

# **Don Maynard**

**Best Big-Time Receiver for New York's Titans and Jets**

By: Jim Sargent

When Donald Rogers Maynard ended his outstanding football career after two games with the St. Louis Cardinals in 1973, he was the all-time leading pass receiver in pro football history. Nevertheless, after his rookie season with the New York Giants, three good years with the New York Titans, and several stellar seasons with the New York Jets, the Texas native seemed to be one of New York City's least recognizable athletes.

Today a member of the Texas Sports Hall of Fame, the American Football League's Hall of Fame, and Pro Football Hall of Fame, Maynard was one of the greatest receivers in pro football in the 1960s. Not only could he make the clutch catch, but once he caught the football he had the speed to gain yardage, and he often scored.

When his football career was over, Don had caught 633 passes from more than two dozen quarterbacks—mostly from Joe Namath after 1964—and picked up 11,834 yards. His passes caught and yardage gained were National Football League records in 1973. A free-spirited athlete, an independent thinker, and a careful person, Maynard usually did the job his way. A sure-handed receiver, he was always a threat to any opponent if the quarterback threw to him.

A down-home fellow who speaks with a west Texas drawl, Maynard had the speed needed by modern receivers. Listed at 6'1" and about 180 pounds in his heyday, he could sprint with the fastest defensive backs. Don was never caught from behind. An all-around athlete in high school, he excelled in track, running the 100, 220, and 440-yard dashes and the low and high hurdles.

Born in Crosbyton, Texas, on January 25, 1935, Don grew up in a family that kept moving around. His father was a cotton broker, and he did not make long-term living commitments. As a result, Don attended 13 different schools, including five high schools, all in Texas. He grew up loving sports, especially track and football.

Talking about his football career in a 2003 interview, Maynard said, "I go all the way back to playing football on vacant lots and playing around the neighborhood with other kids. When I was a freshman, I played six-man football because our high school had a small attendance. We had about ten guys on our team in Three Way, and I probably played a little at quarterback.

"We kept moving around, and I never did play football again until I was a senior in high school at Colorado City. Under Texas rules, I never was eligible for football as a sophomore and a junior. You had to live somewhere for a year. But I played basketball and ran track."

In his senior year at Colorado City High, Don lettered at halfback in football, at guard in basketball, and as a sprinter and hurdler in track. After graduating, he enrolled at Rice University for the fall semester. That spring Don transferred to Texas Western, now the University of Texas at El Paso, making him a redshirt freshman in his sophomore year.

"That's where I learned how to play football, as a redshirt," Don remembered. "I played three years at Texas Western, and I made All-Border conference as a senior. In 1956, my junior year, we had a great team and went 9-1. I think we had four shutouts. We had a great defensive ball club, and we upset Arizona State. They were ranked about third in the nation. We beat 'em, 28-0.

"In those days you played both ways. I played halfback on offense and safety on defense. The heaviest guy on our ball club weighed about 205. Hit 'em quick, and run 'em to death, that's what we did."

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Asked whether he played end before turning professional, Maynard replied, "I'm the guy who finally taught the New York writers how to put down the position. I said, 'One time I'm an end, one time I'm the flanker. Why don't I give you a term and make it simple? Why don't you call me a wide receiver?' That's when they started using the term 'WR' for wide receiver."

After his junior season he married Marilyn Weaver, a baton twirler for Texas Western. Even though he would lose his scholarship as a senior if he were married, Don and Marilyn tied the knot. As a senior he worked on campus washing dishes, and he also took graduate courses.

Don added, "You get drafted in the season you're supposed to graduate, which for me was 1957. But I was a redshirt, so I stayed and played for another year, and I worked on my Master's degree."

In 1957 the Giants drafted Maynard in the ninth round. When he left to take a shot at pro football in 1958, his wife lived with his grandparents. Don made the team as a reserve halfback, competing against veterans like Frank Gifford, Kyle Rote, and Alex Webster.

In 12 games as a rookie, Don ran the ball 12 times for 45 yards, averaging 3.8 yards a carry. He also made five catches for 84 yards, a 16.8 yard average per catch. Mainly he played on special teams, and he ran back 24 punts, averaging 4.9 yards per return but fumbling three times.

