

Is There Life After Football: Sonny Randle

By Bob Barnett & Bob Carroll

"How does that song about New York go? "If you can make it there, you'll make it anywhere!" Sonny Randle made it in New York.

Randle, who finished his ten-year pro career as a back-up receiver for the Dallas Cowboys in 1968, spent most of those years hauling in passes for the St. Louis Cardinals. His 9.6 speed and sure hands won him respect – even fear – from opposition defensive backs, but the Cards' consistent also-ran status kept his name absent from the average household lexicon.

Ah, but that one game in New York ...

It was November 4, 1962, and the Giants (5-2 record) with Tittle, Gifford, Huff, Robustelli, and the rest were cruising to still another NFL Eastern Division Championship, their fifth since 1956. The Cardinals (2-4-1 record) were on their usual trip down the drain. A sell-out crowd of 62,755 filled Yankee Stadium, anticipating an easy New York win.

Sonny, the only deep threat in the Cardinal cupboard, normally lined up at split end on the left, pitting him against Giant All-NFL cornerback Erich Barnes. For this game, Coach Wally Lemm decided to switch Randle to right side flanker, pitting him against Giant All-NFL cornerback Dick Lynch. Talk about out of the frying pan ...

"It was just one of those days when everything went right," Sonny remembers. "I wasn't knocked down; the ball wasn't knocked down; and the quarterback wasn't knocked down – you have to have a combination of circumstances like that to have a day like that."

What kind of a day? All Randle did was catch 16 passes (two short of Tom Fears' NFL record) for 256 yards. The combination of such a high number of catches and so much yardage made it perhaps the best day a receiver ever had in the NFL. By comparison, when Fears set the record for the Rams in 1950, he gained only 159 yards. And he did it in a one-sided game. Randle caught his in a dog-fight.

With quarterback Charley Johnson in only his fourth start throwing, and with Randle catching, the Cardinals held a 14-10 halftime lead over the heavily-favored Giants. The second half had three lead changes – unfortunately for the Cardinals the last change resulted in a 31-28 Giant win.

Sonny didn't know he was close to the record until after the game. Typically, he gave Charley Johnson most of the credit: "Anybody could catch the ball the way Johnson was throwing."

Ironically, only two weeks before his greatest game, Sonny was ready to quit pro football altogether. He had dropped four passes in a debacle in Cleveland and felt he was hurting the team. Another game like that, he promised, and he'd pack it in. Fortunately for the Cardinals, he never had occasion to make good on that promise.

Sonny – given name, Ulmo Shannon Randle – followed a winding road to football stardom. At Fork Union Military Academy in Virginia, he was a one-man track team, starring in everything from the 100-yard dash to the discus throw. But it wasn't until his senior year that he talked athletic director Gus Lacy, virtually his guardian, into letting him go out for football. After three games, a broken collarbone ended his first grid season.

Still, in that short period, he'd shown enough that Virginia Military Institute offered him a grant-in-aid. Once there, however, he suffered a bad attack of home-sickness. After an agonized long-distance call to Lacy, Sonny returned home.

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Randle transferred to the University of Virginia, only a 40-minute drive from Fork Union, and earned a grant-in-aid as a walk-on. At Virginia, his 9.6 speed made him a deep threat, but during his first two seasons he was only a threat because the Cavaliers ran most of the time. Yet at the end of his junior year the Chicago Cardinals drafted him as a "future" on the nineteenth round. (He was eligible because of the abbreviated year at Virginia Military Institute).

The Cardinals were lucky. He would have been drafted in an early round the following year. In 1958 Virginia went to a wide open passing attack, and Randle was second in the NCAA in receiving with 47 catches.

"This may sound corny," said Randle recently, "but my biggest thrill in pro football was the Tuesday before our first league game in Chicago when I was notified that I had made the club. There wasn't anything after that that meant anything more."

Sonny's rookie season was less than thrilling. In college his speed carried him past defensive backs. In the NFL, backs stepped up and decked him with a forearm. He caught only 15 passes during the whole season.

But during that season, Jimmy Hill, veteran Cardinal safety, and legendary cornerback Dick "Night Train" Lane worked Randle over in practice. Once they had his attention, they taught him how to become a wide receiver. From the close of his rookie season in December until training camp opened the following July, Randle worked out every day, using the things Hill and Lane had taught him, and watched game films of other receivers every night.

