

LARRY LITTLE

Guard – San Diego Chargers (1967-69), Miami Dolphins (1969-80)

May 8, 2000

By Thomas Danyluk

Sport Magazine once wrote in 1974, “The best scout in the NFL is a guy named Nobody; against all odds, Nobody drafted Larry Little and Manny Fernandez.” Fernandez started at defensive tackle on three Miami Super Bowl teams, while you were named All-Pro six times and elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. What was it these AFL and NFL scouts failed to see in your abilities coming out of Bethune-Cookman?

Well, I think it was because the type of school I went to, with Bethune-Cookman being a small, all-black school in Daytona Beach, Florida. Only two other guys before me ever played in the NFL from that school, but then again, one of those guys was drafted in the fourth round by the Kansas City Chiefs. A lot of people talked about my [lack of] height.

But before the draft, I received a telegraph from the Raiders and the Rams, both saying they were going to draft me. So on the day of the draft, I stayed around in the school dormitory, not letting anybody use the phone in the hallway, waiting for that phone call, a phone call that never came. It was disappointing. I didn't eat all day. I don't think I even went to class that day, just waiting on the phone call. At that time the draft was going like twenty-some rounds.

I was very, very upset that I didn't get drafted, but I said to myself, “If I have the opportunity to play as a free agent, I am going to prove a lot of people wrong.”

After being courted by the Baltimore, Miami and San Diego, you joined with the Chargers for an almost laughable \$750 signing bonus, which was the highest that any of the teams offered.

The Dolphins called me the day after I signed with the Chargers. [Miami General Manager] Joe Thomas called me the day after I signed the contract. The reason I signed with the Chargers was because of a guy named Bud Asher, who hung around the school a lot and was a part-time scout for the Chargers. He was right there with the contract that day. The Colts, when they called, didn't offer me any kind of a bonus. I was trying to milk whoever I could for as much as I could get. San Diego had the best offer that day, so I thought I had better sign now because I wasn't getting a whole lot of other phone calls as a free agent.

The best I could get was that 750 dollars up front. The next day Joe Thomas from the Dolphins called me and asked me how I would like to play in my hometown. I said, “Joe, I would have loved to in Miami, but I signed with the Chargers yesterday. But by the way, how much of a bonus were you going to give me anyway?” He said five hundred dollars. I said, “Well, I already beat that by \$250 [laughing].”

During your first pro training camp and after comparing yourself to the other rookies, veterans and free agents on the team, did you know relatively quickly that you had the ability to play and be successful in the AFL?

Well, what happened in San Diego was that Sid Gillman, the Chargers' head coach, would bring in all free agents a week before the drafted rookies were scheduled to report. I had thought that all the rookies were going to come in together, and I read an article in the newspaper that said something like, “Sid Gillman has brought in a bunch of free agents again. Maybe only one or two will be around when the drafted rookies come in.” I read that and took it as an insult, that I wasn't considered to be good enough to come in with the other rookies.

I had signed as a defensive lineman, and thought I was going to be playing on defense. But during that first week, we didn't even have enough linemen to scrimmage. We were out there in shorts and shoulder pads running our “forties,” and I ran a 4.9 forty. I was weighing 273-lbs at the time, and they were impressed with my speed.

I had really worked out hard before coming to camp. I had never worked out so hard in my life, but I was determined not to come back home. I had taken everything I owned with me, all my clothes, because I wasn't planning on coming back home. I had talked so much trash before I left - saying I was going to make the team - that I probably wouldn't have come back home had I not made it [laughing].”

We were in camp going half line, because we didn't have that many linemen. One time we would be on offense, the next time we would be on defense. Then the next week the rookies came in. What helped me was that I had gotten some good coaching from the coaches before the other guys coming out of college came in. That gave me a leg-up on all those guys when they finally arrived. They thought I was half-crazy too. A former college teammate of mine went with me out to San Diego because he had signed as a free agent with the Chargers too. His name was John Knight, a running back. We had never flown on an airplane before, and we were both scared of that too.

We got out there and introduced ourselves to the rest of the players. I would say, "Hi. I'm Larry Little from Bethune-Cookman College," and guys would snicker at that, saying, "Where's that? What kind of school is that?" That kinda ticked me off. Well, when we finally put the pads on, we would [run the one-on-one drills], and I after finished blocking my man or knocking him back, I would jump on him and start fighting him. I wanted the coaches to say, "This guy's is a wildman! We've got to look at him twice."

So during camp, they came up with the brilliant idea that I was fast enough to be a fullback. I was up to about 280 lbs, and here I was at fullback. I thought they put me there so they had a reason to cut me. But then Joe Madro, who was the offensive line coach at the time, asked Sid Gillman if he could have me for the offensive line. I didn't know how good I would be on the offensive line, although I had practiced it in college in case anybody got hurt. But still, I hadn't played there in over a year.

