

LENNY MOORE

By Andy Piascik

Watching the old black and white footage, the play begins as just another end sweep around the left side. There's the offense coming set, the horseshoes on the players' helmets immediately identifying them as the Baltimore Colts. There's the familiar number 19 John Unitas taking the ball from center and turning to hand the ball off to Lenny Moore. And there's Moore taking the handoff just outside his own 20 yard line, moving quickly to the outside behind his line as the defense belatedly reacts. Suddenly it is no longer just another end sweep as in no time Moore is out in the open field.

Clearly the fastest man on the field, Moore hits the sideline with still more open space in front of him. There is no game sound accompanying the images but one knows from legend that a 60,000-strong roar is filling Memorial Stadium by now. Deep in enemy territory, Moore is forced to turn inside and it seems that this nice run is about to come to an end. But there's Moore deftly evading several tackles and breaking another as he cuts back to the inside, then with one last burst away and back slightly to the outside, he breaks free and crosses the goal line.

It was the most important and possibly the greatest play in the history of the Baltimore Colts up until that time. Moore's 73 yard touchdown run came in the fourth quarter of a Western Conference battle against the 49ers in Baltimore on November 30, 1958. Looking to clinch their first-ever conference title, and with the specter of their collapse in the final two weeks of the previous season hanging over them, the Colts played terribly in the first half. They fell behind 27-7, and discomfoting thoughts about whether their first place lead would go the same way as 1957's must have crept into the minds of many in the crowd, and perhaps a few in the Baltimore locker room.

Moore's run brought the Colts all the way back, however, and gave them a 28-27 lead in a game they would win a short time later. When the final gun sounded, Memorial Stadium erupted in a celebration as wild as any football stadium has ever seen. The Colts players were swarmed over by fans who began lining the sidelines as the game wound down, and Moore, among others, was carried off the field in triumph. It was not only a great Colts moment but one of the great moments in football history.

Moore's career is filled both with great runs and exciting victories. Nicknamed Spats for the way in which he wrapped white tape around his football shoes, he burst into the NFL in 1956 after an outstanding career at Penn State, immediately establishing himself as a great breakaway threat and winning the Rookie of the Year award. Moore was a part of the Colts teams that were back to back champions in 1958 and 1959 and perennial contenders through his final season of 1967. He was one of the most dangerous offensive players of all time, one of the few who was equally capable of breaking a long run from scrimmage and of catching the deep pass. The Colts used him both out of the backfield and on the flank and throughout his career he was a potent threat who put tremendous pressure on defenses and complemented offensive teammates John Unitas, Alan Ameche, Raymond Berry, Jim Mutscheller, John Mackey, and Jimmy Orr.

Because he was never utilized as a heavy duty runner (he reached 100 carries in only 3 of his 12 seasons), Moore never contended for a rushing crown. His best year on the ground was 1961 when he gained 648 yards. Of note, though, is the fact that in four different seasons he led the NFL in yards per carry, three times averaging over 7.0. And even though he was deployed out of the backfield the majority of the time, Moore was among league leaders in receptions in the five seasons from 1957 through 1961, and was among the leaders in total yards from scrimmage those same seasons and again in 1964. His 1,175 yards from scrimmage in 1957 was tops in the NFL and he was second to Jim Brown in 1958 when he reached his career high of 1,536 yards. In his book *Fatso*, Colt Hall of Famer Art Donovan spoke of Moore as "a willowy little guy who could run, catch, and block with equal ferocity."

Moore's biggest seasons in receiving yards were 1958, when he finished second in the league with 938 yards on 50 receptions, and 1960, when he finished third with 936 yards on 45 catches. Both of those

totals are the equivalent of a 1,250 yard receiving season in today's 16 game schedule. Moore was also consistently near the top of the NFL's leaders in yards per reception during his prime years and was over 20 yards per catch in 1960 and 1964. He averaged 18.7 yards per catch in the four year period from 1957-1960 and 16.6 for his career, figures that are all the more impressive for someone who did as much of his pass catching out of the backfield as Moore did. Despite a very low average of 7.5 carries per game for his career, Moore rushed for 5,174 yards, a total which placed him 9th all-time at the time of his retirement. And while that figure has been surpassed by many in the last 35 years, his 4.84 yards per carry over his career is still 6th all time.

