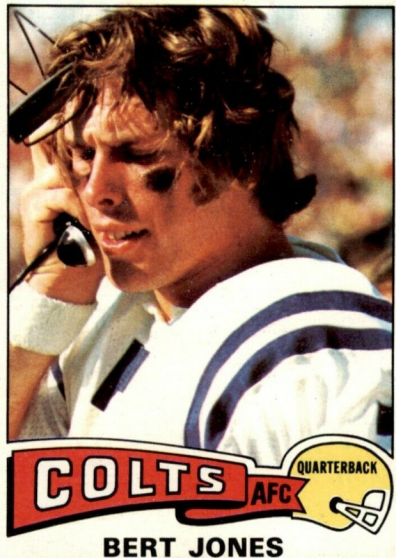


Bert Jones

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Bertram Hays Jones (b. September 7, 1951) achieved a rare feat during his playing days: he was on top of the NFL. Joe Namath, legendary Super Bowl III MVP, commented on Jones' success, "If you asked me to pick the No. 1 quarterback in the league I'd pick Bert Jones, who else?"¹ Jones led the Baltimore Colts to three consecutive AFC East titles from 1975 to 1977, in the midst of his 1976 MVP-caliber season.² In that span, Jones was 31-11 as a starter.³ His Colts won more than 30 games in a three-year stretch for the first time in nearly a decade.⁴ Do you blame Namath?



Another advocate for Jones was Bill Belichick, who worked as a scout for the team in 1975, and witnessed first-hand the type of player Jones was: "Bert Jones was a tremendous player. A tremendous player. Very athletic. He had an arm like no other, really. The kind of whip and accuracy. He had a quick delivery. He was a tremendous

1 Schwab, Frank. "Moment of Glory: Bert Jones, Johnny Unitas' Colts replacement, won an MVP and became a Bill Belichick favorite," Yahoo! Sports, May 18, 2020, <https://www.yahoo.com/video/moment-of-glory-bert-jones-johnny-unitas-colts-replacement-won-an-mvp-and-became-a-bill-belichick-favorite-131827347.html>.

2 "Baltimore/Indianapolis Colts Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/clt/>.

3 "Bert Jones," ProFootballReference.com, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/J/JoneBe00.htm>.

4 "Baltimore/Indianapolis Colts Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/clt/>.



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quarterback in an era that was a little bit different. But if he played today and was healthy, [we'd all say], 'This guy's really good.'"⁵ Speaking of his arm, growing up Jones earned the nickname, "The Ruston Rifle" at Ruston High School in Louisiana. Rumor had it he could throw the ball over 100 yards in the air. Jones took his talents to LSU, where he earned a distinguished career under center.⁶

LSU won the 1970 SEC championship and played in three bowls under Jones.⁷ He was the MVP of the 1971 Sun Bowl, etching his name in school history when he threw the longest pass in school history at 77-yards.⁸ Jones was an All-SEC selection in 1972, when he became the first LSU quarterback to earn consensus All-American. Embracing the success, LSU went 26-6-1 during his years at the school.⁹ Jones may have been most revered for his last second pass in a 1972 game against Ole Miss. With time running out, he hit back Brad Davis for the winning score, a 17-16 victory that extended the team's winning streak to 11-games.¹⁰ In the 1972 Heisman trophy balloting, Jones finished fourth, and was named the national collegiate Player of the Year by the *Sporting News*.

On his way to the NFL, Jones led the SEC in passing during his junior and senior seasons, setting school records in passing yards, completions, attempts, and passing touchdowns.¹¹ NFL ready at 6' 3" and 210 pounds, Jones left a beloved reputation at LSU. He is considered by many fans, alumni, and media to be arguably the greatest quarterback in school history due to his success and record-setting career. The success propelled him to be the second overall selection in the 1973 NFL draft by the Baltimore Colts.¹²

Jones was under a lot of pressure after he was drafted to replace Johnny Unitas, who was traded to the San Diego Chargers prior to the draft. Jones was the proper fit, according to

5 Schwab, Frank. "Moment of Glory: Bert Jones, Johnny Unitas' Colts replacement, won an MVP and became a Bill Belichick favorite," Yahoo! Sports, May 18, 2020, <https://www.yahoo.com/video/moment-of-glory-bert-jones-johnny-unitas-colts-replacement-won-an-mvp-and-became-a-bill-belichick-favorite-131827347.html>.

