even though Kordell Stewart plays 30 miles south down the Allegheny River from where Willie Thrower established himself as a prep school star, operating the single-wing formation at New Kensington (Pa.) High, it's understandable that the name would likely register a blank with the Pittsburgh Steelers star.

Unless you were born in Western Pennsylvania, weaned on the lore of that area's gridiron history, there is little chance of familiarity with Willie Thrower. I first heard of Thrower from my dad and my uncles and, in subsequent trips to the hamlets of the Allegheny Valley, his legend became a part of my football rearing.

But as they say about a bad joke, well, you had to be there. The irony is, Willie Thrower was no joke, and his football deeds no laughing matter. You've got to dig deep into the pages of encyclopedic tomes such as Total Football to unearth the fact that Thrower, then 23 years old, played two games for the Chicago Bears during the 1953 season. He completed three of eight passes for just 27 yards and tossed an interception before coach George Halas released him. It was 13 seasons before another black man lined up at quarterback in an NFL game.

The printed professional football legacy of Thrower, who died Wednesday at age 71, occupies all of 3½ lines, and two of those detail his height and weight, birth date, high school and college. It is preposterous, though, to suggest that Thrower's contribution to the game can be limited to a puny half-inch of agate type.

For many players of this era, the history of the black quarterback in the NFL commences with the glory days of Doug Williams, who earned most valuable player honors in Super Bowl XXII. It's likely, of course, that players such as McNabb and Stewart and McNair still would have become high-profile performers in the NFL even if Thrower had never made his

**"BUT HE WAS A LOT MORE THAN A THROWER. HE WAS A PASSER, A GUY WHO COULD FIT THE BALL THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE WHEN HE NEEDED TO."**

**— Hall of Fame quarterback George Blanda on Thrower**

two-game cameo. But to diminish the importance of Thrower's contribution, from a competitive and social standpoint, is incredibly shortsighted.

Those eight passes Thrower tossed in 1953 before Halas decided he didn't really require a third quarterback on the roster certainly were not the galvanizing event of, say, Rosa Parks refusing to move to the back of the bus. Neither should Thrower's brief NFL career be tossed into the trash bin of history, nor discarded as an afterthought occurrence. He earned less than \$10,000 on his only league contract, but his legacy is far richer than that.

Thrower's son, Melvin, on Wednesday told the local Valley News Dispatch his father was "a giant." But be careful before you charge a grieving son with hyperbole, because Willie Thrower overcame insurmountable odds to simply make it out of the river town where his name and his deeds meant so much.

One of the game's most aptly named athletes, Thrower could fling the ball 70 yards on a line. "But he was a lot more than a thrower. He was a passer, a guy who could fit the ball through the eye of a needle when he needed to," said Hall of Fame quarterback George Blanda.

When the historians click off the names of great quarterbacks of western Pennsylvania lineage -- John Unitas, Joe Namath, Joe Montana, Dan Marino, Jim Kelly and others -- the famous litany never includes Thrower. It's an unfortunate oversight. In the bigger picture, the one beyond the field, his accomplishments were every bit as significant.

A humble and giving man even as a youngster, Thrower's celebrity drew thousands to the New Kensington games on Friday nights, and he led coach Don Fletcher's team to a pair of Class AA titles in the late 1940s. The games also drew college recruiters, many of whom came armed with scholarship offers, only to withdraw them once they noticed through binoculars that Thrower was black.

It took an enlightened administration, and plenty of convincing on both sides, to get Thrower into Michigan State, where he became the Big Ten's first African-American quarterback. After his stint in the NFL, Thrower played three years in the CFL before retiring and returning home to western Pennsylvania to raise his family and work in the community.

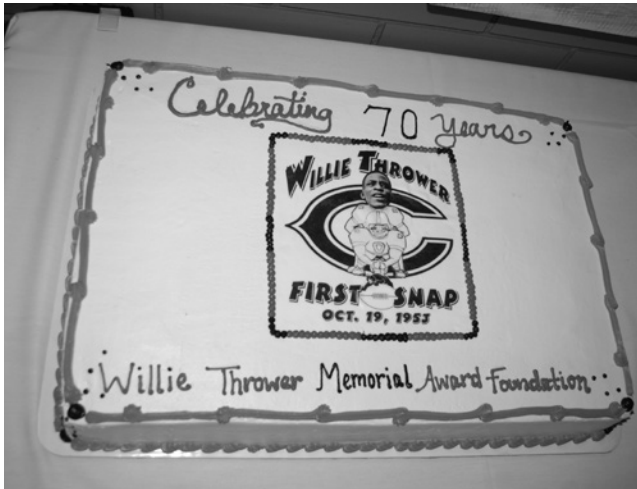
Battling diabetes for the past eight years, Thrower spent much of that time spinning yarns at the local Elks lodge, where on Wednesday night his fellow members toasted his memory. There will be thousands of prayers whispered for Willie Thrower over the next few days, oratories by those who recalled him not only as a football star but more important as a good guy.

It would be fitting if the fraternity of black quarterbacks who now star in the league could recall Thrower with a prayer of thanks.