Moore was also among pro football's all-time best at getting into the end zone. Longtime teammate Berry remembered him as "probably pound for pound, the best offensive weapon – scoring weapon – that I've ever seen." He was the first player in history to score 20 touchdowns in one season (1964) and he scored a total of 113 in his career. He averaged a touchdown per game over the five seasons from 1957 through 1961, and is still in the record books for scoring at least one touchdown in more consecutive games (18) than anyone else. Moore's career average of a touchdown per every 6.2 receptions puts him among the all-time leaders and he is 8th all-time in touchdowns per games played at .790. Perhaps the most remarkable of Moore's statistics, though, is one that he apparently ranks first in all-time (although there is no official career leaders list): 1 touchdown rushing for every 16.95 carries, including an incredible touchdown per every 10 rushes in 1964. Moore's career figure is far better than such great runners as Jim Brown (22.25), Gale Sayers (25.41), Walter Payton (34.89), and O.J. Simpson (39.41). Only Paul Hornung (17.86) and Steve Van Buren (19.13) appear to be close.*

Many of Moore's touchdowns were dramatic and came at crucial times for the Colts. The 73 yard run in the 1958 game against San Francisco may have been his biggest, but there were many others over his twelve seasons that were the difference between victory and defeat. In his rookie year of 1956, Moore broke long, game-winning touchdown runs in the fourth quarter of consecutive Baltimore victories over the Packers and Browns. In a two week span in the latter stages of the 1960 season, with the Colts going after a 3rd consecutive championship, Moore caught touchdown passes in the final seconds against the Bears and Lions. The catch against the Bears was a 39 yard game-

*The research I did on this is far from complete and any more detailed information that readers may have would be most welcome.

winner that came on a 4th and 14 play with 19 seconds left and kept the Colts atop the Western Conference; the 38 yard score against Dick "Night Train" Lane and the Lions with 14 seconds left to play was one of the greatest catches of all time, a truly unbelievable grab that Moore spoke about in almost supernatural terms in an interview years later. (Almost as unbelievably, the Lions scored on a 65 yard pass to win on the last play of the game, striking a deadly blow to the Colts' season.) In a critical game against the Packers in the conference-winning season of 1964, Moore scored with a minute left to give the Colts a 24-21 victory. And he also caught a 59 yard touchdown pass in Baltimore's 1959 title game victory over the Giants.

Five times Moore was selected to the NFL's all-pro team. He played in 7 Pro Bowls and received Comeback Player of the Year honors for his record-breaking 1964 season after playing in only seven games the year before because of injuries. That was particularly sweet for Moore because Baltimore coach Don Shula had attempted to trade Moore after the 1963 season and found no interest. He was also named Player of the Year by one wire news service that year and received the Jim Thorpe Trophy as MVP in a vote of league players. He was one of 6 backs voted to the NFL's all-1950's team and was voted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1975.

Moore's role in the famous 1958 NFL Championship has been somewhat obscured by the accomplishments of some of his teammates in that game. For while Unitas, Berry, and Ameche are the Baltimore offensive players most likely to come up in discussions of the Colts 23-17 overtime victory over the Giants, Moore also had a big game that day. He caught 6 passes for 101 yards, one of which was a key 11 yard reception on 3rd and 10 when the Colts were on the ropes deep in their own territory at the beginning of the tying drive in the final moments of regulation. More than any statistics, though, is the fear Moore put into the Giants defense that day, a fear so great that he was double-teamed for much of the game. Cornerback Lindon Crow could not handle Moore one on one and on one play, Moore came very close to putting the Colts in the lead early in the 4th quarter. With the Giants ahead 17-14, Moore got behind the New York secondary and caught a long pass from Unitas near the Giants goal line, but just out of bounds.

