

## **BAMBI!**

by Don Smith

He was known as Bambi, the smooth and graceful fawn bounding free and easy among the behemoths of pro football. He was the 6-0, 184-pound ace of the San Diego Chargers flashing that 9.6 speed, the high jumper's spring and those eager, grasping hands that spelled sudden disaster for even the best-prepared opponent.

He was Lance Alworth, the premier pass catcher of an entire decade and the first true superstar the American Football League ever produced. Too bad, the experts of the 1960s used to say, that this great talent couldn't really be tested against the superior competition the proud and stately National Football League had to offer.

In 1978, Lance Alworth's "poor league" background no longer was in question for, early that year, he became the first AFL player to be named to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, elected in his first year of eligibility following the mandatory five-year waiting period after retirement.

Alworth's accomplishments on the gridiron are legendary. In eleven pro seasons, he caught 542 passes for 10,266 yards, and 18.93-yard average, and 85 touchdowns. He ranks second all-time in reception yardage and average gain per catch and third in catches per season -- 49 -- and scoring receptions.

Bambi was named all-AFL seven straight years from 1963 to 1969 and played in the league's last seven All-Star games. He caught at least one pass in every AFL game in which he played, including a then-record string of 96 straight regular-season games and 105 straight if you count two AFL title contests and the seven All-Star game appearances.

To Al Davis, the Chargers' assistant coach who signed Alworth to a \$30,000 contract just prior to the 1962 Sugar Bowl game in New Orleans, these rare deeds came as no surprise.

"Lance was one of maybe three players in my lifetime who had what I would call 'it'," Davis, now the Los Angeles Raiders managing general partner, recalls. "You could see right away that he was going to be a super-star."

For a time, however, the San Diego staff wasn't so sure their heralded rookie with the All-American boy look was the prize he was touted to be. Horsing around in place-kicking practice one afternoon, Alworth suffered a muscle tear above his right knee. First diagnosed as a minor ailment, the injury eventually required surgery. Lance caught just 10 passes as a rookie and missed the final ten games of the 1962 campaign. Some Charger assistants openly pondered if Lance had either the ability or willingness to withstand the pounding he was bound to take in pro football.

Lance, considered too small to be a pro running back, was ticketed for the flanker spot in Sid Gillman's pass-oriented attack. When he returned for his second season in sound physical condition, he quickly proved Gillman's assessment to be correct.

Bambi's big breakthrough to stardom came in early season against the Kansas City Chiefs, the defending AFL titlists. Lance, in his typical leaping, grabbing, twisting style, caught nine passes for 232 yards and two touchdowns. The Chargers were on their way toward the 1963 AFL championship.

Even Lance's ill-fated rookie year marked the start of his magnificent consecutive-game streak that was culminated against Buffalo on December 14, 1969, in the final AFL game ever played. Pro Football Hall of Famer Don Hutson, whose record Alworth broke, was on hand to offer congratulations.

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Any fears that Lance was injury-prone proved groundless. Even though he did take a constant pounding from AFL's desperate defensive platoons, Alworth missed only six regular-season contests and the 1964 AFL title game in the remainder of his nine-year stay in San Diego. And he did play hurt.

In 1966, for example, he suffered a hairline fracture in his right hand in one pre-season game and then a more severe break in his left wrist the next week. Keeping the injuries secret, Alworth played until mid-season with both hands heavily taped and crippled. By utilizing his great jumping skill, improving on his pattern running and cradling his catches with his body whenever possible, Lance totaled 37 receptions for 694 yards in a seven-game span!

He went on to win his first of three AFL receiving crowns that year. He won again in 1968 and in the AFL's final campaign in 1969. When the league merged into the NFL in 1970, Alworth dominated the AFL record manual, ranking in the top three in ten different pass receiving categories.

But 1970 was a different story. Playing hurt a good part of the time and beset with a myriad of business and personal problems, Lance's production fell off to just 35 catches. His 96-game streak was snapped in the season opener. And, at season's end, he was traded to the Dallas Cowboys for tight end Pettis Norman, offensive tackle Tony Liscio and defensive tackle Ron East.

