

# STEVE LARGENT

by Don Smith

Two exceptional events took place in the life of Steve Largent, the former Seattle Seahawks pass receiving star, in the month of January 1995. One could not have been predicted even a year ago while the other had been anticipated for many years.

Early in January, Largent began serving his first term as a United States Congressman from Oklahoma. Only five players of the almost 15,000 who have played pro football have served in the U. S. House of Representatives. Largent didn't begin to seriously think about running for Congress until June in 1994.

At the end of the month on January 28, Largent was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility. To the pro football world, his election to his sport's highest honor had been viewed as an absolute cinch ever since he retired from the Seahawks following the 1989 season.

Before his election last January, Largent modestly questioned his chances against the other 14 finalists, all of them outstanding stars in their own right. But for the Hall's Board of Selectors, the decision was an easy one. During a 14-season, 200-game career that started with the Seattle Seahawks' first-ever game in 1976 and continued until the last game of the 1989 season, Largent was arguably the finest wide receiver of his time and one of the very best ever.

When he retired to the cheers of an appreciative crowd at Seattle's Kingdome, Largent held six major pass receiving records: (1) 819 career pass receptions, (2) 10 seasons with 50 or more receptions, (3) 177 consecutive games with at least one pass reception, (4) 13,089 yards on pass receptions, (5) eight seasons with 1,000 or more yards on receptions and (6) 100 career touchdown receptions.

## **Unheralded**

That kind of record might be expected of a No. 1 draft pick blessed with gazelle like speed, track-meet leaping ability and consensus all-America accolades, the kind of a budding superstar every NFL team covets at draft time.

Largent couldn't claim any of those traits even though he did enjoy above-average honors during his three-year tenure at the University of Tulsa. He was a two-time all-Missouri Valley Conference wide receiver who caught 136 passes in three years and led the nation with 14 touchdown receptions in both 1974 and 1975.

Still, most scouts viewed Largent as too small and too slow for pro football. The Houston Oilers picked him in the fourth round, the 117th player taken in the 1976 NFL draft. He caught only two passes before being cut after the fourth pre-season game. "I cried all the way from Houston to Oklahoma City," Largent admits. "I thought football was over for me."

But Seattle assistant Jerry Rhome, who had been on the Tulsa coaching staff, recommended Largent to Head Coach Jack Patera. So Seattle made a trade, giving Houston an eighth-round draft pick for a receiver the Oilers didn't want.

Largent's first day in the Seahawks camp was a disaster. He dropped virtually every ball thrown to him. But Rhome assured Steve that he would make the team. "I'll see to it you are not cut," he promised. Backed by that assurance, the 5-11, 191-pound Largent quickly showed that he was the sure-handed, hard-working pass catcher Rhome had seen in Tulsa. Two weeks later in the regular season opener against the St. Louis Cardinals, Steve came off the bench to catch five passes and contribute some excellent blocks. He sold himself as a "keeper" to Patera that day.

The Seattle expansion team that started the 1976 season was a collection of veteran castoffs, about a dozen draft choices and some young free agents. Largent was one of the free agents and quarterback Jim Zorn was another. Like Largent, Zorn a year earlier had been a rookie free agent who had been cut by his team, in Zorn's case the Dallas Cowboys.

As fate would have it, Zorn and Largent were destined to become the major offensive stars for the Seahawks for the next seven years. Zorn quickly recognized Largent's abilities and the two young players, both gaining confidence every game, became a dynamic yardage-making unit. In 1976, Zorn was named the NFC Offensive Rookie of the Year and Largent caught 54 passes for 705 yards to finish third among NFC receivers.

Eventually, Largent, a productive, possession-type receiver, became recognized as the textbook case for running pass routes. He was the one player, if a coach could choose only one, he would ask a rookie to watch and study. Steve's finest trait may well have been his complete mind and body coordination that allowed his body to talk, lie, cheat and steal on the best defensive backs in football.

Teammate Ken Easley, an all-pro defensive star, was one of Largent's biggest fans. "What separates Steve from the rest of the receivers," he explained, "is that he has a knack for running routes that others don't have. He manipulates defensive backs, he dissects them. He has a phenomenal ability to 'sight adjust' on a pass route, meaning when a defensive back isn't right where he is supposed to be, Steve will make a spur-of-the-moment adjustment in his route to get open."

