

DAZZLING DOAK WALKER

By James Bankes

The death of Doak Walker in 1998 shocked the football community. He seemed to be an athlete frozen in time, forever dashing and youthful. When he died, we all realized we could die too.

Some called him "Dazzling Doak" because of his movie star looks. He appeared on 47 magazine covers, including *Life*, *Look*, and *Collier's*. Kyle Rote, Walker's teammate at Southern Methodist University, once saw a man buying a football magazine and advised, "Don't do it. There's no picture of Doak Walker on the front cover."

For football people, however, dazzling meant Walker's firework: on the field. A member of both the Pro Football Hall of Fame and the College Football Hall of Fame, he earned All-Pro honors four times with the Detroit Lions. At SMU, he won the 1948 Heisman Trophy and gained All-America recognition three times. Today, the annual Doak Walker Award goes to the country's best college running back.

Walker's rise to the zenith of the football world began at Highland Park High School in Dallas, Texas, where he teamed with flamboyant quarterback Bobby Layne. After graduation, Walker stayed home to play halfback for the SMU Mustangs, while Layne headed for the University of Texas Longhorns and the bright lights of Austin.

Walker gained national attention during the first game of his sophomore season when SMU met the Santa Clara Broncos at Kezar Stadium in San Francisco. Twice in the second quarter the Bronco defense seemed to have him trapped behind the line and twice he escaped, once for 18 yards and again for 24 yards. In the third quarter, Walker raced 44 yards for a touchdown and returned a kickoff for a second score. He also booted three extra points as SMU won 22-6.

The Santa Clara game established a pattern of brilliance Walker continued for the remainder of his SMU career. He played on both sides of the ball as a quarterback, running back, wide receiver, and defensive safety. He hit the ball, passed, returned kicks, punted, kicked off, and did all the placekicking.

Kyle Rote, who called him the greatest football player ever, remembered Walker's toughness. "He only weighed about 170," Rote said, "but he could block and tackle with the best. He just loved to hit."

Walker joined the Detroit Lions in 1950 and became an immediate star. His 128 points scored fell just 10 shy of Don Hutson's NFL record.

"Doak was a great football player," said Leon Hart of Notre Dame, Walker's fellow Heisman winner and teammate with the Lions. "He lacked great speed, but he had quickness and as someone once observed, he was so shifty he could get away from a tackler in a telephone booth."

John Panelli, another Notre Dame man, also played with Walker on the Lions. "Doak was the nicest guy on the team," Panelli remembered. "No big head. No big star stuff. He was so humble he even tried to turn down his 1949 All-America selection because he believed others deserved it more."

Walker, the man, also impressed Lions' middle backer, Joe Schmidt. "People had more respect for Doak than for anyone else," Schmidt said. "Actually, it was more like adoration. You could never find anything bad to say about the guy."

"He would stay out on the field for hours after practice signing autographs. The kids followed him everywhere and he never turned any of them down. If you want a role model, Doak Walker would certainly be a great choice."

In 1950, Detroit acquired Walker's old high school friend Bobby Layne from the New York Bulldogs. A tough guy, and a free spirit both on and off the field, Layne played quarterback with macho intensity. Fearless, he wore no protective gear beyond a helmet and razor-thin shoulder pads. Every Sunday, he stood as the bull's eye for defenses led by men with killer instincts, men such as Ed Sprinkle, Hardy Brown, Night Train Lane, Leo Nomellini, and Country Meadows. But Layne thrived in the face of the monster, throwing 196 touchdown passes during his career, and running . . . yes, running for almost 2,500 yards.

By their third year together, Layne and Walker, men of contrasting personality, but great talent, led the Lions to the 1952 NFL Championship Game against the Cleveland Browns, an offensive powerhouse sparked by passing genius Otto Graham. Protected by his massive fullback Marion Motley, Graham threw to an

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exceptional group of receivers led by the glue-figered Dante Lavelli.

Playing before a crowd of 50,934 at Municipal Stadium in Cleveland, the Browns threatened to score in the first quarter, but their drive ended in a colossal collision at the Detroit 18 when Leon Hart drove Motley to the ground. Layne scored the only touchdown of the first half on a quarterback sneak from the two.

Walker made it 14-0 in the third quarter with a 67-yard touchdown sprint astonishing in its beauty and grace. The Browns later scored on a plunge by fullback Chick Jagade, but the Lions won the NFL title 17-7. In 1953, Walker ran for a touchdown as Detroit repeated, this time besting the Browns in a cliffhanger 17-16.

Walker retired after the 1955 season at the peak of his career, just 28 years old. He left an enduring legacy of brilliance and versatility. His 534 points came on 34 touchdowns, 49 field goals, and 183 extra points. He also ran for 1,520 yards, an average of 4.9 per carry; caught 152 passes for 2,359 yards, an average of 15.5 per catch; and averaged 15.8 yards on punt returns and 25.5 yards on kickoff returns.

On crisp autumn afternoons, some memories drift in the mist of time to the smell of burning leaves, the sound of old leather, and the spirit of Dazzling Doak.