

ART SHELL

By Don Smith

During his 15-season career from 1968 to 1982 with the Oakland/Los Angeles Raiders, left offensive tackle Art Shell became widely recognized as the NFL's premier performer at his position. Although he played on a team that for years was famed for its awesomely-effected forward lines, the 6-5, 285-pound Shell was considered by many close Raiders observers to be the most outstanding among the many talented linemen who played for the Silver-and Black.

Thus, it came as no surprise when Shell was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1989.

Shell's size made him ideal for an offensive tackle job in pro football. But he also combined a delicate balance of speed and agility, pride and dignity, along with brains and strength to excel. For most of his career, he teamed with his left guard running mate, Gene Upshaw, to form such a lethal blocking unit that one opponent ruefully commented: "The two of them block out the sun!"

When Oakland coaches reviewed the game films, Shell received consistently high grades but he reached his zenith in Super Bowl XI when the Raiders routed the Minnesota Vikings, 32-14. In the first half alone, the Raiders aimed 27 of 33 running plays toward two premier performers, Alan Page and Jim Marshall, on the right side of Minnesota's defensive front.

Shell and Upshaw paved the way for a then-record 266-yard rushing output with crushing blocks that neutralized the Vikings defenses. When the final statistics were tallied, the big news was that Marshall, Shell's primary blocking target, had no tackles, no assists, a completely lost day.

"When somebody told me I had a perfect game, I was shocked because I had no idea Marshall had not been in on even one play," Shell said. "I was too busy to keep track. Play by play, quarter by quarter, I was totally involved in doing the best job I could."

"The best I could" was basically the way Shell played throughout his 15 pro seasons. While he was often overshadowed by the more flamboyant Upshaw, who became the unofficial spokesman for a generation of Oakland forwards soon after he joined the team in 1967, Shell definitely made his own mark on the National Football League scene.

Equally adept as a pass protector or as a blocker on running plays, Shell was an all-AFC selection six straight years from 1973 through 1978 and all-pro in 1973, 1974 and 1978. He also had plenty of opportunities to demonstrate his skills in post-season play. Art played in eight Pro Bowls and 24 post-season contests, including eight AFL/AFC championship games and the Raiders' victories in Super Bowl XI and XV.

Shell also proved to be durable. He played in his first 156 pro games before a pre-season injury in 1979 forced him out of the line-up for five games. He then launched another streak of 51 games that was finally aborted by injuries midway through his final 1982 campaign. Altogether, he played in 207 regular-season games. Along with Upshaw, Shell is the only Raiders player whose career spanned all or parts of three decades.

"I was fortunate in the sense of never having a serious injury," Shell reflects. "I never had an operation. You have to be lucky and you have to play hard."

Shell's hard-work ethic and his complete dedication to the total team effort earned him the tremendous respect of teammates and opponents alike.

"He was one of those quiet leaders who commanded respect just by being a great player," former Raiders coach John Madden remembers. "He never, ever, acted like a tough guy. He was always nice and business-like. But whether you were his teammate or an opponent, you knew this was a man who deserved your deepest respect."

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When Shell was playing football in high school and college, he was continually reprimanded for not being mean enough. "I thought I was doing well," Shell remembers, "but the coaches thought I would do a whole lot better if I were mean. I'm just not a mean person."

Even after he turned pro, Shell maintained a friendly demeanor. On the field before a game, he would greet his opponent: "Hey, how are you doing today? Let's have a good game." The Denver Broncos' Lyle Alzado, who later became Shell's teammate, admitted that Art's nice-guy demeanor broke the impetus of his pre-game mental preparation. That effect, however, was not Shell's primary intention.

"That's just the way I am," he explained. "I want to greet the guy and have a good, tough game. But we don't have to be vicious about it and take cheap shots."

Shell would deviate from this attitude only when an opponent did take a cheap shot. When that happened, Art became a willing and effective enforcer. He might wait a few plays but when he did retaliate, he would usually take both hands and shoot them up under his opponent's chin, thus bending his neck back just hard enough so the guy would know why this was happening to him.

Ollie Spencer, who was Shell's offensive line coach with the Raiders, remembers that the word around the NFL was "don't get Art Shell mad at you if you have to play against him."

While many defensive linemen and linebackers who played in the NFL in the 1970s can remember long afternoons against Shell, the former Raiders tackle has his own list of opponents who gave him a particularly tough time.

"Some guys do certain things well," Shell said. "I'd hate to single out one guy. You've got people who are strong, like Alzado of Denver and Wilbur Young of Kansas City. Then there are quick guys like Cedrick Hardman of San Francisco and Elvin Bethea of Houston. I'd rather play a strong guy, because the finesse guy who runs real fast is hard to stay with. That's why quickness is important at my position. My job takes place within an area of five yards, so it's not how fast I run a 40 but how quick I get off the ball."