Largent's production fell off to 33 catches and 643 yards in 1977 but he had 10 touchdown receptions and was named the Seahawks' Most Valuable Player. In the tenth game of the season on November 20 against Houston, Largent caught two passes to begin a record string of 177 games with at least one reception, a streak that lasted throughout the remainder of his career.

In eight of the nine seasons from 1978 to 1986 -- every year except the strike shortened nine-game season in 1982 -- Largent had 66 or more receptions and had 70 or more catches six times. In 1978, he won the AFC receiving title with 71 catches. His high marks of 79 receptions and an NFL-leading 1,287 receiving yards both came in 1985. He became the first player to rank among the Top Twenty all-time receivers in less than 10 seasons.

### **A Change at the Top**

In spite of his excellent individual achievements, Largent incredibly went largely unnoticed nationally until Chuck Knox took over the coaching reins in 1983. One of Knox's first moves was to install a new quarterback, Dave Kreig, in place of Zorn. The Kreig-Largent team clicked immediately and continued to excel through the remainder of Steve's career.

The Seahawks had only two winning seasons in their first seven years but, under Knox, they finished at .500 or better the next six seasons. Knox's first team in 1983 advanced to the AFC championship game against the Los Angeles Raiders.

As the Seahawks started to win, people -- all sorts of people in all walks of life - began to notice Steve Largent. Largent soon found himself in the board rooms of advertising account executives and the press rooms of major newspapers. He justified the new-found attention with a continuing string of superb performances.

Largent was named all-pro and all-AFC in both 1985 and 1987. He had become Seattle's first Pro Bowl player after the 1978 season. He missed the next year's game because of an injury but returned to the Pro Bowl two years later. With Seattle contending for the AFC West title each year, Largent was selected for four straight Pro Bowls following the 1984 through 1987 seasons.

For most of his career, Largent's true athletic ability was always questioned and he commonly was described as an over-achiever. But Knox fiercely denied this categorization: "He's not an overachiever. He has unique talent to become a great receiver. He has the lateral quickness, great balance,, body control, tremendous hand/eye coordination and great hands to catch the football."

Mike McCormack, the Seahawks president/general manager, felt that Largent was purposely perpetuating the myth that he wasn't a fast receiver so he could continue to deceive opposing defenders as long as possible. McCormack also marvelled at the long hours he spent on the practice field, catching up to 200 machine-propelled passes every day.

In spite of his comparatively small stature, Largent missed only four games because of injuries his first 13 seasons. He missed a 1979 game at Oakland (broken wrist), the Houston game in 1982 (knee), a 1983

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game against the Los Angeles Raiders (knee) and the 1988 New England game with thumb and foot injuries.

While it wasn't his style, the mentally-tough Largent could respond physically tough if the situation demanded. He came close to getting a career-ending injury in 1988 when he was savagely bashed to the turf by Denver Bronco cornerback Mike Harden, a hit that prompted a \$5,000 fine. The cage of Largent's helmet was mangled and two teeth were broken. Steve was out cold for five minutes.

In the next game against Denver, Harden intercepted a pass and Largent reacted with a vicious tackle that sent Harden flying. Largent admitted he wanted to hit Harden as hard as he could. "It wasn't meant to be a vindictive thing but it sure felt good," he admitted.

In his final season in 1989, Largent's injuries kept him out of six games, two more than he had missed in 13 years. But it was an eventful year, nonetheless, because he did make his 100th career touchdown against Cincinnati on December 10. The record of 99 TD catches had been held by Don Hutson since 1945.

Records are made to be broken and never was this proven more true than in Largent's case. At the time of his election which came in the shortest possible time after his retirement, every one of his six records had been tied or broken. The only record Largent can still partially claim is his 10 seasons with 50 or more receptions. Gary Clark of the Arizona Cardinals tied that mark in 1994.

Not surprisingly, Largent is unfazed by his lost records. "I didn't play football to set records," he says. "The records were nice and exciting and fun when I set them. But setting records was just part of the process of playing."

### **A Mother Insists**

There was little in Largent's childhood that could have presaged his eventual pro football success. Steve was born September 28, 1954 in Tulsa. His parents were divorced when he was six and his mother Sue remarried when Steve was nine. His new stepfather's job forced the family to move four times in two years. "I never had any close friends," Steve recalls. "I never felt like I belonged."

At his parents' urging, Steve, as a sophomore at Putnam High School in Oklahoma City, tried out for the football team but, once he saw the squad of 140 aspirants, he decided he wasn't big enough or fast enough to play football. But his mother insisted that Steve stick with it. "So I followed her advice and I am glad I did," Largent says today.

