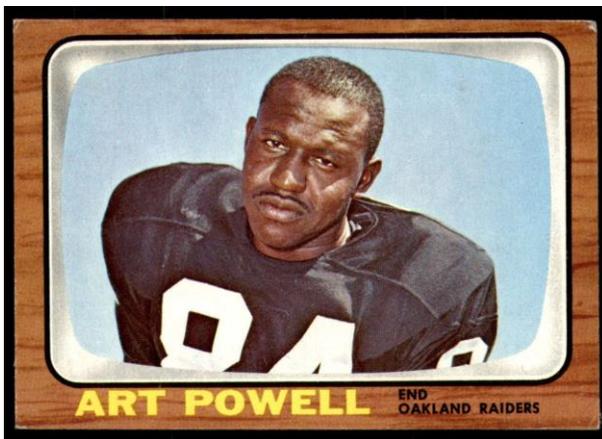


Art Powell

This article was written by Jay Zahn

Some men break the mold. Others make the mold. Art Powell chafed against the restrictions of his times. Some said that Art was the prototype for more recent egocentric recent receivers like Randy Moss or Terrell Owens. Al Davis, Art's former coach, called Art "the T.O. of his time."¹ Seemingly unstoppable on the field, and boy, did they let you know it. Trouble off the field. Art's former teammate, Tom Flores, bristled at the comparisons. "The things Owens does are all self-serving... the things Art did are because of beliefs that he had."² Art himself said that "I chose to challenge (social challenges) while others chose not to challenge 'em. ... I made a lot of people angry."³



Arthur Lewis Powell was born February 25, 1937, in Dallas, Texas, but he grew up in racially integrated San Diego, California. Multisport athletes were common in the Powell family, whose siblings ran nine deep. Father Elvin barnstormed with Satchel Paige, had been a black tennis champion in Texas, and was a scratch golfer. Oldest brother Charlie spurned football scholarships from major schools, and a basketball offer from the Harlem Globetrotters, to play pro baseball, then gave that up for a pro football career that lasted a decade in between stints as a heavyweight boxer. Younger brother Jerry would later receive a football and basketball scholarship to Michigan State.

The Powell children cut their athletic teeth at a place called '40 Acres', later Memorial Park. "We'd have our own track meets there," Charlie Powell said. "We had no starting blocks, so we'd dig holes and mark lanes ourselves. There was an old shack where we

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could check out footballs and baseballs. We saw the man in the shack had some lime in there, so we asked, and he let us have it, so we'd mark the fields with it."⁴

Charlie and Art both attended San Diego High. It was a big school, loaded with talent. Art's football and basketball teammate Willie West would log nine years in the NFL and AFL. On the football team, Art played one end; future baseball RBI champion Deron Johnson played the other. The Cavers played their games in Balboa Stadium, later expanded, and used by the Chargers of the AFL. At basketball, Art was named the San Diego City prep league player of the year in 1954.

Art attracted attention from Pacific Coast Conference schools as a football player, but lacked the grades to qualify. Instead, Art attended San Diego Junior College. Art starred on the football field and particularly the basketball court, scoring more than 30 points a game. He even attracted the attention of the Harlem Globetrotters, who "scouted" Art while he played against them in a January 1956 game.

Art's basketball season ended abruptly when he dropped out of school in February 1956 and enrolled in San Jose State shortly thereafter. San Jose football coach Bob Bronzan was accused "unethical and irregular tactics" in recruiting Art.⁵ Nevertheless, Art was starring for San Jose on the gridiron in the fall of 1956. Despite missing a game when he was suspended for falling asleep in a team meeting, he led all collegians in receptions with 40 catches for 583 yards while playing as a halfback.

Art also played on the San Jose State basketball team. Again, his basketball season ended early when he dropped out of school and signed with the Toronto Argonauts of Canada's Big Four Football League. Again, reports of tampering were levied to no avail, though it was acknowledged that Art had written the Argos personally, asking for a contract.⁶

Art caught 33 passes and scored five touchdowns playing Canadian football in 1957. At midseason, he was released by his own request after the Argos lost five straight games. He finished the season with the Montreal Alouettes, who also released him after the season. At the time, Canadian teams still expected star players to play both ways and for 60 minutes. Art's abilities as an effective deep receiver were recognized, but the consensus was that he needed to improve in his defensive play and overall effort.

