



Left to right, Pat Atkinson, Ed Atkinson, Mary (checked suit), Peggy Atkinson (Al's wife), Father Bill Atkinson, Al Atkinson, Betty and Phil Harvey. Pat and Ed are twins as are Mary and Betty.

## The Priest, the Pro, and All the Other Atkinsons

Each one has been there when he was needed

By DICK RYAN

THE FOOTBALL FANS who watch the Jets at New York's Shea Stadium probably don't know that middle linebacker Al Atkinson has a brother who is a paraplegic and a priest. By the same token, the churchgoers listening to the homily of Father William Atkinson, Augustinian priest, probably don't know that his brother plays football

for the Jets. They may not realize, either, that it once might have seemed more logical for Bill to be considered the future athlete and Al the future priest.

But the story of Bill and Al is the story of the whole remarkable Atkinson family. I met them recently at Al's and Peggy's new colonial house in Yellow Springs, Pa.

Al Atkinson filled the kitchen doorway as he grinned hello. At 6'1" and about 230 pounds, Al has the ideal physique for a professional middle linebacker. There are other qualities about him, however, that one would not expect in a man paid literally to crush, qualities well-known around Valley Forge and Upper Darby, Pa., where the Atkinsons were born and raised and where the Atkinson kids are remembered for a little more than the things that happened on a football field.

Pop Al Atkinson, Sr., was there with his 19-year-old twins, Ed and Patty. He is a robust, ruddy man with strong, handsome features. The white hair visible along his temples has mostly disappeared from the rest of his head. Born in Philadelphia, he came to Upper Darby in 1941 with his wife Mary, and settled down to raise their children, sending them first to St. Alice's Grammar School and later on, seeing the boys go off to Monsignor Bonner High School and the girls to West Catholic High and Archbishop Prendergast. Later on, also, they would see Al and Bill and Ed enter the University of Villanova. At 61, the senior Atkinson still drives a trolley for the Septa Transportation Company.

And Father Bill Atkinson, a young man with blond reddish hair and the same shy smile as the others. He had been driven over from the seminary by classmate

John Ryan; he cannot get around without a wheel chair. Nine years ago his spine was severed in a bobsled accident at the Good Counsel Novitiate in New Hamburg, N.Y. The people who rushed him through the snow to St. Francis Hospital in Poughkeepsie didn't think he would make it. Today, with a metal brace, he can raise his arms and grip a few things that are not too bulky. He has even begun to type. At Mass, he is usually assisted by another priest.

"When they were kids," the father of the family says, leaning over, "Bill was as good an athlete as Al. In fact, we never thought Al would play ball. He had a rheumatic heart for his first four years in grammar school. We all thought that it was Al who was going to be the priest. In fact, when the Buffalo Bills drafted him in 1965, one of the first questions they asked was whether he was still thinking of becoming a priest."

"One priest in the family is enough," Al laughs from the other side of the room. "I'm the one that people like to run over on Sunday afternoon."

HIS SISTER Betty is not quite as shy as some of the others. She will kid and let herself be kidded. She will listen to Al tease her about trying to join his gang when they were kids growing up around Upper Darby. She still talks with a little girl's excitement about the "Greatest-Day-



In-Al's-Career-As-A-Jet," when he helped his team ambush the Baltimore Colts in the 1969 Super Bowl. Betty quit her job to go down to Miami and watch her brother. Al and the others will probably remember that, long after they have forgotten the final game score.

The thought lately of putting No. 62 in mothballs has not been a remote one for Al. In 1973, he tripped over a loose piece of Astro-turf in Buffalo, cracking a bone in the area around his groin. After that, he watched most of the games from the sidelines.

"But it is more than just the idea of not playing much last year. That trip up to New York for Peggy is getting longer and longer. Last year, with the baby and all, she was in the hospital three times in 22 months. I have talked to the coach about working out some kind of deal with the Philadelphia Eagles, but I don't think he went for the idea. Anyway, I have enjoyed playing with the Jets."

Al owns the Angus Restaurant on City Line Ave. in Philadelphia and also has been involved with both real estate and brokerage over the last few years. So he would not consider it too much of a hardship if he suddenly had to trade in the green and white Jet helmet for one of the same colors with the Eagles. And Peggy, with a grinning wink as she looked up from the couch, would not mind at all if those six hours of driving back and forth to

New York for the Jet home games were a thing of the past.

They enjoy life as it exists in Upper Darby and Valley Forge with all the small town charms of their childhood. There are things here that they could never find in any of the big cities.

Peggy excuses herself to check on the baby, and the conversation swings to relaxed banter. "What time did you finally get to bed last night?" Bill's father says to him. The night before, the seminarians at Villanova had thrown a party for Bill which his family had attended.

"Well, it went on quite a while after you left," Bill grins. "But, I went to bed around midnight. I was not going to take any chances of getting kicked out. I don't think the prior was too happy about the hour."

Betty lifts a can of soda to Bill's lips. Over in the corner Pat Atkinson sits quietly on the edge of the couch looking through two large albums of color photographs from the ordination. Bill with the family, with Cardinal Krol, at the altar in the cathedral.

WITH A special dispensation from Pope Paul, Bill had become the only quadruplegic ever ordained in the U.S. His hands lying limp on his lap and his words cutting into the silence of the crowded church, he had thanked all of those who had attended, and who had been with him since that cold gray after-

noon when his bobsled had smashed into a tree.

"It is fitting today that I give all of you thanks for what you have given me," he said quietly. "You have come a long distance and the thing that drew you is love. And the love that you have shown me for all these past years is a love that comes from God." It was his first sermon. The words would not be easily forgotten by those there.

