

MARION MOTLEY

By Andy Piascik

Marion Motley. His name is nowhere to be found among pro football's all-time leaders in rushing yards. His career and best single season rushing totals seem paltry compared to running greats of more recent years. His career as a pro was all too brief, his time in the NFL briefer still, shortened by prejudice and bad knees. Most contemporary football fans would be hard pressed to say who he was, let alone to include him alongside Jim Brown, Eric Dickerson, Barry Sanders and Walter Payton. He is not even among the official top 10 all-time rushers on his own team.

But yet. But yet, there is the testimony of those who played with or against Motley as well as those who saw him play. Paul Brown, who coached them both, said that Motley was a better all-around running back than Jim Brown. Esteemed football writer Paul Zimmerman, who saw him from the beginning of his pro career with the Browns in the All-America Football Conference, has written that Motley was not just the greatest back, but the greatest football player, of all time. And in 1994, Motley was one of seven backs selected by the Pro Football Hall of Fame to its 75th anniversary all-time team.

Motley was born in Georgia in 1920 and grew up in Canton, Ohio, where, 48 years later, he would have one of his finest moments when he was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. It was while playing high school ball in the 1930's that he first encountered Paul Brown, head coach of rival Washington High in Massillon. He attended South Carolina State and then Nevada-Reno, which he left before finishing, returning to Ohio where he went to work in a steel mill. With the onset of the Second World War, Motley went into the service and played for the Great Lakes Naval team. It was there that for a second time he came upon Brown, the Great Lakes head coach.

With the end of the war and with pro football's apartheid racial policies firmly in place, it seemed as though Motley's football playing was at a premature end. However, the immediate postwar period saw a shift in the United States on the question of race. Tens of thousands of people of color had fought for the United States against the racism of the Third Reich for four years and were all the more determined to resist the continuation of such policies domestically. In the field of sports, a campaign led by civil rights activists and radicals demanding an end to Jim Crow policies that had been picking up momentum since the 1930's, and which included picketing at sports arenas like Yankee Stadium, finally began to bear fruit.

The end of 1945 and beginning of 1946 were the early stages of a breakthrough for African-American athletes that Motley was destined to be a part of. The Brooklyn Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson to a contract with their International League affiliate in Montreal; the Los Angeles Rams, having just relocated from Cleveland and having been told by Los Angeles officials that they would not be able to use the Los Angeles Coliseum unless they integrated, signed Kenny Washington and Woody Strode; and the Cleveland Browns, preparing for the inaugural season of a new football league, the All America Football Conference, signed middle guard Bill Willis. Of importance to Motley was the fact that Paul Brown was the general manager, coach, and part owner of the Browns.

Unlike Washington and Strode, who played for UCLA, and Willis, who played at Ohio State on a national champion, Motley played his college ball far from the national spotlight. Thus it was the impression he made on the trailblazing Brown in two different venues that made his pro career possible, for it is unlikely that Motley would have been given so much as a look by other teams. For even after the Browns and Rams broke the color line, and Motley, Willis, Washington, and other blacks such as Horace Gillom, Buddy Young, and Len Ford established themselves as among the very best players anywhere, other pro football franchises were very slow to sign black players and a number had no black players into the 1950's, with the Washington Redskins refusing to sign any blacks until 1962.

Back in Canton after the war, Motley's options seemed limited to working in the steel mill or having one last go at college. (Interestingly, Motley later recalled that the tremendous heat he was exposed to during his stints as a steelworker served to mend his knees). Here Motley's story gets a little muddled, with he and Paul Brown having different versions of what happened in the summer of 1946. Upon reading of the organization of the Browns, and with his coach from Great Lakes at the helm, Motley claims to have called Brown to ask for a tryout only to have Brown decline on the grounds that the team already had enough backs. It was only after the Browns signed Willis that Brown called back because, according to

Motley, they needed another black player to room with Willis. In Brown's version, he makes no mention of Motley's initial request for a tryout or of blowing Motley off, and states unequivocally that he wanted Motley all along because of the tremendous two-way skills he had seen Motley display in high school and at Great Lakes.

That there could have been any doubt about Motley's potential is difficult to understand now. Not only was he among the fastest players anywhere in football, he was 6'1" and weighed 235 pounds at a time when most linemen were not that big. When one thinks of backs who were that big and strong and that fast and who played at the highest level from day one of their careers, one thinks, in addition to Motley, of Jim Brown and Earl Campbell and maybe a few others. Motley's rushing average that first season was an astonishing 8.2 yards per carry. His career average yards per carry of 5.7 was the highest in pro history, although it is not recognized as such because of his four seasons in the AAFC (where his average yards per carry was 6.2). Motley's NFL figure of 5.0 puts him near the very top all-time; however, he is not included among the official leaders because he does not have enough carries to qualify. He is still in the record books, however, for his one game average of 17 yards per carry in a game against Pittsburgh in 1950.