Art re-signed with Toronto in 1958. "I know I didn't make a good impression last year," he said. "I know my attitude was bad. I want a chance this season to fix those mistakes

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and prove I am a good football player.”⁷ Despite his resolve, Art was released by Toronto in pre-season, and trials with Hamilton and the Kitchener-Waterloo Dutchmen also ended before the 1958 season began.

Art’s rocky experience in Canada wasn’t a total loss, as he met his wife, Betty Haggerty, whom he married in November of 1957.

In 1959 the Philadelphia Eagles chose Art in the 11th round of the NFL draft. They were encouraged to sign Art based on a letter of recommendation from an old college coach. San Jose State coach Bronzan wrote Eagles Coach Shaw, telling Buck that while Powell “looks lazy” that “he can fly... this fellow can’t miss being a star in your league.”⁸

Art did not disappoint in training camp; the Eagles considered him for offensive end, flanker, and defensive back. With Pete Retzlaff, Bobby Walston, and Tommy McDonald returning as Eagles receivers, Art wound up with a residence in the defensive backfield and on special teams. He opted to hang onto his receiver’s number of 87.

Art got off to a fast start as a kick returner; his 95-yard kickoff return against the Giants and 58-yard punt return touchdown against the Steelers helped the Eagles win both games. For a time, he led the NFL in both kickoff and punt return average. Later on, he intercepted three passes as a defensive safety. Art helped the Eagles to a 7-5 record, their best in five years.

Electric on the field, Art ran into static off it. Coach Shaw fined Art twice for breaking curfew, and Art told off an assistant coach in an argument over a play assignment.⁹

Art showed up early in 1960 to train with other Eagles before the start of training camp. He was targeted for receiver duty and even placekicking before settling in once again at safety, as a starter this time. His camp and time with the Eagles ended abruptly when he was released on August 27, the day of an Eagles exhibition game in Norfolk, Virginia.

NFL teams walked a tightrope for much of the 1960s in dealing with the American South. Interest in developing an emerging economic market was tempered with ongoing issues involving segregation and their African American players. The Eagles attempted to deal with the issue by avoiding an overnight stay in Norfolk. However, they procured a hotel on the day of the game, with the white players allowed to rest in their rooms, while the African American players were forced to stay in the hotel’s lobby.

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“We were told colored ballplayers – that was the language in those days – would not be allowed to stay with the rest of the team in the hotel. I chose not to play... it cost me my job,”¹⁰ Art said. At the time of his release, the Eagles reported that Powell had showed up to camp overweight and had played uninspired ball in two exhibition games.¹¹

Published rumors later inferred the Eagles felt Powell’s nightlife habits were a bad example for other players.¹² The two rookies the Eagles kept instead of Powell at safety, Bobby Jackson and Jim Niemann, were supplanted by veteran Don Burroughs in a trade the Eagles made a few weeks later.

Though the 1960s brought racial unrest to the USA, they also brought a new football league in the AFL. The AFL provided Art with a new job, and quickly. The New York Titans were scrambling for players; they drafted 30 players, but only three would sign and make the team. Has-beens and wannabes went through a revolving door that lasted into the season. Among the hopefuls and rejects were a few gems; NFL and CFL expatriates like Art. Flanker Don Maynard and quarterback Al Dorow had gone through both leagues as Art had.

A week after his release by the Eagles, Art scored four receiving touchdowns in an exhibition against the Buffalo Bills. No more kick return and safety work for Art. The Titans won their first regular season league game against those same Bills, 27-6. But the going soon got tougher. Al Dorow pitched it long and often to Art and Don Maynard when the line held up, and ran for his life when it didn’t. The Titans scored a lot of points, 382 to lead the league; their defense gave them up just as quickly.

