

Timmy Brown

By Keith Yowell

Moody and sensitive, yet talented on the football field, Timmy Brown provided a great deal of excitement from 1960 through 1968, a period he spent almost entirely with the Philadelphia Eagles. For a time in the '60s, he was considered by many to be the best all-purpose halfback in the NFL. But he played for a mediocre team; greater all-purpose runners have come along and surpassed his records; and today, if he is remembered at all, most often it is as a kick return specialist. To be thought of as a specialist was anathema to Brown, who was proud of his all-around skills, particularly his ability as a runner from scrimmage.

Considering the barriers he faced early in life, that Timmy Brown made it to the NFL in the first place is impressive. His parents separated when he was seven, and he was raised in Knightstown, Indiana, at the Soldiers and Sailors Children's Home. Lonely and lacking confidence, he displayed excellent athletic ability during his high school years, but chose to go to college at little Ball State Teachers College rather than accept a basketball scholarship to Michigan State. While it was basketball that attracted the scholarship offer, Brown became more notable as a football player at Ball State, where he went 91 yards for a score the first time he carried the ball. Even though he didn't start until his senior year, it was enough to draw the attention of the Green Bay Packers, who drafted him in the 27th round in 1959.

Timmy made it through training camp to the regular season, but after fumbling a punt in his first game, he was cut by the Packers (the reputation as a fumbler would haunt him throughout his NFL career). The Eagles offered him an opportunity to join their taxi squad, and Brown made the team as a backup halfback and kickoff returner in '60.

1960 was a championship season for the Eagles, but Timmy Brown was strictly a bit player, returning kicks and seeing occasional, late-season action in the backfield. He returned the opening kickoff 22 yards in the NFL Championship game against Green Bay, the only time he touched the ball in that contest.

Timmy started the 1961 season in a big way, returning the opening kickoff of the first game for 105 yards against the Browns at Franklin Field – still the longest kickoff return in Eagles history. He saw more action and gained confidence that season, even if he was frustrated with being pigeonholed because the offensive coaches doubted that he was big enough, at 5'11" and 198 pounds, to be an every-down back. Still, he showed explosiveness from the backfield and went 59 yards for a score on a pass from Sonny Jurgensen vs. the Cardinals.

The opportunity to start at halfback as well as return kicks arrived in 1962 when his roommate, Ted Dean, suffered a broken leg. Taking full advantage, Brown set a league record for total yardage. Of the 2306 yards he accumulated, 831 came on kickoff returns and 81 on punt returns, while 545 came on running plays from scrimmage (including 107 in a game against Dallas) and 849 as a pass receiver out of the backfield. His most yardage in a game catching passes was 199 (on 5 receptions) at St. Louis in the last game of the season. It was no fluke – he also had pass receiving totals of 160 yards on 9 catches against the Giants and 174 yards on 5 grabs at Minnesota. As if that weren't enough, he also gained 99 yards in the opener against the Cardinals when he returned a short field goal attempt for a score. Needless to say, the missed field goal return was just one of many long and exciting plays for Timmy Brown that season: there was also a 74-yard TD reception from Sonny Jurgensen at home against the Giants; a 61-yard run against the Giants at Yankee Stadium; a 99-yard kickoff return vs. Washington; and touchdown receptions of 60 and 81 yards in the finale against the Cards. His total of 341 yards against the Cardinals (50 rushing, 199 receiving, 92 on kickoff returns) was second at the time only to Houston's Billy Cannon of the AFL, and still ranks among the highest single-game yardage accumulations on record.

Unfortunately for Brown and the Eagles, a rash of injuries caused the team to crash to the bottom of the Eastern Conference after having won the championship in '60 and contending in '61. Things would not get better in 1963, although the star halfback and kick returner managed to break his own record for total yardage. He gained 2428 all-purpose yards, with 841 rushing, 487 receiving, 152 on punt returns, and 945 returning kickoffs. His 11 touchdowns included a 100-yard kickoff return against St. Louis and an 80-yarder on a pass from King Hill vs. the Cowboys. He even threw an 11-yard option pass to Pete Retzlaff for a score against the Giants. Altogether, he gained 4734 yards over two seasons and scored 24 touchdowns for a team that went a combined 5-20-3. For his trouble, he was a consensus second-team All-NFL choice following the '63 season (UPI, NEA, and the New York Daily News; he was a first-team All-Eastern Conference selection by The Sporting News) and earned back-to-back trips to the Pro Bowl.