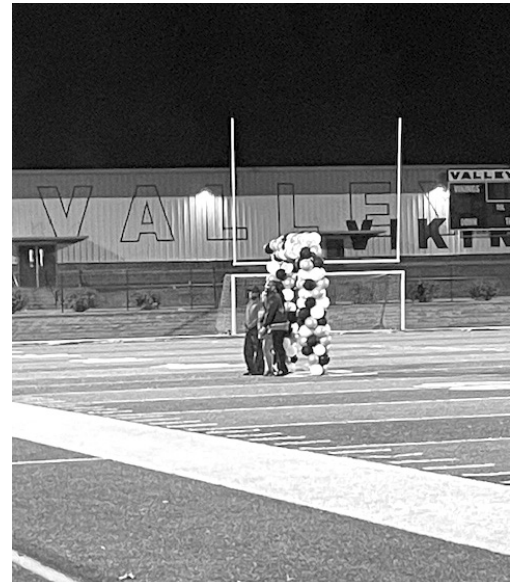
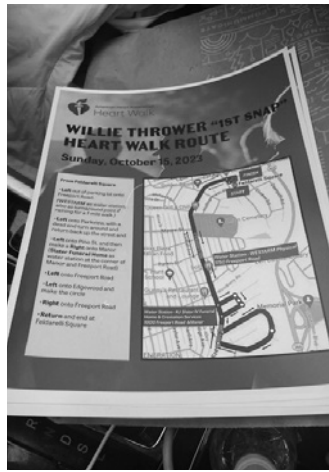
# A SPECIAL CELEBRATION OF THE WILLIE THROWER AWARD

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# 70<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF WILLIE THROWER'S 1<sup>ST</sup> SNAP, OCTOBER 2023



# **WILLIE THROWER MADE HISTORY FOR THE CHICAGO BEARS AS THE MODERN NFL'S 1ST BLACK QB. 70 YEARS LATER, HIS FAMILY HOPES FOR RECOGNITION.**

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By **SHAKEIA TAYLOR** | Chicago Tribune

September 16, 2023

**Willie Thrower** lived his life as a footnote in the history books of one of professional football's most storied franchises.

A quarterback whose "name is synonymous with his skill as a player," as the Pittsburgh Courier declared in 1953, Thrower was the first Black quarterback to play at a Big Ten school and in the modern NFL. He made his professional debut for the Chicago Bears on Oct. 18, 1953, with less than five minutes left in a game against the San Francisco 49ers at Wrigley Field — six years after Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball.

Thrower relieved future Hall of Famer George Blanda with the Bears trailing 35-21. He completed 3 of 8 passes for 27 yards with an interception before being removed. Coach George Halas explained the decision the next day, according to the Chicago Defender: "We had a particular play we wanted to call next and Thrower has not learned all of our offenses. He just didn't know the play." The Bears lost 35-28.

The game was Thrower's lone NFL appearance after notable high school and college careers. Now, 70 years later and 21 years after his death, his family and historians want people to know his name — and his story.

## **OVERCOMING OBSTACLES**

Born in 1930 in New Kensington, Pa., outside Pittsburgh, Thrower was a highly touted and skilled high school player. He led New Kensington to two Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League (WPIAL) championships and a runner-up finish for the state title.

In 1946 the team was invited to play in the Peanut Bowl, an annual showcase of top high school teams at the Orange Bowl stadium in Miami.

"Because of the Jim Crow laws there, they told New Kensington High School's coach (he) could bring (the) white players, but they would have to leave the two Black players — Willie Thrower and Flint Green — behind," recounted George Guido, a retired journalist and New Kensington historian.

According to Guido, Thrower's teammates declined the invitation because everyone wasn't allowed to attend. It was then Thrower started to get national recognition. He was voted an All-American his senior year and named to the Pennsylvania All-State team. As part of the All-America honor, Thrower was invited to play in a national all-star game for high school players in Corpus Christi, Texas.

"He was named captain and then the people down there found out he was Black," Guido said. "And they said not only are you not captain anymore, you can't come and play because Texas had a law against interracial sports teams playing against each other."

It wouldn't be the last time Thrower's race would become an obstacle to his football aspirations.

"My dad had a lot of offers from the South," Thrower's son Melvin said. "He had scholarship (offers) from Georgia, Miami, Kentucky ... but once they found out he was Black, they didn't offer him the scholarship. Once they realized his name and who he was and his ethnicity, that's when they pulled the scholarship and that's why my dad went up North."

From 1949-52, Thrower was a backup quarterback at Michigan State, which joined the Big Ten in 1950 (though the Spartans continued to play football as an independent until 1953). He was one of four Black players on the team along with safety Jim Ellis, halfback Leroy Bolden and end Ellis Duckett, who was named to the Chicago Tribune All-America team in 1951.

Thrower didn't see much playing time at Michigan State, but in the second-to-last game of the Spartans' 1952 national championship season, quarterback Tom Yewcic was injured and Thrower was called upon to finish the game against No. 6 Notre Dame.

Entering the game with the host Spartans holding a tight 7-3 lead, Thrower helmed two touchdown drives in a 21-3 victory that extended the nation's longest winning streak to 23 games.

"My dad had an arm," Melvin said. "While he was at Michigan State, the coach would have him line up at the 40-yard line and throw the ball down the field. That's how they would practice their punt returns and kick returns."