What also helped me was that I played in a pro-style system at Bethune-Cookman. My college coach, Jack McClaren, had played with the Pittsburgh Steelers. He was the first player from Bethune-Cookman to play in the NFL. So all the things we were now doing in the pros, I had been doing in college, so that helped me out a bit too. Since I had come from a small school, the level of competition may not had been as good, but I had experience at doing certain things. We threw the ball a lot, so I had experienced at pass blocking. So when the drafted rookies came in, they moved me to guard, and things started going pretty good for me. I didn't make the team at first. They had put me on the cab squad.

Well, a lot of my college teammates had gone off to play minor league football with a team called the Wheeling Ironmen. So when Sid called me and told me he was going to give me \$250 a week to be on the cab squad – he was known for being cheap [laughing] - I said, "I can't stay here for that. I could go to Wheeling and make more money playing semi-pro." I told him I would stay for three-fourths of my contract, and Joe talked him into giving it to me because Joe liked me.

So I stayed on the cab squad for four games, then a guy who was playing ahead of me, Ed Mitchell, who had gotten really [heavy] during the offseason, was cut. It was a shame because he really helped me out a lot that first year. He was my mentor. Anyway, they cut him and activated me because I could play special teams. I had done really well on special team during the preseason.

I only played a little that first year, in about four games. The second year I started six games, but they were fooling with my contract. My contract called for a bonus if I started seven out of the 14 games during the season. But what they would do was start another guy, then bring me into the game afterwards, to keep from giving me that bonus. But I did play a lot that second year, mostly at left guard, because Walt Sweeney, who was a great guard himself out of Syracuse, was a stalwart on the right side.

In terms of describing the offensive line, one of the best quotes I've ever heard came from Gene Upshaw of the Oakland Raiders. "I've compared offensive linemen to the story of Paul Revere," he said. "After Paul Revere rode through town, everybody said what a great job he did. But no one ever talked about the horse. I know how Paul Revere's horse felt." In transitioning from your college position on the defensive line to offensive guard, what was it like becoming "one of the horses?" How difficult was the transition in term of both mentality and physical requirments?

It wasn't that different because I played both ways in college up until my senior year. That was the year the new ruling came out saying that you were allowed to play one way. We only had about 45 or 50 guys on the team, so I had to practice on offense at time, in case of injuries to the starters. I was most valuable to my college team on defense. Actually, I was voted MVP after my senior year as a defensive lineman. I was quick. I could run, but I had pretty good strength, although I had never lifted weights. The Chargers, because of Sid Gillman, were probably one of the first teams to have a strength coach. We used to do a lot of strength work at San Diego. The transition wasn't that difficult.

What about the footwork? You were initially quick enough to develop those type of skills?

Yes. Joe worked really well with me in pulling to the left. I could pull to the right okay, but I had difficulty pulling to the left. Joe would get me before practice, he would keep me after practice. I used to hide from him in the sauna. I'd hear him calling, "Lar-ree! Lar-ree! Lar-ree!" and I would hide. They players always told him where I was. He would say, "Get your ass outta there [laughing]!" He was a real comical guy. Joe wasn't but about five-feet-four, and he was the offensive line coach. His neck was always going back because he had to look up at all the big linemen that he coached.

When Csonka, Kiick or Mercury Morris runs inside, 28-year old Larry [Big Man] Little is often lost in the pileup, as all guards are. But when they run outside, he is obvious. He is also frightening. He is out there in front of them, his legs churning, his eyes peering through his facemask at a linebacker or a cornerback who wishes he were anywhere else. Once an agile 195-pound cornerback, Charley Ford of the Chicago Bears, tried to pile up a sweep. Big Man came down on Ford as if Little were a 265-pound flatiron. Csonka rumbled for a first down. "You can't get lower than me," Big Man told the flattened cornerback.

Dave Anderson - Sport Magazine, Jan 1974

You once said, "I demanded respect on the football field." How did you get it?

By trying to hit my opponent as hard as I could. I used to think defensive backs were crazy, because when I was leading the sweep, a lot of these guys would try to take me on, instead of trying to avoid me a make the play. I would hit them, then I would tell their coaches to come and get them, especially a guy who played for the Jets by the name of Steve Tannen. I think I must have knocked him out about three or four times every game we played them. He'd keep coming at me, and I'd knock him out and say, "Come and get him. Don't keep bringing that crap in here on me [laughing]!"

You must have had mixed emotions about your trade to Miami in the summer of 1969. Your playing time with the Chargers was increasing, and you were headed to a team that was two years out of expansion and struggling under George Wilson. However, your prospect for playing time would increase considerably with the Dolphins.

