

## The Bodyguard and Johnny U

By Chris Willis

In the late 1950's and early 60's, "Sundays in Baltimore" was definitely a religious experience. The Baltimore Colts were the hometown team and old Memorial Stadium was the cathedral. The city was captivated and mesmerized by their hometown heroes, who after three hours of preaching would leave the Baltimore fans standing and cheering "Amen." The Colts roster resembles the roll call at the Pro Football Hall of Fame, names like Moore, Berry, Marchetti, Ewbank, Donovan and Mackey. The names are synonymous with the history of the Baltimore Colts, but no two names are more synonymous than Unitas and Parker, Teammates for eleven seasons the two Hall of Famers helped lead a team and a town to championship status. Johnny Unitas and Jim Parker entered professional football at the opposite end of the token pole but ended their careers. as arguably the greatest at their respective positions.

Johnny Unitas was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, starting a run of pro quarterbacks from that region. As a high school senior Unitas accepted a football scholarship to the University of Louisville only after Notre Dame and Indiana turned him down. Despite an average college career, Unitas had the confidence he could play pro ball. He received his wish when his hometown Pittsburgh Steelers made him their ninth round pick in the 1955 NFL draft. But the Steelers never gave Unitas a chance, he was cut without appearing in one pre-season game. So Unitas and his young wife settled back into Pittsburgh, assuring himself he could be a QB in the National Football League. In order to keep himself in shape he decided to play semi-pro football for the Bloomfield Rams in the Greater Pittsburgh League. His paycheck for playing in the sandlot league on fields with no grass was an amazing six dollars a game. After the game the six dollar check was delivered to Mrs. Unitas for proper use.

Before the 1956 season Colts head coach Weeb Ewbank received a letter describing a talented young quarterback playing semi-pro football in Pittsburgh. The mysterious letter did accomplish one thing - it gave Johnny Unitas a real opportunity to prove what kind of quarterback he really was. Unitas showed up at training camp and survived the cut as the Colts back-up quarterback behind starter George Shaw. Shaw, a number-one draft pick in 1955 (bonus pick), was a promising star until a week four contest against the Chicago Bears when he was lost for the season with a knee injury. In came Unitas who on his very first pass attempt was intercepted by Bears cornerback J.C. Caroline, who returned it for a touchdown. But Unitas came back and finished the game completing 9 passes on 19 attempts for 131 yards and 1 touchdown. A very telling moment for Unitas as he demonstrated his greatest asset as a QB, his ability to comeback from adversity. "It didn't matter if he threw 3 touchdowns or 3 interceptions, he had the same facial expression and personality. He was the same guy," recalls former Colts center Bill Curry. "That was the secret of the guy." Unitas finished his rookie season by setting a new NFL rookie record for completion percentage at 55.6%.

Jim Parker was born in Macon, Georgia, but moved to Ohio and attended Scott High School in Toledo. As a high school senior Parker was heavily recruited, but decided to stay close to home and play for Woody Hayes at Ohio State. Parker became a two-time All-American who went on to win the Outland Award as the best college lineman in 1956 following his senior year. Because of this effort the Colts made Parker their number-one draft pick in 1957. With the emergence of Unitas and a healthy Shaw the Colts wanted a bodyguard to make sure they stayed in one piece.

The relationship between Unitas and Parker began on shaky ground, or on the ground. In the first exhibition game in 1957 the Colts played the Bears in Cincinnati, Ohio. Parker recalls, "In college we never threw the ball. I never had to pass protect. We threw the ball more times that day than we did my four years with Woody. We used to just hit and dare 'em."

"So this was my first pro game and Woody was in the stands and they played two rookies against me in the first half and it was easy pickin's. Nobody told me they were rookies," remembers Parker. "In the second half they brought in Doug Atkins. He was number 81. You get to memorize that kind of man's number real quick. Oh what he did to me. He just beat the hell out of me. He rammed me back there so hard the only thing I could do was wave to Johnny as I went by. It was awful."

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 20, No. 3 (1998)

---

Parker was a tackle then and he damn near packed it in after that game. His wife was pregnant and his ego bruised, and if it hadn't been for an assistant coach named Bob Shaw, he would have left the club right there. Shaw's encouragement helped Parker think about his return meeting with Atkins because for the next eleven years Parker made sure no one would defeat him like that. Parker quickly became known as "Johnny Unitas' Bodyguard" and he was at his best playing against the premier defensive lineman of the NFL. New York Giants Hall of Fame defensive end Andy Robustelli recalls, "He could stay with anybody I used to think there wasn't a big tackle I couldn't out-maneuver but Parker could move with me. The only way you could beat him was to make him dip his head. But he wouldn't because he was just too strong and too good and too smart."

For Unitas it was a god send, beginning in 1957 he won the starting QB job and went on to win the league's MVP award. He followed that personal honor by helping the Colts win back to back NFL Championships in 1958 and 1959. He was named UPI Player of the Year and threw for a then NFL record 32 touchdowns during the '59 season. In 1960 Unitas' streak of 47 straight games with at least one touchdown pass came to an end against the Los Angeles Rams in week 11, an NFL record that may never be broken. Unitas then earned his second and third MVP awards following the 1964 and 1967 seasons, the latter being the same year Parker retired from professional football. Unitas went on to cap off his last productive season by helping the Colts win their third World Championship by defeating the Dallas Cowboys in Super Bowl V.

Then in 1973, Unitas was traded to the San Diego Chargers, the same year Parker received the greatest honor of his career, induction into Pro Football's Hall of Fame. Unitas retired after the 1973 season and Parker became the first ever full-time offensive lineman to be elected into the Hall. He earned all league honors 8 straight seasons, the first 4 years at tackle and the last 4 at guard. A do-everything player who was called "the greatest who ever played this game," by Don Shula, Parker's coach with Baltimore for 5 years. Unitas never had to worry about the player over Parker.

Unitas appreciated all the hard work of Parker as he joined his teammate in the Hall of Fame in 1979. "He's the best pass blocker around," Unitas said. "He's so damn strong and wide, you know, and then he has this immense pride. You just know he's going to do a job for you." The relationship between a quarterback and his blockers is an artery-to-heart kind of thing and to Parker it is very simple to describe. "We're just the bread," Parker recalls in 1965. "He's the butter. Look, if I break my arm I can still play. If he breaks his we're dead. So I got to feel like if anybody's arm gets broken, it had better be mine." Now that's the true definition of a bodyguard.