

ERIC DICKERSON

Well-Traveled Runner

Had a Knack for Eluding Tacklers

By Roger Gordon

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The closest Eric Dickerson ever came to playing in a Super Bowl was when he and his Los Angeles Rams teammates walked out onto Soldier Field on Jan. 12, 1986, to battle the awesome Chicago Bears for the NFC Championship. The Bears entered the game with a 16-1 record and a ferocious defense that had been utterly dominating throughout the 1985 season. Dickerson, the Rams' star running back, and his offensive teammates were completely shut down by the Bears in the form of a 24-0 rout. Dickerson was held to just 46 yards rushing after amassing 248 the week before in the divisional playoffs against the Dallas Cowboys. The Rams were limited to 130 net yards by the Bears.

Although Dickerson acknowledged the Bears did indeed possess an outstanding defense that year, he claimed the difference in the outcome on that cold afternoon in the Windy City, as opposed to the Rams' 29-13 triumph over Chicago in a regular-season game the year before, was the quarterback position. "Basically, we were the same two teams playing," he said. "Our quarterback in '84 when we beat them was Jeff Kemp. Dieter Brock was our quarterback in the playoff game."

Brock's '85 stats and Kemp's '84 numbers were even, for the most part. Dickerson, however, saw something at the position that made the difference. And who is going to argue with one of the finest running backs of all time?

"Jeff Kemp was a better quarterback than Dieter Brock," Dickerson said. "We matched up real well with the Bears. They played a nine-man front all day long, and our quarterback had a hard time with that. That was our main problem."

A key component to Chicago's defense that day was linebacker Mike Singletary, a brutal force with Chris Spielman-like intensity. Singletary's talents earned him induction to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1998.

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

Dickerson has done just that. He was one of five men voted to the pro grid shrine on Jan. 30.

Dickerson, 38, was not all that surprised when he learned of his selection to the Hall in his first year of eligibility, but was not cocky about it, either. "I think I had a good career," he said, "a career that probably warranted my selection."

Dickerson will enter the Hall of Fame as a Ram, despite the fact he played for three other teams throughout his career. Legendary Rams left tackle Jackie Slater will be his presenter. Slater spent his entire 20-year career, from 1976-95, with the Rams (the last in St. Louis) - seven B.D. (Before Dickerson), 4 ½ W.D. (With Dickerson) and 8 ½ A.D. (After Dickerson).

Dickerson chose Slater to present him due to the fact that Slater took Dickerson under his wing when he was a rookie in 1983. Ever since, the two have carried on a tight friendship. "Jackie's a good friend and knows me well," Dickerson said. "He helped me a lot when I first came into the league. He showed me the ins and outs of the pro game."

Not to take anything away from Slater, but it is probably a safe bet that Dickerson would have prospered at the pro level with or without Slater. In fact, the way Dickerson ran the ball, it is probably safe to assume that he would have succeeded with or without his entire offensive line.

Dickerson had the uncanny ability to gain forward yardage. Whether he was taking hand-offs from Vince Ferragamo, Kemp, Brock, Jim Everett, Jack Trudeau, Gary Hogeboom, Chris Chandler, Jeff George, Jay Schroeder, Todd Marinovich, or Bobby Hebert, Dickerson piled up the stats and ended his career with 13,259 rushing yards and 90 rushing touchdowns. He added 2,137 receiving yards and six receiving touchdowns.

Dickerson was a powerful back but graceful at the same time. John Robinson, the Rams' head coach from 1983-91, was awestruck by his gifted star. "If you were blind," Robinson once said, "he could run right by you, and you wouldn't know it unless you felt the wind. He's unique in that way. He's the smoothest runner I've ever seen."

Dickerson befuddled opposing defenses. The more he ran the ball, the better he seemed to play. "I can't define a weakness in Eric Dickerson," former Philadelphia Eagles, and now Rams head coach, Dick Vermeil,

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once said. "Although all great backs are multi talented, most have one thing they do extremely well. But this guy can plow through a pile of bodies like (John) Riggins and then put on the moves like (Tony) Dorsett.

The accolades just keep coming. "(Eric) was the finest running back I ever had the opportunity to look at," said Jack Faulkner, a longtime Rams executive and former NFL coach. "I remember Jim Brown and some of the other great ones. Jim Brown ran over people. This guy (Dickerson) made you miss."

Dickerson was the second overall pick by the Rams out of Southern Methodist University in the 1983 NFL Draft. He had been one of the two cogs in the Mustangs' "Pony Express" backfield his senior year, along with Craig James, now a college football television studio host.

Dickerson's head coach at SMU was Ron Meyer. Dickerson recalled Meyer doing everything but get down on his hands and knees to persuade him to attend SMU over his first choice, the University of Oklahoma, while he was recruiting him out of Sealy High School in Sealy, Texas. Dickerson amassed 311 yards on the ground in the state title game his senior year.

"Meyer told me, 'I'll make you a star, man,' " Dickerson said.

Dickerson's great-great aunt, who had raised him from birth, urged her "wanted" nephew to stay at home in Texas, and he listened. SMU was the choice.

Dickerson recalled two moments from his college playing days that he will never forget - one a positive memory, the other a not-so-positive one. Dickerson was just a sophomore on an SMU team that allowed a Jim McMahon-led Brigham Young squad to turn a 20-plus-point deficit late in the fourth quarter into a 46-45 victory in the 1980 Holiday Bowl in San Diego. Earlier that season, though, Dickerson and company shocked a University of Texas team that

was ranked No. 2 in the country - on the *road*, no less.

