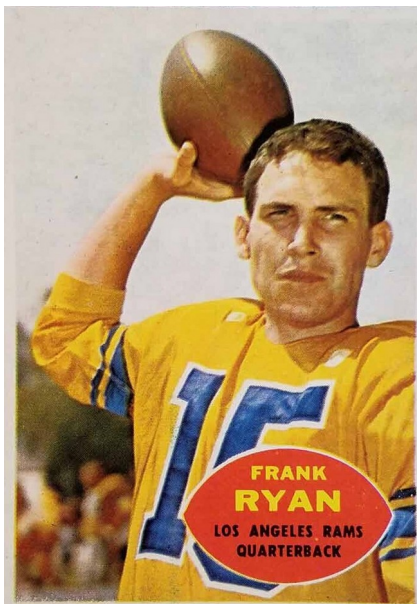


Frank Ryan

This article was written by Matthew Keddie.

Frank Ryan had it all figured out. He was able to calculate exactly how far he needed to throw the football in order to make a play. His calculating capabilities arose from his off-the-field profession as a mathematician. Ryan once said, “I was meant for the long ball. I was good at it, really good at it. To measure my arm, I would stand on one goal line and try to get it to the other goal line. That only happened two or three times, but I'd usually get it 93 or 95 yards. That's a long way to throw a football. As you lower the trajectory of that ball, the energy you put into it going 95 yards it is now translated into speed, so I had a long ball that got there fast. I loved it. That was my kind of football, and I got to call it.”¹ That, combined with his offensive creativity allowed him to excel as a signal caller for 13 professional seasons as a member of the Los Angeles Rams, Cleveland Browns, and Washington Redskins.² Ryan also demonstrated free-lancing on the field running the offense, “I got to call my plays and design an offense. That design was discussed in detail with coaches. I went into the field not with a radio in my ear that gives instructions. I went on the field with concepts. Occasionally, I'd get a sense of something special and break the thesis of the moment and decisions that I got to make in the run of the game that are not available to quarterbacks today.”³



Ryan's professional football career began when he was selected in the fifth round of the 1958 NFL Draft by the Rams. During four seasons in Los Angeles, he did not see much



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playing time, making just 11 starts because he was competing with quarterbacks Zeke Bratkowski and Billy Wade.⁴ An early shining moment occurred in 1961 when he set a then-team record on a 96-yard touchdown pass to receiver and future Hall of Famer Ollie Matson in a 24-14 win over the Pittsburgh Steelers.⁵ The Rams' teams he played on were progressively worse from 1958 (8-4) to 1961 (4-10).

Seeing his playing time was not going to increase, Ryan demanded a trade. In July 1962, he was traded to the Browns for defensive lineman Larry Stephens and two draft choices (third and sixth round picks) in the 1963 NFL Draft.⁶ He made seven starts in 1962, backing up incumbent quarterback Jim Ninowski on a Browns team that struggled to a 7-6-1 record, despite featuring future Hall of Famers running back Jim Brown and kicker Lou Groza, as well as playmaking receiver Gary Collins.⁷ Ryan took over the starting duties after Ninowski was injured on October 28 in a 41-14 win over the Pittsburgh Steelers. Cleveland's third place finish in the NFL Eastern Division was the club's worst since finishing fourth in 1956.⁸ The 1962 season would also be the last for legendary head coach Paul Brown.

Brown was fired prior to the 1963 season, partly due to a feud between owner Art Modell. Blanton Collier took over as head coach for the 1963 season. Collier was a close friend of Brown, who recommended him to take the position. Collier also previously spent time as an assistant on the Browns from 1946 to 1953.⁹ The change fueled the team to a 10-4 record as the Browns ripped off six consecutive wins to start the year. Ryan went 10-3 as a starter, throwing for 2,026 yards and 25 touchdowns against 13

- 1 Warsinsky, Tim. "Former Cleveland Browns QB Frank Ryan marvels at CWRU, cautions about 'vicious' NFL," cleveland.com, September 29, 2013, [Former Cleveland Browns QB Frank Ryan marvels at CWRU, cautions about "vicious" NFL – cleveland.com](#).
- 2 "Frank Ryan," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Frank Ryan Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 3 Warsinsky, Tim. "Former Cleveland Browns QB Frank Ryan marvels at CWRU, cautions about 'vicious' NFL," cleveland.com, September 29, 2013, [Former Cleveland Browns QB Frank Ryan marvels at CWRU, cautions about "vicious" NFL – cleveland.com](#).
- 4 "Frank Ryan," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Frank Ryan Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 5 "Pittsburgh Steelers at Los Angeles Rams – October 1st, 1961," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Pittsburgh Steelers at Los Angeles Rams - October 1st, 1961 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 6 "Frank Ryan," ProSportsTransactions.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Football Transactions Search Results \(prosportstransactions.com\)](#).
- 7 "Frank Ryan," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Frank Ryan Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 8 "Cleveland Browns Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Cleveland Browns Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).