The Titans were settled in with a 4-6 record when they and Art had their best stretch of the season. Art’s 8 catches for 110 yards and a TD, along with Maynard’s 10 for 179, helped in a 41-35 home upset of the Dallas Texans. Then Art blitzed Denver for 122 yards and 3 scores in another close 30-27 victory. Finally, with Maynard out of the lineup, Art scorched Oakland for 10 catches, 179 yards, and two touchdowns in a 31-28 victory. A narrow 43-50 loss to the Chargers cost the Titans a winning record; they had to settle for 7 wins and 7 losses. Art wound up leading the entire AFL with 14 receiving touchdowns; he and Don Maynard both topped 1,000 yards receiving as well, the first NFL/AFL duo ever to accomplish that feat.

The new league also gave Art a chance to go up against older brother Charlie. Charlie was giving football another go after a couple of years as a boxer, and he was with the

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AFL's Oakland Raiders. Their first meeting was not only the first time they'd played against each other, it was the first time Charlie had seen Art play any football game. It seemed like Art had finally found a football home. He then spent the offseason threatening to retire, but eventually signed. The 1961 preseason brought another trial, as the Titans had a preseason game scheduled for Greenville, South Carolina.

"I had never been to a place with colored and white drinking fountains," Powell said. The African American Titans didn't stay with the white players at their hotel; they were taken elsewhere. "When we drove in, it was like something you'd see in an old movie. You go down a dirt road, past a bunch of trees, to this place they called a 'colored only' resort. The swimming pool was like a swamp. Of course, the air conditioning doesn't work, so it's a hundred degrees out, and you're just laying on your bed, sweating like crazy."¹³ Art said that he refused to play in the following game, though press reports indicate that he caught a touchdown pass.

The 1961 regular season got off to a surprisingly good start for the Titans. A 3-1 record and a slow start by returning champion Houston found the Titans unexpectedly in first place. But the Oilers righted their ship and the Titans' lead eroded. Maynard missed several games with a separated shoulder, while Art struggled with his own knee injury. The Titans' fading title hopes were extinguished in a 21-48 loss to Houston in the Titan's 13th game.

Art saw his numbers slip to 881 yards receiving and five touchdowns; the Titans scored 301 points, down from 382 in 1960. The team's 7-7 record masked decline in other areas, as the Titans were outscored, gave up more scrimmage yardage, and turned the ball over more than their opponents.

The Titans traded quarterback Al Dorow in 1962. Among his replacements were former New York Giant heir apparent Lee Grosscup. Lee was also an author, and he would have plenty to say about the casual practices, thin playbooks, and primitive pass coverage techniques of the early AFL. But he'd known Powell, having played with him in California high school All Star games, and recognized Art's talent. On Grosscup's first play in the AFL, he threw a deep pass to a sprinting Powell. Art had beaten Raiders' cornerback Bob Garner, but had to come back for the underthrown ball. Art came back, outjumped Garner, shed Garner's tackle, and went the rest of the way for an 80-yard touchdown in what would be a 28-17 Titans win. Lee continued to entertain Art's huddle suggestions (a.k.a. "give me the ball") until they became too frequent and Lee felt he needed to reassert command.¹⁴

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With the Titans again adding almost no players from the draft, the 1962 Titans were the same old Titans. That simply wasn't enough in a growing league, and it showed on the field and at the turnstiles. A still porous defense doomed the Titans to a losing record in 1962, even as Powell and Don Maynard had another set of 1,000-yard seasons. Poor attendance meant that undercapitalized owner Harry Wismer, already behind on his bills, started bouncing payroll checks. By the Thanksgiving game in Denver where Art caught the winning touchdown pass in a 46-45 victory, the team's last win as the Titans, the AFL had already taken over the team from Wismer to ensure that the payroll was met.

Conscious of the team's direction, Powell made other plans. At the beginning of the 1962 season, Art had decided to play out his option and become a free agent. Free agency wasn't foreign to pro football, as a couple of NFL receivers had gone the same route just a year ago. But Powell would be the first AFL player to take the plunge. Owner Wismer, aware he'd lose his star, offered Art in trade during the 1962 season, but found no takers.¹⁵

After entertaining offers from several AFL, CFL, and NFL teams, Powell signed with the Oakland Raiders on January 31, 1963. The decision seemed curious; the Raiders may have been clearing their payroll checks, but they'd won but three games in two years, and suffered the AFL's worst attendance. Art's decision was based on the personal recruitment of new Oakland head coach and general manager, 33-year-old Al Davis. Davis was so new to the job (two weeks) that Art believed Al to still be in his former job of San Diego Chargers assistant.