Reflecting on that season, he commented, "I ran second-string behind Frank Gifford, and to me that was like playing first string at a lot of places. I was running at halfback and flanker on the right side. I was split end behind Kyle Rote on the left side, and I was the fifth defensive back. I ran back some kicks. We had 33 guys on the ball club, and I played on the special teams. But it's hard to beat out a guy like Gifford.

"In 1959 the Giants changed coaches. Vince Lombardi went to Green Bay, Tom Landry went to Dallas, and they brought in Jim Lee Howell and Allie Sherman. They took over the ball club, and for some reason they didn't like me."

By then Maynard had acquired a reputation as a nonconformist. He wore cowboy boots, dressed in blue jeans and western shirts, and sported long, shaggy sideburns, but that was just Don. The Giants' coaches told him to cut his sideburns, but he refused.

Interviewed by Arthur Daley of the *New York Times* on November 12, 1967, the Texan said, "No one seems to have forgotten two things about me on my season with the Giants. Jim Lee Howell told me to cut off my sideburns, and I didn't. The other was that I dropped a punt against Cleveland. So what? We won, 10-0, and the fumble couldn't have been such a big deal.

"In training camp the next year, Allie Sherman chewed me out because my stridin' on a sweep was too long. 'Run the play over,' he says, 'this isn't a track meet.' I told him I covered more ground with one step than most runners did with three. Allie and I didn't hit it off. A couple of days later I was gone, cut from the squad. I'm now real thankful it happened."

Talking about those events in 2003, Don added, "They cut me, and I went to Canada, to Hamilton. We went to the Grey Cup, which is their championship, and we lost to Winnipeg. Twenty years later my son played for Winnipeg, and they won the Grey Cup. That's a little bit of personal history that I'm proud of."

Maynard did not smoke or drink, making him an unusual athlete. Lean and strong, he always did stretching exercises and stayed in top condition.

"They call me a character," Don told Cooper Rollow of the *Chicago Tribune* on January 10, 1969, "but I don't see there's anything particularly odd about not drinking. When I see how some of the other guys feel in the morning, I'm darn glad I'm a teetotaler."

He played 1959 in the CFL on a one-year contract. Reflecting on that season in 2003, Don explained:

"I could see all the writings on the wall that there was going to be an American Football League founded by Lamar Hunt and all the people behind it. I read that Sammy Baugh signed with the Titans, and I'd played against him as a college coach for three years. He'd coached me in the Blue-Grey Game. So I wrote to him and said, 'Hey, I'd like to play for you.' He knew me pretty good, so I ended up being the first Titan to sign, and I stayed in New York."

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Maynard had three good seasons for the Titans before Sonny Werblin bought the bankrupt franchise in 1963, renamed it the Jets, played the season in the run-down Polo Grounds (former home of the New York Giants baseball club), and moved the team to Shea Stadium in 1964.

In his first Titan season, Don caught a career-best 72 passes for 1,265 yards, a 16.8 average, and he scored six touchdowns. In 1961 he grabbed 43 passes for 629 yards and eight scores, and in 1962 he made 56 catches for 1,041 yards and eight touchdowns.

Before Super Bowl III, Maynard figured he played with 25 quarterbacks, with the best being Namath. Most of those he teamed up with for the Titans. One of the best early New York signal-callers was Al Dorow, the Michigan State All-American who led the Titans in 1961-62.

The eight-team AFL began by signing a television contract with ABC, and that contract gave each club \$150,000 a year. Even if the upstart league had a shortage of quality players at first, the teams played exciting and often high-scoring football games. Fans enjoyed the passing shows put on by the AFL. Coached by "Slingin' Sammy" Baugh, the Hall of Fame Redskin quarterback, the Titans produced on an aerial circus.

For example, Al Dorow, who had spent three seasons with the Washington Redskins and another with the Pittsburgh Steelers, led the AFL with 26 touchdown passes in 1960. In that debut season, flanker Lionel Taylor of the Denver Broncos topped the AFL with 92 receptions. In 1961 the scrambling Dorow led the league in passes attempted with 438 and completions with 197. The former Michigan State great threw for 19 TDs, but he was intercepted 30 times. Later, in 1965, George Blanda of the Houston Oilers set a record by attempting 501 passes, and teammate Charley Hennigan caught 101 of those.

