

JIM RAY SMITH

By Andy Piascik

Among the traditions of the Cleveland Browns is one of great offensive linemen. This is not surprising for a franchise that has 4 running backs in the Pro Football Hall of Fame; the two go together. Among the great blockers who were integral parts of the Cleveland offense during their championship years of the 1940's, 50's and 60's are Frank Gatski, Lou Groza, Abe Gibrion, Mike McCormack, Gene Hickerson, and Dick Schafrath. Each made all-pro and all were regular selections for the Pro Bowl. Gatski, Groza, and McCormack are in the Hall of Fame while Hickerson is considered by many to be the best offensive lineman not in the Hall of Fame.

But perhaps the best of all of the Cleveland linemen was guard Jim Ray Smith. A four sports star in high school, Smith was a two-time All-American tackle at Baylor in 1954 and 1955. He was selected as a future in the seventh round by the Browns in the 1954 draft but did not join the team until halfway through the 1956 season because of a hitch in the army. During that season, Smith played as a 220 pound defensive end. The following year, Paul Brown switched him to offense and he became one of the team's messenger guards.

A track star in high school, Smith routinely finished in a dead heat with Ray Renfro behind only Bobby Mitchell and Jim Brown in sprints during Cleveland practices. When the 6'4" Smith reported to training camp in 1958 at 250 pounds without having lost any of his speed or quickness, he became a full-time starter and was on his way to the first of five consecutive appearances in the Pro Bowl. That combination of size, strength and speed made him one of the most devastating blockers of his era.

Smith was also a master of technique and paid close attention to developing his skills as his career progressed. He became a driving force in leading Brown and Mitchell around the corners on the famous Cleveland Browns sweep. Years later, he recalled working with Brown to perfect the play. "He'd run out and I'd tell him to slow down a bit. I'd say, 'Let me knock the guy on his can and you cut behind me.'" It was in Smith's first year as a full-time starter that Brown set a pro football record of 1,527 yards rushing to go with a 5.94 yards per carry and 18 touchdowns – this in a 12 game season. Prorated to a 16 game season, Brown's figures are the equivalent of a 2,036 yard, 24 touchdown season.

"That's something people don't teach now," Smith said of his rapport with Brown. "The lineman and the running back need to be talking all the time." With Brown and Mitchell a devastating one-two punch throughout that 1958 season, Cleveland ended the season atop the NFL in rushing, a feat the team duplicated in 1959. Twice in 1958, Smith did a masterful job against the Pittsburgh Steelers great tackle Ernie Stautner, a ferocious competitor who left many an offensive lineman battered and bewildered. Teammates recalled how Stautner never even got close to Cleveland's quarterback in those confrontations with Smith.

Another particularly memorable Smith performance was one recalled by Paul Brown in his autobiography. It came in a 38-31 Browns victory in 1959 over the defending champion Baltimore Colts. Playing against one of the greatest defensive lines in football history, Smith and his linemates blasted the way for Brown to rush for 179 yards and 5 touchdowns. Smith totally dominated Gene 'Big Daddy' Lipscomb, the 6'6", 290 pound Colts tackle, in that game.

Smith's off field success more than matched the success he had in football. He had become involved in real estate in the Dallas area in 1958, and within a few years was earning more annually in business than he was from playing for the Browns. Despite his high level of play, Smith retired after the 1961 season to devote himself full-time to business. Although the Browns convinced him to return, Smith again retired after the 1962 season determined not to play anymore. The team, therefore, worked out a trade that sent him to the hometown Cowboys in exchange for offensive tackle Monte Clark that made it possible for Smith to both play football and work at his real estate business year round.

Although at times he played at the level of his years with the Browns, Smith's two seasons in Dallas were marred by serious knee injuries in both of his seasons there. He retired after the 1964 season. In all, Smith was named to four consecutive All-Pro teams after the 1959-62 seasons, and he played in the Pro

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Bowl every year from 1958 through 1962. Those accomplishments are all the more noteworthy, for he played in a period when some of pro football's greatest linemen graced the fields every Sunday: Jim Parker, Roosevelt Brown, Jerry Kramer, Stan Jones, Bob St. Clair, and Forrest Gregg, to name a few. And unlike Parker, Brown, Kramer, Jones, and Gregg and teammates Groza, Gatski, and McCormack – Hall of Famers all – Smith never played on a championship team, an important factor in the visibility of even great linemen among fans and media people around the league. His only appearance in a title game was the 1957 Browns loss to Detroit a year before he became a full-time starter.

Whether Smith ever experiences further glory through induction into the Hall of Fame is difficult to say; in addition to not having played on a championship team, he only played six full injury-free seasons, and only five of those as a starter. But he was among the very best during those five seasons and many who played with and against him, as well as many who had the chance to see him play, will remember Jim Ray Smith as one of the best ever.

JIM RAY SMITH

Smith, James Ray

Baylor

B: 2 / 27 / 1932, West Columbia, TX

Drafted: 1954 Round 6 Cle

1956 Cle 6	1959 Cle 12	1962 Cle 13
1957 Cle 12	1960 Cle 12	1963 Dal 8
1958 Cle 12	1961 Cle 14	1964 Dal 4

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HS: West Columbia [TX]