The threat of such plays to Moore is in part what gave Berry, operating on the opposite side of the field, room to work that day. There was no way the Giants could double team Moore *and* Berry, and Unitas was able to find the weaknesses in New York's defense at crucial moments of the game. Berry finished the game with record breaking totals of 12 catches and 178 yards including numerous key catches during Baltimore's tying and winning drives. Finally, Moore also threw a path-clearing block out of the backfield on Ameche's winning touchdown run.

Beyond the numbers and more than any one play or one game, though, was the sheer artistry of Moore breaking loose for a long gain. Baltimore defensive back Carl Taseff remembered it this way: "Anytime somebody would get close to him, he just knew how to cut. And fluid. He was like a symphony on the football field." Whether it was going deep to catch a bomb, turning a short pass into a long gain, or breaking free on a run, Moore in his prime was one of those rare players capable of breaking a big play anytime from anywhere on the field. In the open field he moved with the grace and beauty we associate with Hugh McElhenny, Gale Sayers, Barry Sanders, and a precious few others, the handful of great runners who consistently made defenders miss with their moves, were strong enough to break tackles, and fast enough to run away from just about anybody.

Although vindicated by his performance in 1964 (a year in which the Colts made it back to the championship game), Moore was not satisfied with his situation with the Colts. He later said that Shula made a commitment to play him strictly at receiver and then did not follow through. Since the Colts had Berry, Orr, and Mackey, it is not clear how this could have been done other than in a three wide, one back set, but Moore was convinced that his career could have been extended and been more productive had he played exclusively outside at that point in his career. He felt that the pounding he took at 190 pounds running and blocking inside (which he had been doing for 9 seasons by then) was not the most effective use of his skills. (Interestingly, the exact same conflict took place a few years later just 40 miles away when Washington coach Otto Graham moved Bobby Mitchell back to the backfield even though he had made all-pro several times as a wide receiver. Mitchell resisted on the same grounds as Moore, and Graham went so far as to bench the Future Hall of Famer for suggesting that the move was not the best utilization of *his* skills). Moore was right at least in that his production in the final third of his career did drop, and he was further angered at Shula for writing him out of the Colts plans and essentially forcing him to retire after the 1967 season.

The conflict with Shula and the bitterness it engendered in Moore touches upon another part of the Lenny Moore story beyond the glory of the football field. It is a distressing tale of anger and promise unfulfilled, of prejudice and economic opportunities that white players on the Colts took for granted but which were not as available to Moore. Part of the legend of the Colts is the warm relationship that existed between the players and the people of Baltimore. Fans baked birthday cakes and knitted sweaters for players and lived alongside and went to church with many of them. A good number of players who hailed from distant parts of the country settled in the city and were successful in business there. At the same time, however, blacks lived in a world apart, limited in where they could go and cut off from many opportunities. This was true even for famous football players like Moore, and it is an experience he has never forgotten.

In his wonderful 1994 book *When the Colts Belonged to Baltimore*, sportswriter William Gildea recounts the beloved community that was Baltimore and its Colts when he was growing up there in the 1950's. When confronted with Lenny Moore's experience, however, he examines the painful truth of segregation and racism that was also a part not just of Baltimore but of the United States as a whole. "On our side of the [color] line life was almost idyllic," Gildea writes. White people in Baltimore "didn't cross that line, didn't even think to cross it, and didn't know the pain being experienced on the other side."

Moore knew and felt the pain, and he resented it. While white teammates were able to feel the love of a city on an almost daily basis, Moore was dealing with being confined to the black sections of town. "You couldn't go to the movies downtown," he told Gildea. "You're supposed to be relaxing, thinking about a game, getting ready, and you're carrying this thing."