Though only 5-foot-11 and 170 pounds, Thrower is said to have had large hands and incredible arm strength, able to throw a football 60 yards. His hands were so large, in fact, they were featured in "Ripley's Believe It or Not" and were the source of his nickname, "Mitts."

## A BRIEF CAREER

The NFL was integrated from its inception. In 1920, Fritz Pollard became the first African American to play in the league.

For its first decade teams signed Black players, but after the 1933 season they disappeared. An unofficial ban — or “gentleman’s agreement” — during the Depression era prevented Black players from participating in pro football from 1934-46, a year before MLB integrated. Team owners denied the existence of a ban, but there’s little explanation otherwise as to why Black players suddenly vanished from NFL rosters.

During the 1946 season, after the Los Angeles Coliseum threatened to evict the Rams unless they signed a Black player, they signed Kenny Washington and Woody Strode. A few months later, Bill Willis and Marion Motley joined the Cleveland Browns. The four men reintegrated pro football permanently. Today, nearly 70% of NFL players are Black.

Thrower went undrafted and signed with the Bears for the 1953 season for \$8,500. At that time the NFL had 12 teams and only 15 Black players; Thrower was the only one on the Bears roster.

Dr. Louis Moore, a historian and author of the upcoming book “The Battle of the Black Bombers: Doug Williams, Vince Evans and the Making of the Black Quarterback,” noted it was Washington who was the first Black quarterback in 1946. The Rams tried Washington as a T-formation quarterback in the preseason and the season opener, in which he went 1-for-7 passing before being switched to fullback.

“But it’s Thrower who gets remembered as the first,” Moore said, “and that’s still really important because through understanding what happened to Thrower, we can see how pro football used the stereotype of the ‘unthinking’ Black quarterback as a way to protect the position from Black men.

“From the beginning of training camp, word from the press and players was that Thrower could not handle the position and struggled with the key aspects of learning the plays and commanding the offense. In other words, he had the physical tools — everyone marveled at his arm strength — but lacked the intangibles of brainpower and leadership to replace white men at the position and lead white men.

“When it was time to show and prove, however, he came in and played well enough to lead the team on a drive that eventually led to a touchdown. Of course, that glory was reserved for the white quarterback as the coach pulled Thrower out of the game.”

Thrower wouldn’t see action in another game that season, and then his NFL career was over. He played pro football in Canada for a few years, but a shoulder injury caused him to retire at 27.

He returned to New Kensington, where he married Mary, a woman who had grown up next door during their childhood. They moved to Yonkers, N.Y., where Thrower worked as a social worker, Mary said.

Though his playing career didn’t pan out as he’d hoped, football never really left Thrower.

“He was a humble man, loved children ... he helped them wherever he could,” Mary told the Tribune. “We would go on vacations and he would see the children playing ball and he would actually stop the car and show them how you should do it this way or do it that way. That’s the kind of person he was.”

## HIDDEN HISTORY

He and Mary returned home to New Kensington in the late 1960s to raise their children. With football now in his rearview, Thrower worked as a construction worker and entrepreneur. One of his businesses was The Touchdown Lounge, a bar whose name paid tribute to his short career.

No one in his town was really aware of the history Thrower had made, though, and the people he did tell didn’t believe him.

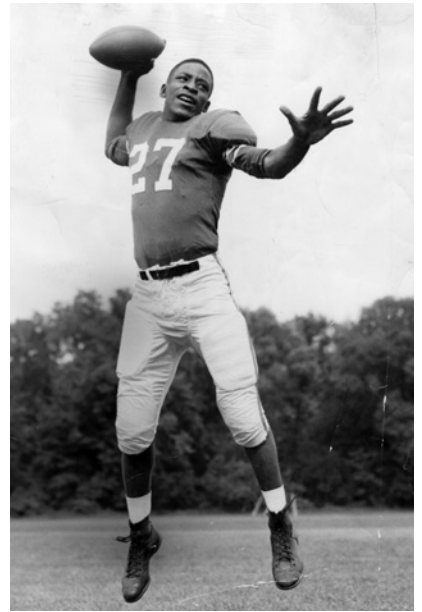
Even his children weren’t fully aware of what their father accomplished. Thrower rarely spoke of it, and when he did, they could sense there was a bit of pain behind the memories.

“I didn’t even realize my dad was the first Black quarterback until I was in eighth grade,” Melvin said. “If you knew my dad, he was very humble, very quiet. He didn’t walk around with an ‘S’ on his chest. A lot of people around here called him a liar. I really believe that hurt my dad, and he really never spoke about his accomplishments unless you knew him.

“I remember watching the Washington Redskins (in Super Bowl XXII against the Denver Broncos). I (was) a kid and I remember sitting on the couch with my two older brothers. When Doug Williams hoisted up that Lombardi Trophy, I heard my dad softly say: ‘Finally, finally. But one day they’ll know who I am.’”

Thrower told the Tribune in 1988 he knew “it was a Jackie Robinson-type thing,” just without the recognition.

In 2006, Valley High School (formerly New Kensington High School) erected a life-size statue of Thrower. Beginning in 2021, the Willie Thrower Award has been given to the top quarterback from WPIAL and Pittsburgh City League schools.



