

Obituary LIFE OF A LEGEND

For a decade, Charlie Sanders was one of the best tight ends in the NFL, a sure-handed pass catcher who helped revolutionize the position, but with the Detroit Lions, that's only part of Sanders' legacy.

When Sanders' playing career ended in 1977, a year after he suffered a serious knee injury, he stayed a part of the organization, first as a broadcaster, then an assistant coach, and most recently - since 1998 - as a member of the personnel department. "The Ultimate Lion," said Sanders' good friend, former Detroit Pistons star and former Detroit Mayor Dave Bing.

The Ultimate Lion spent 43 years with the organization over parts of the last five decades, the longest tenure of anyone outside the Ford family who owns the team.

On Thursday, Sanders died at the age of 68, after a 7 1/2-month battle with cancer.

"Today we lost one of the greatest Detroit Lions of all time," Lions president Tom Lewand said in a statement. "Charlie was a special person to the entire Lions family for nearly a half century. While never forgetting his North Carolina roots, 'Satch' became the consummate Detroit Lion on and off the field. He was a perfect ambassador for our organization and, more important, was a true friend, colleague and mentor to so many of us."

Sanders, a Greensboro, N.C., native, will be most remembered for his Hall of Fame playing career that spanned 10 seasons (1968-77), all in Detroit.

He made seven Pro Bowls, was twice selected a first-team All-Pro, and modernized a position that, when he entered the NFL, was mostly an extension of the offensive line.

A third-round draft pick out of Minnesota in 1968, Sanders was selected to the NFL's all-decade team of the 1970s and to the Lions' 75th anniversary team.

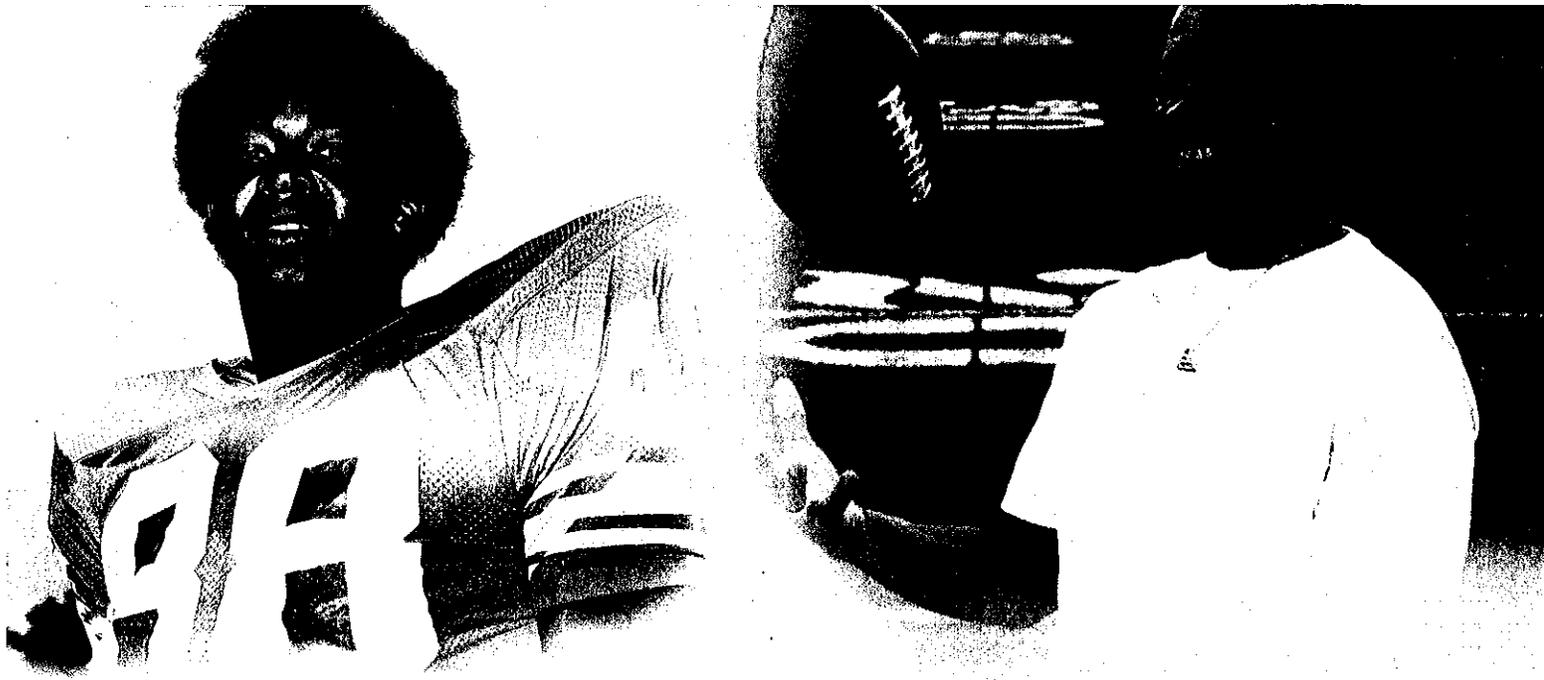
Sanders joined the Lions' front office as a player personnel scout in 1998 and took over as assistant director of pro personnel in 2000, a role he held until the time of his death.

