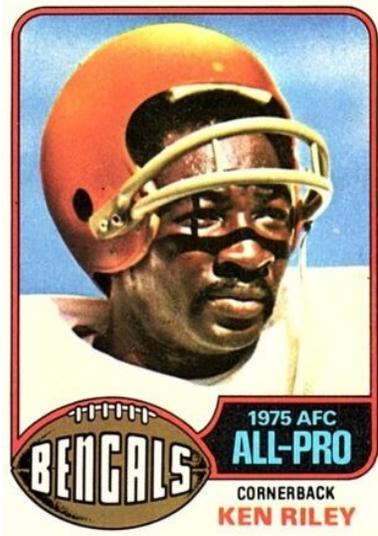


Ken Riley

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Kenneth Jerome Riley played across three decades with the Cincinnati Bengals (1969-1983). Sporting number 13, he made 202 starts in 207 career games, both of which are franchise records.¹ Riley was a severe threat for opposing quarterbacks because of his uncanny ability to intercept the pass. Throughout his career, he recorded 65 interceptions, most in Bengals history, currently ranking fifth all-time. Only Hall of Famers Night Train Lane, Rod Woodson, Emlen Tunnell, and Paul Krause intercepted more passes.² Former teammate Cris Collinsworth witnessed Riley's greatness for three seasons, remarking that, "I don't know how you put a number on intelligence. And I don't know how many touchdowns he saved the Bengals because he knew what was coming."³



What may have been most unique about Riley was his intellect and athleticism. In college at Florida A&M, he starred at quarterback. Upon being drafted by the Bengals in the sixth round of the 1969 NFL draft, head coach Paul Brown immediately shifted him to cornerback, a position he had never played. Riley not only self-taught himself how to play in the defensive backfield, but he also taught other teammates how to play the position.⁴

Louis Breeden, a teammate for six seasons from 1978 thru 1983 stated, "How great is that? How great is it that he had 65 interceptions at a position he never played until he got to the NFL? That's how frickin' good Ken Riley was. I had to learn from Kenny. What I knew, Kenny taught me. Kenny took me under his wing. He was quiet. Smart. The quiet



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guys gravitated toward him. I was a lot like Ken. Not a rah-rah guy, but just go out and play.”⁵ During those six years, Breeden nabbed 18 interceptions, and was voted first-team all-pro in 1982 by the Associated Press.⁶

Riley's influence was not limited to defensive players. He also worked with the receivers, particularly Isaac Curtis, who made four consecutive Pro Bowls (1973-1976), and Collinsworth, who was a three-time Pro Bowl selection from 1981 thru 1983.⁷ Curtis recalled of working with Riley, “I was just in my second year as a wide receiver. He would give me tips. Going against Kenny and Lemar [Parrish] in practice I didn't go up against any corners who were any better in a game. He (Riley) was one of those guys that have great character and you look up to. Guys that make you better just being around them.”⁸ Collinsworth reflected on the lessons learned from Riley, “Nothing you could do could fool him. Not only would you not fool him, afterwards he would tell you why you didn't fool him. Then you would try something else and he'd tell you why that didn't work, either. He was a coach on the field is what he was.”⁹ Collinsworth continued, “I probably learned more football from Riley than from anyone I played for or against. Everything I did that worked against everybody else never worked against him. But as soon as he would pick-off a pass on my route or beat me to a spot, he'd tell me why, explain what I'd done wrong. He wanted me to be better because that made the team better.”¹⁰

A secret to Riley's success was he kept detailed notes about each receiver he matched up against. He held a journal for each player, jotting down their tendencies and weaknesses that allowed him to formulate a plan next time the two met. The Steelers' John Stallworth