It was not an entirely new experience for Moore. He was born poor as well as black in Reading, Pennsylvania into a large family in the bleakest year of the Great Depression. His father worked in a steel mill and supplemented his income by doing repair jobs. Moore's mother worked as a domestic. He was the first in his family to go to college, and the only one of 11 siblings to do so. He starred at Penn State but also experienced the isolation of being in an overwhelmingly white world as well as the hypocrisy of being simultaneously a star athlete and a second class citizen.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 5 (2002)

What was jarring for Moore upon making it with the Colts was the continued coexistence of that duality of prejudice and adulation at an even higher level now that he was in the NFL. Thousands of fans cheered his

wondrous exploits on the football field, yet he still faced the limitations of racism off it. As Moore told Dave Klein, author of *The Game of Their Lives*, another book well worth reading about the 1958 championship game and some of the players who played in it: "A star and a nigger. They couldn't handle that. They were caught between hating me because I was black and needing me for their ego trips."

That kind of climate had an impact on the field, too. "The situation probably affected what I could have been," Moore told Gildea. "With both groups giving out and reaching out, maybe I could have been even a better ballplayer than what I was. Because it affected you to the point that sometimes you ended up getting moody, and that hurt you...Like if I could just play football without this pressure and tension and constant thing on me, what a joy it would be."

In some ways, things got more difficult for Moore after he retired. He had to deal not just with the difficult transition of having one's primary career over at 34, but also with confronting a double standard in his efforts to start a new one. He spent 1968 doing NFL games for CBS-TV as the first black network analyst but was not rehired after that one season. Moore then bounced around for seven long years before getting hired by the Colts as community relations director in 1975. He enjoyed the work and seemed to have found a way to establish deeper roots in Baltimore and get to know the people of the city in a way he had not been able to do during his playing days, but was let go from his job not long before the Colts moved to Indianapolis.

Still unresolved were the feelings of what might have been with his old teammates. At a gathering of ex-Colts at a restaurant owned by former defensive standout Bill Pellington, Moore raised the disappointment of not having been able to get to know any of the white players, of not having been able to enter their world and forge closer friendships. His remarks were met by an uncomfortable silence. Only Ameche and Berry, on earlier occasions, had ever expressed regret to Moore about the obstacles he and other blacks had faced, and at the harm segregation had done to them all as teammates and as human beings.

Eventually Moore went to work for the state of Maryland in substance abuse prevention for youth, and he seems to have reached a certain level of peace, both with himself and some of his Colts teammates. "Touching one of these kids is the most important thing I could ever do," he told Gildea. "The majority of these kids have never had anyone tell them they're loved [and] just putting your arm around them is a major thing because in a lot of cases no one has ever done it." Art Donovan and Jim Mutscheller are two of the main people he has come to rely on to meet and talk with the kids with whom he works.

"The whole process that I've learned in my later years is to give, man. That's bottom line, that's the whole thing, regardless of what venture I may be in. That's fulfilling, that's what life's about. What can I do that can help you?"

LENNY MOORE

HB-FL 6-1 198 Penn State
b: 11/25/33, Reading, PA

YEAR	RUSHING					RECEIVING			
	G	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD	NO	YDS	AVG	TD
1956 Bal	12	86	649	*7.55	8	11	102	9.3	1
1957 Bal	12	98	488	*4.98	3	40	687	17.2	7
1958 Bal	12	82	598	*7.29	7	50	938	18.9	7
1959 Bal	12	92	422	4.59	2	47	846	18.0	6
1960 Bal	12	91	374	4.11	4	45	936	20.8	9
1961 Bal	13	92	648	*7.04	7	49	728	14.9	8
1962 Bal	10	106	470	4.43	2	18	215	11.9	2
1963 Bal	7	27	136	5.04	2	21	288	13.7	2
1964 Bal	14	157	584	3.72	*16	21	472	22.5	3
1965 Bal	12	133	464	3.49	5	27	414	15.3	3
1966 Bal	13	63	209	3.32	3	21	260	12.4	0

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 5 (2002)

1967 Bal	14	42	132	3.14	4	13	153	11.8	0
12 Yrs	143	1069	5174	4.84	63	363	6039	16.6	48

* - Led NFL