

# EARL CAMPBELL, THE TYLER ROSE

By Don Smith

Few teams in pro football history ever paid a higher price to obtain the rights to a prized prospect than the Houston Oilers did when they shipped a well-regarded tight end and four high- round draft picks to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers so that they could pick Earl Campbell in the 1978 NFL selection meeting.

The 5-11, 233-pound Campbell was one of the most heralded collegians in years for good reason. In four seasons at the University of Texas, he rushed for 4,444 yards and was named to the all-Southwest Conference team four times. He was the 1977 Heisman Trophy winner and the first person in the 20th century to be designated as a Texas legend by the state legislature.

The Oilers viewed him as a home-state hero they simply had to have. While it was obvious that he could be a superstar on the field, they felt he could provide a big boost for the club's image off the field as well. He was the dominant figure in the Houston offense for six-and-one-half years before being traded to the New Orleans Saints midway into the 1984 campaign. He played there until his retirement in the 1986 preseason.

In just nine seasons, Campbell rushed for 9,407 yards, caught 121 passes for 806 yards and scored 444 points on 74 touchdowns. He averaged 1,175 rushing yards a year, an average surpassed by only three ball-carriers in history. And he turned the Oilers, who hadn't earned a playoff berth since the 1969 American Football League season, into championship contenders.

So it is not surprising that in his first year of eligibility in 1991, Campbell was accorded his sport's highest honor, membership in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

## **Even More Than Expected**

The Oilers, who signed Campbell to a \$1.4 million, multi-year contract shortly after he was named as the first player taken in the 1978 draft, got what they bargained for and much more. From the very start, the fullback with the excellent speed that was powered by driving, churning legs took the NFL by storm. In 1978, he was named the NFL's Most Outstanding Offensive Player, all-NFL and Rookie of the Year. He became the first rookie since Jim Brown in 1957 to win the NFL rushing championship with 1,450 yards and was named to the AFC Pro Bowl squad.

Campbell got even better in 1979 and still better in 1980, which turned out to be his finest season ever. In 1979, he won his second straight rushing title with 1,697 yards and has an NFL-leading 19 rushing touchdowns. In 1980, he rushed for more than 200 yards, in a record four games and wound up with 1,934 yards, third highest in history behind only O. J. Simpson in 1973 and Eric Dickerson in 1984. He was all-pro, NFL Player of the Year and a Pro Bowl participant both years.

As Campbell flourished, so too did the Oilers. The Oilers finished 10-6 in 1978 and 11-5 the next two years. All three years, the Oilers finished second in the powerful AFC Central division and then were eliminated by the eventual Super Bowl champions, the Pittsburgh Steelers in 1978 and 1979 and the Oakland Raiders in 1980. In seven playoff games in three years, Campbell prevailed against the crack defensive units keyed to stop him and led the Oilers rushers six times.

## **Humble Beginnings**

At the age of 25, Campbell reigned at the top of the pro football world. His elite status existed in marked contrast to his earlier years which began with his birth in Tyler, Texas, on March 29, 1955. He was named Earl Christian after the doctor who delivered him.

When Earl was in sixth grade, his father, B. C., died. His mother Ann, who was left with seven sons and four daughters, kept the family together by tending the family's 100 acre rose field and by working as a maid several days a week.

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Their home was a shack along a blacktop country road between a junkyard and a peach orchard. When Earl tried to apologize for the frayed furniture in his home during a recruiting visit by Darrell Royal, the Texas coach replied softly: "I grew up in a shack, Earl. I know what it is like."

Ann Campbell was a devout Christian and she saw to it that her children attended church regularly. But by the time he entered high school, Earl had strayed into smoking, drinking and pool hustling. Before the final football game of his junior season at Tyler High School, he was suspended for missing classes. His mother, who was determined that Earl was going to make something of himself, sternly reminded him that a lucrative pro football career might lie ahead if he took his opportunities more seriously. The next year, he led the undefeated Tyler Lions to the Texas State 4A championship.

Campbell was heavily recruited by several colleges but finally narrowed his choice down to Texas or Oklahoma. Earl decided to let God make the choice. If he slept through out the next night, he would go to Oklahoma. If his sleep was disturbed at any time, he would view that as God's way of telling him he should choose Texas. Earl awakened at least once and so was on his way to Texas to become the first member of his family to earn a college degree. He majored in speech communications.

When Earl first entered Texas, he promised his mother he would build her a new home if he did well enough at Texas to be able to play in the pros. Soon after he signed his first Oilers contract, Campbell followed through on his promise. On the Easter Sunday after her son's rookie season, Ann Campbell and the two children moved into a four bedroom, brick, ranch-style house with a paved semicircular driveway and a two-car garage.

### **Staying Home**

When it came time to think of pro football, Campbell hoped he could play with a team from his home state. When the Dallas Cowboys selected Tony Dorsett in the 1977 draft, it became apparent that, if Earl were to play in Texas, Houston would be the team.

Campbell made a tremendous, and immediate, impact on the Oilers in a number of ways. Coach Bum Phillips explained: "(Quarterback) Dan Pastorini now has some weapons to fight with. It used to be that Dan was like a sword fighter with a pocket knife. Now he has his sword."

The prized rookie not only was a threat as a big-play game- breaker but he was also the Oilers' "bread and butter" ramrod in short-yardage situations. On 54 occasions with less than three yards needed for a first down during his rookie season, Campbell converted 37 times for a .685 success percentage.