I was upset when I was traded, because I felt that I could beat out the guy who was starting ahead of me in San Diego with one more year of experience. They had traded me for Mack Lamb, who was my college roommate, of all things. I had just mailed my plane ticket reservation back for my flight to San Diego. When I got the phone call, I got very upset. In fact, I was getting ready to make my home out there because I liked it so much.

A good friend of mine, Freddie Woodson, got a phone call from the Dolphins, who were trying to track me down to tell me about the trade. He was a guard for Miami, and we had become friends after a Chargers-Dolphins game one year. I was back in Miami staying with my Mom for the offseason. San Diego never did reach me to tell me about the trade. Freddie finally caught up with me. I was at this little watering hole we used to hang out at, and he comes in and says, "Hey, man, they've been trying to reach you. Joe Thomas called me and said the Dolphins just got you in a trade."

But what I think really initiated that trade – and a lot of people don't know this – was that I met Larry Csonka at a Buick place one day. I had taken my car down there for service or something, and a guy introduced him to me. "I need some linemen with your size down here in Miami with me!" he said. I played it off, didn't think much of it, but then the next thing you know, I was traded to Miami. Csonka likes to say that he was the one that made the trade [laughing], but I joined the team and the rest, you could say, is history.

I really didn't want to play for the Dolphins because they were a losing team. I thought we had a shot [at a championship], or at least were close to having a shot, with the Chargers, because there were a lot of talented football players on that team. Lance Alworth, Gary Garrison, Paul Lowe, Ron Mix, Walt Sweeney – we had some talent! But I didn't know that much about the Dolphins' team. Although they were from my hometown, I didn't pay that much attention to them. My family was happy I was traded because they could see me a lot more than on TV every now and then. Joe Thomas said to me, "We finally got you back down here, didn't we?" Almost immediately I was competing for a starting position. My first game with the Dolphins was a preseason game against the Bears, and Dick Butkus and I got into a fight. We both got thrown out of that game, but I said to myself, "I know this is the great Dick Butkus, but I'm not going to let him beat me, especially here with all my buddies in the stands.

Then I hurt me knee the next week against Philadelphia and missed the rest of the preseason. Then Rod ruptured his spleen in the first game of the year, and I was in the lineup.

Your first season in Miami was also Wilson's last, as the team finished a disastrous 3-10-1.

There were no crowds in the stands. I think the biggest crowd we had in the Orange Bowl that year was a game they were calling Victory Sunday. We were playing Buffalo, and neither team had won a game all season. A big crowd showed up, about 28,000, and we won the game.

Why do you feel Wilson was unable to get the franchise moving in the right direction? Was it a lack of talent? Youth, as the '69 Dolphins had 22 players 23-years old or younger? Poor coaching by Wilson and his staff?

You have to remember that it used to be hard on expansion teams back then, much harder than it is today. The Dolphins came into existence in 1966, and his last year was 1969. But we did have a lot of young talent on that team, and the talent was getting ready to blossom. We had Csonka, Mercury Morris, Jim Kiick, Bob Griese, Manny Fernandez, and Dick Anderson. They had traded for Nick Buonoconti from New England. Then in 1970, Joe Thomas made the deal that brought Jake Scott out of Canada, and the one that brought Paul Warfield to Miami from Cleveland. All of this occurred before they fired George and hired Don Shula as coach. So a lot of the ingredients for a winning team were already here. Shula's job was to refine it.

Do you feel that Wilson got a bad deal then, considering his talent level was finally improving when he was fired?

I wouldn't say that. I think that George did the best he could for where the team was at that particular time. When we heard Don Shula was coming, all of us were happy knowing we were getting a coach of his caliber.

What was the most dramatic difference with the team that occurred when Shula began coaching the Dolphins in 1970, as compared to how it was run under Wilson?

Hard work. We worked three times, maybe five times, as hard with Shula. With George, training camp was almost like a country club. On a hot day, George would come out on the field and say, "What the hell – it's too hot. Go get in the pool." We'd miss a day of practice. But with Shula? Now way we'd ever think of missing a day of practice because it was too hot! When Shula got there, but we didn't have any time to spend sitting in a swimming pool.

During his first year with the team, [the NFL players] were on strike. We did not come to camp until a week before our first preseason game, and I was happy about it. I hated training camp. I hated two-a-days. We came into camp on Sunday and had a preseason game against Pittsburgh coming up the following Sunday in Jacksonville. This man came in here and worked us four times a day. Four times a day! I had never been through anything like that in my life!

