

LARRY LITTLE

by Don Smith

When Larry Little was just a young boy, even before he played football at Booker T. Washington high school in Miami, he dreamed of becoming a pro football player some day.

Many years later, when his future with the Miami Dolphins seemed assured, Little began dreaming of the ultimate career experience, election into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

"I'd really like to go to Canton some day," he said wistfully. "And not just for a visit."

On July 31, 1993, Little's dream became a reality. That was the day he and four other members of the class of 1993 were inducted into the Hall.

Little is the fifth player from the Miami Dolphins' juggernaut that dominated pro football in the early 1970s to be elected. The other Hall Of Fame Dolphins are, fullback Larry Csonka, quarterback Bob Griese, center Jim Langer and wide receiver Paul Warfield.

He is only the third modern-era player who performed exclusively at guard to enter, the Hall. Other Hall of Fame guards are Gene Upshaw and John Hannah. Two other Hall of Famers saw extensive, but not exclusive service as guards. Jim Parker split his career between guard and tackle and Stan Jones started as a guard but wound up as a defensive tackle.

Little's pro football tenure began in 1967 when he signed as a free agent with the San Diego Chargers. Two years later he was traded to the Dolphins for cornerback Mack Lamb, who had played on the same high school team as Little. While Little quickly blossomed into one of the NFL's successful young stars, Lamb never played a game for the Chargers.

Little became a true rarity, a player in an obscure Position whose play was so superior that he attracted headline attention. He was a six-time all-pro. He played in one AFL All-Star game and four AFC-NFC Pro Bowls. He was the first Dolphin to be elected to the Florida Sports Hall of Fame. The NFL Players Association selected him as the AFC's Outstanding offensive lineman in 1970, 1971 and 1972.

Dolphins opponents often praised Little for his play. "Trying to get around Larry Little is like trying to throw a paper airplane through a mountain," Washington Redskins defensive end Ron McDole said.

The Pittsburgh Steelers Hall of Fame defensive tackle, Joe Greene, was just as laudatory: "Every time we played Miami, it seemed that Little was always in front of me. We battled several times and I came away from each game with more respect for him than ever. Whatever he did, I just couldn't ever shake him."

Once Little joined the Dolphins, super-star status came relatively easy for him. But there were many obstacles he had to overcome before he could reach that stage of his career.

Born in Groveland, Georgia, on November 2, 1945, Little moved with his family to Florida as a young boy. He grew up in downtown Miami within walking distance of the Orange Bowl, where he would eventually play some day. He was the second of six children. His father, a stern disciplinarian, was a laborer, his mother a domestic.

"We were poor but we ate well. I never was hungry," Little recalls. "I ate more than anybody in the family. If there was any food anyone didn't want, I was around to eat it. When it came to football, we'd play tackle in the street. No equipment. Four, five on a side."

Little was a good, but not spectacular, 190-pound lineman in high school. "I didn't make all city," he says. "In fact, I didn't make anything until my senior year in college."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 15, No. 4 (1993)

After his high school days ended, none of the big-college scouts came knocking on Little's door so he had to settle for tiny Bethune-Cookman College in nearby Daytona Beach. By the time he graduated four years later, Little had become the team captain and most valuable player, all-conference and Ebony Press all-America. Although he weighed 260, he had not lost any of the unusual speed he possessed even as a youngster.

Several coaches and scouts predicted that Little would be selected in the upcoming AFL-NFL draft but his name never came up. Some said his 6-1 height, small for a lineman, or his small-college background deterred pro teams from wasting a draft choice. Little was so upset he lost his appetite. "When that happens, you know something is really bothering me," he joshed.

He talked with a couple of teams but his first offer came from the San Diego Chargers, \$750 to sign, no guarantees that he would ever play. Little was signed as a defensive tackle but Chargers coach Sid Gillman was so impressed with his 4.9 speed in the 40-yard sprint that, briefly, he envisioned Little as a speed-burning 285-pound fullback. But after just two practices, Little was shifted back to line play and finally assigned to the offensive line. Since he was considered too short to be a tackle, he was programmed to be a guard.

While he was playing in San Diego, he did pick up a nickname that stayed with him for many years. "While I was with Gene Foster and Joe Beauchamp one night, I ate two half-chickens so they started calling me Chicken Little."

Little played in all 14 Chargers games, several of them as a starter, in 1968, but his outrageous eating habits were an increasing problem. For some, watching Little eat became a spectator sport as the scales edged toward 300 pounds.

Frustrated, Gillman offered Little to the Dolphins. Although Miami's general manager, Joe Thomas, had opted not to match San Diego's \$750 offer to Little two years earlier, he was willing to take a chance this time.