*Michigan State quarterback Willie Thrower, circa September 1951. Thrower, the first Black quarterback to play for a Big Ten school, helped the Spartans win a national championship in 1952.*



The 29-pound bronze trophy is a miniature version of the statue, made by the same artist. It's one way the Willie Thrower Foundation has attempted to right the wrongs when no one believed Thrower's stories.

Melvyn Smith, who isn't related to Thrower but knew him as an uncle, serves as president of the foundation. He has dedicated much of his time to ensuring the people of southwestern Pennsylvania know who Thrower was.

"You can go through New Kensington, Arnold and Lower Burrell — three contiguous cities all with the same zip code," Smith said. "The one thing that will remain consistent is you will never hear anybody say a negative word of Willie Thrower. Never."

This October marks 70 years since Thrower replaced Blanda for the Bears against the 49ers. Smith and the foundation, along with the local community, plan to hold a weekend of events commemorating the occasion.

It starts on Oct. 12 with a homecoming parade, Willie Thrower Community Day, an essay contest, a basketball clinic, horseback riding and a 5k walk to benefit the American Heart Association. On Oct. 15, a local sports radio station will do a remote broadcast from the Thrower statue to conclude the four-day event.

Though the Bears have not yet agreed, Smith hopes they will participate.

"At a time when few Black players got a chance to play pro ball regardless of their position and when teams only kept two quarterbacks on their 33-man rosters, (making the Bears) shows the talent Thrower had," Moore said. "No team was wasting a spot on a Black man if he was not good."

"I often think about how game-changing it would have been if George Halas kept Thrower and built on his talents. At the time, Halas was still one of the most respected minds in pro football and the co-innovator of the modern T-formation, the same formation that all of the pros used. For him to give Thrower his stamp of approval, and for him to show the rest of the league that you could build with a Black man and let him lead, would have been transformational."

'It gives them hope'

When quarterback Warren Moon was enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame on Aug. 5, 2006, he mentioned Thrower in his induction speech.

"A lot has been said about me as being the first African American quarterback into the Pro Football Hall of Fame," Moon said. "It's a subject that I'm very uncomfortable about sometimes, only because I've always wanted to be judged as just a quarterback. But because I am the first and because significance does come with that, I accept that."

"But I also remember all the guys before me who blazed that trail to give me the inspiration and the motivation to keep going forward, like Willie Thrower, the first Black quarterback to play in an NFL game."

Moon's reference gave Thrower's family validation, but Willie never got to hear his name mentioned. He died of a heart attack on Feb. 20, 2002, at 71.

His family still is waiting for him to get the celebration and recognition they feel he deserves in Chicago. Melvin said a jersey patch or something similar honoring Thrower would be "a blessing." The Thrower family views current Bears quarterback Justin Fields as part of the legacy that Willie left behind.

"My mom would love to give Justin Fields an autographed picture of my father that not too many people have," Melvin said. "It means so much, not to us but these other kids that (are) coming up. It gives them hope. It gives them belief that they can do it."

The autographed photo of Thrower is rare. Melvin said Kansas City Chiefs wide receiver Skyy Moore, a New Kensington native, is the only person who possesses one.

Whether or not the Bears join them in October, the Thrower family plans to continue to honor Willie both in the way they live and in their community.

"One of my dad's favorite sayings (was), 'In anything you do, always be a giant,'" Melvin said.

Mary added: "He gave us that nickname and we still use it today. We are his giants."

## In history books, Willie Thrower always will be No. 1

Willie Thrower's best memory of his history-making year in the National Football League has nothing to do with throwing a great pass or leading a game-winning drive. Or even playing in a game.

The memory speaks simply of his considerable ability and scant opportunity. He still embraces a compliment from former Bears quarterback George Blanda.

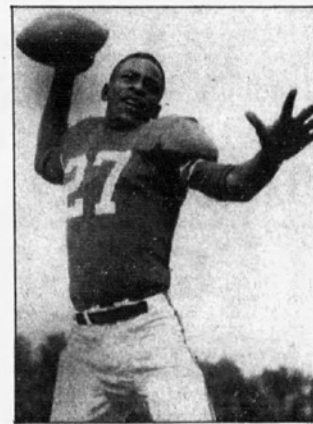
"We're in the same compartment on the train going to Baltimore from Chicago," Thrower says. "He said, 'You know what, Will? If I could throw a football as good as you, I'd be playing for the next 35 years.'"

Thrower, the first black quarterback in the NFL, lasted one season. Blanda played for 26 years.

When Washington Redskins quarterback Doug Williams, one of three starting black quarterbacks in the NFL, strides out on the field Sunday against the Minnesota Vikings, he probably won't be thinking of Willie Thrower. He probably never has heard of Thrower. He can be pardoned for that.

Thrower lasted one year, 1953, in the NFL, threw eight passes and completed three. Hardly big numbers. But there's one number he's proud of: one, as in the first.

"I was aware," says Thrower, now a construction foreman in New Kensington, Pa. "I knew



Tribune photo  
Willie Thrower at Michigan State.

there had never been a black quarterback. I was proud of it, and I still am today. It was a Jackie Robinson-type thing. It was pioneering. It was a step forward."

Thrower was also the first black quarterback in the Big 10, when he played at Michigan State. The Bears sent Sid Luckman to East Lansing, and he signed Thrower as a free agent. Thrower made the team in 1953 and appeared in two games.

