

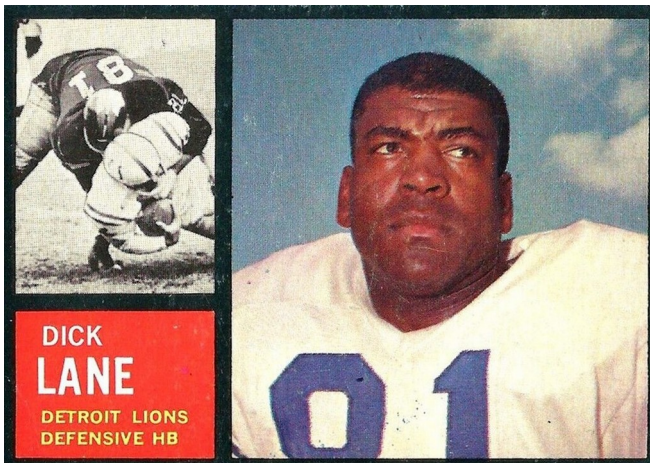
## Dick “Night Train” Lane

This article was written by David Hegler.

It was a warm, summer night in Austin, Texas and a strange sound was coming from a lonely dumpster. Ella Lane, a widow with four children, heard the noise and pondered the possibilities. What could it be? Was it a cat? As she peered into the dark tin of despair, she noticed something, someone, that she didn’t expect. Wrapped in newspaper lay a baby.

Ella was understandably shocked. The boy couldn’t have been more than just a couple of months old. Who could have possibly done this? What Ella came to find out was that the sweet, innocent infant that now rested in her caring arms was the product of one of the darkest corners of society. His mother was a prostitute who was convinced to place him in the dumpster by her pimp named Texas Slim, presumably the father. Ella took in the boy and promptly gave him a name, Richard.

Commonly known as “Dick,” the young child would be raised in a household that was run like a tight ship. As the sole provider of her large brood, Ella Lane had to be strict to keep her children in line. As he grew in stature, Dick Lane became enchanted with the game of football, helping his team at L.C. Anderson High School win the state championship in 1944.



But as he grew up, Lane often wondered about the circumstances of his birth. He often pondered the reasons for his being left in a dumpster. With his heart burning for answers, he sought them and eventually found his birth mother who now resided in America’s heartland. After graduation, Lane moved to Nebraska to spend time with her, to learn



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more about his origins and to possibly establish a relationship long strained by time, place and the ills of society. He went to school there and starred on the football field and the baseball diamond for Scotts Bluff Junior College. However, he was there for just a year before enlisting in the Army in 1948.

He served his country and played for the Fort Ord (Monterey, CA) football team. Used mainly as a receiver in those days, he earned second-team All-Army honors in 1949 and first-team honors in 1951 after catching 18 touchdown passes. Following his discharge from the military in 1952, Lane got a job at an aircraft plant in Los Angeles but quickly found the work mind-numbing and boring. On quiet nights after a hard day's work, he would look back on his exploits on the field of play, longing for the gridiron until it became a passion that burned within his soul.

One day, he passed by the Los Angeles Rams' practice facility and an idea began to grow in his mind. He would try out for and join the reigning NFL champions. So he worked up the courage to walk into the Rams' headquarters and ask coach Joe Stydahar for a tryout, armed with only news clippings of his high school exploits. Stydahar gave him a chance and he failed to impress. Lined up as a receiver, he didn't amaze the Rams' coaches like their other receivers, a group that included Elroy "Crazy Legs" Hirsch and Bob Boyd.

Believing that he stood little to no chance on the depth chart, Stydahar convinced Lane to switch to defense. Perhaps he didn't prove to be a quick study on the practice field, but come game days that rookie year, he built one of the most impressive rookie seasons of all time.

While he studied in his room during that training camp, his teammates played music on their record players to pass the time. Lane took a liking to Tom Fears' musical tastes, particularly to Jimmy Forrest's "Night Train." Many nights, teammates often found themselves watching with amusement as their mysterious rookie danced the night away to the soundtrack of that memorable song. Inspired by his quirk, they began to call him "Night Train." He didn't like it much, thinking that it had a racial meaning. But Lane eventually came around after reading a newspaper article depicting a big play he made against the Washington Redskins' Charlie "Choo Choo" Justice in a preseason game with the headline "Night Train Derails Choo Choo." He was sold on the nickname from then on.