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interceptions.¹⁰ Jim Brown led the NFL in rushing with 1,863 yards and 12 rushing touchdowns, winning the UPI MVP award. Cleveland narrowly missed the playoffs, finishing a game out of first place in the NFL East Division, behind the New York Giants.

Cleveland and Ryan further improved in 1964 to win the NFL East Division title at 10-3-1.¹¹ Ryan led the league with 25 touchdown passes, earned Pro Bowl honors, and passed for 2,404 yards. On December 27, the Browns squared off with the Baltimore Colts for the championship at Cleveland Municipal Stadium. The Colts were led by legendary coach Don Shula and future Hall of Fame quarterback Johnny Unitas.¹² Baltimore sported the league's best record at 12-2, and not only the NFL's top scoring offense at 30.6 points per game, but also the league's stingiest defense. The Colts barely allowed more than 16 points per contest.

After a scoreless first half, Ryan broke open the scoring, finding receiver Gary Collins on two touchdown strikes in the third quarter, of 18 and 42 yards, respectively. After a Lou Groza field goal in the fourth, Ryan threw another touchdown pass to Collins that routed the Colts, 27-0.¹³ Unitas was held in check, throwing two interceptions, and passing for just 95 yards. Baltimore mustered only 181 yards of total offense. For comparison, Ryan alone passed for 206 yards. The title marked the fourth for Cleveland, and its first since 1955.¹⁴

Ryan suffered a shoulder injury during the 1964 season that carried over to his performance in 1965. He also aggravated his elbow in the preseason. As a result, his numbers dipped to below 2,000 passing yards and just 18 passing touchdowns, but he still earned Pro Bowl honors, and went 10-2 as a starter.¹⁵ Cleveland returned to the NFL title

9 “Cleveland Browns Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Cleveland Browns Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 0 “Frank Ryan,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Frank Ryan Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 1 “Cleveland Browns Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Cleveland Browns Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 2 “Championship – Baltimore Colts at Cleveland Browns – December 27th, 1964,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Championship - Baltimore Colts at Cleveland Browns - December 27th, 1964 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 3 “Championship – Baltimore Colts at Cleveland Browns – December 27th, 1964,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Championship - Baltimore Colts at Cleveland Browns - December 27th, 1964 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 4 “Championship – Baltimore Colts at Cleveland Browns – December 27th, 1964,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Championship - Baltimore Colts at Cleveland Browns - December 27th, 1964 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 5 “Frank Ryan,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Frank Ryan Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).



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game against the Green Bay Packers. The Browns fell, 23-12, ending their chance at a repeat. Ryan threw two interceptions in the game and completed just 8 of 18 passes. Jim Brown was held to only 50 rushing yards.¹⁶

The following season, 1966, turned out to be arguably Ryan's best statistical year. He threw for a career high 2,974 passing yards and 29 touchdowns. His 29 scoring passes led the NFL and was also a franchise record. Ryan was chosen to the Pro Bowl for a third consecutive year.¹⁷ The Browns regressed to a 9-5 record, however, finishing in second place, effectively missing out on the playoffs.

In 1967, Ryan underwent surgery to alleviate his past elbow and shoulder ailments. However, this affected his throwing mechanics that led to a decrease in his production. He also injured his ankles during the season, though he battled through the tough times, leading Cleveland to a 9-5 record and division championship.¹⁸ In the playoffs, the Browns met the Dallas Cowboys in the Divisional Round. Dallas blew out Cleveland, 52-14, to advance to the NFL championship game against the Packers.

Ryan made just three starts the following year in 1968 before Collier replaced him with Bill Nelsen.¹⁹ Nelsen found success, going 9-2, and leading the Browns to the playoffs and 10-4 record. Cleveland exacted revenge on the Cowboys in the Divisional Round of the playoffs, winning 31-20. That set up a rematch with the Colts for the NFL title. Baltimore got revenge blanking Cleveland, 34-0.²⁰ Ryan made an appearance after Nelsen struggled and the game was out of hand, completing 2 of 6 passes for 19 yards.

