

## **JACKIE SMITH: REVOLUTIONARY RECEIVER**

**By Don Smith**

Jackie Smith wanted to play high school football but managed to see action for only half a season. He had no intention of playing college football but wound up as a four-year regular. He never even dreamed of playing professional football but he played 16 quality seasons in the National Football League.

The improbable career of the 6-4, 232-pound tight end completed its incredible cycle in January, 1994, when he was accorded his sport's ultimate honor, election into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

In between his aborted attempt to play football in high school and his final NFL season in 1978, Smith, hard-working and determined, fashioned a landmark career with the St. Louis Cardinals for 15 seasons from 1963 to 1977. He finished his pro football tenure with the Dallas Cowboys in 1978.

At the time of his retirement, Smith ranked as the leading tight end receiver in NFL history. He had 480 catches for 7,918 yards and 40 touchdowns. Jackie hit his personal high-water mark with 56 receptions for 1,205 yards and nine touchdowns in 1967, when he was named to the all-NFL team. He caught more than 40 passes seven different years and was selected to play in the Pro Bowl after five of those seasons.

Not only was he the top-ranking tight end when he retired, he also ranked 11th among all career receivers and third among active receivers at the time. Today, he is surpassed only by Roy Green among all Cardinals receivers.

Smith's 16.5-yard average per reception was a reflection of both his excellent speed and determined running style. He was fast enough that he was often used on end-around rushing plays. On 38 rushes, he averaged 8.6-yards per carry and scored three touchdowns.

The 6-4, 232-pounder was an all-around excellent football player. He obviously was a talented receiver, but he also was a punishing blocker, a fierce competitor and a difficult-to-stop runner after he caught the ball. He even was the Cardinals regular punter for three years from 1964 to 1966. As he was nearing the end of his career in the mid-1970s, he also filled in as a kickoff returner in emergencies.

No player ever was more determined to play than Smith and, even though he battled injuries a good part of his career, he missed only 12 games in 16 years. The Cardinals offensive co-captain, Jackie saw service in his first 121 games before a knee injury in 1971 ended his streak and caused him to miss the last five games of the season. Altogether, he played 210 games, 198 of them with the Cardinals and the last 12 with Dallas in 1978.

Smith was born on February 23, 1940, in Columbia, Mississippi, but his family migrated to Louisiana. It was there at Kentwood high school that his football career had its shaky beginnings. Jackie was a first-chair clarinet player in the school band but by the time he was a sophomore, he decided he wanted to give football a try.

He went out for spring practice as a sophomore but he suffered a torn achilles tendon and had to sit out the entire year. As a junior, he had osteomyelitis in his ankle but "at least I got out of the band for good." Smith did get to play in the second half of the last game of his junior season. "We were in the single wing and I was one of the backs," he recalls. "I ran so goofy that the other team couldn't figure out what I was doing."

Smith started his senior year as the first-string tailback but incurred a severe hip injury in the fourth game. His high school grid career amounted to about one half of one season -- five games in all.

"I didn't get any football knowledge in high school," Smith says. "I didn't even know what a draw play was. The only reason I went to college was because of track. I ran track the whole time I was in high school and eventually won the state championship in the hurdles in my division."

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Smith's still-undeveloped football career got a big boost because of a scholarship rule that would permit Northwestern Louisiana State College to offer only a half a scholarship for track. But if Smith would agree to playing football, he then could get a full scholarship.

He was not a major star during his four years at Northwestern Louisiana but he did display enough speed to impress Jack Rockwell, then the Cardinals trainer and a part-time scout, who watched him in a spring game before his senior season.

Jackie was the 10th round selection in the 1963 draft. "On the basis of my college record, I have no idea why they drafted me," he said. "I'm sure I was selected on the basis of my track ability."

The Cardinals programmed the 210-pound trackman to play flanker, but good fortune intruded again. Fran Polsfoot was the Cardinals end coach. He saw possibilities for Smith as a tight end, a position that was just becoming popularized by such stars as Mike Ditka and John Mackey, who along with Smith are the only tight ends to be elected to the Hall of Fame.

Jackie recalls the help that Polsfoot gave him as a rookie. "The tight end is both a lineman and a receiver, so the position didn't really have a coach," Smith said. But Polsfoot had played the position so he could teach me things like how to protect myself, how to fake and how to get proper position on my pass patterns. He kept my faith up, and he kept faith in me."

Smith got his chance at tight end when starter Taz Anderson was injured early in the 1963 season. He really won the spot for good in a 24-23 victory over the Pittsburgh Steelers that still stands as a landmark performance in Jackie's career. He caught nine passes for 212 yards, more yardage than he had gained in his senior season in college.

Reflecting on how he made the team that first year, Jackie said: "I had a lot of things going for me -- some people who were interested in me, God-given ability and being in the right place at the right time."

The result was a veritable revolution in the duties of the tight end. "Tight end play has changed quite a bit since I started with the Cardinals seven or eight years ago," Smith once said. "In man-to-man coverage, the tight end once was used mostly for blocking. Guy likes Ron Kramer mainly caught short passes over the middle. The defenses soon started doubling up on outside people, so the offenses needed an extra receiver fast enough to get away from linebackers."