He said the Bears invited him back in 1954, but they had just given rookie quarterback Zeke Bratkowski of the University of Georgia a \$75,000 signing bonus, an unheard of amount in those days. Thrower saw his opportunities with the Bears

fading, and he signed with Winnipeg of the Canadian Football League.

Even though Thrower, now 56, made history in his one NFL season, it didn't always mean society had caught up.

"Most linemen in the NFL, even today, are from Southern schools," Thrower says. "When I was there in 1953, the linemen from the South never played against blacks because blacks weren't allowed to play against whites. There was a little animosity there when I went into the huddle. You could feel it. Maybe a snicker here or there."

"But George Halas would never let anything disrupt the team's morale."

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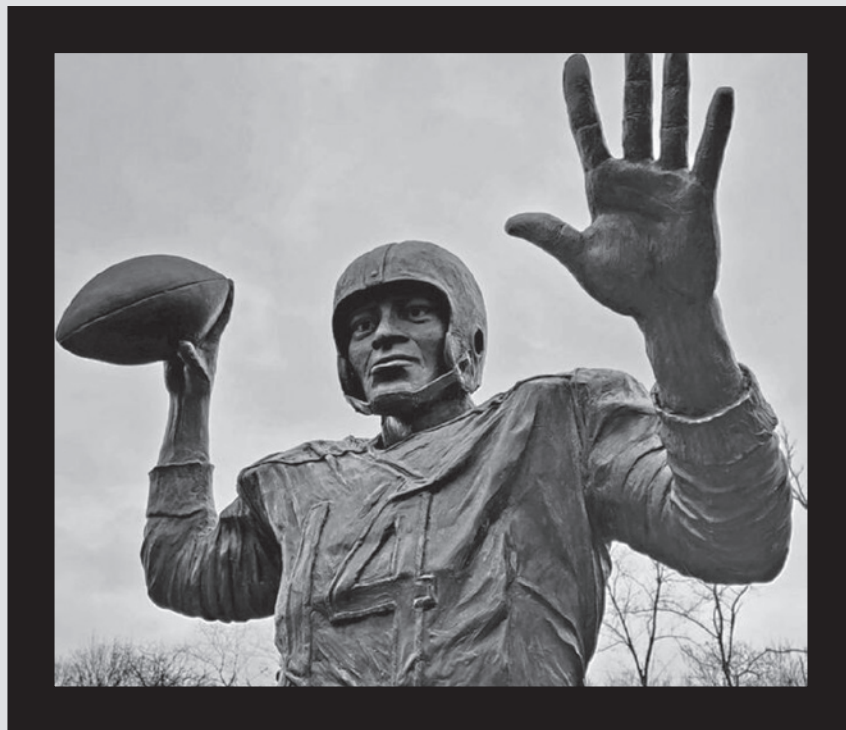
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**THE VOTING COMMITTEE would like to thank all the coaches and media members who took the time to cast ballots for the 2023 Willie Thrower Award. A total of 61 ballots were issued.**

**Congratulations to this year's finalists:**

Nolan DiLucia, Peters Township High School  
Julian Dugger, Penn Hills High School  
Logan Kushner, North Allegheny High School  
Matt Sieg, Fort Cherry High School  
Payton Wehner, Central Catholic High School  
Jake Wolfe, Montour High School



**Previous Willie Thrower Award Winners:**

2020 Cole Spencer, Pine-Richland High School  
2021 Cadin Olsen, Armstrong High School  
2022 Cadin Olsen, Armstrong High School



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## PATRON MESSAGES

**Rep. Jill N Cooper-** Congratulations to all of the finalists!

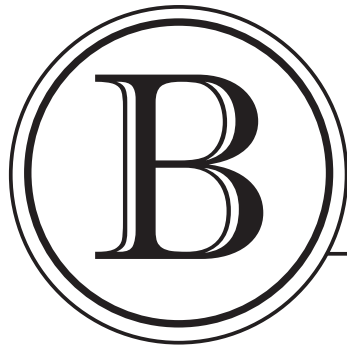
**Gail and Trevor Edwards-** Wishing you all the best! Congratulations to all of the award finalists.

**Duke George & Dan Joseph-** Best wishes and much success to all of the 2023 WTAF student athletes.

**New Kensington Lion's Club-** We are united in service and congratulate the WTAF quarterbacks for their outstanding leadership and service to athletics.

