

# **DERRELL PALMER**

By Andy Piascik

Derrell Palmer considers the years of his pro football career the best time of his life. Where wins and losses are concerned, Palmer's career was certainly a rousing success. His teams played in their league championship game in seven of his eight seasons and won almost 80% of their games. And if he never quite became a household name, that was partly due to the fact that he played with and for many of the legendary figures in the annals of pro football, men like Otto Graham, Bruiser Kinard, Paul Brown, Ace Parker, Lou Groza, Spec Sanders, Bill Willis, Ray Flaherty, Arnie Weinmeister, and Marion Motley. But while he may have been overshadowed, few who played with or against Palmer overlooked his skills as a player.

Born in Breckenridge, Texas, Palmer was an excellent athlete as a boy and then at Texas Christian University. In addition to football, Palmer played baseball and ran track in high school. He persevered even after sustaining a major hip injury in high school, one that was so serious that doctors told him he would never play football again.

The decade of the 1940's was a glorious era for football in the Southwest Conference, and Palmer led TCU to a conference championship in his junior year. Along the way he first encountered a number of players he would meet again in the pros including Jack Russell, Bruce Alford, and Weldon Humble.

A two-way tackle who stood 6'2" and weighed 240 pounds, Palmer was TCU's defensive captain, was named all-conference twice, made All-America as a senior, and led the Horned Frogs to the 1942 Orange Bowl. There where they lost to a Georgia team that was led by Heisman Trophy-winner Frankie Sinkwich, another future teammate. He was drafted by the powerhouse Bears upon graduating in 1943 but instead went into the Marines.

Rising to the rank of lieutenant, Palmer spent two years in the Pacific and a third in Pearl Harbor, where he played for the base football team. Palmer was not very impressed by the \$2,000 contact the Bears were offering, and his prospects improved with the formation of the All-America Football Conference. He signed with the AAFC's New York Yankees for \$4,500 a short time before being discharged and joined the team for their inaugural season in 1946.

For two years, the Yankees were one of the best teams in football. They featured former NFL standouts like Parker, Kinard, Sinkwich, Perry Schwartz, and Pug Manders as well as newcomers Palmer, Russell, Alford, and a dynamo tailback named Orban "Spec" Sanders. In addition, the Yankees were coached by Ray Flaherty, who had won NFL championships as both a player with the New York Giants and as a coach with the Washington Redskins. The Yankees posted records of 10-3-1 in 1946 and 11-2-1 in 1947 and won the AAFC's Eastern Division both years.

"We had a lotta talent," Palmer said recently. "It was a good mixture." Palmer was especially impressed by Sanders, another player he first encountered in college. In 1947, Sanders had one of the greatest offensive seasons ever in pro annals as he compiled 3,631 yards passing, rushing, and returning kicks and scored a record 19 touchdowns.

"Spec was a deceptive runner, and a determined and dedicated football player," Palmer said. Sanders was so fearless running with the ball, Palmer recalled, that it may have been the reason he played only four seasons. "He was not that big of a guy and he really took a lot of shots."

The Yankees came up short against Cleveland in their two AAFC title game appearances and then fell to 6-8 and third place in 1948. It was a frustrating season for Palmer in particular, both because of the losing and because his playing time diminished when Flaherty was replaced by Red Strader after four games. At the end of the season, Palmer was traded to the Browns.

"I was surprised but I was also elated," Palmer said of being traded to a team that the Yankees, as good as they were, had never been able to beat. The Yankees used the single wing on offense while the Browns went strictly with the T-formation, Palmer recalled, and that gave Cleveland a big advantage in the passing game. That advantage, he thought, was one of the main reasons for their success against New York. Palmer was also very impressed by Cleveland's coach.

"I had learned playing against Paul Brown's teams that that guy knew what he was doing and had a great football mind." Palmer respected Flaherty and thought him a good coach, but "he didn't have the knowledge Paul Brown had."

The eight years of Palmer's career mark the period that pro football evolved from the era of players going both ways to the two-platoon system. Until the end of his career, however, Palmer remained a throwback, playing both offense and defense.