Shell's sense of responsibility and dedication no doubt was a product of his early family life. Art was born in Charleston, S.C., on November 26, 1946. His mother died when he was 10 and he was raised by a quiet, loving, strict father. Since his father worked long hours at a paper mill, Art, as the oldest of five children, had to look after the rest of the kids.

"We never gave our parents a bad time," Art reminisces. "Our mother taught us well when she was with us. Then when she wasn't there any more, we just had to carry on. We were very, very close to our father. When we were growing up, he talked softly, but when he said something, you knew he meant it. When he did pull out the rod, you knew you deserved it and you were awfully sorry."

His father's fair-but-strict doctrine stayed with Art on the football field, both as a player and later as a Raiders assistant coach, a position he still holds today. That is why the week following Super Bowl XXIII was both the happiest and saddest of his life. On Tuesday, he was notified of his election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. On Wednesday, his beloved father died.

At Bonds-Wilson High School in North Charleston, Shell was an all-state star in both football and basketball. He was thinking of going to Grambling when the Maryland State football coach showed up at his house and insisted: "I'm not leaving without you." Art knew it would be too much of a burden for his father to pay for his college education so Maryland State it was.

Since Maryland State was a comparatively small school, Shell managed to play both football and basketball. For the first two years on the gridiron, Art was a center and defensive tackle but he spent his last two years as a two-way tackle. He was all-conference three years, all-America two years on the Pittsburgh Courier and Ebony Magazine teams and little all-America as a senior in 1967.

The Raiders selected him in the third round of the combined AFL-NFL draft in 1968. When they were scouting Shell, the Raiders were fascinated not only by his size but by the fact he also played basketball.

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"The primary thing we saw in Art was his great size," Madden said. "But we also were excited that he was an accomplished basketball player. With that size, combined with his ability to move his feet and the agility he showed on the basketball court, we knew we had a quality prospect."

Shell, however, did not become an immediate star. "Coming to the pros was an eye-opening experience," he confessed. "The toughest adjustment was pass blocking. In college, we ran more than we passed. When we did pass block, it was like taking the guy right there on the line in what you called a short set. In the pros, you can't do it that way every time. Sometimes you have to change up -- drop deep, medium and short."

Another problem for Shell as a rookie was that an established veteran, Bob Svihus, was firmly entrenched in the starting left tackle position. For two seasons, Art busied himself as a valued member of the special teams. He also backed up Svihus and saw brief action on the defensive unit.

But in the 1970 pre-season, Shell finally got his chance when Svihus was injured. "I want to start. I'll give it everything I've got," Art promised. "I don't know if I can hold the job, but I do know the best man will win it." Shell did prevail and, except when he was injured, he never sat on the bench again.

After 12 injury-free seasons, most of them as a full-time starter, Shell was carried from the field with a damaged knee in the 1979 pre-season. He was 32 years old and many thought his career might be over. But once again Shell proved the value of hard work. By the beginning of October, just seven weeks later, Shell was back on the field harassing defensive ends.

"It was an amazing recovery," Raiders coach Tom Flores said. "He worked out as many as four times a day on his own. Any other player would have been out for the season." Throughout Art's career, his weight remained a mystery. Early in his tenure, the Raiders press book listed his weight at 255 and then at 265. By 1981 and 1982, his published weight was established at 285 pounds.

Some, however, guessed he was nearer 300, possibly even as high as 320 pounds. "John Madden told me as long as I performed it didn't matter to him how much I weighed, so when everybody else got on the scales, I would walk by," Shell said.

"But I will tell you honestly the day when I weighed the most," he continued. "It was the day of Super Bowl XI. I went into the locker room alone and weighed myself just before the game -- I weighed 310 pounds."

Shell then played perhaps the finest game of his career. It was this kind of excellence, game in and game out and regardless of what the scales said, that assured Art Shell a permanent spot among pro football's immortals!

ARTHUR (Art) SHELL

Hgt: 6-5 Wgt: 285

School: Maryland-Eastern Shore

Born: November 26, 1946, Charleston, SC

YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM
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1968	Oakland	A	14
1969	Oakland	A	14
1970	Oakland	N	14
1971	Oakland	N	14
1972	Oakland	N	14
1973	Oakland	N	14
1974	Oakland	N	14
1975	Oakland	N	14
1976	Oakland	N	14
1977	Oakland	N	14
1978	Oakland	N	16
1979	Oakland	N	11
1980	Oakland	N	16
1981	Oakland	N	16
1982	Raiders	N	8
15 years			207