Little somehow became a starter in 1969 and even was selected to play in the final AFL All-Star game. But his play for a team that finished 3-10-1 was nothing to get excited about. Then George Wilson was fired and Don Shula was hired to replace him as head coach. It proved to be a turning point in Little's career.

Shula, who had turned down Little when he asked for a tryout with the Baltimore Colts in 1967, didn't hide his displeasure over the excessive weight Little was carrying. He was given an ultimatum -- bring that weight down to 265 pounds or face a \$10 per day per-pound-over-that-weight fine. Thanks to a players' strike that delayed camp for two weeks, Little just made the deadline.

While Little was busy losing weight, Shula was studying Dolphin game films from the previous season and he realized that his overweight guard might truly be a diamond in the rough. "I see the promise of what could be the finest offensive lineman in the game," Shula remarked to an associate.

It was rough going for Little at first. Weakened by the drastic loss of weight, he even collapsed during one heated practice session. But he gradually worked himself into excellent condition and soon was permanently in place as the Dolphins' starting right guard.

Little's overall excellence apparently was one factor behind Shula's decision to go to a ball-control offense in Miami. In Baltimore, Shula had split his first-down calls almost evenly between the pass and run. But in Miami, he went to the run almost three out of four plays.

"I saw that Little could be an outstanding pulling guard," Shula said. "We had one of the NFL's best blocking tight ends in Marv Fleming. Both Jim Kiick and Csonka could block as well as run. I got the idea it would be best to go with the run and use the pass as a mixer."

The three-man center of the Miami offensive line was awesome -- Langer at center flanked by Bob Kuchenberg at left guard and Little on the right. Little perhaps was the most intimidating of the group. He was an awesome figure leading sweeps, the epitome of the powerhouse style of football employed by the Dolphins in the early 1970s.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 15, No. 4 (1993)

"I like the running plays," Little always said. "It evens up your tools with the defensive man. You can unload on him. I remember Green Bay used to be known for those sweeps. I'd like to think the Dolphins might some day be just as famous."

"Some day" came quickly for the Dolphins. They won 10 games in 1970, their first AFC Eastern title in 1971 and followed with Super Bowl championship years in 1972 and 1973. In 1972, when the Dolphins won 17 straight games without a loss for the first and only perfect season in pro history, they used the ball-control attack to amass a then record 2,960 rushing yards.

Csonka and Kiick, both heavy-duty ball-carriers, particularly appreciated Little's contributions. Csonka was amazed at his speed: "I'll be running behind Chicken, who is blocking for me, and suddenly I realize he is pulling away from me. Sometimes I grab hold of his pants to keep up."

"Chicken's a big truck," Kiick added. "When he gets rolling on an end sweep, the traffic suddenly thins out. I feel sorry for the little backs coming up on the play. Larry wipes them out."

Off the field, Little made as much impact on the Miami community as he did on the playing field. Before the 1970 training camp, he organized the non-profit Gold Coast Summer Camp for underprivileged boys of all races in the Miami area. It was a football oriented camp designed to teach the boys discipline and to provide them something more than just roaming the streets during the off-school months.

In the second year, the Dolphins offered their backing and the Gold Coast Summer Camp became a model program with several hundred youngsters benefitting each year from the association with Little and other pro stars.

"I was an underprivileged kid myself and I know what these people are going through," Little said.

In recognition of his community service, Biscayne College awarded Little with an honorary Doctor of Science and Human Relations degree.

Following their victory in Super Bowl VIII after the 1973 season, the future turned sour for the Dolphins when three stars -- Csonka, Kiick and Warfield -- signed to play in the rival World Football League beginning in 1975. Dolphins Owner Joe Robbie responded by offering generous pay raises to the rest of his stars. Little in 1974 became the first \$100,000-a-season guard in NFL history. But the inevitable uncertainty and unrest that followed took its toll on the Dolphins in the won-lost column for the next few years.

The 1974 Dolphins won their fourth straight AFC East title but were eliminated by Oakland in the playoffs. They didn't win their division again until 1979. Although openly unhappy with the entire situation, Little continued to perform at a high level with all-pro seasons in 1974 and 1975 and again in 1977.

But a knee injury he suffered late in the 1979 campaign limited his playing time to just five games in 1980. After the season, he retired.

Little once was asked whether he resented all the attention the ball-handlers received. He responded positively: "No, I'm a guard. I do what a guard does. All I'm interested in is knocking people off their feet and making them respect me and remember me."

Thus his pro football "wish list" is now complete. He has been elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame and he is remembered and respected not only by those who saw him play, but by those he played with and against, the most satisfying compliment of all.