

THREE GREAT LINES

by Mike Gershman, *Football Datebook 1988*

THE FEARSOME FOURSOME

"They remind me of Dempsey, Firpo, Ruth, and Gehrig." --Norm Van Brocklin

Rams publicist Jack Teele gave them their name, but the Fearsome Foursome did the rest themselves. They made up signals, invented moves like stunting and looping, coined the term "sack," and made defense a focal point of football.

From left to right, they were 85 - end David (Deacon) Jones; 74 - tackle Merlin Olsen; 76 - tackle Roosevelt Grier; and, 75 - end Lamar Lundy.

Lundy, who joined the Rams in 1957, was the senior member, an honor student from Purdue. Next came David Jones of Eatonville, Florida who played at South Carolina State and Mississippi Vocational. He once said, "I was a poor black boy in a poor black place and no one was beating down any doors to get to me." That changed when Ram scouts saw film of him catching an offensive back from behind.

The Rams' fourteenth-round draft choice in 1961, Jones was winning his spurs when Merlin Olsen was named a consensus All-America tackle at Utah State. Two years later, Olsen, Jones, and Lundy became a foursome when the Rams traded John Lovetere to the Giants for Roosevelt Grier.

But Jones was the star, the man Ram fans called the "Secretary of Defense." An all-pro from 1965 to 1969, he won the George Halas Trophy as the league's best defensive player in 1967 and 1969 and finished second in 1967 and 1969 in voting for UPI's NFL player of the year award.

Olsen played both offense and defense and was named rookie of the year in 1962. He found a home on defense and was voted into 14 consecutive Pro Bowls, more than any other player. He was honored with the Bert Bell Award as NFL player of the year in 1974. Although the Fearsome Foursome never led the Rams to a championship, they changed the way the game was played and watched.

THE PURPLE PEOPLE EATERS

Carl Eller once said, "Football is a great medium of expression, a performance that is more total because it is completely spontaneous."

Eller, Alan Page, Gary Larsen, and Jim Marshall--the Purple People Eaters, or Purple Gang expressed themselves by becoming one of pro football's dominant front fours in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Also known as the Four Norsemen, the Purple People Eaters turned Minnesota's defense 360 degrees from the NFL's worst in 1961 to the best from 1969 through 1971, when the Vikings allowed the fewest points of any team.

The Gang's first recruit was Marshall, who had played a year with the Browns but was traded before the 1961 season making him an original Viking. He gained notoriety in 1964 by picking up a 49er fumble and running 66 yards with it -- the wrong way. Marshall spiked the ball in the end zone, giving the 49ers a safety, but the Vikings hung on to win 27-22. Invited to accept the Bonehead of the Year award in Dallas, he got on the wrong plane and ended up in Chicago.

Eller, nicknamed "Moose," was named to a high school All-America team in 1959 and was a consensus All-America selection as a senior at the University of Minnesota. A four-time all-pro, he was awesome in the closing days of the 1968 season. On November 10th, he played offense and led a Bill Brown sweep into the end zone, then blocked a field goal and was awarded the game ball. He got a second a week later as the Vikings forced eleven Lion fumbles. When the Vikings had to beat the Eagles to win the 1968

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NFC Central Division Championship, Eller forced a goal line fumble and made unassisted tackles on two key third-and-short plays.

If Eller's game was brilliance, Gary Larsen's was steadiness. A former Marine, he attended Concordia College in Minnesota and was the Rams' tenth-round pick in 1964. Traded with Red Phillips to Minnesota for Jack Snow in 1965, he split tackle duties with Paul Dickson until Dickson snapped a calf muscle. Larsen eventually matured into a two-time Pro Bowler.

Alan Page played defensive end on the 1966 Notre Dome team which also featured Rocky Bleier, Terry Hanratty, and Jim Lynch. Switched to tackle against his wishes when he came to Minnesota, Page was named all-pro six times, and, in 1971, was named the NFL's most valuable player.

After 12 seasons with the Vikings and four with the Bears, Page earned his law degree. He currently works on the labor division of the attorney general's office in Minnesota. Eller also lives in Minneapolis and treats outpatient chemical dependencies with the Trlumph Life Center, while Gary Larsen is sales manager for Ford trucks in Seattle.

Marshall, the former skydiver who once said, "It is my nature to take chances," works in financial services in Bloomington, Minnesota, and still holds the NFL records for most consecutive games played (282), most games with one team (270), and most opponents' fumbles recovered (29).

THE STEEL CURTAIN

Every member of the Steel Curtain, the Pittsburgh Steelers defenders who started Super Bowls IX and X, was named to at least one Pro Bowl except Ernie Holmes.

Holmes, Joe Greene, L.C. Greenwood, and Dwight White were the front four of the defense that dominated pro football in the mid and late-1970s, winning four Super Bowls in four tries.

While the name was later applied to all eleven men, Pat Livingston of the Pittsburgh Press originally named the front four the Steel Curtain, and each member also had his own nickname. White (78) was Mad Dog for his ferocious play at East Texas State, and Holmes (63) was dubbed Fats as a boy. Greene (75) was nicknamed Mean Joe when North Texas State, his alma mater, was nicknamed the Mean Green in his honor; Greenwood (68) was Hollywood Bags, because he yearned for movie stardom and became Birmingham Bags after signing with the WFL.

Greenwood attended Arkansas AM&N, while White, Holmes and Greene all grew up and attended college in Texas. Charles Edward (Joe) Greene was Chuck Noll's first draft choice as head coach of the Steelers. Noll said that Greene would be "the cornerstone of a championship team," and he was named defensive rookie of the year in 1969.

Three years later, he blocked a field goal, forced and recovered a key fumble, registered five sacks and made six unassisted tackles as the Steelers beat Houston to clinch a wild-card spot. Oiler coach Lou Rymkus said, "It was the best performance I have ever seen by a defensive tackle." When the season ended, the Pittsburgh defense had not allowed a touchdown in seven games.

In 1973, Holmes had the best game of his career in a 33-6 rout of Cleveland. Despite being double-teamed, he made five solo tackles, eight assists, and was responsible for three quarterback sacks. When the Steelers defeated Oakland 17-9 that season, it was White's turn to shine; he intercepted two passes and registered three quarterback sacks and nine tackles to be named AP Defensive Player of the Week.

By 1974, the Steel Curtain was ready for Super Bowl IX. Joe Greene intercepted one Fran Tarkenton pass, and L.C. Greenwood knocked down three others. Holmes and White helped hold Chuck Foreman, Dave Osborn, and Tarkenton to exactly 17 yards rushing, a Super Bowl record.

Every member of the unit was cited for post season honors. Greene and Greenwood made the Pro Bowl and were named first team all-pro, while Holmes and White both made UPI's all-AFC second team. In addition, Greene was the NFL's defensive player of the year.