I got through it, but in the process I pulled one of the biggest acting jobs in the history of professional football. [Laughing] I passed out during practice, and the night before I had told my roommate Woodson that I was going to do it. I said, "There is no way I'm going to let this man kill me on that field!" I pretended I had passed out, and then they took me off the field in a station wagon to the air-conditioned lockerroom. I had one eye open, peeking the whole time to see what they were going to do with me. They started packing me down in ice, and I got way too cold. Then I had to think up a Plan B. So I jumped off the table, pretending I was having hallucinations just so I could knock the ice off of me [laughing]. The whole time I knew everything that was going on around me, and to this day, Don still doesn't know. I broke down and told him at a banquet once, but he thought I was kidding.

Considering his coaching philosophy and style, could Sid Gillman have won with talent Shula inherited in Miami?

I think he could have been successful, but I don't think he would have had the same success that Shula had. Sid had a wide-open attack and liked to throw the ball, and Shula's philosophy was different. He was the grind-it-out type, who believed in getting the running game going. With Paul Warfield on the team, we had a downfield threat, but Bob Griese was only a good passer, not a great passer. Sid probably would have had some success, but I don't think the Dolphins had the weapons he needed to run his kind of attack in Miami. I think we saw the second coming of Sid in Shula after he got Dan Marino.

What were the obvious differences in the way Gillman's Chargers taught offensive line play versus the way it was taught under Shula?

Well, there wasn't a whole lot of difference. I learned a great deal from Joe Madro in San Diego. I think Joe really had a lot to do with me getting to where I got in my career. Shula brought in a young offensive line coach who had just gotten out of the game in Monte Clark. Monte and Shula were sticklers for details. We would be in practice working on drills, and Shula would be on the other side of the field. You didn't think he was watching you, but he was. He would holler out your name from one end of the field to another, "Hey, you're not doing that right!" The man was just a perfectionist, and he embedded in our minds that we ought to strive for perfection.

Can you recall any particular instance or game or play the first indicated to you that Shula was going to lead Miami to the top of the National Football League?

When he got to Miami, we all knew his reputation as a coach. We all listened to everything the man he had to say because we knew the man knew how to get it done. During our first meeting, Shula stressed all the positives, not the negatives. He didn't discuss what we had done before but what we were going to do now and in the future.

In your mind, what made Don Shula a great football coach?

What set him apart from other coaches was that he could get the most out of his football players. Bum Phillips once said about him, "He can take his'n and beat your'n, and take your'n and beat his'n." Shula could take anybody's team and be successful.

What did he add to your career that you feel you could not have gotten from any other coach?

I had met him at his first press conference in Miami. He asked me my name and how much I weighed. I had gotten a little pudgy during the offseason and hadn't been working out as much. I told him 285 pounds. He looked at me and said, "Yeah? Okay." Well, when I got the letter telling me to report to training camp, it said he wanted me down to 265 pounds. He made me lose twenty pounds because it would make me lighter, quicker, more effective at what he wanted me to do. Today, 285 pounds would be too small! When he made me lose that weight, that really helped my career to blossom. It made me get in better condition, and me to do the things I had to do to help our team be successful, like pulling on sweeps and getting in front of speedy guys like Mercury Morris. He helped me believe in myself, because he was always stressing that the was going to feature a lot of the offense behind me. It really helped my confidence, where I said, "Hey, I must be pretty good!" By watching films, he could see I had a lot of talent and could be a good football player if I lost weight.

The refinements [to Little's technique] were added by Monte Clark. Little had a habit of looking around as he pulled on a sweep, worrying about blitzing linebackers or crashing safetymen. All Clark wanted Little to be concerned with was blasting the cornerback. Other people would take care of the crashers. One day, Clark yelled at him, "Larry, you look around again and you'll turn into a pillar of salt!" This got his attention. Clark spent five minutes explaining about Lot's wife, and Little never looked around again.

- Steve Perkins and Bill Braucher, *The Miami Dolphins: Winning Them All* (1973)

One of the less talked about seasons was that first one with Shula, 1970. However, I feel it's one of the more interesting ones.

It was one of the biggest turnarounds in history – from 3-10-1 to 10-4.

After a loss to Boston in the season opener, the Dolphins won four straight games, including a 20-13 win over the Raiders, the team's first against Oakland. Then a three-game losing streak hit, which included consecutive shutouts by Cleveland and Baltimore and a loss to the pathetic Eagles. What was the team's mindset during that losing streak, and how was Shula able to pull the team out of a complete tailspin?

That [losing streak] was more the result of growing pains than anything else. Cleveland and Baltimore were more ready to play than we were, and it showed. They were experienced playoff teams and had a lot of talent, and we were looking for our first winning season as an organization. The Philadelphia game was really the lowpoint of the season. They even had us shut out for the first three quarters of that game. Shula really came down on hard on us, but not to the point where he broke our confidence. We scored 17 points in the fourth quarter, trying to come back against the Eagles. Then we went on a roll and won the last six games of the year and made the playoffs. Nobody was able to shut us out again until a decade later.