- 1 “Ken Riley,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/R/RileKe20.htm>.
- 2 “NFL Interceptions Career Leaders (since 1940),” ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 23, 2022, https://www.pro-football-reference.com/leaders/def_int_career.htm.
- 3 “Ken Riley,” Bengals.com, accessed July 23, 2022, <https://www.bengals.com/news/ken-riley-bengals-cornerback>.
- 4 Hobson, Geoff. “Bengals Legend Ken Riley Passes Away at 72,” Bengals.com, June 7, 2020, <https://www.bengals.com/news/bengals-legend-ken-riley-passes-away-at-72>.
- 5 Hobson, Geoff. “Stunned Bengals Savor Life Of Ken Riley,” Bengals.com, June 8, 2020, <https://www.bengals.com/news/stunned-bengals-savor-life-of-ken-riley>.
- 6 “Louis Breeden,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/B/BreeLo20.htm>.
- 7 Hobson, Geoff. “Stunned Bengals Savor Life Of Ken Riley,” Bengals.com, June 8, 2020, <https://www.bengals.com/news/stunned-bengals-savor-life-of-ken-riley>.
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often matched up against Riley, playing in the AFC Central Division during the 1970s and 1980s. Every time, he felt a disadvantage, “I always felt that he knew our system, our game plan, that he had viewed our films, that he knew our tendencies, my tendencies. From an intellectual standpoint, he was going to take away what I did well. He wasn't an in-your-face bumping guy, but he was going to be where he needed to be when he needed to be there. I knew he was going to challenge me every play.”¹¹

From 1970 to 1977, Riley teamed with Parrish to form one of the most formidable cornerback duos in the league. Parrish was selected to six Pro Bowls and recorded 25 interceptions.¹² The Bengals' defense was consistently ranked in the top ten in points allowed. In 1973, the team won double-digit games for the first time in franchise history finishing at 10-4.¹³ Cincinnati won double-digit games in consecutive years, going 11-3 and 10-4 in 1975 and 1976, respectively.¹⁴

Ironically, 1975 and 1976 were two of Riley's three best statistical seasons. He picked off six passes in 1975, returning one for a touchdown, while recovering two fumbles. Riley upped his game the following season, nabbing nine interceptions, returning them for a career high 141 yards.¹⁵ In both years, he was named second-team all-pro by the Associated Press and the Pro Football Writers of America. He was also a first-team all-conference choice by the Associated Press in both 1975 and 1976.¹⁶ Somehow, Riley was not named to the Pro Bowl that year or for that matter, at any point in his career. He merely shrugged it off and years later said, “It's a mystery to me. That's out of my control. The only thing I can do is be solid and go out and be consistent. And I was consistent every Sunday when I played football. And I played in more games than anybody in Cincinnati. I was durable.”¹⁷

The 1981 season was special for both Riley and the Bengals. Cincinnati held at least a share of the division lead throughout the entire campaign. The Bengals won the division

1 1 Freedman, Samuel G. “Ken Riley had a Hall of Fame career, but died without getting inducted,” andscape.com, June 10, 2020, <https://andscape.com/features/ken-riley-died-still-not-in-hall-of-fame/>.

1 2 “Lemar Parrish,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/P/ParrLe00.htm>.

1 3 “Cincinnati Bengals Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/cin/>.

1 4 “Cincinnati Bengals Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/cin/>.

1 5 “Ken Riley,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/R/RileKe20.htm>.

1 6 “Ken Riley,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/R/RileKe20.htm>.

1 7 Judge, Clark. “Remembering Ken Riley and why he deserved more from the Pro Football Hall,” SI.com, June 7, 2020, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/nfl/ken-riley-and-the-pro-football-hall-of-fame>.



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on December 13, with a 17-10 win over the Steelers, en route to a 12-4 record.¹⁸ To date, it was the most wins in franchise history for a single season. In the divisional round of the playoffs, Riley hauled in a pivotal interception and the Bengals held off the Buffalo Bills, 28-21, in Cincinnati, for their first ever playoff victory.¹⁹

The following week in the AFC Championship Game against the San Diego Chargers, the Bengals won convincingly, 27-7, in the infamous Freezer Bowl game, under bitterly cold conditions.²⁰ The wind chill at -59 degrees created total pandemonium for San Diego's high octane passing offense.

Cincinnati then squared off against the San Francisco 49ers in Super Bowl XVI. The Bengals fell behind 20-0 at halftime and despite scoring 14 fourth-quarter points, lost, 26-21. Cincinnati became the first team in Super Bowl history to outgain their opponent in total yards (356 to 275) and lose.²¹

Riley's final two seasons saw him record a combined 13 interceptions, while leading the league in interceptions returned for touchdowns. His final season in 1983, Riley was a consensus first-team all-pro and first team all-conference. In 15 seasons his 65 career interceptions were returned for 596 yards, five of which were returned for touchdowns.²² He recovered 18 fumbles, was a first-team all-pro (1983), two-time second-team all-pro selections (1975, 1976), and three-time first-team all-conference choice (1975, 1976, 1983).²³

Riley joined the Green Bay Packers as an assistant coach for the 1984 and 1985 seasons. He then returned to his alma mater, Florida A&M, to serve as the head coach from 1986 to 1993.²⁴ In eight seasons leading the Rattlers, Riley compiled a 45-40-2 record, including a 23-13 mark in Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference games. The Rattlers won two

1 8 "Cincinnati Bengals Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/cin/>.

