

JIM PARKER

By Don Smith

For the Pro Football Hall of Fame

Jim Parker was an exceptional star for 11 seasons with the Baltimore Colts. Yet he received his first "game ball" on December 10, 1967, three days after he retired. No other proof is necessary to underscore the thankless task of the offensive lineman, the unsung hero of professional football. For Parker, however, the long wait for the game ball was exceptional because most honors came quickly and in a steady stream for the 6-3, 275- pound All-America from Ohio State.

Even pro football's highest honor, election into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, came in January of 1973, immediately after Jim's mandatory five-year retirement period was over. He was the first "pure" offensive lineman inducted into the Hall. Included among previous enshrinees had been two-way players who starred on the offensive line but Jim stood as the first who spent his entire pro career at the obscure task of clearing the way for the backfield stars who dominate the headlines.

In Jim's case, he may have received more attention than most offensive line stars because he was helping protect pro football's most fabled passer, Johnny Unitas. The fact that Parker and his teammates did the job well goes a long way toward explaining the unprecedented passing feats of Unitas and the overall success of the Colts under both of the coaches for whom Parker played, first Weeb Ewbank and later Don Shula.

Parker's career was further set apart from those of most offensive linemen in that he played the first five-and-one-half years at left tackle and then in mid-1962 switched to left guard, a totally different position with totally different responsibilities. During this period, he was all-NFL eight straight seasons, the first four as a tackle, the last four as a guard. During those same years, he was a member of the Pro Bowl's West team every season.

Jim's most-remembered assignment at both positions was to protect Unitas. But particularly when he moved to guard, he took on a host of additional duties. That he was able to perform equally well at either spot is a testimony not only to his great natural ability but also to his fierce determination to succeed on the NFL playing field.

One big difference in the two positions was that, as a tackle, Jim ordinarily drew the defensive end as his primary blocking assignment. At guard, he drew the bigger and stronger defensive tackles.

"That is one thing I liked about playing guard," Parker compares. "The tackles were bigger and usually not as agile as the ends. I liked the big guys. Speed boys gave me trouble. I also noticed that the guard's blocking space was comparatively limited. Blocking a defensive end meant more movement. The end had lots of space outside to roam."

As a guard, Jim had to do a lot more running, particularly on plays where he pulled to lead the interference on a Colts' sweep.

"At guard, your legs get tired from all the pulling and running you have to do," Parker summarizes.

Whatever the differences, Jim adjusted well and soon the Colts were relying on him to punch holes in the defense for their running backs, as well as to keep Unitas healthy.

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Particularly near the end of a scoring drive, it became highly predictable that Parker would be called upon to lead the way for a Colt running back, hopefully into the end zone.

Parker was labelled as a future great from the moment he joined the Colts as a No. 1 draft choice in 1957. He was a two-way performer at Ohio State, but he had excelled on defense. He had won the Outland Award in 1956. The Award is given by the Football Writers Association to the nation's outstanding college lineman.

Woody Hayes, Ohio State's veteran coach, had recruited Parker from Scott High School in Toledo, Ohio. Jim had played only his senior season at Scott after transferring from a high school in Macon, Ga. "I think I was only fourth-team all-state," Parker recalls, "so I was delighted to get a chance to go to Ohio State." Hayes took a special interest in Parker and even had him stay at his home during his freshman season. When Parker joined the Colts, Hayes confided to Ewbank that he felt his prize pupil's best shot would be on defense.

Right from the first day of the 1957 summer camp, however, the Colts geared Parker for the offensive unit even though he actually had very little practice pass blocking for the run-dominated Buckeyes and his main job at Baltimore would be to pass block.

The Colts opened their 1957 exhibition season in Cincinnati against the Chicago Bears and the Colts threw 47 passes.

"We threw the ball more that day than we did all my four years at Ohio State," Parker remembers. "In the first half, I played against rookies and it wasn't so bad. Then in the second half they threw Doug Atkins at me. Man, did he give me a lesson that day."

That day marked the start of a Parker-Atkins "feud" that highlighted the Bears-Colts meetings the next few years and the duel was one of several that Parker developed with some of the all-time greats. Parker always came out well in such encounters.

"I used to think that I could outmaneuver any big tackle but that Parker can stay with anybody," Andy Robustelli, the New York Giants great defensive end, once said. "He sure could move with me. The only way you can beat him is to make him move his head. But he is too strong and too good and too smart to do that."

"It didn't take me long to learn the one big rule," Parker summarizes his career. "Just keep 'em away from John. I remember Coach Ewbank telling me my first summer in camp: 'You can be the most unpopular man on the team if the quarterback gets hurt.' How could I ever forget that?"

Obviously, Parker didn't forget and he earned a number of nicknames in the next few years --Johnny Unitas' bodyguard, the mother hen, the den mother, the guardian, Jumbo Jim. Almost any nickname that meant that he did his job superbly would have been appropriate.

When a knee injury failed to respond to treatment, Parker voluntarily stepped aside as an active player late in the 1967 campaign because "I can't help the team and I won't deprive 40 guys of their big chance."

The Colts were undefeated at the time and hopefully headed toward a big Super Bowl pay day, in which Parker might have shared.

"It was one of the most unselfish moves ever made in sports," Colts coach Shula said. "Jim has stepped aside strictly to help the team. He will be remembered as one of the greatest offensive linemen in pro football history."

Shula was already a great coach and he proved himself to be a great prophet as well!

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JAMES THOMAS (Big Jim) PARKER

Offensive Guard-Tackle

Born: April 3, 1934, at Macon, GA

Hgt: 6-3 Wgt: 275

High School: Toledo, OH, Scott

College: Ohio State, received BA in PhysicalEd. 1956

Named to Look All-American Team 1955

Consensus All-America 1956

Winner Outland Trophy 1956

Member of College Football Hall of Fame

Selected on 1st Round of 1957 NFL Draft

Pro Bowl following 1958-59-60-61-62-63-64-65 seasons

All-Pro Selections:

1957 Sporting News Western Team

1958 A.P., U.P.I., N.E.A., Pro Football Weekly, NY News

1959 A.P., U.P.I., TSN Western Team

1960 A.P., U.P.I., TSN Western Team

1961 A.P., N.E.A., TSN Western Team

1962 A.P., N.E.A., TSN Western Team

1963 A.P., N.E.A.

1964 A.P., U.P.I., N.E.A., TSN Western Team

1965 A.P., U.P.I., N.E.A., TSN Western Team

Elected to Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1973

Year	Team	Lg	GM
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1957	Baltimore Colts	N	12
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1958	Baltimore Colts	N	12
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1959	Baltimore Colts	N	12
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1960	Baltimore Colts	N	12
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1961	Baltimore Colts	N	14
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1962	Baltimore Colts	N	14
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1963	Baltimore Colts	N	14
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1964	Baltimore Colts	N	14
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1965	Baltimore Colts	N	14
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1966	Baltimore Colts	N	14
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1967	Baltimore Colts	N	<u>3</u>
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11 years			
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Returned one kickoff for 15 yards in 1963