Recognized at that time as the best receiver out of the backfield in the league, Brown proved that he could run well from scrimmage, and not just as a breakaway threat. Of his 841 yards rushing in 1963, his longest run was just 34 yards, yet he averaged a solid 4.4 yards per carry, often fighting for daylight between the tackles and displaying surprising power against defenses geared to stop him.

With a change of ownership following the dismal 1963 season, a new head coach/general manager came to town. Joe Kuharich sought to shake up the team with a series of major trades, and while it was rumored that both the Giants and Cowboys had offered to deal for Brown (the Cowboys ended up with flanker Tommy McDonald instead), Timmy stayed in Philadelphia and became the offensive weapon that Kuharich sought to build his retooled offense around. Unfortunately, after two seasons of impressive durability, he missed four games to a thigh injury in 1964 and failed to match his previous production. Still, he managed to gain over a thousand yards in total offense, scored 10 TDs, and had two hundred-yard rushing performances. His best rushing performance, 116 yards on 16 attempts against Pittsburgh, came in a game in which he accumulated 253 yards, including 87 yards on a TD pass from Norm Snead, the longest reception of his career.

After the disappointments that marred 1964, and a pre-season experiment at flanker, Brown had an outstanding season in '65, gaining a career high 861 yards rushing and leading NFL qualifiers with a 5.4 average gain-per-carry – this, in spite of missing one game due to injury and playing at various times with a hairline fracture to the ribs, torn thumb ligament, bruised thigh, and sprained ankle. His 186 yards at Cleveland on 16 attempts included a 54-yard dash to the end zone and was his career high for a single game. Three weeks later at St. Louis he burned the Cardinals for 180 yards on 18 carries and had yet another long scoring run of 43 yards. Still dangerous out of the backfield as a receiver, he caught 50 passes for 682 yards and ended up with 1602 total yards, almost all of which came on offense – he returned just four punts and three kickoffs that season. He went back to the Pro Bowl and received widespread second-team All-NFL honors (AP, UPI, and the New York Daily News; once again, he was a first-team All-Eastern Conference choice of The Sporting News).

The offensive numbers dropped in '66, but Brown again found himself returning kickoffs as well as starting at halfback for the Eagles; indeed, he made history in that capacity against the Dallas Cowboys at Philadelphia's Franklin Field on November 6, 1966. In the first quarter, following a short Dan Reeves touchdown run, Brown fielded Danny Villanueva's ensuing kickoff at the seven yard line on the east (enclosed) end of the stadium and evaded Mike Johnson, the first defender to approach him as he cut to his right. Passing the ten yard line, he benefited from a fine block by Ollie Matson on Mike Connelly and then managed to shake free of a diving Pettis Norman at the 15. Finding daylight, he broke toward the south sideline, racing past the Eagles bench. A block by Ron Medved knocked the kicker, Villanueva, out of the way at midfield, and it was a foot race to the goal line, with Brown breezing into the end zone after his 93-yard return ahead of Warren Livingston, who made a last futile dive at the five.

Exciting enough as that play had been for the home crowd, Timmy wasn't finished yet. In the second quarter, with the Cowboys having just scored on a one-yard plunge by quarterback Don Meredith to take a 17-7 lead, Villanueva again kicked off, with Brown gathering in the ball at the ten. Initially, he appeared to be hemmed in as he headed to his left, with Obert Logan taking the first unsuccessful shot. Still, in spite of the heavy traffic in front of him, Timmy pulled loose from Mike Connelly's grasp at the 20 and, with blocks from Arunas Vasys and Dwight Kelley, broke into the clear at the 30. Now charging down the north sideline past the Cowboys bench, Livingston and Villanueva again gave pursuit. At the Dallas 35, first Livingston, and then the kicker, leaped for Brown, ending up in a pile on the sideline as Timmy sprinted to the goal line, completing his 90-yard jaunt. Following Sam Baker's extra point, the score stood at 17-14 in favor of Dallas (the Eagles would eventually win, 24-23, with an Aaron Martin punt return for a TD helping the cause). But more significantly, Timmy Brown had become the first player in NFL history to return two kickoffs for touchdowns in the same game. In addition, his 247 yards returning kickoffs that day was the second highest single-game total up to that time.