1 9 "Cincinnati Bengals Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/cin/>.

2 0 "AFC Championship – San Diego Chargers at Cincinnati Bengals – January 10th, 1982," ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 24, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/198201100cin.htm>.

2 1 "Super Bowl XVI – San Francisco 49ers vs. Cincinnati Bengals – January 24th, 1982," ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 24, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/198201240cin.htm>.

2 2 "Ken Riley," ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/R/RileKe20.htm>.

2 3 "Ken Riley," ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/R/RileKe20.htm>.



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conference titles in 1988 and 1990.²⁵ In both seasons, Riley was named MEAC Coach of the Year. The team played in the second edition of the Heritage Bowl in 1992, losing to Grambling State, 45-13, in front of 11,273 fans.

Riley stepped down from the coaching ranks, moving to the school's athletic director role, where he stayed from 1994 until 2003. Under his direction, the school won 35 conference championships in 11 different sports.²⁶ Riley retired and moved back to his hometown of Bartow, FL.

He passed away unexpectedly on June 7, 2020 as a result of a heart attack. Riley was survived by his high school sweetheart, Barbara Riley, his son, Ken Riley II, and two grandchildren.²⁷ Florida A&M Sports Hall of Fame Chairman Alvin Hollins praised Riley and his contributions to the institution, "Ken showed tremendous leadership as a student and a quarterback. The only regret is that he didn't get in the Pro Football Hall of Fame before he passed. Several of the players he coached made it to the NFL. We had great success with him as a coach and athletics director."²⁸ Rattlers head football coach Willie Simmons commented on Riley's passing, "I woke up this morning with a heavy heart as I learned of the passing of FAMU and NFL great Ken Riley. Coach Riley was one of the first to welcome me to the FAMULY and having him speak to our team before our first Orange and Green game is definitely at the top of my list of unforgettable moments as head coach here at FAMU. My deepest condolences go out to his family and we as football community will surely honor his memory."²⁹

Riley was known as a humble player throughout his football career. He always said, "Your work speaks for you."³⁰ Decades after his retirement there have been calls for his enshrinement into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Despite never being named a finalist, he

2 4 Moore, Kevin. "The Tragic Death of Cincinnati Bengals Great Ken Riley," sportscasting.com, July 1, 2020, <https://www.sportscasting.com/the-tragic-death-of-cincinnati-bengals-great-ken-riley/>.

2 5 Moore, Kevin. "The Tragic Death of Cincinnati Bengals Great Ken Riley," sportscasting.com, July 1, 2020, <https://www.sportscasting.com/the-tragic-death-of-cincinnati-bengals-great-ken-riley/>.

2 6 Moore, Kevin. "The Tragic Death of Cincinnati Bengals Great Ken Riley," sportscasting.com, July 1, 2020, <https://www.sportscasting.com/the-tragic-death-of-cincinnati-bengals-great-ken-riley/>.

2 7 Hobson, Geoff. "Stunned Bengals Savor Life Of Ken Riley," Bengals.com, June 8, 2020, <https://www.bengals.com/news/stunned-bengals-savor-life-of-ken-riley>.

2 8 "Ken Riley dies at 72; former FAMU, Bengals star had Jacksonville ties," jacksonville.com, June 7, 2020, <https://www.jacksonville.com/story/sports/2020/06/07/ken-riley-dies-at-72-former-famu-bengals-star-had-jacksonville-ties/41728519/>.

2 9 "Ken Riley dies at 72; former FAMU, Bengals star had Jacksonville ties," jacksonville.com, June 7, 2020, <https://www.jacksonville.com/story/sports/2020/06/07/ken-riley-dies-at-72-former-famu-bengals-star-had-jacksonville-ties/41728519/>.