For Bambi, talent-laden Dallas with its consistent, careful ball-control offense was the wrong team. Rarely did he get a chance to go deep on his favorite fly pattern. Most of the Cowboys' plays called for him to serve as a blocker, an assignment, incidentally, that he did perform very well.

While he had 34 receptions, his average per catch fell off to 14.3 yards, well below his previous norms. His personal highlight was the seven-yard scoring catch he made in Super Bowl VI that got the Cowboys off and running in their 24-3 conquest of the Miami Dolphins.

"Going to Dallas was a great experience and I did get a Super Bowl ring," Alworth explained without rancor as he announced his retirement a year later. "But unfortunately this was not the type of football I had been used to and had enjoyed playing so much."

Another factor undoubtedly was that Lance was an AFL man through and through. "I really feel I could not have accomplished what I did if I hadn't played for Sid Gillman," Alworth has said many times. "He had a great passing game, was a super offensive coach and gave me a chance to fully develop my abilities. And for my money, the 1963 Chargers were the best team ever during my career. Playing for that team was my great pro football thrill."

Alworth staunchly defended the AFL and looked forward to the day there would be inter-league play.

"Parity with the NFL was always on my mind," he remembers. "For the most part, people just refused to compare the leagues. It was a put down."

So Lance enjoyed a happy moment in August, 1967, when the Denver Broncos upset the Detroit Lions to give the AFL a first-ever triumph over an NFL team.

"We were playing the Raiders and were in the huddle when the score was announced," Lance, laughs. "I was so interested in the score I didn't pay any attention to John Hadl's call. I wound up going to the wrong side to line up."

A mistake for any reason was rare for this shining star who was born August 3, 1940, in Houston, Texas. He grew up in Brookhaven, Mississippi, where he earned 15 sports letters in high school. Alworth was a good enough baseball center fielder that he was offered generous contracts by both the New York Yankees and Pittsburgh Pirates to play major league baseball. But his dad counseled him that a college education was important enough that he should shoot for a football scholarship instead.

Had Lance not married at 17, he likely would have played at Mississippi. But the Rebels had a rule against married players on the squad and, although the rule was quickly rescinded, Lance had already opted for Arkansas.

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With the Razorbacks, Lance played in the Gator, Cotton and Sugar Bowl games and then in the Hula Bowl and College All-Star game after his senior season. In both the 1961 Cotton and 1962 Hula Bowl games, he was voted the game's outstanding back. His College All-Star coaches named him "the best athlete on the squad." He was a consensus All-American in 1961.

While Lance's signing with the AFL as one of the first big prizes of the inter-league war raised a few eyebrows, the fact that both leagues wanted him so badly came as no surprise. San Diego sent three veteran players to Oakland for the draft pick needed to select Lance and the 49ers used their first-round choice in the NFL selection.

Such was the attention focused on Alworth throughout his playing days. Even after he retired in 1972, the accolades continued to pour in.

"In the history of the game, very few have been equal to his talent," his long-time coach, Gillman, declared. "He had the greatest hands I have ever seen. Nobody could jump and catch a ball as Lance did."

Or, as Charley Hannigan, himself a record-setting wide receiver with the Houston Oilers, once said: "A player comes along once in a lifetime who alone is worth the price of admission. Lance Alworth was that player!"

### LANCE ALWORTH'S RECEIVING RECORD

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>TEAM</u>	<u>Lg</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>YDS</u>	<u>AVG</u>	<u>TD</u>
1962	San Diego	AFL	10	226	22.6	3
1963	San Diego	AFL	61	1205	*19.8	11
1964	San Diego	AFL	61	1235	20.2	*13
1965	San Diego	AFL	69	*1602	*23.2	*14
1966	San Diego	AFL	*73	*1383	18.9	*13
1967	San Diego	AFL	52	1010	19.4	9
1968	San Diego	AFL	*68	*1312	19.3	10
1969	San Diego	AFL	*64	1003	15.7	4
1970	San Diego	NFL	35	608	17.4	4
1971	Dallas	NFL	34	487	14.3	2
1972	Dallas	NFL	<u>15</u>	<u>195</u>	<u>13.0</u>	<u>2</u>
	11 years		542	10266	18.9	85

\*-Led league