Art and Al clicked immediately, and it showed in training camp. Davis said that "Art has more understanding of what I'm trying to with the aerial game than any end I've ever been associated with." In turn Art, who'd slimmed down to 200 pounds on his 6-3 frame from his usual 215 or so, reported that "the moves and releases Al asks of an end fit in more with the way I think the position should be played than any other system I've used."¹⁶

Again, though, racial issues reared. Powell, along with other African American teammates, protested when an exhibition game in Mobile, Alabama, failed to provide integrated seating for the fans as promised. Davis came through and moved the game to Oakland at the last minute. "Al never put another game in the South during the time I was with the Raiders," Art said.¹⁷

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Back on the field, the Raiders won, in two weeks, more games than they'd won in all of 1962, with victories over the Oilers and Bills. But when halfback Clem Daniels was hurt and ineffective, the Raiders' offense faltered, and the team lost four straight games. When Daniels returned though, the team took off, with Art and Clem leading the way. 49 Raider points against the Jets nee Titans, 34 in a victory over the Chargers, 41 more in ANOTHER victory over the Chargers. A seven- game winning streak.

By the season's final week, the Raiders trailed the Chargers by just a game in the standings. The Raiders hosted the Oilers, while the Chargers hosted the Bills. Oakland trailed early, but fought back with Powell leading the way. Art scorched the Oilers with 10 catches for 247 yards with four going for scores, all 20 yards away or more. The four touchdowns would never be bested in the AFL's ten-year history. The combined 101 points in a 52-49 Oakland victory were the most ever in an AFL game. But the Chargers could not be caught as they closed out the Western championship with a 52-20 win of their own.

Powell capped his 1963 season by catching the winning touchdown pass in the AFL All Star Game. Art had dominated, and was rewarded with a first team selection on every All-AFL team. He led the league with 1,304 yards and 16 touchdown receptions, and his 73 catches were twice that of any teammate, and more than the two ends the Raiders employed in 1962. Fellow All-AFLer Lance Alworth won one of the three AFL MVPs awarded despite Art having better statistics in all areas. Teammate Clem Daniels, the league's leading rusher, also won an MVP, despite scoring only half as many touchdowns.

Art briefly requested a trade in the 1964 offseason due to incidents with his Oakland neighbors relating to his interracial marriage.¹⁸ Powell wound up moving back to Toronto, and was late reporting to training camp while he settled things there. Once in camp, Art was optimistic about 1964, but said his performance was as dependent upon halfback Clem Daniels as himself. "When he isn't healthy, they stop me," Art said.¹⁹

Daniels did not get off to a good start in 1964, rushing for just two yards a carry through the Raiders' first six games. Oakland lost the first five of those games, knocking themselves out of contention. It was a productive statistical season for Art though, as he set career highs for catches (76) and yards (1,361), though he'd cede the league titles in both, as well as first team All-Pro honors, to Houston's Charley Hennigan.

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Powell made the AFL All Star game again, which was scheduled for New Orleans. Upon arrival, Art and other African American players had numerous problems hailing cabs and entering other businesses. At a meeting suggested by Art, the African American players decided they would all leave New Orleans rather than play in the game.

“I did not want to take a leadership position, and after my experiences in Philadelphia I didn’t trust the other players on what they would say later,” Powell said. “So to protect myself I wrote up a paper that said everyone in this room is here voluntarily and nobody has been coerced and I made them all sign it.”²⁰ As the players began leaving, the AFL opted to move the game to Houston. The West won the game 38-14, with Art catching a touchdown pass in the 4th quarter.

Whatever happened off the field, few had ever found fault with Art’s talents on the field in any respect, and by 1965 Powell was at the top of his game. A comprehensive look at Art’s skills came in a 1965 interview with Raiders quarterback and future coach Tom Flores.