3 0 Dajani, Jordan. "Ken Riley, Bengals great who ranks fifth all-time in NFL interceptions, dies at 72," CBSSports.com, June 7, 2020, <https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/ken-riley-bengals-great-who-ranks-fifth-all-time-in-nfl-interceptions-dies-at-72/>.



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simply shrugged it off, “This is my personality. It's the way I was brought up – parents, grandparents, everybody. Let your work speak for itself and be humble. We had a coach on the Bengals, Paul Brown, who felt it was your job to do certain things. If you got an interception, if you got a sack, he'd say, 'That's what I am paying you for.' He didn't want superstars.”³¹

Riley was born on August 6, 1947 in Bartow, FL. He attended high school at Union Academy, playing football under the legendary Claude Woodruff. Woodruff was a local legend, excelling as an athletics coach in Central Florida from 1952 to 1986. At Union Academy, he coached future NFL players in Riley, Major Hazelton, and Sam Silas.³²

Riley was pleased to attend Florida A&M in Tallahassee, affording him the opportunity to escape Bartow, which experienced much racism and hate crimes at the time. He excelled as a quarterback in college all four years, leading the Rattlers to a 23-7 record, earning the starting job in his junior and senior years. Riley was also an academic leader off-the-field. As a senior, he was a candidate to become a Rhodes scholar. Instead, he chose to pursue a career in the NFL.³³

In 1982, for all his contributions to the school, he was inducted into its Athletics Hall of Fame. Riley earned other distinctions and awards that included selection to the Florida High School Association All-Century Team in 2007. The team encompasses the top 33 players in the state of Florida's football history. Riley is also a member of the Black College Football Hall of Fame (class of 2015) and was added to the Cincinnati Bengals inaugural class of their Ring of Honor.³⁴ On being named to it, Ken Riley II said, “I think that Cincinnati is one of the last teams to get a ring of honor. We've always talked about that if you don't honor your own, you can't expect the rest of the nation to do it for you. We are a family that is appreciative of this opportunity.”³⁵ Mike Brown, Bengals' president, believed this was long overdue, stating, “We have a long history of players, many of them great players. Ken Anderson and Ken Riley are at the top of that list of great players... They were the type of players that we like to think our team is all about.”³⁶

He was named to the 1970's NFL All-Decade second team. In addition, Riley was named to the Pro Football Researchers Association's Hall of Very Good in 2010. In 2022, he was named as a semi-finalist for the pro football hall of fame. Whether he is enshrined in Canton for 2023 does not undermine the legacy and life he lived, the impact he left on

3 1 Freedman, Samuel G. “Ken Riley had a Hall of Fame career, but died without getting inducted,” andscape.com, June 10, 2020, <https://andscape.com/features/ken-riley-died-still-not-in-hall-of-fame/>.

3 2 Buchalter, Bill. “James Joins Old High School Coach Woodruff in FAMU Hall of Fame,” orlandosentinel.com, October 4, 1990, <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-1990-10-04-9010040666-story.html>.

3 3 Freedman, Samuel G. “Ken Riley had a Hall of Fame career, but died without getting inducted,” andscape.com, June 10, 2020, <https://andscape.com/features/ken-riley-died-still-not-in-hall-of-fame/>.



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football at the high school, college and professional level. His greatness indeed speaks for itself as he is arguably one of the most underrated defensive players in professional football history. As a career Cincinnati Bengal, Riley definitely earned his stripes.

End Notes:

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- 3 4 Wilson, Vaughn. "Ken Riley added to Cincinnati Bengals' ring of honor," HBCUgameday.com, October 1, 2021, <https://hbcugameday.com/2021/10/01/ken-riley-added-to-cincinnati-bengals-ring-of-honor/>.
 - 3 5 Wilson, Vaughn. "Ken Riley added to Cincinnati Bengals' ring of honor," HBCUgameday.com, October 1, 2021, <https://hbcugameday.com/2021/10/01/ken-riley-added-to-cincinnati-bengals-ring-of-honor/>.
 - 3 6 Wilson, Vaughn. "Ken Riley added to Cincinnati Bengals' ring of honor," HBCUgameday.com, October 1, 2021, <https://hbcugameday.com/2021/10/01/ken-riley-added-to-cincinnati-bengals-ring-of-honor/>.