"I played a few 60 minute games," Palmer said matter of factly. By contrast, he said, some players from the single platoon era were a liability on one side of the ball or the other. Palmer recalled a teammate who was one of the best offensive players of the postwar era but, he said with a laugh, "couldn't play a lick of defense."

Brown once told Palmer that the reason he traded for him was that he was impressed that a man of his size was also as quick and as fast as he was. One indicator of that speed were the training camp races he had with Arnie Weinmeister in the one season the two played together in New York. Weinmeister was the fastest lineman in football, and he was faster than a whole lot of ends and backs as well.

"I never could beat Arnie," Palmer said of their races, "but he never beat me by much more than half a step."

In his first three years with the Browns, Palmer played mostly defense, but he also spelled Groza and Rymkus on offense. His ability to play all four tackle positions made him especially valuable. After Rymkus retired, Palmer's playing time on offense increased as he shared time with John Sandusky, although he still spent more time on defense.

Sandusky has said that Rymkus and Palmer taught him a great deal even though they knew doing so might make them expendable sooner. Their willingness to teach a younger player who was a potential replacement was the kind of attitude that ran through the Browns, Sandusky thought, and was a big reason why the team was so successful for so long.

Palmer has fond and vivid memories of the 1950 season, Cleveland's first in the NFL. Like so many AAFC veterans, Palmer felt that the league's reputation was on the line that year. Looking back, he said "the AAFC was every bit as good" as the NFL.

"We prepared a great deal for our first game against the Eagles," he said of the team's smashing 35-10 debut against the two-time defending NFL champions. The Browns went on to win the league championship that year, and they made it back to the title game in each of Palmer's three remaining seasons. In all, they posted a 40-8 regular season record during the NFL half of Palmer's career.

In his last two seasons, the Browns experienced a fair amount of upheaval at the defensive tackle spot, and Palmer's steady play was important to their continued success. During that time, Chubby Grigg was traded, John Kissell went to Canada, and

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Bob Gain was injured one year and in the military the other, yet the Cleveland defense continued as the NFL's best.

Palmer may not have been spectacular, but he was a solid player and he helped make the middle a very difficult place for opposing runners. Playing alongside Len Ford, Palmer's dependability and ability to stay at home allowed Ford the freedom to crank it up and go all out after the quarterback.

By 1954, Palmer had a family that lived in Texas year round, and he found the separation too disruptive to family life. He retired after eight seasons and then worked for many years for the Sherwin-Williams Paint Company. He continued decades-long friendships with fellow Texans Alford, Russell, Humble, and Grigg and lives not far from where he grew up. Palmer's son Scott followed in his father's footsteps, playing tackle for the University of Texas's 1969 national championship team and for two seasons in the NFL.

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### DERRELL PALMER

Palmer, Derrell Franklin

Texas Christian

B: 8 / 27 / 1922, Breckenridge, TX

Drafted: 1943 Round 4 ChiB

1946 NY-A 13

1949 CleA 11

1952 Cle 11

DT

6-2, 240

HS: Albany [TX]

1947 NY-A 14

1948 NY-A 14

1951 Cle 10

9 yrs 96

### "Uniform Numbers"

I compiled a book called Uniform Numbers of the NFL this year and wanted to publicize 2 related web pages for researchers:

1) The Online Supplement page

(<http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~maxymuk/home/numbers.html>) is an update to the book and includes any additions or corrections that I find or are reported to me.

2) The Ongoing Research pages

(<http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~maxymuk/home/ongoing/ongoing.html>) are intended as a clearinghouse of uniform number data for the 40+ NFL franchises that vanished before the New Deal. There are links to the rosters of each of those teams. If you have access to game programs, local newspaper listings or even team pictures that provide uniform numbers for these teams, please forward the information to me and I will post it here and credit your contribution. Similarly, if you have evidence that a team did not wear numbers on their jerseys in any seasons, forward that as well.

Thanks

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