

## **JIM OTTO**

Courtesy of Pro Football Hall of Fame

Almost everything about Jim Otto's pro football career falls into the improbable category. When Jim joined the Oakland Raiders of the newly-founded American Football League in 1960, most sports experts insisted there was little chance for the survival, let alone the success, of either the AFL or the Raiders. The prognosis wasn't much better for Otto, a former three-year center-linebacker for the University of Miami Hurricanes who, at 205 pounds, was considered too small for pro football. Not one team in the established National Football league drafted him or offered him even a free agent contract.

So Jim's only chance was in the new NFL. He had been a 25th pick of the Minneapolis franchise before it shifted to Oakland. Armed with two pair of football shoes, a helmet and two flimsy suitcases, plus an exceptional desire to play, Jim reported to the Raider's Santa Cruz, Calif., summer camp with a positive "I intend to stay" attitude. Jim did stay. For the next 15 years, he started every regular-season game for the Raiders. All-league recognition, all-star game invitations and a host of other honors transformed Otto into the most honored offensive lineman in pro football. The ultimate honor – election into the Pro Football Hall of Fame – came in 1980, the 20th anniversary of Jim's first AFL season. He was the first Oakland Raider and only the third AFL graduate to be so honored.

For Otto, Hall of Fame election was the culmination of a dream albeit an originally improbable one, come true. Born in Wausau, Wisc., on January 5, 1938, Jim grew up in Green Bay Packer country, where many stars ticketed for eventual Hall of Fame election grabbed the headlines each fall. Even Wausau itself produced one all-time legend in Elroy (Crazylegs) Hirsch, a 1968 enshrinee. "In that atmosphere I couldn't help but dream," Otto admits. "But when the time finally came, I was so choked up I couldn't even tell my wife Sally for a while."

Otto's election in his first year of eligibility following a mandatory five-year waiting period was appropriate because few players have so thoroughly dominated one position as Jim did in his 15 year career. For 13 straight years, he was all-pro, the only all-AFL center in the league's history, followed by three years as the all-AFL selection. He played in each of the AFL's nine all-star games and in the first three AFC-NFC Pro Bowl games. Altogether, Otto played 308 games as a Raider, including 210 straight regular-season games as a starter, 73 pro-season contests, 12 all-star matches and 13 playoff games, among them Super Bowl II. Except for 1960 when he wore a No. "50" jersey, he wore the uniform "00" and this unique number undoubtedly helped Otto gain the attention he deserved. Primarily, though, Jim was rapidly becoming a super-star and, as he developed, so did his team.

After a disheartening string of 19 straight losses in the 1961 and 1962 campaigns, the Raiders under new coach Al Davis bounced back with a 10-4 record in 1963. During the remainder of Jim's career, Oakland amassed the best won-loss record in pro football, winning the AFL championship in 1967 and seven divisional championships in an eight year period from 1967 through Jim's final 1974 campaign. Throughout this period, the well-balanced Raiders could boast of a particularly outstanding offensive line. Otto, a sure-handed ball-snapper and a superior blocker who sought out targets far beyond the limited area usually expected of a center, was a perennial tower of strength.

But there was more to Otto's success than technical know-how and sheer determination. People who played with or against him will use such words as pride, dedication, leadership, and intelligence. Not in the visible rah-rah way but more because he was always in the lineup performing at peak efficiency, Otto became the ultimate team leader. "He loved to win. He led by example and he set the tempo," his long-time teammate George Blanda said recently. "He gave the Raiders an image of hard discipline, hard work and hard-nosed football."

Otto also was assigned to call blocking signals for the offensive line. In one season the Raiders called about 650 plays and Otto was judged to have made only three or four errors. "We don't make many

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 6, Nos. 11 & 12 (1984)

---

mental errors and Otto is the main reason," Ollie Spencer, the team's offensive line coach for much of Jim's career, proudly explained.

Unlike many stars who try several positions before settling on one, Otto always played center. A second team all-Wisconsin center at Wausau High, Jim played both center and middle linebacker at Miami. He even set a school record for tackles made during a career. When he got to Oakland, coach Eddie Erdelatz, who had watched Jim in a particularly outstanding defensive effort against Navy, wanted Otto as his middle linebacker. But Jim, remembering that his college injuries had all come when he was on defense, chose to let down a little during defensive tryouts and then really go all out when it came time for offensive team trials. He soon was established as the Raiders center. He wasted little time eliminating one other problem – his size. From a skinny 210-pounder at the start of camp, Jim built himself to the 240-pound level by season's end. At the height of his career, the 6-2 Otto played in the 255-260 pound range.

Otto can look back on his playing days now with a great deal of satisfaction, but he also remembers that the early days of the AFL required a lot of understanding, off the field as well as on. Poor practice and locker-room facilities, sub-standard traveling accommodations, meager fan acceptance and comparatively low pay all added to the discomfort of being a Raider in 1960. Even the Raiders moved from stadium to stadium like unwanted orphans. It is said that seagulls many times outnumbered fans in the various team homes – San Francisco's Kezar Stadium in 1960, Candlestick Park in 1961, tiny Frank Youell Field in Oakland in 1962 and continuing until the Raiders moved into the new 54,000-seat Oakland Coliseum in 1967.

If Jim hadn't had a strong sense of loyalty, he could have terminated his AFL misery after just one season. The same NFL teams that wouldn't give him a tumble a year earlier by 1961 were offering him large sums to quit the Raiders. But Otto, remembering who had given him his pro football opportunity, would have none of it.

Were it not for dozens of injuries Jim constantly battled, he might have played even longer. His medical history could fill an encyclopedia – bone chips in his elbow, 10 broken noses, a broken jaw, numerous brain concussions, dislocated knee, dislocated fingers, a severe pinched nerve in his neck, three left knee operations and six operations on his right knee. The final operation after the 1974 season was the clincher. Following complicated surgery, Jim wound up with what is essentially an artificial right knee.

Even then, Jim gave it one more try. Early in the 1974 pre-season, he started against the San Francisco 49ers. The Raiders, on their first possession, quickly moved down field and scored behind Jim's excellent blocking. Then Otto left the game, not to return. "I didn't have to quit," Jim insisted. "I thought I played well, but not well enough to play with the Raiders an entire season. I know I have to quit when I am still on top."

Year	Team	Season Record	Division Finish
1960	Oakland Raiders	(AFL) 6-8-0	3rd
1961	Oakland Raiders	(AFL) 2-12-0	4th
1962	Oakland Raiders	(AFL) 1-13-0	4th
1963	Oakland Raiders	(AFL) 10-4-0	2nd
1964	Oakland Raiders	(AFL) 5-7-2	3rd
1965	Oakland Raiders	(AFL) 8-5-1	2nd
1966	Oakland Raiders	(AFL) 8-5-1	2nd
1967	Oakland Raiders	(AFL) 13-1-0	1st
1968	Oakland Raiders	(AFL) 12-2-0	Tie 1st *
1969	Oakland Raiders	(AFL) 12-1-1	1st
1970	Oakland Raiders	(NFL) 8-4-2	1st
1971	Oakland Raiders	(NFL) 8-4-2	2nd
1972	Oakland Raiders	(NFL) 10-3-1	1st
1973	Oakland Raiders	(NFL) 9-4-1	1st
1974	Oakland Raiders	(NFL) 12-2-0	1st

## **THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 6, Nos. 11 & 12 (1984)**

---

---

Fifteen playing seasons -- 210 games

\* Oakland defeated Kansas City, 41-6, in divisional playoff.