Today, he talks about the changes that have occurred in the Church over the last several years. "In a way," he began, "change is a good thing. It forces a priest to be flexible and approachable, and maybe more important than anything else, to show understanding. To do any of this, you have to be around the people, and show them that you are always a part of them."

Bill has always enjoyed being around people, being a part of their games and their laughter and their problems. And, sometimes, their tears. He has no idea what kind of assignment he will be getting. It could be teaching. It could be parish work. It could be a chaplaincy in some hospital or prison. It really makes no difference to this man sitting there motionlessly, his head turning with a sudden jerk every now and then as though asserting the movement, the strength. Today on his way over to help supervise a bunch of kids in one of the local gyms, he is enjoying the laughs and the old memories and the kidding.

As Pat continues flipping through the albums, calling over to Father Bill once or twice and holding up one of the pictures with soft, kidding affection, the brothers and sisters reminisce about the fun they had growing up around St. Alice's in Upper Darby.

The twins are the last of the Atkinsons following a family tradition by going to Villanova, Ed as a sophomore and Pat as a secretary. Not too many people in the old neighborhood could understand how Allen Atkinson could send his children through high school and college on the salary of a trolley car driver. Or how he managed, year after year, to take the entire family to Ocean City for the summer. Al, Jr., smiled. "Pop just thought it was important, so he did it." He cannot conceal a bit of pride.

Now Peggy comes downstairs with baby John Allen. Al places him delicately on his knee and Betty's little girl, Tara, begins talking to him with four-year-old condescension. The baby, for a few moments, is the center of attention. Not Al. Not Bill. Everyone in this family is special in his own way, in his own time. Everyone is loved and kidded the same. It is something that has come down with them through the years.

"Give Mary the credit," the senior Atkinson said, leaning back after a quick drag on his cigar. "She was the one who made things go in this

family. She was the one that left nothing to chance." And his strong, blue eyes go suddenly soft as the conversation turns to his wife for the first time.

In 1965, the same year that Al Atkinson went into the pros, and the same year that Bill Atkinson was crushed against a tree, the doctors announced that Mary Atkinson had cancer. In the last year or so, her once vibrant life had begun to wither and weaken. It was obvious to the family that the end was near. The seminary moved Bill's ordination up from May of this year to February 2, so that his mother could be there with the rest of the family in the front row at St. Alice's. But Mary Atkinson died in November. She never saw her son say his first Mass or preach his first sermon. Her son could not whisper his first blessing into her ear as she had once whispered her own frantic blessings into his ear as he lay broken and almost dying on a hospital bed.

Talking about it now, all of them agree that Mary Atkinson had been the glue. And, when she had to be, she also had been the discipline for each growing child. She and Allen Atkinson complemented each other perfectly.

It is almost three o'clock. Al and the twins walk outside to their car. John Ryan brings a small panel truck closer to the house. Bill, an orange woolen cap pulled down around his ears and a blanket

wrapped tightly around his legs and across his lap, smiles in his shy, youthful way as he is pushed up the driveway and helped into the truck.

Phil Harvey, Betty's husband, talks about his in-laws as he puts a couple of things into his car. "I have never seen a family as close or united as this one. And like someone said inside, the one behind it was always the mother. You can't take anything away from Mr. Atkinson but he has always been a quiet man. Mary was the one who made things move. It would have been great if she could have seen the ordination. That was the least that she deserved after raising the kind of kids that she and Al did."

Each of the Atkinsons has followed his own drummer. It is something that Bill is a priest and Al a football player. But it also is something very beautiful that Pat is a secretary and Ed a sophomore and the others housewives and mothers.

Each one has had his own special star in this family. And each one of them has been there when he was needed. Whether it was on that day not so long ago when Al was cut by the Buffalo Bills and his career seemed over before it had started. Or whether it was on another day in a Poughkeepsie Hospital hallway when the doctors shook their heads and all but gave up on the young man whose life hung on a thread of courage and desire spun by his mother. Or whether it was another day, more recently, when they knelt

together in a church and wept for the strong woman who had finally left them on their own.

The Atkinsons are the kind of family that every family hopes to be. They have come through some bad, bitter times. They have stayed together and, even after they were married, held onto some of the things that Allen and Mary Atkinson tried to mold for their children. They have never lost their sense of humor, or their solid loyalties to Church and friends and to each

other. When most of us are soured by prices and shortages and yesterday's headlines, they are a breath of fresh air.

The morning Bill Atkinson was ordained, someone said something to the young priest about how unfortunate it was that his mother could not have been alive to see it all. He smiled and shrugged and said something that might have been said by any of them. "Well, not really," he smiled. "She had one of the best seats in the house."



## HEARTS ARE TRUMPS

ED AND RAY were high school juniors in one of my first homerooms. They were lively, intelligent, and friendly. Ed came from a professional home where he was given many opportunities: music lessons, books, adult conversation. Ray's father was an unskilled laborer, and his home lacked some material comforts, but there, too, reading and study were encouraged.

Both boys were scholastic leaders, and were particularly interested in creative writing. They competed fiercely for the school writers' club trophy, awarded annually for the highest number of points on papers submitted during the year. On the day of the final tally, Ed's followers joyfully announced that he had 108 points, Ray, 105. Ray whispered miserably to me that he had forgotten a paper worth 10 points at home. I suggested that since the deadline was after school, he might go home at noon for his missing paper, but he only shook his head.

At four o'clock the candidates presented their portfolios and the secretary tallied points: Ed, 108; Ray, 115! Ray had won. Later I learned what happened.

At lunchtime Ed had found out that Ray could not make the extra trip home because he had no bus pass. Ed then insisted that Ray take *his* pass and pick up the winning paper.

That was years ago. Today Ray is happily married, the father of three grown sons. Ed? He was 21 when he died on an icy battlefield in Korea.

Sister Marie Emmanuel, S.C.

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