You lost to the Raiders in that game, 21-14 in a soaking, sloppy mess of a field. However, two of the Raiders touchdowns came on fluke plays – a 50-yard interception return by Willie Brown and an 82-yard TD pass from Daryl Lamonica to Rod Sherman. Should the outcome of that game have been different?

Well, they watered the field down before the game. We all believed that. We felt we had a better team than Oakland. They were definitely a more experienced team than we were, and had a lot of good players, but we weren't intimidated by that. We had already beaten them in the regular season that year, so we felt we had a pretty good chance of winning that playoff.

Your former teammate, linebacker Nick Buoniconti, points to a specific game as a defining moment in the history of the Miami Dolphins franchise. "I think the turning point of the Miami Dolphins – when they grew up – was 1971 when we played the Los Angeles Rams out in Los Angeles," he says. "The Rams had a heckuva good football team, and we were sort of still 'part of the old AFL.' When we beat the Rams [20-17] out there, every player, to a man, turned around to another one and said, 'You know something? I think we've arrived.'" Do you agree with him? If not, what game do you view as being the franchise's most pivotal during those early Shula years?

I remember Jim Murray of the LA Times wrote in his column before the game, "Who are these Dolphins? Where are they coming from? What kind of fish are these?" We knew we were going up against a good football team in the Rams, who had Deacon Jones and Merlin Olsen and the rest of the Fearsome Foursome, but we knew we had a good football team as well. Going into that game at the Coliseum, we had lost only once ourselves. I think the real turning point for our football team was the longest game in history - our playoff game against Kansas City. They had won the Super Bowl two years before and were still a very good football team, and we went up there and knocked them off (27-24) and went on to our first Super Bowl. I feel that was when we really arrived. Although the Rams game was a catalyst and added to our momentum to our season, after we beat the Chiefs we knew we were a true contender.

The Dolphins went on to shutout the Colts 21-0 in the AFC Championship, but were then derailed by the Cowboys in Super Bowl VI. Although you only trailed by seven points at half time, Dallas was able to pull away by pitching a defensive shutout over the final two quarters. Despite the team's youth and inexperience, could the Dolphins have beaten Dallas that day had some things been done a little differently?

I believe so. I think the mistake that was made – and I am not second-guessing anyone here – was that, although we had three excellent backs on that team in Csonka, Kiick and Mercury Morris, we didn't utilize Mercury as much as we could have that game. All Dallas did was pile up the inside, knowing we wouldn't be able to run to the outside with Kiick. Although Jim was a good outside runner, he didn't have the speed like Mercury did to open up the offense. I think had we used Morris to stretch the width of the field and keep Dallas from bottling up the inside, things could have been different. Not to take anything away from Dallas. The Cowboys were an excellent football team, who had been to the Super Bowl before and lost. They knew that feeling. We were a young team, and in a lot of ways, we were just happy to be there. But I don't think Dallas was that much better than we were. Not 24-3.

Morris didn't even have one carry in that game.

No. In fact, he appeared in his own personal press conference after the game. He was pretty upset about not playing, and Shula chided him for it afterwards. The only time he was on the field was for the National Anthem and the opening kickoff. But the next year we came into training camp, Mercury was the starting tailback.

The undefeated season of 1972 has been well documented. Tell me one thing that you will always remember about it.

After we lost to Dallas in the Super Bowl the previous season, Shula stood in the lockerroom and said, "Remember this feeling. I don't ever want to have this feeling again. We're going to come back and we're never going to have this feeling of defeat again." We all took that in. We knew we were a good football team, and we knew we were good enough to get back to the Super Bowl. What we did not know was that we were good enough to go undefeated.

What regular season game stands out in your mind most that year?

We went up there and played [Kansas City] in 115-degree weather on opening day. This was a rematch from that great playoff game the year before, and we thought they would be out for revenge. We were leading 20-3 at the end of the third quarter, and I saw those guys from Kansas City really sucking it up. They were really wilting. We were used to that kind of heat in practice. So when the gun sounded, I just took off and sprinted to the other end of the field, just to get even more of a psychological advantage. It was just a gut reaction. We were in shape, and I wanted the Chiefs to know it.

One of the biggest changes made to the starting lineup going into the 1972 season was the insertion of Jim Langer at center in place of Bob DeMarco, a former All-NFL player who was traded to Cleveland for a 7th round pick that summer. What did Langer, an unknown free agent who had been cut by Cleveland, have over DeMarco talent-wise, and at the time, did you feel the move was a good one for the offensive line?