Off the field, Sanders was known for his warmth and generosity. He spent most Sundays after games with Barney, Mel Farr and other teammates relaxing at the old Larco's Chophouse, and Landry called Sanders "the most giving person I've ever seen."

"He was involved in everything," Landry said. "And if you wanted someone from the Lions to do something, Charlie Sanders would call you up and say, 'What can I do to help the kids in Detroit?' He was very good that way."

Sanders started his own foundation, the Charlie Sanders Foundation, in 2007 as a way to provide scholarships to high school students in Michigan and North Carolina. More recently, the organization raised funds for student heart-check programs, a cause he took up after hearing the stories of Wes Leonard, the Fennville basketball player who died on the court in 2011, and Chris Keenist, the son of Lions senior vice president of communications Bill Keenist, who was forced to give up football because of a heart condition.

Last week, as Sanders was fighting for his life, his foundation presented a \$3,000 check to the Wes Leonard Heart Foundation to provide automated external defibrillators to high schools.



He amassed 336 catches for 4,817 yards as a Lion, retired as the team's all-time leader in receptions and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2007. He is one of just seven other tight ends that are in the Hall.

• Flashback: Charlie Sanders gets face time in Canton in 2007

"When I got inducted into the Polish American Sports Hall of Fame and Charlie was there and he was the one that introduced me, all it showed on the highlight film was him diving and catching the ball," recalled Greg Landry, Sanders' quarterback for most of his tenure with the Lions. "I got up and told the people, 'Hey, wait a minute now. I didn't throw the ball that poorly all the time.'

"But it seemed like Charlie, he would so concentrate on the ball that sometimes he'd lose his legs and he'd just dive out there and he'd never drop one. He'd just catch it in his hands and tuck and tumble and hit the ground. But he was a great athlete that way, and he was a blocker. He could hook people, hook linebackers or hook defensive ends because he was so strong. He had strong legs and he was strong in his arms, and he was a great blocker."

"I loved the guy," said Bill Keenist, one of Sanders' close friends. "I used to tease Charlie, growing up in my small town south of Pittsburgh we had one NFL player come from our town and he was a tight end that played for the Detroit Lions and his name was Craig Cotton. So every year at Thanksgiving, we'd be so excited and he'd never get on the field because of Charlie. And I didn't like Charlie because I'm thinking, 'If it wasn't for this guy, our hometown hero would be playing football.' So I didn't like Charlie, and then you get here and I loved him like a brother. He was the best."

"There was no one that was more selfless and more giving, that truly walked the walk and talked the talk when it came to giving back and being thankful for what he had. The Bible verse that he lived by says, 'to whom much is given, much is required, and he lived that every day because he felt he was truly blessed and all he did was give and give and give.'"

Sanders is survived by his wife Georgianna and their children Mia, Charese, Mary Jo, Georgianna, Charlie Jr., Talissa, Wayne and Jordan. He was preceded in death by their daughter Nathalie. He is also survived by daughter Angela and son Lee, Great Aunt Dorothy Everett, brothers Adrian (Jeanette), Nathaniel (Ann), and a host of grandchildren, great grandchildren, cousins, nieces, nephews, and friends. Memorial Contributions may be made in lieu of flowers to Have a Heart Save a Life, Charlie Sanders Foundation, C/O ProAssist, 620 Renshaw St., Rochester, MI 48307, or visit www.haveaheartsavealife.org

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