



Gus Tinsley

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

For those who witnessed Gaynell (Gus) Charles Tinsley's (b. 1915) years as an athlete, they would've sworn he was some sort of unicorn. Standing at roughly 6'1" and 200 pounds, he was a well-built figure for his time. Despite the fact Tinsley was not very well known in his NFL years with the Chicago Cardinals, he was arguably one of the most heralded athletes of his era. For example, he was a natural, record setting athlete in his short stint in the NFL. In 1937 as a rookie, Gus set the single-season receiving record with 675 yards, was second with 36 receptions, and led the league at 18.8 yards per reception, and 61.4 receiving yards per contest.¹ He also forewent the 1939 season to try out minor league baseball.

Gus was born in Ruple, Louisiana, and raised nearly eight miles away in the small town of Homer. He starred on the baseball and football teams at Homer High School. He was one of four athletes from the area to have played professional football, following in the footsteps of another, his cousin, Jess Tinsley. Jess graduated seven years ahead of Gus, who went on to star at LSU and play professionally with the Chicago Cardinals from 1929 to 1933.²



Gus served as the football and baseball team captains each season he was at LSU. His natural athletic ability came from his instinct to roam the entire field, on offense and defense. On offense, Gus starred at end, and was a tenacious lineman on defense. This spectacle of performance was eyed by first year football coach Bernie Moore. Moore had a very strong reputation with the school, as he was the track coach for 18 years who



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sought to take his success to the gridiron. Upon taking over the football team in 1935, Tinsley and back Abe Mickal were just the spark he needed for success.³ The 1935 season would be one to remember for Tiger fans. To date, it marked the second time ever the school won more than seven games in a season. LSU lost a hard fought opener to Rice at Tiger Stadium, but swept through the rest of the regular season, which ended with a decisive 41-0 win over Tulane. LSU finished at 5-0 in the SEC and a berth in the 1936 Sugar Bowl, where the Tigers lost a 3-2 decision to TCU.⁴ Tinsley was recognized as a consensus All-American, the first in school history, by major media outlets such as the Associated Press, *Collier's Weekly*, and the *New York Sun*. At 19, he was the youngest player ever to earn the honor.⁵

The 1936 campaign would prove to be no different. LSU was among the nation's best teams, sweeping the SEC championship once again with a 6-0 mark, and an overall 9-1-1 campaign.⁶ Tinsley was once again a consensus first-team All-American. Moore was simply amazed by Tinsley's play, stating, "Tinsley could have made All-American at any position. He was so tough, he made blockers quit. He's the greatest lineman I ever saw."⁷

Tinsley capped his collegiate career participating in the Chicago College All-Star Game. Gus scored the game's only points in a 6-0 win for the College stars. The win marked the first time the college all-stars defeated an NFL team.⁸ Decades later, LSU named its all-time team, with Tinsley the only unanimous choice.⁹ His achievements at the school were summed up as nothing short of immaculate as Gus was a two-time All-SEC performer in 1935 and 1936. He returned to LSU from 1939 to 1942 as ends coach.¹⁰ Several years later, in 1948, he was promoted to the head coaching position.

Tinsley had large shoes to fill due to the departure of Bernie Moore as SEC commissioner, and much of the top recruits (Y.A. Tittle, Ed Champagne, Gene Knight, etc.) moved on due to graduation.¹¹ After a rough 1948 season at 3-7, he regrouped the team to win eight games against a daunting schedule that included Bear Bryant's Kentucky Wildcats, Rice, defending Southern champion North Carolina and arch nemesis Tulane. The effort earned the school's first Sugar Bowl berth since the 1937 season. LSU finished ranked ninth in the final polls.¹² LSU rode Tinsley's magic again in 1951, going 7-3-1 for his two best seasons. Gus left after the 1954 season, compiling a 35-34-6 record.¹³

Drafted by the Chicago Cardinals in the second round with the 12th pick in the 1937 NFL draft, Tinsley starred on a team that was widely unsuccessful.¹⁴ As a rookie in 1937, he was selected to be a first-team all-pro, the only all-pro player on the team. He twice set the record for the longest pass reception, at both 97 and 98 yard receptions, in both 1937 and 1938, respectively.¹⁵ The latter remains a franchise record which he shares. He led the league in 1938 with 41 receptions, which tied the league record. Tinsley earned Pro



