

Sports

Former Houston standout Wilson Whitley, who died in 1992, will be inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame.

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Whitley receives a deserved honor

'70s UH standout part of new class for Hall of Fame

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The news that Wilson Whitley will be inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame was bittersweet for those in the University of Houston football program.

While excited that Whitley, a star defensive tackle in the mid-1970s, was named among the 14 players and coaches in the Class of 2007, all were saddened that he never lived to see this day.

Whitley, who died of a heart attack in 1992 at age 37, will be posthumously honored at the National Football Foundation's 50th annual awards dinner in New York on Dec. 4. Among the inductees who will be honored at the Enshrinement Festival, which will be held in South Bend, Ind., in July 2008, are Boston College quarterback Doug Flutie, Oregon wide receiver Ahmad Rashad, Texas defensive back Johnnie Johnson and Penn State coach Joe Paterno.

Whitley, a four-year starter, was the 1976 Rotary Lombardi Winner and was so dominant that he was named the Southwest Conference Defensive Player of the Decade for the 1970s despite playing only one season in the SWC. That season, 1976, the Cougars went 10-2, won a share of the SWC title and beat previously undefeated Maryland in the Cotton Bowl.

"I think it's totally deserved," said former University of Houston coach Bill Yeoman of Whitley's induction. "He was one of the really great players in college football history.

"He was very aggressive but at the same time very disciplined. He's just kind of what you were looking for. He had great quickness and always got to where the ball was. Anybody who could be impressive enough that for one year he could be the Player of the Decade in the Southwest Conference is not bad. He was a great leader and a great kid.

"He led by example, which is always a good deal. I have nothing but good things to say about that young man."

Wilson, who played at Houston from 1973-76, is among a class that includes Flutie (1981-84), Rashad (1969-71), Johnson (1976-79), Oklahoma center Tom Brahaney (1970-72), Michigan defensive back Dave Brown (1972-74), Clemson linebacker Jeff Davis (1978-81), Ohio State quarterback Rex Kern (1968-70), Indiana running back Anthony Thompson (1986-89), Dartmouth linebacker Reggie Williams (1973-75), Southern Cal linebacker Richard Wood (1972-74) and Notre Dame defensive tackle Chris Zorich (1988-90), along with coaches Herb Deromedi (Central Michigan, 1978-93) and Paterno (1966-present).

Whitley was the eighth pick by Cincinnati in the 1977 NFL draft and played six seasons with the Bengals, including a trip to Super Bowl XVI. He spent his final season with the Oilers.

"When I think about Wilson Whitley, I honestly think of a guy who was 20 years ahead of the game," said current Cougars coach Art Briles, who was a two-year teammate of Whitley's. "He was big, agile and mobile. He was a guy who could move and play light on his feet at the defensive tackle position back in a day when everybody just wasn't that way.

"Here was a guy who weighed 280 pounds at 6-3 but could really flow and move. He was just years ahead at his position. It's a great honor for him to be inducted into the Hall of Fame."