“With Art Powell we – Cotton Davidson and I – have the most complete receiver in the game today to work with. Some guys might be able to catch-and-run better, some to go deep better, some to get the short pass better, but few of them can put it all together. Besides that, he’s a good blocker.”

“Art is an intelligent receiver,” Flores continued. “A good receiver has to be thinking together with the quarterback. For instance, if he’s covered, he must sense when to break the pattern, and the quarterback often can sense just what he’ll do and when he’ll do it. Art wants to win all the time.”²¹

Going into 1965, Art himself thought that due to improved teammates, he’d catch fewer passes than prior years, but more touchdowns than the 16 he had in 1963.²² The former prediction proved to be correct.

After catching 11 passes for 206 yards in a victory over the Boston Patriots in Week five, Art only caught 24 passes over the Raiders’ last nine games of the season. Rookie Fred Biletnikoff actually caught more passes during that time period, though Biletnikoff didn’t touch the end zone once, while Art scored seven times over the same period.

Art was nonplussed after a win over the Oilers where he caught just one pass for nine yards. “I don’t like this decoy business – this standing out there for nothing. They say

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I'm doing my job and that's supposed to be good, but you can't take that kind of talk to the bank," he said.²³

The Raiders improved in 1965 to 8-5-1, but were eliminated from the playoffs in the season's penultimate week. Art made the AFL All Star Game again, missing out on first team All Pro to Alworth and Lionel Taylor.

Change was afoot for Powell and the Raiders in 1966. Art had been injured in the last game of the 1965 season, and had his foot operated on to repair his Achilles' tendon. Then in April, coach and general manager Al Davis was named AFL commissioner. The Raiders' new coach was assistant John Rauch.

Powell and teammate Clem Daniels held out into early August and were suspended by the Raiders. The contract issues were settled, Art returned, but he was far from a happy camper. "I want out", Art said after a November victory over the Oilers. "I'll be glad when the season's over. I couldn't play another season here."²⁴ Art's numbers were indeed reduced from his 1963-64 peak, but he still caught 53 passes for 1,026 yards and 11 touchdowns. It was the fifth season he'd passed the 1,000-yard mark, and the fifth he'd caught at least 10 touchdown passes. Both were AFL records.

The 1966 Raiders got off to their annual mediocre start before rallying for another 8-5-1 record and another second-place finish. The team was good, but not progressing. By the end of the season, Art's ire had cooled, and he was equivocal on any trade.²⁵ But he also had business interests to attend to. Art still lived in Toronto. He requested a trade to an Eastern team.

Meanwhile, the AFL and NFL had merged, and Al Davis had returned to the Raiders as head of football operations and managing partner, where he and John Rauch had an uneasy alliance. Davis did not want to trade his star receiver. The Buffalo Bills made an offer. Davis could not commit, and it was ultimately John Rauch that pulled the trigger on the blockbuster deal that took place March 14, 1967, the day of the first combined NFL/AFL draft.²⁶ Art and starting quarterback Tom Flores were traded for Buffalo's backup quarterback Daryle Lamonica and receiver Glenn Bass. Draft choices also passed both ways.

Unlike the bridesmaid Raiders, the Bills had made the playoffs every year from 1963 to 1966, winning AFL titles in 1964 and 1965. Along with acquiring Chargers' halfback

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Keith Lincoln, the Bill's reasoning behind the trades seemed to be that the defensive oriented team needed veteran offensive help to make one last push at a title.

Powell easily beat out Bills split end Bobby Crockett for a starting job. He, Lincoln, and Flores all started the Bills' opening game against the Jets. Joe Namath hit Art's old running mate Don Maynard with two touchdown passes to help build a 17-0 lead. The Bills mounted a rousing comeback in the fourth quarter. Art caught two touchdown passes of his own, though they were thrown by Jack Kemp, as Flores had been injured and ineffective. Two field goals gave the Bills a thrilling 20-17 victory.

But then the Bills offense faltered, and the team lost their next three games. Worse, Art hurt his right knee warming up against the Bills' fifth opponent, the Denver Broncos. Powell opted to play through the injury, and caught a touchdown pass in another fourth quarter comeback win in Denver by a 17-16 score.