Tight ends like Smith were assigned pattern routes much like the wide receiver. They were expected to be more mobile to give the quarterback as many options as possible when he was looking for possible receivers. For the tight end of the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was no longer a question of being able to beat a man-to-man coverage but being able to recognize a zone defense and go to the appropriate area.

With his 235-pound body on a 6-4 frame, Smith's 4.7 speed in the 40 was comparable to that of many wide receivers. The combination proved devastating for defensive backs once Jackie hauled in a pass. Running with great determination, Smith didn't try to avoid tacklers but preferred to run through and over them instead. He seemingly took a personal affront to anyone trying to tackle him.

"I never wanted to give up before I had to," Smith said. "Your teammates were all out there working hard and it was a great obligation to them to get every bit of yardage I could."

The Cardinals' head coach, Wally Lemm, was one of Smith's earliest enthusiasts. "Everybody liked Jackie from the first day we saw him," Lemm said. "In fact, we wondered why he wasn't drafted until the 10th round. Two things I remember best. If you got the ball to Jackie, he would catch it. Then he would set sail for the end zone and nothing was going to stop him. He was just a bull to bring down."

One of the Cardinals coaches described Smith as a "runaway horse" once he got his hands on the ball.

"I think he called me that because I know about as much about where I am going as a runaway horse," Smith responded when asked about the remark. "I really don't have any idea of where I am going. I just go. I don't think how to stiff-arm a guy or give him a leg. If a guy is ahead of me, most likely, I'll put my head down and try to run over him."

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The ferocious competitive spirit of Smith as a player was in direct contrast to his off-the-field demeanor. He was polite and soft-spoken and his conversation was flavored with the intonations and expressions of his southern upbringing. There was a puckish sense of humor in his talk.

In the mid 1970s, when he was reaching the latter stages of his NFL career, Smith often was asked about his fondest memories. His response was invariably the same. He couldn't remember scores and he perhaps chose not to recall exceptional personal achievements. What he would remember was the big moments that his teammates experienced.

"I never was much on scores," he said. "I usually forgot them as soon as the game was over. But when Charley Johnson (quarterback) left St. Louis. that's a moment I couldn't forget and when Sonny Randle was traded . . . when Bobby Joe Conrad played his last game."

But when asked to remember a big game of his own, Smith responded: "I can't rightly recall any one game because I enjoyed every game I ever played in. If a pass I caught helped our team win, that was what counted."

To others, though, two Smith catches against Dallas in a 1971 game stand out in their memory. Just before the half, Jackie caught a pass from Jim Hart and incredibly broke five tackles in a furious burst into the end zone. Earlier that same game, Smith was on the receiving end of an 81-yard pass on a halfback-option play that ended just short of the goal line.

Smith was furious that he hadn't made it to the end zone but he could laugh about it later. "I guess that was the first sign that this old man was slowing down. That wouldn't have happened a couple of years ago."

But as it turned out, there was still one short chapter to play in the Jackie Smith saga. After four games of the 1978 season, the Dallas Cowboys, decimated by injuries to their tight end squad, called on Smith to fill the void. He played in 12 regular-season games for the Cowboys and then got his first chance to play in a Super Bowl. The best the Cardinals could do in Smith's 15 seasons were NFC East divisional championships in 1974 and 1975 followed by first-round playoff losses.

In the Super Bowl XIII clash between the Cowboys and the Pittsburgh Steelers, the Steelers led 21-14 late in the third quarter but Dallas had the ball on the Steelers' 10. Roger Staubach elected to pass to Smith, who was wide open in the end zone. But when the ball arrived, Jackie dropped it. Ironically, it was the only pass thrown to him during his Cowboy tenure.

Staubach was quick to insist that the ball was poorly thrown behind the receiver. The disconsolate Smith took the blame, however, saying that the pass was catchable. While the failed play did not necessarily lose the game for the Cowboys, the Steelers did eventually win, 35-31. Because the Cardinals were never in the national media spotlight during Smith's stay in St. Louis, the dropped pass before a huge Super Bowl television audience unfairly became the most famous play of his career.

Still, one missed reception does not a career make and the words that Jackie Smith spoke a year earlier when he left the Cardinals more aptly sum up his career.

"I had more football than I thought I would ever get," he said. "I went farther than I thought I could go. And probably more than I ever deserved. It's been a tremendous experience."

### **JACKIE L. SMITH**

TE 6-04 235 Northwestern Louisiana

b: 02/23/40, Columbia, MS

Drafted 10th Round St. Louis 1963

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### JACKIE SMITH'S RECEIVING RECORD

YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	NO	YDS	AVG	TD
1963	StL	N	14	28	445	15.9	2
1964	StL	N	14	47	657	14.0	4
1965	StL	N	14	41	648	15.8	2
1966	StL	N	14	45	810	18.0	3
1967	StL	N	14	56	1295	21.5	9
1968	StL	N	14	49	789	16.1	2
1969	StL	N	14	43	561	13.0	1
1970	StL	N	14	37	687	18.6	9
1971	StL	N	9	21	379	18.0	4
1972	StL	N	14	26	407	15.7	2
1973	StL	N	14	41	600	14.6	1
1974	StL	N	14	25	413	16.5	3
1975	StL	N	9	13	246	18.9	2
1976	StL	N	12	3	22	7.3	0
1977	StL	N	14	5	49	9.8	1
1978	Dal	N	12	-	-	-	-
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16 years			210	480	7418	15.5	45