Bowl honors in 1938, and also garnered much attention as an all-pro player once again.¹⁶ Interestingly enough, Tinsley passed up the 1939 season to play minor league baseball in the East Texas League.¹⁷ Tinsley returned to the NFL in 1940 with the Cardinals for seven games, only to suffer a career-ending knee injury.¹⁸

Upon his retirement in 1940, he ranked fourth all-time in pass receptions with 93. Gus was touted as one of the top receivers in NFL history, alongside Don Hutson. Quite a remarkable comparison given that Tinsley did not even play three full professional seasons.¹⁹ In his approximately three professional seasons, Gus played in 29 games, starting in 25. He totaled 1,401 yards from scrimmage, seven touchdowns, averaged 14.6 yards per reception, and 46.8 yards receiving per game.²⁰

End Notes:

- 1 "Gaynell Tinsley," ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 1, 2021, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/T/TinsGa20.htm>.
- 2 "Jess Tinsley," ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 10, 2021, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/T/TinsJe20.htm>.
- 3 "History Class: The First Years of Gaynell Tinsley," *And the Valley Shook*, June 12, 2019, accessed October 1, 2021, <https://www.andthevalleyshook.com/2019/6/12/18651008/history-class-the-first-years-of-gaynell-tinsley>.
- 4 "1935 LSU Fighting Tigers Schedule and Results," SportsReference.com, accessed October 10, 2021, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/louisiana-state/1935-schedule.html>.
- 5 "LSU's First All-American, Former Coach Gus Tinsley Dies," LSUSports.net, July 24, 2002, accessed October 10, 2021, <https://lsusports.net/news/2002/07/24/162476/>.
- 6 "1936 LSU Fighting Tigers Schedule and Results," SportsReference.com, accessed October 17, 2021, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/louisiana-state/1936-schedule.html>.
- 7 "LSU's First All-American, Former Coach Gus Tinsley Dies," LSUSports.net, July 24, 2002, accessed October 10, 2021, <https://lsusports.net/news/2002/07/24/162476/>.
- 8 "LSU's First All-American, Former Coach Gus Tinsley Dies," LSUSports.net, July 24, 2002, accessed October 10, 2021, <https://lsusports.net/news/2002/07/24/162476/>.
- 9 "LSU's First All-American, Former Coach Gus Tinsley Dies," LSUSports.net, July 24, 2002, accessed October 10, 2021, <https://lsusports.net/news/2002/07/24/162476/>.
- 10 "Gaynell 'Gus' Tinsley," National Football Foundation, accessed October 7, 2021, https://footballfoundation.org/hof_search.aspx?hof=1497.
- 11 "History Class: The First Years of Gaynell Tinsley," *And the Valley Shook*, June 12, 2019, accessed October 1, 2021, <https://www.andthevalleyshook.com/2019/6/12/18651008/history-class-the-first-years-of-gaynell-tinsley>.
- 12 "History Class: The First Years of Gaynell Tinsley," *And the Valley Shook*, June 12, 2019, accessed



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- October 1, 2021, <https://www.andthevalleyshook.com/2019/6/12/18651008/history-class-the-first-years-of-gaynell-tinsley>.
- 13 “Gaynell ‘Gus’ Tinsley,” National Football Foundation, accessed October 7, 2021, https://footballfoundation.org/hof_search.aspx?hof=1497.
- 14 “1937 Chicago Cardinals Starters, Roster, & Players,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 17, 2021, https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/crd/1937_roster.htm.
- 15 “Gaynell Tinsley,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 1, 2021, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/T/TinsGa20.htm>.
- 16 “Gaynell Tinsley,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 1, 2021, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/T/TinsGa20.htm>.
- 17 “Gus Tinsley,” Baseball-Reference.com, accessed October 17, 2021, <https://www.baseball-reference.com/register/player.fcgi?id=tinsle001gay>.
- 18 “Gaynell Tinsley Through for Rest of Season,” *San Jose Evening News*, October 29, 1940, 11.
- 19 “Tinsley Selected Ace Pro Receiver,” *The Anniston Star*, December 22, 1938, 10.
- 20 “Gaynell Tinsley,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 1, 2021, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/T/TinsGa20.htm>.