The Browns were an immediate success, winning the AAFC championship in all four years of its existence, and contributing to its downfall with their absolute dominance. Motley led the AAFC in rushing in Cleveland's undefeated 1948 season with 964 yards and he finished as the league's all-time leading rusher, leading the Browns all four years. He made all-league first team in 1946, 1947, and 1948 and second team in 1949. And he was spectacular in the 4 AAFC championship games, rushing for 104 yards per game, 8.6 yards per carry, and 5 touchdowns. In Cleveland's 1948 championship game victory over Buffalo, Motley ran for 133 yards on 14 carries (9.8 yards per carry) and scored 3 times.

It was by no means an easy road for Motley, however. (Or for teammate Willis, who also immediately established himself as an outstanding player). As with Jackie Robinson, who had to deal with beanballs and baserunners trying to spike him, Motley experienced dirty play that went far beyond the norm because of his skin color. Opposing defenders made a point of stepping on his hands, and Cleveland's two black players confronted racial epithets on a regular basis. "My hands were always bloody," Motley said in Stuart Leuthner's book "Iron Men". "That kind of crap went on for two or three years until they found out what kind of players we were. They found out that while they were calling us, 'niggers,' I was running for touchdowns and Willis was knocking the shit out of them."

Through the AAFC years and the Browns dominant years in the NFL in the 1950's, there is little indication that Motley and Willis faced any overt hostility from Cleveland teammates. And it is easy to see why, for regardless of what any of the white players racial attitudes may have been, the Browns certainly would have won fewer championships during their dynastic run without Motley or Willis, fewer still without both. Paul Brown is said to have made all white rookies from the South shake hands and introduce themselves to the two black stars at the beginning of training camp. And virtually every Cleveland player from that era who has spoken or written about Motley in the many books about the team speaks with a combination of admiration for him as a human being and awe of him as a player.

One interesting speculative point regarding Motley's career is to wonder what he might have accomplished in individual rushing statistics had he been given the ball more. Of course the Browns were successful doing what they did, which was to balance the run and the pass, throwing a little more than most teams. And with Otto Graham at quarterback, Dub Jones at flanker, and Dante Lavelli and Mac Speedie at ends, they quickly developed a passing game of deadly efficiency. What is remarkable, however, is what seems to be an underutilization of Motley, and a closer look at his career reveals some astonishing numbers.

For example, in his 8 years with the Browns, Motley averaged an incredibly low 8.3 carries per game. In his best season, 1948, the year he had an AAFC-leading 964 yards, he averaged only 11.2 carries per game. And two years later, when he won another rushing title in his and the Browns' first season in the NFL with 810 yards, he hit his career high with 11.7 carries per game. Compare those numbers with the career figures of other great runners like Dickerson (20.5 carries per game), Payton (20.2), Brown (20.0), and Campbell (19.0). Even allowing for the fact that the best backs from Motley's era had lower figures than outstanding backs from later eras because of changes in offensive strategies, his carries per game figures are still lower than a number of his contemporaries. For example, the best NFL back of the 1940's, Steve Van Buren, averaged far more carries per game than Motley in all of their common years

(1946-1951). His career figure (15.9) is almost double Motley's. And even in Motley's two best years, Van Buren's carries per game is 60% higher than Motley's (18.3 to 11.2 in 1948 and 18.8 to 11.7 in 1950.)

The other astonishing statistic that emerges is how low Motley's carries were as a percentage of his team's total rushes. He never carried for more than 30% of his team's rushes in any one season and wasn't even first on his own team in carries in 1946, when he was under 15% (Edgar "Special Delivery" Jones led the Browns that year). He's way below Van Buren in every season during a five season stretch when both men were at their peaks (1946-50), with Van Buren having a figure almost twice as high in 1946 (27.5% to 14.8%) and 50% higher in two other seasons (45.8% to 30.5% in 1947 and 41.6% to 28% in 1949). And although the disparity is greatest in comparison with Van Buren, Motley's figures in both categories are lower in different seasons than a number of other backs of that era including Joe Perry, Elmer Angsman, Spec Sanders, Tony Canadeo, and Gene Roberts.