In his first game as a professional, Lane picked off a pass thrown by legendary quarterback Bobby Layne in Detroit's Tiger Stadium, taking it 13 yards in an eventual 24-16 loss. Just days after that game, a long simmering tension between Stydahar and assistant coach Hamp Pool boiled over. By the end of the week, Stydahar left the organization, accepting a payout for the rest of the year while Pool took over the team.



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Little did Stydahar or Night Train know but they would soon cross paths in a completely different setting.

Four games later, Lane picked off two passes in a 31-7 win against the Bears. This sparked an avalanche of interceptions for the young defensive back. In the next three weeks, he picked off four more passes, gaining 83 yards against the likes of Dallas and Chicago. In a 34-21 Week 10 victory over the rival 49ers, he picked off Y.A. Tittle at Kezar Stadium.

The following week against Green Bay, he returned one of his three interceptions for a touchdown in a 45-27 smackdown over the woebegone Packers. In the season finale against the Steelers, Night Train again intercepted three passes and returned one for a touchdown in a convincing two-touchdown win to end the season on a high note. When it was all said and done, Dick “Night Train” Lane, the once overlooked prospect with barely a sliver of a resume before the season began, had set an NFL record that still stands to this day: 14 interceptions. He returned those thefts a league leading 298 yards and scored two touchdowns. From then on, the abandoned baby that had been found in a dumpster was a household name.

Unfortunately, Lane’s rookie season ended in heartbreak. Due to having been picked off by him earlier in the year, Layne was skittish about throwing in Night Train’s general direction. This strategy proved to be successful as Lane failed to intercept a pass for one of the few times all year. Still, Night Train’s teammates picked up the slack, intercepting the Lion’s great passer four times in the divisional playoff. But it was too little too late as the Rams ultimately fell to the eventual champion Lions, 31-21. Lane would never come so close to the NFL Championship Game again.

From then on, the magic that had filled Los Angeles’s smoggy sky just the year before began to evaporate. Though they would return to the title game once more before the decade was complete, gone were the days when the Rams could earnestly compete for the NFL championship. The NFL now belonged to the dynasties in Detroit and Cleveland. The cracks began to show in the foundation in 1953 when the Rams missed the playoffs despite sporting an 8-3-1 record and winning their last two games.

In the coming years, he continued to haunt quarterback’s dreams, always seeming to be in the vicinity of their passes. After two years with the organization that sparked his football career, Night Train and the Rams became involved in a contentious squabble over money. Seething at their low-ball offers, Lane requested and received a trade. But in an era where players had little to no leverage, Lane was stuck with a pretty undesirable destination - the Chicago Cardinals. Even though he joined his old Rams coach, Stydahar, it did little to stifle the stench that wafted from the years of losing.



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Alas, the times were not so good for the Cardinals in those days. After winning the NFL championship in 1948, they enjoyed just one winning season between then and 1954 while going through an inglorious carousel of coaches and quarterbacks. In his first season with the Cardinals, Night Train again led the league in interceptions, picking off 10 passes and earning his second Pro Bowl invitation. But his effectiveness in the passing game could only do so much and much of the time Lane could only watch as his team lost its first five games before stumbling to a league worst 2-10 record. It was his first venture into the life of a loser in the NFL and he didn't like it one bit.

After that disastrous season, the Cardinals fired Stydahar and hired Ray Richards as his replacement. Like many NFL coaches of his time, Richards had played in the NFL in the not-too-distant past. After earning All-America honors at Nebraska in 1929, the versatile lineman bounced around the NFL for the next eight years, playing for teams such as the Yellow Jackets, Bulldogs, Lions and Bears where he won the NFL championship in 1933. After serving several years as an assistant coach with the Rams and Colts to begin the 1950's, Richards was hired as the Cardinals' head coach in 1955.

To his credit, the team did improve, doubling their win total from 1954 in his first year at the helm and coming within two wins from taking the mighty New York Giants out of championship contention in 1956.

Meanwhile, Night Train Lane continued to dominate, intercepting seven passes and scoring a touchdown in 1956 while earning UPI's First Team All Pro honors for the first time in his career. But the life of a great defensive back can be fickle. If he's good enough, quarterbacks often throw away from him. All the great defensive backs have experienced this at some point in their careers. Players such as Deion Sanders, Darrell Revis and Richard Sherman have all suffered large swaths of time with nary a pass thrown in their direction. Lane experienced that in his last three years as a Cardinal. From 1957 through 1959, the man who once picked off 14 passes in a single season snared just seven.