Largent was assigned to a group of wide receiver candidates. There he met an assistant coach, Gene Abney, who drilled him in the hot Oklahoma sun until he was ready to drop. Abney found out that Largent could catch the football and Steve, who liked the hard work, thrived on his coach's praise.

Sometime in his sophomore year, Steve met Terry Bullock, a popular straight-A student and cheerleader. They started dating his junior year, and in practical effect, never stopped. She was a steadying influence as Largent developed into an all-state high school player and followed his career closely at the University of Tulsa. They were married in 1974.

Ever since, or at least until Steve became a congressman, Friday night has been date night in the Largent household. A typical date will be low-key, possibly a concert or dinner or a milk shake on the way home. The Largents have four children, three sons and one daughter.

Football has been a big part of Largent's life but he never let it become his life. He is deeply religious, a dedicated father and husband. He was watching his son's basketball game at South Tulsa Baptist Church when he was informed of his Hall of Fame election.

Throughout his days as a Seahawk, Largent also was extremely supportive of community charity activities. Because his son Kramer was born with the affliction, Steve has had a special interest in the Spina Bifida Foundation. In recognition of his many years of public service, he was named the 1988 NFL Man of the Year, an annual award given to the league's top "citizen athlete."

After his retirement, Largent spent a few years as a business consultant before turning to politics in the summer of 1994. When Largent learned the incumbent congressman from his district would give up his

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seat to run for the U. S. Senate, Steve decided to try for the vacated spot. "I'm a Christian and I think God orders certain events in your life for a purpose," he explained. In the November election, he won the House seat with a 65 percent majority.

Largent is as disciplined and as focused in his job as a Congressman as he was on the football field. But he has already found that, for the next few months, he will have to find some time for his old career. Already, there has been a trip to New York to help honor Art Monk for breaking Steve's consecutive-game record and a hurried trip to Hawaii to be introduced with the Hall's Class of 1995 at the Pro Bowl. And, finally, there will be the ultimate -- his induction weekend in Canton in July.

Largent's presence on the political scene assures that he will remain in the public eye but his football record undoubtedly would have assured this anyway. As former NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle said when Steve retired: "It took only seven months to find my successor but it will be years before anyone with the character, human decency and on-the-field skills will be found to replace Steve Largent."

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### STEVE LARGENT

WR

5-11 191 Tulsa

Putnam HS [Oklahoma City, OK]

Born: 09/28/54, Tulsa, OK

Selected by Houston on 4th round of 1976 draft

Traded to Seattle for 8th round draft pick, 1976

All-Pro, All-AFC 1985, 1987

Seven Pro Bowls

Pro Football Hall of Fame 1995

| YEAR   | TEAM | LG | Gm  | NO  | YDS   | AVG   | TD  |
|--------|------|----|-----|-----|-------|-------|-----|
| 1976   | Sea  | N  | 14  | 54  | 705   | 13.1  | 4   |
| 1977   | Sea  | N  | 14  | 33  | 643   | 19.5  | 10  |
| 1978   | Sea  | N  | 16  | *71 | 1168  | 16.5  | 8   |
| 1979   | Sea  | N  | 15  | 66  | *1237 | 18.7  | 9   |
| 1980   | Sea  | N  | 16  | 66  | 1064  | 16.1  | 6   |
| 1981   | Sea  | N  | 16  | 75  | 1224  | 16.3  | 9   |
| 1982   | Sea  | N  | 8   | 34  | 493   | 14.5  | 3   |
| 1983   | Sea  | N  | 15  | 72  | 1074  | 14.9  | 11  |
| 1984   | Sea  | N  | 16  | 74  | 1164  | 15.7  | 12  |
| 1985   | Sea  | N  | 16  | 79  | *1287 | 16.3  | 6   |
| 1986   | Sea  | N  | 16  | 70  | 1070  | 15.3  | 9   |
| 1987   | Sea  | N  | 13  | 58  | 912   | 15.7  | *8  |
| 1988   | Sea  | N  | 15  | 39  | 645   | 16.5  | 2   |
| 1989   | Sea  | N  | 10  | 28  | 403   | 14.4  | 3   |
|        |      |    | --  | --- | ----  | ----- | --- |
| 12 yrs |      |    | 200 | 819 | 13089 | 16.0  | 100 |