6 "Bert Jones, Former Player," Lib.lsu.edu, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.lib.lsu.edu/sites/all/files/oralhistory/presentations/football/biobertjones.html>.

7 "Bert Jones, Former Player," Lib.lsu.edu, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.lib.lsu.edu/sites/all/files/oralhistory/presentations/football/biobertjones.html>.

8 "Bert Jones," FootballFoundation.org, accessed April 16, 2022, https://footballfoundation.org/hof_search.aspx?hof=2397.

9 "Bert Jones, Former Player," Lib.lsu.edu, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.lib.lsu.edu/sites/all/files/oralhistory/presentations/football/biobertjones.html>.

1 0 "Bert Jones," FootballFoundation.org, accessed April 16, 2022, https://footballfoundation.org/hof_search.aspx?hof=2397.

1 1 "Bert Jones," FootballFoundation.org, accessed April 16, 2022, https://footballfoundation.org/hof_search.aspx?hof=2397.

1 2 "Bert Jones," ProFootballReference.com, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/J/JoneBe00.htm>.



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former NFL executive Ernie Accorsi, “He [Jones] had it all. Athletic, accurate, had a rifle for an arm and not only could run but was fast and powerful. He was smart, too, and could see the field and find the right receiver. He excelled under pressure, was a great leader and could carry a team on his back. Teddy (then coach Ted Marchibroda) did a great job with him in '75.”¹³

It took Jones a couple of years to jell, starting just 13 games in his first two seasons. Jones then found his groove, leading the league in lowest interception rate (2.3%) in 1975, while completing 59% of his passes.¹⁴ He led the league in passing during his monumental, 1976 campaign, throwing for 3,104 yards, which was unheard of in a mostly run oriented league. The Colts lost in the playoffs to the Pittsburgh Steelers for the second consecutive postseason. Despite the loss, Jones led the Colts to an 11-3 mark, won the AP Offensive Player of the Year award, and was both a Pro Bowl and first-team all-pro selection.¹⁵ Baltimore was the top ranked offense in both points scored and in yards gained. His 102.6 passer rating marked Jones as just the third quarterback to eclipse a 100.0 rating for the decade.¹⁶

Jones followed up his masterful campaign with a solid 1977 season. The Colts went 10-4, boasted a top ten offense, however, lost three of their final four contests to limp into the playoffs.¹⁷ Jones was named second-team all-pro by the Associated Press and *Newspaper Ent. Association*, and second-team All-AFC.¹⁸ The Colts met the Raiders in the postseason, losing in heartbreaking fashion, on December 24, 1977 at Memorial Stadium in Baltimore. Leading 31-28 with less than 3 minutes to play, the Colts failed to hold the lead, when Ken Stabler hit Dave Casper at the Baltimore 14 yard line that set up the tying field goal.¹⁹ The first overtime was scoreless, but just 43 seconds into the second, Stabler found Casper again on a 10-yard score that ended the game, 37-31 in favor of Oakland. It

1 3 Judge, Clark. “Gone too soon: The parallel universes of the Colts' Andrew Luck and Bert Jones,” Sports Illustrated.com, August 25, 2019, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/nfl/gone-too-soon-the-parallel-universes-of-the-colts-andrew-luck-and-bert-jones>.

1 4 “Bert Jones,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/J/JoneBe00.htm>.

1 5 “Bert Jones,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/J/JoneBe00.htm>.

1 6 “Bert Jones,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/J/JoneBe00.htm>.



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became known as the “Ghost to the Post” game because of the deep post routes Casper ran for several critical plays throughout the game.²⁰

August 26, 1978 marked a pivotal juncture in Jones' career. On a hit from Al Baker in a preseason contest, he suffered a separated shoulder that ended up limiting his playing time over the next two seasons. Starting just three games in 1978 and four in 1979, Jones attempted to return from injury too quickly.²¹ He played 15 games each in 1980 and 1981, throwing 23 and 20 touchdowns, respectively, but his interception numbers nearly equaled his touchdown output.²² At the time, the Colts lacked a supporting cast. Any offensive success was off-set by poor defensive performance, and the Colts were in need of a large rebuild.