But interceptions were just a part of his game. Throughout his career, he was well-known for making plays that are highly illegal today and were outlawed while he was a player. The first was the clothesline tackle. Dubbed the "Night Train Necktie," he wreaked havoc on many a helpless receiver's necks as he launched his forearms right into their Adam's Apples. This move eventually was banned from the game, but by then it was too little, too late for his victims tracheas. He was also well-known for violently forcing his opponents to the ground by pulling on the recently invented facemasks. This quickly proved to be dangerous and by 1956, the act had been banned.



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By the beginning of the new decade, Lane was ready for a fresh start, weary of all of the losing. In a complete reversal of fortune compared to the last time he was traded, Night Train was shipped to the Lions where he seemed to drink from the Fountain of Youth. In 1960 he picked off five passes, returning one for a touchdown and earning another Pro Bowl invitation. Despite having not won a championship since 1957, the Lions were still a team loaded with talent and led by a coach, George Wilson, that knew how to win. Rejuvenated with a winning atmosphere, Lane went on to collect ten interceptions over the next two years, earning Pro Bowl and All Pro honors in both.

Amazingly, he played the 1961 Pro Bowl despite having suffered from appendicitis. Showing a level of tenacity that today's players often fail to show, he blocked a P.A.T. and returned a Y.A. Tittle interception 42 yards. Lane had his appendix removed the following day.

The Lions continued to play well in 1962, finishing second for the third straight year. But it was their Thanksgiving game against the Green Bay Packers that still lives on to this day. At the time, Vince Lombardi's troops were undefeated and looked unstoppable. But this Lions squad was not one to take lightly, boasting five future Hall of Famers on their defense. With tackle Alex Karras leading the way and middle linebacker Joe Schmidt manning the middle Detroit's defense sacked Packers quarterback Bart Starr a career worst 10 times while both Night Train and Dick LeBeau each collected an interception. The rest of the Lions followed suit and jumped to a 26-0 lead by the middle of the third quarter. Despite a late effort by the eventual NFL champions, it was for naught. This was Detroit's day. The 26-14 defeat would be the only blemish on an otherwise perfect year for the Packers.

Meanwhile, Lane collected four interceptions, Pro Bowl and All-Pro honors for the 1962 Lions (11-3). The 1963 season was his last good one as he intercepted five passes. Lane had gotten married to the famed singer Dinah Washington the summer before the season began and life seemed good. But life has a way of kicking someone off of their mountaintop just when it seems like nothing bad will ever happen.

The morning of December 14, 1963, as he was getting ready to leave for the team's final game of the season in Chicago, he leaned down to kiss his sleeping wife on the forehead. Her skin felt cold and as he let his gaze wander, he noticed a bottle of pills. It was at that moment that he knew she was dead. He didn't travel with the Lions and missed their loss to the eventual league champion Bears, having suffered a much greater loss himself. Lane eventually found love again, just a year later, with Mary, a school teacher. They had a son and as they began to raise the child, Lane began to see a life outside of football. The growth of his young family coincided perfectly with the end of his career as the aging defensive back only collected one more interception for the rest of his career, before



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retiring after the 1965 season with 68 interceptions for 1,207 yards and five touchdowns. At the time of his retirement, his 68 interceptions were second on the NFL's all-time list behind Emlen Tunnell's 79.

When his playing career ended, Lane stayed with the Lions in an administrative capacity through the 1972 season before moving on to a brief coaching career at Southern and Central State Universities. In 1975, a year after his induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Lane was hired as the manager of Detroit's Police Athletic League, a position he held until his 1992 retirement. Lane died on January 29, 2002, having changed the game of football in more ways than he ever could have imagined. While working in that capacity, he found an avenue where he could give back to his community, instilling impressionable children with the values that had driven him to success in the NFL, all the while never forgetting where he had come from.

His life had come full circle. As he coached and mentored Detroit's youth, he channeled the kind of compassion that had once been shown to him when Ella Lane found him swaddled in newspaper and lying in a dumpster all those years ago. Once he had been abandoned, now he was adored and revered. On lazy Sunday afternoons, he would often notice how the league had changed with both of his signature moves (the facemask and clothesline tackles) having been outlawed since his playing days. Once he had to muster the courage to march into the reigning league champion's headquarters just to ask for a tryout, now his moves had proved to be so effective (and dangerous) that the entire landscape of the sport was changed forever. Dick "Night Train" Lane passed away on January 29, 2002, having changed the game of football in more ways than he ever could have imagined.

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