Even though Langer was a backup, we knew he had talent, and Bob DeMarco was in the twilight of his career. I didn't think it was a bad move when they traded Bob. Although he was a good, knowledgeable player, he wasn't as strong as Jim. Jim was one of these guys who worked out in the weight room all the time, and was just a strong, tough guy. Bob was more of a finesse kind of player, and for our running game to be successful, we needed a center who could really get out there and pound it.

You and Langer, both offensive linemen, are in the Hall of Fame for your efforts on the field. What other member of your Super Bowl line – Bob Kuechenberg, Wayne Moore, and Norm Evans – is the most underrated?

I believe it was Wayne Moore. He was my roommate with the Dolphins. All of us went to the Pro Bowl at one time or another, and when it was Wayne's turn to go (after the 1973 season), he had such bad knees that he wasn't able to play. Norm played next to me, so he got a lot of recognition, and Wayne played next to Kuechenberg. Wayne was very underappreciated. He was outstanding at pass blocking, and he would have had a great, great career if it weren't for his bad knees. He was as steady as they came. He was a basketball player in college. He didn't even play football in college. He had those long arms, and at 6'7", he was one of the first real tall offensive linemen. Norm was very steady also. Very, very steady. And I loved playing next to him. We knew how each other played like we knew each other's names.

Here are Jim Kiick's comments on Shula's decision to play Bob Griese in the second half of the '72 AFC Championship, replacing Earl Morrall: "Earl Morrall had saved us after Bob got hurt in the fifth game. But when Bob was able to play against the Browns [in the AFC semi-final], we thought Shula should have put him in... So when Shula announced that Bob would start the Super Bowl, some fans wondered if it was a mistake. But in our minds, he should've started Bob earlier." What were your thoughts about that quarterback controversy? After all, Morrall went 10-0 as a starter, beat Cleveland in the playoffs, and had Pittsburgh in a 7-7 tie before he was lifted.

Well, I don't know if it was a controversy or not. Griese had been the starting quarterback, and Shula had always said that a player does not lose a starting job because of an injury. We needed a lift against Pittsburgh, and he felt Bob was ready. Although Earl had taken us most of the way that season, I agreed with the move. As it turned out, Bob was ready and played very well. He took us in for two touchdowns in the second half and helped win that game for us.

Bob Griese, as well as many other former Dolphins, have said they feel the 1973 team, which lost to Oakland and Baltimore during the regular season, but captured Super Bowl 8, was an even better team than the undefeated one. Agree or disagree, and why?

I was one of the first people to say that. In '72, we won games, but we weren't dominating teams. People were also making comments about our schedule, how we really didn't play anybody that year. So in '73, everybody wanted to be the team to knock off the Miami Dolphins.

I remember during the preseason that year, we went up and played the Vikings in Minnesota and they beat us. Coming off the field, [Vikings coach] Bud Grant was so happy that he was tipping his hat to the crowd, and it was a preseason game! We were thinking, "What is this all about?" When the Raiders beat us in the second game of the year, John Madden and all the players and the Raiders fans were acting like they had just won the Super Bowl. I remember pulling a "Joe Namath" before our rematch in the '73 AFC Championship. I guaranteed that [Oakland] would not beat us, that we were going to win the football game. And we did – convincingly. We made it a point to dominate every team we played that season, to show that we really were a superior, powerhouse football team. Neither playoff game that year – against Cincinnati and then Oakland – was even close, and neither was the Super Bowl. We scored the first time we had the ball in each of those games.

What did it take to stop the Miami ground game, and which teams were most successful at it?

To tell the truth, I don't remember too many teams that were successful at stopping our running game. We had Csonka and Kiick pounding it up the inside, and then we'd hit them with Mercury coming around the outside. Teams didn't know where we were coming from. We had a very cohesive offensive line and played very well together, so it took a very talented and disciplined team to stop our running game. They had to be in their lanes at all times, because if they weren't, somebody would come out of nowhere, make a block and we'd be off to the races again. We were the first team to have two 1000-yard rushers on it [in 1972], and the next season we were only 46 yards away from doing it two years in a row.

How about individual linemen? Which gave you the roughest time on Sunday afternoon?

I would have to say Joe Greene from Pittsburgh. He was the best that I ever played against. He was a combination of strength, speed, quickness, and he was nasty. Curly Culp was probably the strongest guy I ever played against, and Mike Reid from Cincinnati was probably the quickest.

You made your reputation as a punishing force leading the churning Miami sweep. Which opposing cornerbacks were the most fearless at challenging you, and therefore were able to gain your respect?

What I did when I was pulling was start out really fast to get to the head of the sweep, but then I would slow down because the backs would try to juke me. I remember Robert James being one of the toughest guys I had to block. He was a Buffalo cornerback who didn't think twice about coming up and taking me on. He was a very quiet, unassuming guy who wore glasses and looked like a professor. But on Sundays, boy, he was tough. I knew I had to take something to the parlor to get him out of the way.