**Sebak Insurance and O'Neil Insurance-** Bravo to the Willie Thrower Award Foundation! Your hard work has paid off.

**Valley Lodge #294-** Honoring Fallen Brother, Willie Thrower, with our deep respect and gratitude.



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*Of Counsel & Founder*

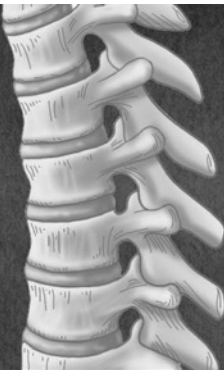
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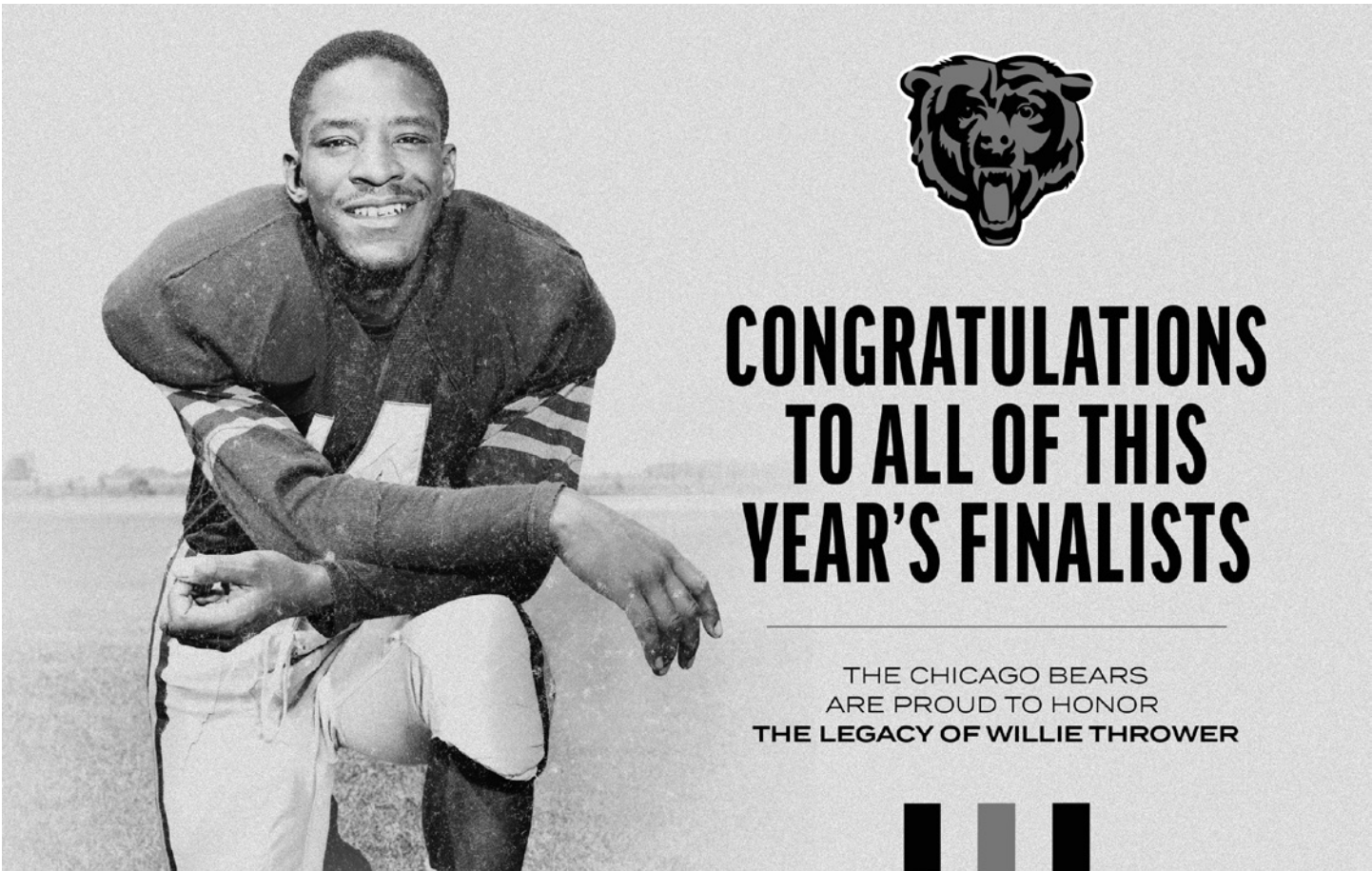
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Above: The Willie Thrower Award visits Steeler's Training Camp.

# NOLAN *DILUCIA*



## SOPHOMORE - QUARTERBACK PETERS TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL

---

- 2023 WPIAL 5A Champion
- 2023 PIAA 5A State Finalist
- 2023 PA Writers and Coaches All-State Selection
- Two year Varsity Starter (2022 - DB, 2023 - QB/DB)
- Two year Varsity letter winner
- 2023 PAToday Class 5A Player of the Year
- 2023 Trib-Live HSSN 5A Player of the Year
- 2023 Trib-Live HSSN Terrific 25
- 2023 KDKA Radio WPIAL 5A Championship Player of the game
- 2023 Almanac MVP
- 2023 WPIAL Allegheny Six - 1st team All Conference QB
- 2022 Allegheny Six - Honorable Mention DB
- 2022 Almanac Rookie of the Year
- 2022 Peters Township Leading tackler
- Peters Township High Honor Roll
- 4.15 Weighted GPA
- Two time letterwinner - Peters Township baseball team
- Two year starter - Peters Township baseball team.





# JULIAN **DUGGER**

## SENIOR - QUARTERBACK STO-ROX JR/SR HIGH SCHOOL

---



- Four-year starter at Penn Hills
- Rated the nation's No. 17 dual-threat quarterback prospect by Rivals
- Compiled 4,984 passing yards and 1,939 rushing yards for his career
- As a senior, completed 101-of-192 passes (53%) for 1,646 yards and 20 touchdowns
- Rushed for 776 yards on 126 carries (6.2 avg.)
- Led Penn Hills to a 9-3 record, the Northeast Conference title and semifinals of the WPIAL Class 5A playoffs
- Pennsylvania Football Writers All-Class 5A
- Pittsburgh Post-Gazette "Fabulous 22"
- Rated one of Pennsylvania's top 30 overall prospects by On3 (No. 10), Rivals (No. 20), ESPN (No. 24) and 247Sports (No. 26)
- Played under Coach Charles Morris
- Starting forward for the Penn Hills basketball team that won the 2023 WPIAL Class 5A championship.
- Admitted and enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh. Recipient of an athletic scholarship.