In 1960 the Titans (7-7) finished second to the 10-4 Houston Oilers in the AFL's Eastern Division. Dorow's favorite targets were Maynard and end Art Powell, and both were speedsters. The Titans won unusual games, beating the Denver Broncos, 28-24, by blocking a punt in the last 20 seconds. New York lost the finale to the Los Angeles Chargers in a 50-43 shootout. But a shortage of paying fans (the league averaged 16,000 per game in 1960) and the death of Titan guard Howard Glenn, who suffered a broken neck after the Titans-Oilers game of October 9, cast a shadow over New York's first season.

Producing another 7-7 record in 1961, the Titans slipped to third place behind Houston (10-3-1), led by George Blanda's then record 36 touchdown passes, and the Boston Patriots (9-4-1). New York got off to a good start, winning three of the first four games. Fullback Billy Mathis led the league in rushing attempts with 202, gaining 846 yards and scoring seven touchdowns. Mathis also caught 12 passes, one for a touchdown.

But a rash of injuries slowed the team. Dorow continued to fill the air with footballs, with Powell (71) and Maynard (43) making most of the receptions. But while New York scored 247 points, they gave up 242. Off the field, owner Harry Wismer announced the club had lost \$1.2 million in two seasons.

In 1962 Wismer's chaotic front-office situation led to bankruptcy for the Titans in mid-November, but AFL commissioner Joe Foss, former governor of South Dakota, stepped in and ran the club with league funds. Now coached by Hall of Famer Bulldog Turner, New York fell to last place with a 5-9 mark. Ex-Giant Lou Grosscup led the team at quarterback in the early games. After Grosscup was injured, Turner used ex-Buffalo Bill signal-caller Johnny Green to continue the passing attack. Art Powell (64), halfback Dick Christy (62), and Maynard (56) led the team in catches.

But with Billy Mathis injured most of the season, New York's ground attack stalled. Linebacker Larry Grantham and defensive back Lee Riley enjoyed stellar seasons, but the otherwise weak Titan defense left the team in fourth (last) place. Only 36,161 fans paid to see seven home games.

In 1963 new owner Sonny Werblin renamed his team the Jets, and New York hired former NFL coach Weeb Ewbank of Baltimore to rebuild the team. Ewbank signed a variety of former NFL players, notably Colts like ends Robert ("Bake") Turner and Dee Mackey, fullback Mark Smolinski, and rookies Winston Hill, an offensive tackle, and Bill Baird, a defensive back. Dick Wood, who lacked mobility due to bad knees, was a good passer.

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Wood mainly targeted Bake Turner, who caught 71 passes, Maynard (38), Mark Smolinski (34), and John Mackey (23). But the Jets were not yet tough enough on defense to give the offense a real shot, and New York finished last in the East with a 5-8-1 ledger.

"We had a pretty good offense the first three years," Maynard recollected, "but every year we wound up with ten new starters on defense. Larry Grantham was the only guy left over on defense after the first three years. We scored a lot of points, but our defense didn't stop many people.

"In the early years the AFL was wild scoring, and the league probably had a lot less defense than the NFL. People love to go and see teams score. The whole AFL in the beginning was a league of ex-NFL guys and a lot of college guys trying to make it in pro football.

"Then you had guys like Larry Grantham. Larry was just an outstanding player at Ole Miss, playing end and linebacker. With the Titans, he played linebacker. He played 13 years with us and hardly ever missed a play. He was sharp, good, and quick. He was just a great ball player."

In 1964 the AFL prospered, signing a new TV contract with NBC. That season the Jets moved into new Shea Stadium and led the league in attendance, drawing 60,300 in a 20-7 loss to Buffalo on November 8. Ewbank drafted good rookies, including fullback Matt Snell, defensive ends Gerry Philbin and Bert Wilder, linebacker Ralph Baker, John Schmitt and Dave Herman, reserve offensive linemen who would later be regulars, and kicker Jim Turner. Dick Wood again handled the quarterbacking duties, passing mainly to Bake Turner (58), who scored nine touchdowns, Matt Snell (56 receptions, 1 TD), and Maynard (46), who scored eight times. The Jets finished third with another 5-8-1 mark, and Buffalo led the East with a 12-2 record.

In 1965 Sonny Werblin signed quarterbacks Joe Namath of Alabama and John Huarte of Notre Dame to what seemed at the time to be super contracts, \$400,000 for Namath and \$200,000 for Huarte, the Heisman trophy winner. Many people wondered about the huge salaries.

