

Lake's unlikely football story lands him in Delaware Afro-American Sports Hall of Fame



Former Delaware State running back Gene Lake (left) poses with Delaware Afro-American Hall of Fame president Mark Sills and some of the honors he won during his career. DELAWARE STATE ATHLETICS PHOTO

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By [Andy Walter](#)

MILFORD — Gene Lake was sure he was never going to put on a football helmet and shoulder pads again.

He was almost 25 years old and had graduated from Milford High six years before.

But here was John Coveleski asking him if he might be interested in playing college football. The former Delaware State assistant coach had seen Lake playing flag football.

Lake laughed at the question.

“I said, ‘Man, I’m too old for that,’” Lake remembered. “He said, ‘No, you’re not.’ “I said, ‘Did you hear what I said? I’m going to be 25. ... It’s been five years, I don’t know.’ He said, ‘Gene, if you really want to do it, I think I can make that happen.’”

What followed was one of the more remarkable comeback stories in Delaware college football.

Despite starting his Delaware State career at the age of 25, Lake was a record-breaking running back for the Hornets, even getting an NFL tryout when he was 28.

That career has now landed Lake in the Delaware Afro-American Hall of Fame. He’ll be honored with other 11 inductees at the group’s 26th annual banquet on April 19 at Dover’s Modern Maturity Center.

Tickets are available at www.daashof.org through April 12.

Lake, now 66, finished his DSU career third in school history with 3,123 rushing yards. His school records include rushing yards in a game (336), touchdowns in a game (6) and TDs in a career (35).

Those numbers earned Lake a long list of honors, including Kodak I-AA All-American and induction into the DelState and MEAC Halls of Fame.

While Wing-T offenses tend to divide up carries pretty evenly among running backs, Lake said he remembers Hornet assistant coach Herky Billings telling him early on that he wanted Lake to carry more of the load.



Gene Lake ran for 3,123 yards and 35 touchdowns during his abbreviated DelState career. DELAWARE STATE ATHLETICS PHOTO

After separating a shoulder before his first season, Lake didn't get his first carry until the seventh game of the season, in a contest at Towson State. Lake said he gained 17 yards on his first carry and finished with 134 yards in only about a half.

"He (Billings) called me into the office and said, 'The Wing-T is built around running backs,'" said Lake. "But we're going to try to build around you. Do you think you can handle 25 carries a game?' Like I'm going to say, 'No, I can't handle that.'

“I said, ‘I think I can.’ He said, ‘I think you can, too. This is how it’s going to be.’
“I know I ran hard every play,” he added. “I told the guys, ‘You cannot stop when you see a defender coming.’”

A second-team All-Stater at Milford, Lake’s college career was delayed because he spent three years driving tanks in the U.S. Army in Europe.

Despite finding football success at a relatively older age, Lake said he’s happy with the way his life played out.

“The man above, he had a path for me,” said Lake. “I have no regrets. Like I told my buddies, ‘Listen guys, who’d have thought that I was going to be going to college and trying out for an NFL team? I’m just happy that I got the opportunity.’

“I made the move that I made and I’m not looking back. I’m happy and content where I’m at to this day.”

Even the fact that he wasn’t able to make an NFL roster didn’t bother Lake too much. He realized that, at almost 29, it was a longshot anyway.

After giving up his senior season at DSU, he spent time in camps with both the Redskins and Eagles.

“I really understood it,” said Lake. “To be honest, I was just happy because I had the opportunity to be there. ... I gave it a shot and I’m not mad at all.”

After leaving football, Lake eventually moved to Georgia. He worked for the phone company there before recently moving back to the Milford area. The reason he probably didn’t go into the Delaware Afro-American Sports Hall of Fame sooner is because he was living out of the region.

But, just like with his college career, Lake found his way there eventually.

“Like my grandkids said, ‘I thought you were too old to be in the Hall of Fame,’” Lake joked. “I said, ‘I guess I’m not too old.’ I was really surprised.”