The work paid off. Sonny caught 62 passes for 893 yards and 15 touchdowns in 1960. He was named to the AP, UPI, and *Sporting News* All-Pro teams in only his second season. "That was my best year," said Randle. "That's when I felt I became a fixture in the NFL."

Randle had six more good years with the Cardinals (who moved to St. Louis in 1960), was traded to San Francisco in 1967, and joined the Cowboys in 1968. "The Dallas organization was first class from the president all the way to the ground keepers," Randle recalled. "And there has never been anyone better as a football coach than Coach Landry. He's a coach that you would someday want to be like."

That 1968 season with the Cowboys was Randle's last in the NFL. All told he caught 365 passes for 5996 yards and scored 65 touchdowns in 10 seasons.

"I have always wanted to be thought of as one of the best receivers in the NFL. I was reaching the point that I could no longer be the best. I am not sure what it was but I wasn't as good as I once was," said Randle recently. "I didn't want to stay as a hanger-on. That just wasn't me and I wasn't going to be a part of anything like that. I had an opportunity in college coaching and that was what I knew I wanted to do."

Randle's coaching career immediately skyrocketed. Following one season as an assistant coach at East Carolina, he was appointed head coach. Randle was phenomenally successful during his three years at East Carolina winning two Southern Conference Championships and compiling a 22-10 record.

With his career on the rise Randle accepted the head coaching position at his Alma Mater, the University of Virginia. The Cavaliers were the doormat of Atlantic Coast Conference if not all college football. Randle could not resurrect the program and after a three year record of 5-17 left Virginia under pressure.

Sonny accepted the football coaching position at Massanutten Military Academy (a prep school in Woodstock, VA) in 1977. In two seasons Massanutten teams went 19-3 and earned Randle another chance as a head college coach.

In 1979 Randle was hired as head coach at Marshall University, a division 1 AA school in Huntington, West Virginia.

Like Virginia, Marshall was a doormat and in fact had not had a winning season since 1964. And as at Virginia, Randle's skyrocket burst at Marshall. In five seasons (1979-83) under Randle the Thundering Herd had a record of 12-42-1, which was about par for Marshall coaches. Despite a somewhat improved record of 4-7 in '83, Randle was fired from his Marshall position on November 20 of that year.

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In an interview conducted just a few days before he left Marshall, Sonny Randle talked about life after pro football. "Pro football is such a very special glamorous life. You're at the top of your profession playing with the very best. Everything was super as far as playing. But the pressure of having to perform every Sunday worked on me. If you can do a certain thing on Sunday that can help your team win then they expect that each time out. If you don't, then you feel like you let a whole lot of people down. The mental pressure was tougher for me than the physical. But you're in the big time, the best there is. It's a great life. I wish I could go back and live that life over again and appreciate it to the fullest."

"It was a shock to me to go from the glamorous type life in pro football, and then all of a sudden I was an assistant college coach," Randle continued. "But I got so involved and so much a part of coaching youngsters that I didn't miss it as much as I thought I would."

Randle concluded with some advice to current NFL players. "Life after pro football is anything you want to make it. If you don't want a life you can keep saying, 'I was this and I was that,' but that and a quarter will get you a cup of coffee. When playing is over with, brother, you've got to be ready to fire, and you find out what life is really all about. Just be prepared because it will be a real shock. But life after pro football has been very good to me. I think I have worked hard and it's been rewarding."

Sonny Randle's Pass Receiving Record

<u>Year</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Yards</u>	<u>TD</u>
1959	Chicago Cardinals	15	202	1
1960	St. Louis Cardinals	62	895	15
1961	St. Louis Cardinals	44	591	9
1962	St. Louis Cardinals	63	1158	8
1963	St. Louis Cardinals	51	1014	10
1964	St. Louis Cardinals	25	517	6
1965	St. Louis Cardinals	51	845	9
1966	St. Louis Cardinals	17	216	2
1967	St. Louis Cardinals	33	502	4
1968	S.F. - Dallas	4	56	1
10 seasons		365	5996	65