Again, even taking into consideration changes in the game over the 50 years since Motley played, the difference in his numbers and those of great backs of more recent times is mind-boggling. Walter Payton and O. J. Simpson account for over 50% of their team's carries in every one of their peak seasons. Jim Brown is consistently above 60% during his peak. Earl Campbell accounted for a staggering 77.5% of Houston's rushes one season. And Eric Dickerson was over 70% for a 5 year span at the height of his career. During his 5 peak seasons, on the other hand, Motley carried on only 26% of his team's running plays. We can only wonder, as Zimmerman and Motley do in the conversation between the two that is a part of a chapter in Zimmerman's "A Thinking Man's Guide To Pro Football", what numbers Motley would have put up had he been a more featured part of Cleveland's offense.

While playing, however, the only statistic Motley concerned himself with, as Paul Brown once said of him, was the final score. The Browns won 5 championships and appeared in 8 championship games in Motley's 8 seasons with the team and had an overall regular season record of 87-12-3. In addition to his devastating rushing, he was an integral part of the Browns' passing game. A good receiver, he did catching the ball what he did when he ran from scrimmage: he made more yardage than was there, averaging 13 yards per reception out of the backfield. Probably the play Motley is best known for to modern fans is one that pops up every so often on highlights shows where he takes a desperation pass from Graham in the left flat in that same record-breaking 1950 game against the Steelers, eludes several tacklers, has his helmet knocked off as he's seemingly pinned against the sidelines, and breaks free for a touchdown.

But in the opinion of Paul Brown (and Zimmerman), it was Motley's blocking that set him apart from all other backs. The Browns' passing game was the first to utilize the pocket (called a cup at the time) and Motley was an essential part of protecting Otto Graham. He became renowned for his ability to pick up blitzing linebackers or linemen who had gotten past one of Cleveland's blockers. As Dante Lavelli remembered it, "Motley really built the passing attack for the Browns because of his blocking."

Last among Motley's amazing skills was his ability to play defense at almost as high a level as he played fullback. He was a two-way player in his early pro career and Brown continued to use Motley at linebacker in crucial situations. One particularly memorable occasion was Cleveland's first NFL game against the two-time defending NFL champion Philadelphia Eagles in 1950, one of the biggest games of that era because it matched the AAFC's champions against the best team in the NFL. Leading 7-3, Cleveland was backed up on defense at its 6 yard line when Motley entered the game at linebacker. Four straight times the Eagles ran the ball in an effort to crack the Browns' end zone and four straight times Motley broke through to bring down the ballcarrier. The game turned decisively in Cleveland's favor, they drove and scored, and the Eagles were ultimately defeated 35-10. Again, Paul Brown from his autobiography: "I've always believed that Motley could have gone into the Hall of Fame solely as a linebacker if we had used him only at that position."

Motley's knee problems eventually returned, and from 1951 on he did not play at the same high level he had played at up until that time. Age was also a factor: because of the late start he got playing professionally, he was 31 after having played only 5 seasons. However, he remained an important part of the Cleveland dynasty and led the team in rushing for the sixth and final time in 1952. He was forced out by Brown after the following season, but, feeling he could still play, made a comeback with the Steelers in 1955 after sitting out a season. He played only 7 games that year almost exclusively at linebacker, then retired for good.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 4 (2002)

What he considered to be his premature phase-out and his inability to get a job in coaching with the Browns left Motley frustrated and eventually embittered towards his old coach. Overtures to former teammate Graham about a coaching job with the Redskins in the 1960's when Graham was head coach of that team also led nowhere. Motley lived in the Cleveland area for the rest of his life, working at various jobs and raising a family. He was a part of the sixth ever class to go into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in the city where he grew up, the second African-American after Emlen Tunnell to be inducted. He died in 1999, still a legendary player to an earlier generation of football fans and a highly regarded friend to many of his teammates.

MARION MOTLEY

FB-LB

6-1, 232

South Carolina State; Nevada-Reno

HS: McKinley [Canton, OH]

B: 6 / 5 / 1920, Leesburg, GA

D: 6 / 27 / 1999, Cleveland, OH

YEAR	LG	Gm	ATT	YDS	AVG	RUSHING	
						TD	
1946	Cle	AAC	13	73	601	8.23	5
1947	Cle	AAC	14	146	889	6.09	8
1948	Cle	AAC	14	157	#964	6.14	5
1949	Cle	AAC	12	113	570	5.04	#8
1950	Cle	N	12	140	*810	5.79	3
1951	Cle	N	11	61	273	4.48	1
1952	Cle	N	12	104	444	4.27	1
1953	Cle	N	12	32	161	5.03	0
1954	Voluntarily retired						
1955	Pit	N	7	2	8	4.00	0
9 Yrs			107	828	4720	5.70	31

- Led AAFC; * - Led NFL