# LOGAN *KUSHNER*



## SENIOR - QUARTERBACK NORTH ALLEGHENY HIGH SCHOOL

---

- 1877 passing yards | 24 tds
- 1475 rushing yards | 24 tds
- 3352 all-purpose yards | 48 total tds
- WPIAL 6A Player of the Year –Feb 22
- 1st team all-conference
- Back-to-back WPIAL champions
- 6A State runner-ups
- 1st team all-state
- KDKA Super 7
- 2023 Willie Thrower Award Finalist
- Attending Duquesne University



# MATT SIEG



## SOPHOMORE - QUARTERBACK FORT CHERRY HIGH SCHOOL

### 2023 STATS/ ACCOLADES

- 15-1 Record
- WPIAL Class A Champions
- KDKA WPIAL Finals Player of the Game
- PIAA Class A Finalist
- 1671 Passing Yards 20 TDs
- 2387 Rushing Yards 40 TDs
- Accounted for 63 Total Touchdowns
- WPIAL Leading Scorer (All Classifications)
- 1st QB in WPIAL History to lead all classifications in scoring
- 1st Sophomore in WPIAL history to lead all classifications in scoring
- First Team All-Conference QB
- First Team All-Conference DB
- Blackhills Conference Offensive MVP
- Pittsburgh Post-Gazette FABULOUS 22 SELECTION
- Tribune Review Terrific 25 Selection
- KDKA Super 7 Class A Player of the Year
- PFN Writers First Team All-State QB
- Willie Thrower Award Finalist
- Observer-Reporter Terrific 22
- Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Single A Player of the Year
- Tribune Review Single A Player of the Year
- WPIAL Blitz WPIAL Player of the Year
- WPIAL Blitz Single A Player of the Year
- Penn Live First Team All-State DB
- MR PA Football Finalist
- Cover 3 Athletics Single A Player of the Year
- Second Player in WPIAL history to throw and rush for 1,000 Yards TWICE (Skye Moore- SSA)

### CAREER STATS/ RECORDS

- 2,891 Yards Passing
- 31 Passing Touchdowns
- 4,371 Yards rushing (most by a sophomore in PIAA history)
- 72 Rushing Touchdowns
- 105 Total Touchdowns
- 2 Year Starter @ QB (23-5)
- First Freshman in WPIAL history to throw and rush for 1,000 yards (2022)



# PAYTON **WEHNER**



## SENIOR - QUARTERBACK CENTRAL CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL

---

- 2020 WPIAL Football Champion
- 2021, 22, 23 WPIAL Runner-up
- 2023 1st Team All-State
- 2023 1st Team All-Section
- 2023 Feb 22
- 4-year letterman
- 3-year starter
- 2023 Team MVP
- Willie Thrower Finalist 2023
- 2022 TribLive HSSN Terrific 25
- 2022 WPIAL Today 6A Player of The Year
- 2023 WPIAL Today 6A Player of The Year
- Pittsburgh Central Catholic All-Time Leading Passer
- WPIAL 13th All-Time Leading Passer
- Elite 11 Invitee
- 6,956 Career Passing Yards, 71 TD
- 2,940 Yards, 36 TD (Senior Year)
- 2,507 Yards, 17 TD (Junior Year)
- 1,460 Yards, 17 TD (Sophomore Year)
- KDKA Super 7 Finalist ('22, '23)
- East-West Game Selection
- 2023 Football Leadership Committee Member
- 2x Captain in Football
- 4.3 GPA
- 2023 WPIAL Basketball Champion
- 3- year starter & letterman in basketball (sophomore and junior)
- Captain in Basketball
- Berger and Green Scholar Athlete
- 1st Team All Section in basketball
- Central Catholic Academic High Honors
- Youth camp coach for football and basketball
- Attending Saint Francis University



# JAKE WOLFE



## SENIOR - QUARTERBACK MONTOUR HIGH SCHOOL

### 2023 STATS:

- Record: 10-2
- 3,523 All-Purpose Yards
- 45 Total TDs
- 2,662 Pass Yards
- 31 Pass TDs
- 861 Rush Yards
- 14 Rush TDs

### CAREER STATS:

- 6,394 Total Yards
- 74 Total TDs
- 4,868 Pass Yards
- 53 Pass TDs
- 1,526 Rush Yards
- 21 Rush TDs

### FOOTBALL AWARDS:

- PFN 1st Team All-State QB
- Willie Thrower Finalist
- Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Fabulous 22
- Trib-Review Terrific 25
- 3x PFN All-Academic Gold Team (4.5 GPA)
- KDKA Super 7 Finalist
- 3x All Conference QB
- 3 Year Starter and 2 Year Captain

### HIGHSCHOOL RECORDS:

- Single Game Total Yards ( 521 All-Purpose Yards)
- Single Game Passing Yards (404 Pass Yards)
- Single Game Total TDs (6)
- Single Game Passing TDs (5)
- Montour High School Career TDs (74)

### BASKETBALL AWARDS:

- 19.8 PPG
- 1,127 Career Points
- 2x 1st Team All Conference
- 3 Year Starter and 2 Year Captain
- 1x WPIAL Runner Up
- RoundBall Classic All-Star Game

### ACADEMICS / FUTURE:

- 4.5 GPA
- NHS
- Committed to RMU for Football and to study Civil Engineering.