"That was just an incredible feeling, when we upset Texas," said Dickerson, who racked up 4,450 yards on 790 carries in his Mustang career, breaking Earl Campbell's Southwest Conference record for yards and attempts. He also scored 48 touchdowns. He was twice named the Southwest Conference's Offensive Player of the Year. In addition, Dickerson was a consensus All-American and third-place finisher in balloting for the Heisman Trophy following his senior year.

The Rams were not the only team to draft Dickerson in 1983. The Arizona Wranglers of the upstart United States Football League (USFL) selected him in the first round of that league's draft. The Wranglers offered Dickerson a lucrative contract, but just as she had done four years before when her nephew was undecided about what college to attend, his great-great aunt told him, "Go with the NFL. They've been around longer."

Dickerson listened, and signed with the Rams. It was the right decision, for the USFL folded three years later.

Upon his arrival on the NFL scene in 1983, Dickerson started basically where he left off in college. He rushed for 1,808 yards and 18 touchdowns in '83, breaking the rookie rushing record of 1,674 yards by George Rogers, set just two years before while Rogers was a member of the New Orleans Saints. Dickerson led the Rams back to their customary spot in the playoffs after they had experienced two consecutive losing seasons in 1981 and '82.

Despite his great success his rookie year, Dickerson admitted he overdid it just a tad toward the end of the season, that he was a little too eager. "I just plain ran out of gas about the last four or five games," he said. "I was trying to do too much. I realized after the season, and Jackie told me too, that I had to learn how to pace myself so I wouldn't be worn out down the stretch."

One-thousand-eight-hundred-eight yards and worn out down the stretch? Think of the possibilities had he *not* tired at the end.

Maybe 2,000 yards? Maybe 2,105?

Yes, 2,105. Dickerson, in 11 fewer attempts than the year before, became the second player to eclipse the 2,000-yard plateau by rushing for 2,105 yards on 379 carries, a remarkable average of 5.6 yards per carry. The first to break the 2,000-yard barrier was O.J. Simpson, Dickerson's boyhood idol, who gained 2,003 in 1973 as a member of the Buffalo Bills (albeit in two fewer games).

In week 15 of the '84 season at home in Anaheim Stadium against the Houston Oilers, under four minutes remained and Dickerson needed just six yards to pass O.J. Dennis Harrah, a Rams lineman from 1975-87, recalled the historic moment. "We got together in the huddle and said, 'This one's for you, Eric. Go get it.' And he did," Harrah said."

On a play called 47-Gap, Kemp handed off to Dickerson, who burst around the right side of the line for a nine-yard gain and a permanent place in pro football history. The carry gave him 215 yards on the afternoon, and 2,007 for the season. The next week, he churned out 98 yards against the San Francisco 49ers to finish his amazing record-breaking season with 2,105 rushing yards.

The Rams qualified for the playoffs again in 1984, but lost in the first round. Then came the '85 season, the only season in which the Rams won the NFC Western Division title with Dickerson there. Dickerson gained "just" 1,234 yards that year, a season that ended with the Rams' loss to the Bears in the NFC title game. In 1986, Dickerson topped the 1,800-yard mark for the third time in four years by totaling 1,821. Again,

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 27, No. 3 (2005)

a playoff spot for the Rams, again a playoff defeat for the Rams.

A contract dispute with the Rams' front office resulted in Dickerson being shipped to Indianapolis in a mid-season trade (and a reunion of sorts for Dickerson with Meyer, then the Colts' head coach) for *eight players*, one of the biggest trades in NFL history. Dickerson led the Colts, who were 4-4 at the time of the trade, to a 5-2 finish in the strike-marred season, the AFC Eastern Division title, and the franchise's first postseason berth since Johnny Unitas was still flinging the football for the Baltimore Colts in 1977. Dickerson accumulated a combined 1,288 rushing yards with the Rams and Colts that year.

The seasons that followed saw Dickerson keep the talent-starved Colts competitive and around the .500 mark, but no more. After a 1,659-yard, 14-touchdown performance in 1988, the wear and tear, and the grind of being the primary target of opposing defenses for years, was beginning to show. Dickerson's yardage totals (and playing time) began to digress. 1989: 1,311. 1990: 677. 1991: 536.

A trade to the Raiders returned Dickerson to his former stomping grounds in Los Angeles in 1992, where he contributed 729 yards on 187 carries. After a brief stint with the Falcons in 1993, "Eric the Great" finally called it quits.

Dickerson's list of honors and achievements at the professional level is as long as a Stephen King novel. Here is a sample: 1983 Rookie of the Year. 1983 MVP/Player of the Year. 1986 Offensive Player of the Year/MVP. All-Pro five times. Six Pro Bowls. Four league rushing titles. 1980s All-Decade Team.

Dickerson resides in Calabasas, Calif., with his 11-year-old daughter Erica. He works out of his home as the owner of a company called E Champs, which sells sporting goods via the internet.

One of Dickerson's surest secrets to his success was maintaining his tiptop physical condition. He possessed a rock-solid physique, standing 6-feet-3, 220 pounds in his prime. Dickerson was a seemingly tireless runner who would wait until he sensed the defense showed even the slightest sign of fatigue, and then go for the kill. "You could see it," he once said. "When they have their hands on their knees, that's when they're tired. If I get the ball enough times, something's going to give - me or the defense."