Let's discuss your offensive line coaches with the Dolphins – first Monte Clark and then John Sandusky. What were these men able to contribute to your approach to the game and playing style that you wouldn't have been able to develop on your own? How much do you believe they contributed to you reaching the Hall of Fame?

Monte was the first one to get the most out of me in Miami. He was such a technician, a guy who was hung up on technique. Monte stressed repetition, doing the same things over and over again, until I didn't have to think about doing them. When John took over, I was pretty much established as a player. John was a good x's and o's man and was great at getting us in the right position to make plays. But I had already reached the peak of my career when John had gotten there.

Bob Griese was known as the "Thinking Man's Quarterback." Give me your best example of how he earned that title.

Bob called his own plays. He always seemed to call the right plays at the right time. I never saw him get rattled. I never saw him get emotional. He never raised his voice in the huddle. I remember in that '72 game against Pittsburgh, he came off the bench and immediately hit Paul Warfield for a big gain. I know he must have seen something from the sidelines during the first half, and knew he could get the ball downfield against their defense. He always seemed to be thinking one or two plays ahead of the one we were about to run, trying to envision the upcoming situation. Trying to set the defense up.

By the end of his career, long-time backup quarterback Don Strock developed a reputation as being the best relief pitcher in the game. But he was never able to beat out an aging Bob Griese or young David Woodley for the starting position, and when Dan Marino arrived, there was never a chance for him. What part of Strock's game prevented him from becoming a solid, starting quarterback for the Dolphins?

That's a tough question. I really don't know. We knew Strock had a lot of ability and could throw the football, but I don't think he ever became better than Bob at any time the two of them were there. After Bob retired, Shula may have been intent on going with a more versatile quarterback like David Woodley, but I don't know that. Woodley could run the ball and was a good athlete, but Don was a much better passer. He was one of the better throwing quarterbacks you could find. Some guys are just meant to be backup quarterbacks, and Don was a great backup quarterback. Just like Earl Morrall.

The Dolphins buried once and for all the myth that other teams have better material. That Miami wins on unity rather than speed or muscle. Jim Langer and Bob Kuechenberg and Larry Little and Wayne Moore and Norm Evans picked up Bud Grant's fabled Front Four from the Northland and shook them like a gang of King Kongs dangling a cluster of Fay Wrays from the Empire State Building. Scorning audible check-offs at the line of scrimmage and throwing a Super Bowl-low seven passes, Bob Griese aimed Larry Csonka through the debris and Csonka flung it aside like confetti in his Super Bowl record (145 yards) running show.

- Edwin Pope, The Miami Herald, January 14, 1974

What effect did the announced defection of Csonka, Kiick and Warfield to the WFL have on the Dolphins chance for a Super Bowl three-peat going into the 1974 season? Initially, do you feel it provided a sense of urgency, or disheartened the team? What was your reaction when you first heard the news?

Well, we weren't disheartened. We were happy that those guys were getting the money they were getting. What it did was open up [owner] Joe Robbie's pocketbook to keep us in Miami. A lot of us went back and renegotiated our contracts after that happened. I was happy for them. Csonka called me and told me what he was going to do. I wished him good luck and asked him to take me with him [laughing].

After a season-opening loss at New England that year, it was basically the same old Miami Dolphins again, as the team won 11 of its next 13 to win the AFC East for a fourth straight year. Going into the AFC Semifinal against Oakland, what was different about the team – attitude or personnel-wise - from its previous three Decembers, each of which had led to the Super Bowl?

Honestly, we felt we were going for our fourth straight Super Bowl. Make no mistake – we were a confident football team. But if you look at some of the things that happened to us in that game, they were tough to overcome. Cliff Branch catches the pass, falls down, then gets up and runs it all the way. Stabler getting sacked and tossing the ball up for grabs into the endzone for the winning touchdown. All the injuries we had on defense. And we still had a chance to win it at the end, but it just didn't happen. Had we gotten out of there with a win, we would have played the Steelers the next week for the AFC Championship. I felt we had Pittsburgh's number, that we matched up good against them, and probably would have won that ballgame. Up to that point, they had not beaten us. They were an excellent football team, but we had guys that just matched up well with their people.

Mercury Morris was, if anything, the most dynamic of the Dolphins Super Bowl trio, although Shula always had concerns about his durability. After injuries limited his playing time in '74, he averaged four yards per rush on 219 carries the following season, then was traded to San Diego, where his career ended with a whimper. Do you feel Shula gave up too soon on Morris? Did he still have any football left in him when he was traded?