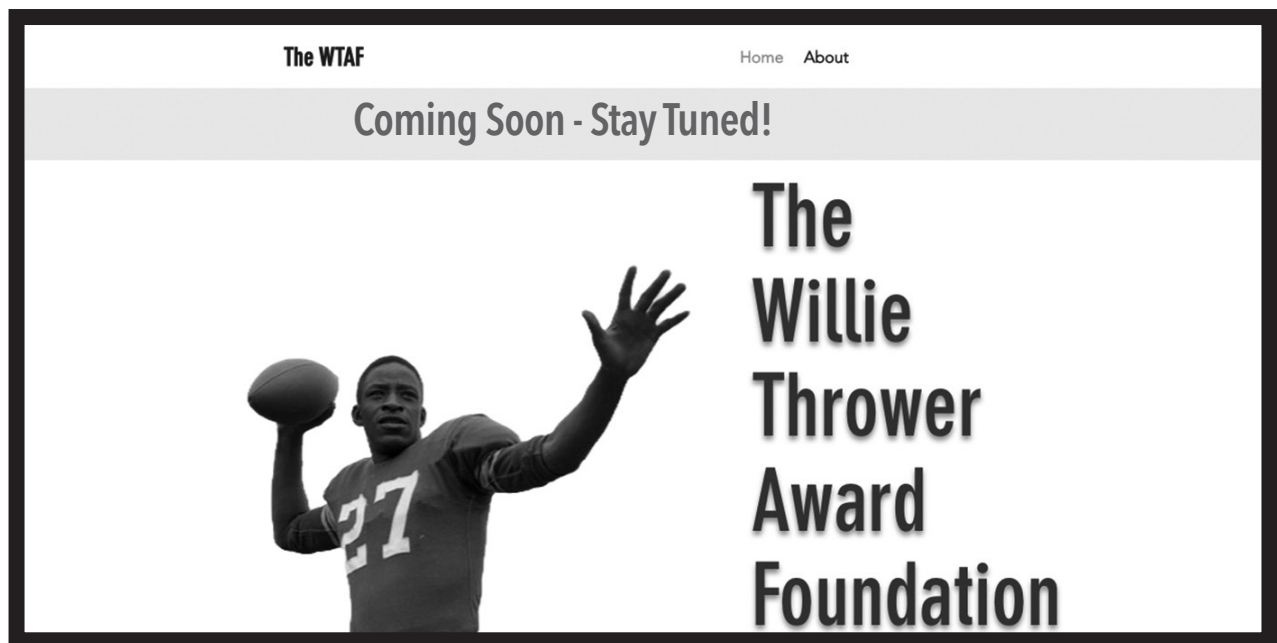


# Coming Soon - Stay Tuned!

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The Willie Thrower Award Foundation is pleased to announce the development of a WTAF website.



[www.williethrowerawardfdn.org](http://www.williethrowerawardfdn.org)



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**INSPIRING GREATNESS: WILLIE THROWER**

A trailblazer on the field of play, Willie Thrower led the way.  
A quarterback with skill and grace, Breaking barriers, he set the pace.

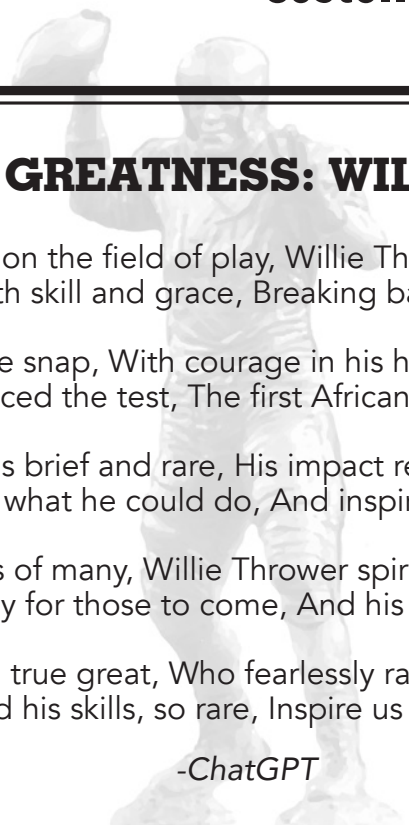
In 53, he took the snap, With courage in his heart, he made the call.  
A pioneer, he faced the test, The first African American at his best.

Though his time was brief and rare, His impact reached beyond compare.  
He showed the world what he could do, And inspired many to follow through.

A hero in the eyes of many, Willie Thrower spirit still shines so brightly.  
He paved the way for those to come, And his legacy will forever run.

So, here to Willie, a true great, Who fearlessly ran through football's gate.  
His courage and his skills, so rare, Inspire us all to strive and dare.

-ChatGPT



# THE WILLIE THROWER AWARD