Ryan was cut by the Browns prior to the start of the 1969 regular season. A week later Washington Redskins head coach Vince Lombardi inked Ryan to a lucrative \$100,000 contract to back-up Sonny Jurgenson.²¹ Ryan finished his career with the Redskins where

1 6 “Championship – Cleveland Browns at Green Bay Packers – January 2nd, 1966,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Championship - Cleveland Browns at Green Bay Packers - January 2nd, 1966 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 7 “Frank Ryan,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Frank Ryan Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 8 Moore, Thomas. “Frank Ryan named the most underrated player in NFL history,” dawgpounddaily.com, May 30, 2017, [Cleveland Browns: Frank Ryan most underrated player in NFL history \(dawgpounddaily.com\)](#).

1 9 “Frank Ryan,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Frank Ryan Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 0 “Cleveland Browns Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Cleveland Browns Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 1 Warsinsky, Tim. “Former Cleveland Browns QB Frank Ryan marvels at CWRU, cautions about 'vicious' NFL,” cleveland.com, September 29, 2013, [Former Cleveland Browns QB Frank Ryan marvels at CWRU, cautions about "vicious" NFL – cleveland.com](#).



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he spent the 1969 and 1970 seasons. He appeared in just two contests and announced his retirement prior to the 1971 season.

Ryan made 87 starts in the NFL and appeared in 126 games over 13 years. He ranks fifth in Browns history in passing yards with 13,361 and is third with 134 touchdown passes. Ryan was 52-22-2 as a starter for the team. His 52 wins ranks third all-time in club history.²² In 2005, he was inducted into the Cleveland Browns Legends program that seeks to honor the franchise's greatest contributors.

Despite his struggles and injuries, Ryan has received high praise for his time in Cleveland.²³ Mike Tanier at Bleacher Report spoke highly of him writing, "Frank Ryan made three Pro Bowls, but All-Pro status was blocked by a couple of guys named Johnny Unitas and Bart Starr. His career was cut short by injuries suffered in the first of those three Pro Bowls. The Colts accused Ryan of running up the score in the 27-0 championship rout of 1964. A Colts defender delivered some payback in the all-star game. Ryan needed surgery and was in constant pain for the rest of his career. Yet he still led his team to the playoffs three more times. There have been many better quarterbacks than Ryan in NFL history. But few accomplished more than Ryan while receiving less acclaim.

Frank Beall Ryan was born on July 12, 1936 in Fort Worth, Texas. He played football at nearby R. L. Paschall High School where he was an outstanding athlete. Pressured by his family to continue the legacy of attending Yale University, he set his own path by enrolling at local Rice University.²⁵ At the time, Rice fielded relatively competitive football teams. The Owls were coming off three Southwest Conference titles in the past decade under head coach Jess Neely, who began coaching at the school in 1940.²⁶ Ryan's senior season in 1957, the Owls won the Southwest Conference title that saw them beat No. 12 Arkansas and top-ranked Texas A&M, coached by the legendary Paul "Bear" Bryant.²⁷ Rice met the Navy Midshipmen in the Cotton Bowl and were beaten, 20-7.²⁸ Despite the loss, the Owls finished ranked in the Top 10 in the Associated Press final

2 2 "Frank Ryan," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Frank Ryan Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 3 Moore, Thomas. "Frank Ryan named the most underrated player in NFL history," dawgpounddaily.com, May 30, 2017, [Cleveland Browns: Frank Ryan most underrated player in NFL history \(dawgpounddaily.com\)](#).

2 5 Fortune, Jonas. "A MAN OF TWO WORLDS," artsci.case.edu, February 9, 2017, [A Man of Two Worlds | art | sci magazine \(case.edu\)](#).

2 6 "Rice Owls School History," sports-reference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Rice Owls College Football History, Stats, Records | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

2 7 "1957 Rice Owls Schedule and Results," sports-reference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [1957 Rice Owls Stats | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

2 8 Ratliff, Harold V. "Forrestal Pilots Navy in 20-7 Rout of Rice," *The Spokesman-Review*, January 2, 1958, 17.



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rankings. Rice would not play in another bowl game for nearly another half century (2006 New Orleans Bowl).²⁹

Ryan was not Rice's bonafide starter at quarterback as he split time with King Hill, though Ryan did have his moments of glory. In 1956, he led multiple scoring drives in the fourth quarter against rival Texas in a 28-7 Rice victory.³⁰ Ryan carried the Owls in the Cotton Bowl loss to Navy, accounting for the team's only score on an 8-yard touchdown pass to Ken Williams, thoroughly outplaying Hill, who was an All-American choice that season.³¹ Ryan never attained All-America status and was close to not playing professional football after he graduated with a bachelor's degree in physics in 1958. His desire was to pursue a doctorate degree in mathematics, which he was able to do in the off seasons. Jonas Fortune of Case Western Reserve University wrote of Ryan's split time between football and school, "... In training camp and during the regular season, he split his time in the evenings between watching game film and solving elaborate math problems."³² He graduated with his doctorate in 1965 and while in Cleveland, he taught mathematics at Case Western Reserve University. One of his former students, Michael Diamant, said, "I think it is significant that he was not simply teaching the basic required freshman calculus or sophomore differential equations courses, but rather advanced math electives."³³