That's a tough question. I don't really know. Shula and Merc started to have some problems, and Merc did have a bad neck injury that never was right again. In fact, it's still not right. I think that neck injury was what really hurt his career. When he was traded to San Diego, I don't think he had that much football left in him. We had some younger guys on the team, like Benny Malone and later Gary Davis, who tried to fill in the role of speed back for us, but they were no Mercury

After the departure of Csonka, Kiick and later, Morris, the Dolphins' running game was taken over by players like Norm Bulaich, Don Nottingham, Benny Malone, Gary Davis and Leroy Harris – a true running back-by-committee operation. What contributions were those players able to make that gave Miami a different dimension to the running game that it didn't have prior to 1975?

They were all good tough running backs, but they couldn't contribute what Csonka, Kiick and Morris could. We definitely were not as good a running team without them. Benny Malone was as hard as a rock, an excellent blocker who had no fear. Gary Davis was a good, solid running back. Bulaich and Nottingham was our two-headed fullback that replaced Csonka. These guys all contributed, but they couldn't take over a game.

After six straight years of ten or more wins, the 1976 campaign was a 6-8 disaster. What was it like being a member of Shula's first losing team?

It wasn't a good feeling, but you know what was ironic about that year? In the 1972 preseason, we were 3-3. In '76, we were 6-0 in the preseason. We felt very good about the '76 team until injuries started hitting us. We were an injury-riddled team that year, and that's what really hurt us.

What characteristics or traits did that losing season bring out in Shula that you had not seen before when the team was winning?

I don't really think that season changed him. I feel that he knew that the reason was all the injuries that we had. He was being the same Don – raising hell with us like he always did, but still congratulating us when we did something well. But our last game of the year, we played Minnesota at home, and a win would have given us a .500 record for the year. We stunk the joint out and they beat us 29-7. Don was very upset, and after that game I knew a lot of guys wouldn't be back after that year. We had some players who already had one foot in the parking lot during that game, knowing it was the end of the season and we wouldn't be going to the playoffs. That kind of attitude is not tolerated on a Shula-coached team, and some changes were made during the offseason.

After your win in Super Bowl VIII over the Vikings, Miami failed to win another playoff game until 1982, a span of 9 years. What do you feel was the main cause for such a long draught, when considering the main constant with the team was Shula?

Well, we came very close in 1975 to getting in, but we lost to Baltimore twice and that kept us out, even though we both had 10-4 records. I remember the 1977 season, the year after our losing record, in which we bounced back to 10-4 and were trying to get into the playoffs. On the last weekend of the season, we were at home against Buffalo, and the Patriots were in Baltimore. We had to beat the Bills,

which we did, and the Patriots had to beat the Colts. New England jumped out to a big lead and looked like they were going to win the game, so I called up Wayne Moore and told him, "Get ready to get up for practice in the morning, buddy!" Then Bert Jones pulled them back and won the football game. That one really hurt! But earlier in the year, we had a chance to control our own destiny, and we didn't. We lost to San Diego at home 14-13, and that shouldn't have happened. We lost a tough game at New England in the second-to-last week of the season. We didn't want to be in a position to depend on anybody else to get into the playoffs, to back in, and that's exactly what happened.

In '78, we had a great year and played Houston in a wild-card game at the Orange Bowl. This was the same Oilers team that had scored 35 points against us earlier in the season, and in the playoffs we held them to 17. But our offense was completely out of sync that day. We couldn't run the ball. We had four turnovers. [Griese] was playing with bruised ribs and had trouble throwing the football. It was not a good day. We made the playoffs again in 1979 and played Pittsburgh, but we were not as good a football team as the Steelers and they beat us pretty easily.

* * * *

LARRY LITTLE OG-OT

Pro Football Hall of Fame bio:

Free-agent signee with 1967 Chargers ... Traded to Miami, 1969 ... Immediately won starting right guard job ... Epitome of powerful Dolphins rushing game of 1970s ... Fast, quick on pass protection - awesome, intimidating as pulling guard on sweeps ... All-Pro six years ... Five-time Pro Bowl pick ... Three-time NFLPA pick as AFC offensive lineman of year ... Started in three Super Bowls.

Lawrence Chatmon Little
6-1, 265 PF HOF 1993
College: Bethune-Cookman
High School: Booker T. Washington [Miami, FL]
Born: 11 / 2 / 1945, Groveland, GA
Uniform Number: #66 (also wore 73)

1967 SD 10	1972 Mia 14	1977 Mia 14
1968 SD 14	1973 Mia 13	1978 Mia 16
1969 Mia 12	1974 Mia 14	1979 Mia 15
1970 Mia 14	1975 Mia 14	1980 Mia 5
1971 Mia 14	1976 Mia 14	

