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Wilbur Charles ("Weeb") Ewbank

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EWBANK, WILBUR CHARLES ("WEEB") (b. 6 May 1907 in Richmond, Indiana; d. 17 Nov. 1998 in Oxford, Ohio), Hall of Fame professional football coach who won championships with two different teams.

The third of four children of Charles and Stella Mae (Dickerson) Ewbank, Wilbur became “Weeb” because his younger brother mispronounced his first name. As a boy, Ewbank made deliveries by horse-drawn wagon for his parents, who owned two grocery stores in Richmond. After graduating from Morton High School, he rejected an opportunity to pursue professional baseball, instead entering Miami University (Oxford, Ohio), where he was a quarterback on the football team (a position he shared with Paul Brown), captain of the baseball team, and also played basketball.

Planning to take classes in business and teaching, Ewbank switched to the newly created coaching program, only the second such curriculum in the country. While at Miami, he also married his high school sweetheart, Lucy Keller Massey, and they eventually had 3 daughters. After graduating in 1928 with a B.S. in Athletic Coaching and Physical Education, Ewbank became football coach and athletic director at Van Wert High School (Ohio) for two years, before returning to Miami to serve as head football, baseball, and basketball coach at McGuffey High School, a demonstration school run by the university’s Education Department. To supplement his income, he also played semipro baseball under the name Carl “Shorty” Thomas. During his 13 years at McGuffey, Ewbank taught in Miami’s
coaching school as an assistant professor of physical education. Taking Summer
classes, he also earned an M.A. in Health and Physical Education from Columbia
University in 1932.

In 1943, Ewbank joined the Navy and was commissioned a lieutenant
junior grade. Assigned to the Great Lakes Naval Training Station (Waukegan,
Illinois), he worked under Paul Brown, coaching their football team’s offensive
backs. After his discharge in 1946, Ewbank spent two years at Brown University
as backfield coach of the football team and head basketball coach, before becoming
head football coach at Washington University (St. Louis). Ewbank was then hired
in 1949 by Paul Brown to be tackle coach and director of scouting for the Cleveland
Browns of the All-American Football Conference (AAFC). When the AAFC
folded in 1950, the Browns were absorbed into the National Football League
(NFL).

In 1954, Ewbank was hired by owner Carroll Rosenbloom as head coach of
the Baltimore Colts. Starting from scratch, Ewbank relied on an extensive
network of scouts and, as he had done at Cleveland, sent questionnaires to college
players and coaches around the country. His uncanny knack for picking up quality
players that had been discarded by other teams – the most famous example being
quarterback Johnny Unitas – helped to certify his reputation as a superior judge of
talent. Ewbank kept voluminous records and every player was graded on every
play, including practice sessions, leading Rosenbloom to refer to him as “my
crew-cut I.B.M. machine.” When the Colts defeated the New York Giants for the NFL championship in December 1958, it came to be considered by many as the “Greatest Game Ever Played,” for it was both the first overtime game and the first nationally televised football contest. Ewbank was honored as NFL Coach of the Year, and the Colts went on to win a second championship the next year, but he was fired in 1962 following three years of mediocrity.

He was then hired in April 1963 to be coach and general manager of the New York Jets of the rival American Football League (AFL), on the same day that the recently bankrupt team’s name had been changed from “Titans.” As with the Colts, Ewbank had inherited an unsuccessful team and was forced to start from the bottom. A turning point in the franchise’s history was in 1965, when Ewbank convinced team president David “Sonny” Werblin to sign quarterback Joe Namath from the University of Alabama.

Although he was a tough contract negotiator and a demanding coach who stressed preparation and fined players for infractions of team rules, he also treated them like men and gave them the freedom necessary to succeed (as long as they produced on the football field). Thus he was able to successfully coach both Johnny Unitas, whose flat-top crew-cut and high-top black cleats made him an emblem of the conservative Eisenhower era, and “Broadway Joe” Namath, whose long hair, Fu Manchu mustache, and white cleats made him a symbol of the more liberal 1960s. Namath once called the short, roly-poly coach “you little
butterball,” but grew to respect Ewbank as “one of the best coaches that ever lived.” Unlike Paul Brown, he also allowed his quarterbacks to call their own plays.

After the Jets defeated the Oakland Raiders for the AFL championship in December 1968, they faced the NFL champion Baltimore Colts as 17-point underdogs in the “Third World Championship Game” (i.e., Super Bowl III) in January 1969. The Jets’ victory, considered by many to be the greatest upset in sports history, helped legitimize the AFL and ushered in the previously agreed upon 1970 NFL-AFL merger. The Jets could not repeat their success, however, and Ewbank retired as head coach after the 1973 season, staying on as Vice President before retiring from football one year later.

During his long retirement in Ohio, Ewbank enjoyed fishing and assisted a local high school football coach by reviewing game films. Diagnosed with myasthenia gravis, which was controlled with medication, he also had two artificial hips implanted. In later years, he suffered from a faulty heart valve and was advised by doctors not to watch the Jets play on television. He died at home in Oxford of natural causes at age 91.

Although his overall record in 20 years as a head coach was only 130-129-7, Ewbank was 4-1 in the postseason and was the only coach to win championships with two different football teams. He was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1978, and was also inducted into the Miami University, Indiana Sports, and Washington University halls of fame. Among his numerous
awards were an honorary Doctor of Athletic Arts from Miami University (1960), the Arthur Daley award for “long and meritorious service” to pro football (1974), and the Walter Camp Football Foundation award (1988). In 2000, the NFL Alumni established an award in his name to be given to a company that embodies the “Caring for Kids” theme.

A kind and loyal man, Ewbank declined to gloat after the Jets’ Super Bowl victory, even though he had defeated the owner who had fired him and the coach who had replaced him (Don Shula). Many of his coaching practices, such as the grading of players, later became commonplace. Underrated and not always appreciated, he laughed when his name was frequently misspelled or even reversed (e.g., “Eub Weebank”). He won two of the most important games in football history, and coached in several other notable ones, including the famous “Heidi” game and the first Monday Night Football game.

[Although there is no full-length biography of Ewbank, The Last Season of Weeb Ewbank, by Paul Zimmerman (1974) chronicles his final year as head coach of the Jets and includes reminiscences of his younger days. Insights into his coaching philosophy and his relationships with players can be gleaned from My Sunday Best, edited by Jack Fleischer (1971), as well as from two of Ewbank’s books: Goal to Go: The Greatest Football Games I Have Coached, as told to Neil Roiter (1972), and Football Greats, written with Jack Buck and Bob Broeg (1977). There are}

Obituaries appeared in the *Baltimore Sun, Cincinnati Post, New York Times*, and *Newsday* (all 18 Nov. 1998). Among the many tributes to Ewbank, the most notable are by Bill Wallace (“Remembering Weeb”) in *Pro Football Weekly*, 23 Nov. 1998, and two by Joe Gergen in *Newsday*: “Weeb Leaves Us Fond Memories” (18 Nov. 1998), and “Ewbank: One From the Heart” (21 Nov. 1998).]  

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