It was the high point in a season in which Brown's rushing average was his lowest to date (3.4) on 161 attempts, and he caught only 33 passes. In addition, the uneasy relationship with Joe Kuharich and the rest of the offensive coaching staff that had been simmering for years was setting the stage for his eventual departure from Philadelphia. The sensitive halfback had long bridled at being chewed out for blown assignments in practice, and in turn the coaches questioned the commitment of a player who spent his Mondays taking singing lessons in New York and openly stated his preference for achieving success as a singer and actor instead of as a football player. There were little annoyances: uncomfortable with uniformity, Timmy didn't appreciate the kelly green blazers that the team required the players to wear on road trips, and while not a carouser, he liked to sit up late and avail himself of room service on the night before games in violation of team rules. While often fun-loving and pleasant, he could also be moody (he once claimed to be possessed of 107 different moods by his own count) with a streak of arrogance, and he didn't like the questions that arose from time to time regarding his commitment to the team.

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The breaking point came in 1967. First, during the off-season Joe Kuharich stated that Brown no longer fit into his plans, which demoralized the halfback, particularly since the team had posted its first winning record since 1961 and he had made an effort to be more accommodating to the coaching staff's wishes. Then Timmy missed the first half of the season with a hamstring pull, which caused some teammates to accuse him of malingering. After his return to action, he was struck in the jaw by Dallas linebacker Lee Roy Jordan while running a pass pattern, losing nine teeth and forcing him to drink through a straw for awhile. He demanded to be traded, and Kuharich obliged him after the season, sending him to the Baltimore Colts in exchange for a defensive back, Alvin Haymond, who was also a fine kick returner.

Brown got the chance to end his career with a winning team, although his role was more like that of his early years, returning kicks and seeing occasional action in the offensive backfield. The Colts won the NFL title, but lost the Super Bowl to the AFL's upstart New York Jets. It was Timmy Brown's final pro game.

The singing and acting career never achieved the level of Brown's football excellence, and that excellence was considerable. In the end, he had gained 12,684 yards, the fourth highest total in league history up to that point. Much of that was done in spectacular fashion, and with a largely unimpressive supporting cast. Excluding the championship season of 1960, when Brown was a bit player, the Eagles went a combined 41-53-4 during the remainder of his stay with them, with losses in the Playoff Bowl capping the only two winning seasons in that span. He may have been hard to fathom, and he may have fumbled a bit too often, but he was a major all-around running talent in his day, and many of his all-purpose yardage totals still rank among the best of all-time.

Thomas Allen (Timmy) Brown

Born: May 24, 1937

Height: 5'11" Weight: 198

College: Ball State Teachers College

Year	Team	Rushing				Pass Receiving			
		Att.	Yds.	Avg.	TD	Rec.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
1960	Phila.	9	35	3.9	2	9	247	27.4	2
1961	Phila.	50	338	6.8	1	14	264	18.9	2
1962	Phila.	137	545	4.0	5	52	849	16.3	6
1963	Phila.	192	841	4.4	6	36	487	13.5	4
1964	Phila.	90	356	4.0	5	15	244	16.3	5
1965	Phila.	158	861	5.4	6	50	682	13.6	3
1966	Phila.	161	548	3.4	3	33	371	11.2	3
1967	Phila.	53	179	3.4	1	22	202	9.2	1
1968	Balt.	39	159	4.1	2	4	53	13.3	0
Totals		889	3862	4.3	31	235	3399	14.5	26

Year	Team	Punt Returns				Kickoff Returns			
		No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD
1960	Phila.	10	47	4.7	0	11	295	26.8	0
1961	Phila.	8	125	15.6	1	29	811	28.0	1
1962	Phila.	6	81	13.5	0	30	831	27.7	1
1963	Phila.	16	152	9.5	0	33	945	28.6	1
1964	Phila.	10	96	9.6	0	30	692	23.1	0
1965	Phila.	4	13	3.3	0	3	46	15.3	0
1966	Phila.	1	0	0.0	0	20	562	28.1	2
1967	Phila.	None				13	301	23.2	0
1968	Balt.	16	125	7.8	0	15	298	19.9	0
Totals		71	639	9.0	1	184	4781	26.0	5

NOTE: Record does not show 1959 season with Green Bay, when Brown appeared in one game and accumulated no statistics.

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