Ryan enjoyed teaching saying, "I thought there was something really fundamentally good about teaching, and teaching right. That was a responsibility that older people had for younger people. I had this view of teaching as a very special role, and I didn't have the same view of athletics."³⁴ Ryan underscored the value of hard work. There are only several players who had such a commitment that ran parallel with football. CIT Professor Arthur Lohwater said, "There seems to be an impression that Ryan was handed his doctorate on a platter. Nothing could be less correct. The man worked hard for his degree. He worked for seven postgraduate years under Dr. G. R. MacLane, one of the best geometric-function theorists and a man of uncompromising standards."³⁵ Ryan earned the

2 9 "Rice Owls School History," sports-reference.com, accessed August 30, 2023, [Rice Owls College Football History, Stats, Records | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](https://www.sports-reference.com/college-football/history/rice-owls/).

3 0 Morrison, John. "Rice Rolls Past Steers by 28-7," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, October 28, 1956, 38.

3 1 Ratliff, Harold V. "Forrestal Pilots Navy in 20-7 Rout of Rice," *The Spokesman-Review*, January 2, 1958, 17.

3 2 Fortune, Jonas. "A MAN OF TWO WORLDS," artsci.case.edu, February 9, 2017, [A Man of Two Worlds | art | sci magazine \(case.edu\)](https://artsci.case.edu/~jfortune/2017/02/09/a-man-of-two-worlds/).

3 3 Fortune, Jonas. "A MAN OF TWO WORLDS," artsci.case.edu, February 9, 2017, [A Man of Two Worlds | art | sci magazine \(case.edu\)](https://artsci.case.edu/~jfortune/2017/02/09/a-man-of-two-worlds/).

3 4 Fortune, Jonas. "A MAN OF TWO WORLDS," artsci.case.edu, February 9, 2017, [A Man of Two Worlds | art | sci magazine \(case.edu\)](https://artsci.case.edu/~jfortune/2017/02/09/a-man-of-two-worlds/).

3 5 Fortune, Jonas. "A MAN OF TWO WORLDS," artsci.case.edu, February 9, 2017, [A Man of Two Worlds | art | sci magazine \(case.edu\)](https://artsci.case.edu/~jfortune/2017/02/09/a-man-of-two-worlds/).



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nickname, “Dr. Frank,” which he often rolled his eyes at. His thesis was titled, “A Characterization of the Set of Asymptotic Values of a Function Holomorphic in the Unit Disc.”³⁶ Later in his career he stated, “I didn't want to be limited to just being a football player. I wanted to be something beyond that. I was always curious, and most of the time I didn't fulfill my curiosity to the extent I wish I had now. But that always pushed me, and I was becoming more and more confused as to where football was leading me.”³⁷

After retiring from football, Ryan worked as the director of Information Services for the U.S. House of Representatives. His work encompassed an electronic voting system that shortened voting times by 33%.³⁸ He also worked at Yale University as the school's athletic director and lecturer in mathematics. Ryan returned to his alma mater in 1972 to work on the school's board of governors, a position he held until 1976, then served in other roles at the university into the mid-1990s.³⁹ While working in external affairs at Rice, he greatly enhanced its fund-raising capabilities. Ryan is married to his wife, Joan, who is a retired sportswriter and columnist for *The Washington Post*. The two met in college and have been married since 1957.⁴⁰

3 6 Fortune, Jonas. “A MAN OF TWO WORLDS,” artsci.case.edu, February 9, 2017, [A Man of Two Worlds | art | sci magazine \(case.edu\)](#).

3 7 Fortune, Jonas. “A MAN OF TWO WORLDS,” artsci.case.edu, February 9, 2017, [A Man of Two Worlds | art | sci magazine \(case.edu\)](#).

3 8 Fortune, Jonas. “A MAN OF TWO WORLDS,” artsci.case.edu, February 9, 2017, [A Man of Two Worlds | art | sci magazine \(case.edu\)](#).

3 9 Fortune, Jonas. “A MAN OF TWO WORLDS,” artsci.case.edu, February 9, 2017, [A Man of Two Worlds | art | sci magazine \(case.edu\)](#).

4 0 Fortune, Jonas. “A MAN OF TWO WORLDS,” artsci.case.edu, February 9, 2017, [A Man of Two Worlds | art | sci magazine \(case.edu\)](#).