In April 1982, Jones was traded to the Los Angeles Rams in exchange for first and second round draft choices.²³ He made four starts, tallying a 1-3 record before a severe neck injury effectively ended his career. He required cervical fusion surgery to repair a fractured vertebra. At the time, Jones was 31, had a family and was an entrepreneur.²⁴ He recollected, “There aren't any happy endings in the NFL. I certainly wish I hadn't broken my neck. That's five, six, seven years cut short, and with the rule changes, who knows how long I could have played?”²⁵ His career spanned nine seasons, 96 starts (47-49 career record), 18,190 passing yards, 124 touchdowns against 101 interceptions.²⁶ Among his all-conference and all-pro selections, Jones was also the recipient of the George S. Halas Courage Award (1979), inductee into the College Football Hall of Fame in 2016, and a member of the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame (1986).²⁷

Football was a mainstay in his family growing up. Jones' father, Dub Jones, was a receiver for the Cleveland Browns (1948-1955), Brooklyn Dodgers (1946-1947), and Miami Seahawks (1946).²⁸ He also worked for the Browns as a coach from 1963 to 1968.²⁹ Bert always found a way onto the football field. Looking back on his career, “When I look back on the whole experience, I have fond memories. There's not a lot of

1 7 “1977 Baltimore Colts Statistics & Players,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/colt/1977.htm>.

1 8 “Bert Jones,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/J/JoneBe00.htm>.

1 9 “Divisional Round – Oakland Raiders at Baltimore Colts – December 24, 1977,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/197712240clt.htm>.

2 0 “Divisional Round – Oakland Raiders at Baltimore Colts – December 24, 1977,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/197712240clt.htm>.

2 1 “Bert Jones,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/J/JoneBe00.htm>.

2 2 “Bert Jones,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/J/JoneBe00.htm>.



remorse.”³⁰ He also credits many of his teammates for his MVP season in 1976, particularly Roger Carr, Glenn Doughty, and Lydell Mitchell.³¹

End Notes:

- 2 3 “Bert Jones,” ProSportsTransactions.com, accessed April 23, 2022, <https://www.prosportstransactions.com/football/Search/SearchResults.php?Player=bert+jones&Team=&BeginDate=&EndDate=&PlayerMovementChkBx=yes&submit=Search>.
- 2 4 Schwab, Frank. “Moment of Glory: Bert Jones, Johnny Unitas' Colts replacement, won an MVP and became a Bill Belichick favorite,” Yahoo! Sports, May 18, 2020, <https://www.yahoo.com/video/moment-of-glory-bert-jones-johnny-unitas-colts-replacement-won-an-mvp-and-became-a-bill-belichick-favorite-131827347.html>.
- 2 5 Schwab, Frank. “Moment of Glory: Bert Jones, Johnny Unitas' Colts replacement, won an MVP and became a Bill Belichick favorite,” Yahoo! Sports, May 18, 2020, <https://www.yahoo.com/video/moment-of-glory-bert-jones-johnny-unitas-colts-replacement-won-an-mvp-and-became-a-bill-belichick-favorite-131827347.html>.
- 2 6 “Bert Jones,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/J/JoneBe00.htm>.
- 2 7 “Bert Jones,” FootballFoundation.org, accessed April 16, 2022, https://footballfoundation.org/hof_search.aspx?hof=2397.
- 2 8 “Dub Jones,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed April 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/J/JoneDu00.htm>.
- 2 9 “Dub Jones,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed April 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/J/JoneDu00.htm>.
- 3 0 Schwab, Frank. “Moment of Glory: Bert Jones, Johnny Unitas' Colts replacement, won an MVP and became a Bill Belichick favorite,” Yahoo! Sports, May 18, 2020, <https://www.yahoo.com/video/moment-of-glory-bert-jones-johnny-unitas-colts-replacement-won-an-mvp-and-became-a-bill-belichick-favorite-131827347.html>.
- 3 1 Schwab, Frank. “Moment of Glory: Bert Jones, Johnny Unitas' Colts replacement, won an MVP and became a Bill Belichick favorite,” Yahoo! Sports, May 18, 2020, <https://www.yahoo.com/video/moment-of-glory-bert-jones-johnny-unitas-colts-replacement-won-an-mvp-and-became-a-bill-belichick-favorite-131827347.html>.