Yet in his finest career performance in the 12th game of his rookie season, Campbell scored the winning touchdown on an 81- yard run that saw him elude a tackler behind the scrimmage line, break free at the sidelines and outrace all defenders to the end zone. Overall, he rushed 28 times for 199 yards and four touchdowns as the Oilers defeated the Miami Dolphins, 35-30, before a packed Houston Astrodome and a national Monday night television audience. For the first time, the masses knew exactly how devastating Campbell could be.

Campbell was more than just a runner, however. "I thought Earl would be the kind of runner he is," Coach Bum Phillips said, "but he really surprised us with his blocking, faking and pass protection. He's a good run-blocker, too. He's got absolutely no regard for his body or anybody else's body."

As good as he was from the very start, Campbell was always willing to try to improve. During his second season, Oilers backfield coach Andy Bourgeois commented on his improvement as a runner. "Earl reads blocks better now. Last year, he had the tendency to jump in there too quick and try to run over people. He hasn't punished as many people this year but he's smarter and he still makes the big yardage against teams geared to stop him."

Campbell also recognized that his teammates were a key to his success. "If I lay down and die today," he said midway through his career, I can say I've realized my dream. If there's one thing I love to do, it's to play football But it isn't a one man show." He provided a tangible expression of that feeling during his landmark 1980 campaign when he gave each of his offensive linemen an 18-karat gold Rolex watch.

### **A Cloud**

But a cloud appeared on Campbell's sunny horizon when Phillips, with whom Earl had developed a warm rapport, was suddenly fired and assistant coach Ed Biles was named to replace him for the 1981 season.

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The new mentor first opted to use Campbell more as a pass receiver and then decided to shift from the I-formation with its one deep back to the pro-set offense with split backs. "We hope to open up our running game and make Earl effective doing other things," Biles explained. "Rarely can one individual control the game. Earl is still big in our plans but he won't be the entire offense."

In 1981, Campbell caught 36 passes compared to the 36 receptions he had his first three seasons. He also rushed for 1,376 yards and 10 touchdowns and went to a fourth Pro Bowl. But for the first time, he was not selected to the all-NFL team. In the strike shortened 1982 campaign, Earl led Houston rushers with 538 yards but his per-carry average dropped from a career-high 5.2 yards in 1980 to just 3.4 yards.

Trade rumors involving Campbell arose for the first time but he responded with another big season with 1,301 yards rushing and 12 touchdowns in 1983. He also earned a trip to the Pro Bowl for the fifth and last time. The Oilers expected big things in 1984 from a rejuvenated Campbell teaming with new quarterback Warren Moon and rookie coach Hugh Campbell. But Earl suffered a serious knee injury in pre-season and, when the Oilers lost their first six games, they traded Campbell to New Orleans for the Saints' No. 1 draft pick in 1985.

While the trade did reunite Campbell with his favorite coach, Phillips, the big fullback was forced to share playing time with another big-yardage rusher, George Rogers. Campbell carried just 50 times for 190 yards in 1984. Earl always had said he would play in the NFL just seven years but, perhaps because of Phillips, he came back for an unproductive eighth season in 1985. Coach Phillips retired with four games left that year. Campbell followed him into retirement after two pre-season games the next summer.

### **In Review**

In reviewing Campbell's eight years in the NFL, it is clear that he experienced two distinctly different tenures. From 1978 to 1981, Earl averaged 22.6 carries and 104 yards rushing per game and the Oilers had a 39-25 record. In his final four seasons, his production dropped to 14.8 rushes and 56 yards per game. The won-lost total of the Oilers and Saints those four years was a dismal 12-47.

There are some who suggest Campbell wore out, that the heavy-duty ball-carrying he endured early in his career was simply too much. Earl once admitted that running backs can get "shellshocked" when met on every play by the force of gravity at the line of scrimmage. "I didn't ever get that way," he said, "but I wasn't far from it."

However, those who had the experience of tackling Campbell remember him with awesome respect. "All you can do is close your eyes and hope he doesn't break your helmet," Dallas safety Cliff Harris once said.

Throughout his football-playing days, Campbell was a much honored individual. Yet honors were something the somewhat shy and silent fullback never openly sought. "I'm just a guy who believes if you work hard enough, some awards will come your way. I just try to let my accomplishments speak for themselves."

No one would argue that Campbell, who today operates a football camp for youngsters and serves as a counselor at the University of Texas, had the kind of career that certainly did "speak for itself."

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### **CAMPBELL, EARL RB**

Earl Christian Campbell  
5-11 233 Texas Tyler HS [TX]  
Born: 03/29/55, Tyler, TX  
Consensus All-America, Heisman Trophy 1977  
First selection on 1st round 1978 NFL draft  
Pro Bowls following 1978-79-80-81-82-83 seasons  
ALL-NFL 1978-79-80; NFL MVP three times  
National Football Foundation Hall of Fame 1990  
Pro Football Hall of Fame 1991

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YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	RUSHING -----				PASS RECEIVING --				
				ATT	YDS	AVG	TD	NO	YDS	AVG	TD	
1978	Hou	..	N	15	302	*1450	4.8	13	12	48	4.0	0
1979	Hou	..	N	16	*368	*1697	4.6	*19	16	94	5.9	0
1980	Hou	..	N	15	*373	*1934	*5.2	*13	11	47	4.3	0
1981	Hou	..	N	16	*361	*1376	3.8	10	36	156	4.3	0
1982	Hou	..	N	9	157	538	3.4	2	18	130	7.2	0
1983	Hou	..	N	14	322	1301	4.0	12	19	216	11.4	0
1984	Hou-NO		N	14	146	468	3.2	4	3	27	9.0	0
1985	NO	...	N	16	158	643	4.1	1	6	88	14.7	0
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8 years			115	2187	9407	4.3	74	121	806	6.7	0	

\* - Led conference