The next week found Art's old mates the Raiders coming to Buffalo for a game. Daryle Lamonica threw four interceptions for the Raiders, but they still led 24-14 in the fourth quarter. Art caught a 26-yard touchdown pass from Jack Kemp, but the Bills could rally no further and lost 24-20.

The Bills had a bye week the next week. Art's knee did not respond to rest. Tests were done and a cartilage tear was found. Surgery was scheduled, and Powell would be out for the season.²⁷ The touchdown against the Raiders would be the last pass Art ever caught in the AFL.

Powell had been used to being a gifted player, and the knee injury meant he would need to work harder to achieve what had come easier. He resisted. "I had been a durable player for ten years. But now it would take me all week just to be ready to play," he said. "I figured it was time to do something else."²⁸ The Buffalo Bills felt the same way. The 1967 season had not gone well, and the Bills finished with a 4-10 record. They were looking to rebuild. They were aware of Art's outspoken history, and concerned about his effect on morale should he slip into a support or reserve role.²⁹ Art was released by the Bills in early August 1968.

Art wound up regretting requesting to be traded from the Raiders. "Not every decision you make goes well," he said. I regret it more than (Al) Davis does. There is no doubt playing for the Raiders would have been the best way to finish my career. No doubt. You make a decision and live with it."³⁰ Sitting in the stands watching the Raiders play

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the Packers in Super Bowl II, he wistfully commented that “I know damn well if I was on that field, we would have beaten Green Bay.”³¹

Art would take one more crack at pro football. The Minnesota Vikings signed Powell on August 21, 1968. Art beat out incumbent Paul Flatley, who was waived to the Atlanta Falcons. But he couldn't beat out former Saint Tom Hall for a starting split end position. Art caught one pass for thirty-one yards against the Falcons, then was released when the Vikings activated receiver John Henderson from their taxi squad. Art's pro football career was over.

After a brief period selling cars, Powell became involved in the then lucrative business of trading stamps. Black and Brown Trading Stamps featured the likeness of soul singer James Brown, who invested money in the business. By 1971, the company was doing \$1 million of business in a year.³² Later Art owned the Indo-American Oil Company in California.

Later in life, Art was honored by his San Diego hometown. He was inducted into San Diego's Breitbard Hall of Fame to honor sports figures, and the Boys and Girls Club of San Diego Hall of Fame for his work in the community.

After experiencing heart problems, Art Powell died on April 6, 2015 in Aliso Viejo, California. He was survived by his wife Betty of 49 years, and his daughters Teri and Tracy. Teri married former professional basketball player Brian Taylor, and her son, Art's grandson, Bryce Taylor, also played college and professional basketball. Art's brother Charlie died in 2014.

At the time of his retirement, Powell ranked third in all pro football history in touchdown receptions with 81, behind Don Hutson and Tommy McDonald. At the end of 1967, those 81 touchdowns were the most in the AFL, and gave Art a lead of 13 over his next closest competitor, Don Maynard. At the time, Art was a close second to Maynard in AFL receiving yards gained, 8,105 to 8,154, and was second in receptions to Lionel Taylor. Continuing the comparison to Maynard, Art had more all-star game appearances, and more seasons with 10 or more touchdowns, more seasons with 70 or more catches, an equal number of seasons with 1,000 yards. Yet Maynard is in the Hall of Fame, and Art is not. This is due to Don's longevity. Despite being two years older than Powell, Don played for five more seasons, allowing him to accumulate better total statistics in all categories. Simply, Maynard was effective well into his 30s, and Art was injured and out of football. But at his peak, Art had better statistics per year than Don Maynard.

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Casting a wider net, Powell's career totals, reasonably impressive at the time, have now been surpassed by many players. Art fares much better in per game averages. No adjustment is made for Art's season as a defensive back, as other players also were relegated to defense for a time as well. Compared to all players with 300 or more receptions, Art's finest accomplishment was as a touchdown maker; 81 receiving TDs in 117 games made for 0.692 per game, surpassed by only three other players. One is the pro football pioneer and all-time great receiver, Don Hutson. The other two? Randy Moss and Terrell Owens.³³ Maybe molds aren't such a bad thing after all.

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