Most fans in the East now talked about the Jets, about Namath, and about the AFL, but not about whether the league would survive. As it turned out, Huarte fell short of a great NFL career, but Namath led the improving Jets to first place in 1968 and an upset win over the Baltimore Colts in Super Bowl III on January 12, 1969.

Namath, a free-spirited athlete with a bachelor's life style, generated great publicity for the Jets in 1965. But the club continued to make fine draft choices, including receiver George Sauer, who played tight end at first and later split end, middle linebacker Al Atkinson, defensive end Verlon Biggs, defensive tackle Jim Harris, and defensive backs Jim Hudson and Cornell Gordon. Ewbank's team rose to second place but finished with yet another 5-8-1 record.

Mike Taliaferro, in his second season with the Jets, played quarterback in the early games, but once Namath took over, New York improved. With a quick release and a strong and accurate arm, Namath worked particularly well with Maynard, who caught 68 passes for 1,218 yards and a league-high 14 touchdowns. Namath's second favorite target was fullback Matt Snell, who caught 38 passes for 264 yards in an early version of the so-called "West Coast offense."

In 1966 the Jets started strong and won the first four games, thanks to an infusion of more good young talent, before finishing the season in third place with a 6-6 record. Along with Namath and Snell, New York's lineup featured receiver George Sauer, who topped the club with 63 receptions for 1,079 yards and five touchdowns, halfback Emerson Boozer, and tight end Pete Lammons. Those five players as well as offensive tackle Winston Hill, offensive guard Dave Herman, and center John Schmitt were all 25 years old or less. Veterans like Maynard, who caught 48 passes and scored five times, Billy Mathis, offensive tackle Sherman Plunkett, and offensive guard Sam DeLuca added stability to the offense.

But the Jets struggled in the expanded five-team Eastern Division, now including the Miami Dolphins. The young defense had trouble stopping other passers, the Jets beat only Miami (3-11) and Denver (4-10) away from Shea Stadium, and Namath completed 19 TD passes but also threw 27 interceptions.

However, the structure of pro football changed in 1966. To end the bidding war for talent, the NFL and AFL agreed to a merger that would occur three years later. NFL chief Pete Rozelle became commissioner of both

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leagues. In 1970 the AFL teams would merge with the NFL, but a championship game—soon nicknamed the Super Bowl—would begin after the 1966 season.

In 1967 the Jets came close to winning the East but missed by one game to the revitalized Houston Oilers, who were coming off a 3-11 season. Entering December the Jets had a 7-2-1 record and a one-game lead over Houston. But New York lost to Denver, 33-24, the Kansas City Chiefs, 21-7, and the Oakland Raiders, 38-29, before winning the finale against the San Diego Chargers, 42-31. Still, the Oilers, winning five of their last six games, finished first with a 9-4-1 mark. In the AFL championship game, Oakland crushed Houston, 40-7. But the Raiders lost Super Bowl II to the powerhouse Green Bay Packers, 33-14.

Injuries hurt the Jets in 1967. In the latter part of the season, the pass rush proved inconsistent, and the defensive secondary often could not stop first-rate quarterbacks. On offense, Matt Snell injured his knee in the opening game. When he returned to action in mid-November, Emerson Boozer had suffered a knee injury. Namath led the AFL in passing with 491 attempts and 258 completions, and he threw for an AFL-best 4,007 yards. Joe Willie set career highs of 26 TD passes and 28 interceptions.

Sauer led the league in receptions with 75, scoring six times. Maynard hauled in 71 Namath aerials and led the AFL with 1,434 yards gained, averaging 20.2 yards per catch. He also tied Boozer with a team-best 10 touchdowns. The 1967 season was Maynard's fourth of five career years where he caught at least 56 passes and gained more than 1,000 yards. In 1968 he grabbed 57 passes for 1,297 yards, scoring 10 TDs and recording an AFL-high 22.8 yards per catch.

"In '67 we missed winning the division by one game," Maynard said recently, "but we had 15 knee operations. In '68 when we won the championship, we only had one knee operation to a key ballplayer, and that was Billy Joe, who'd played at Denver and Buffalo. In '69 we even had a better team than we had in '68. But we had injuries that killed us. Gerry Philbin, our defensive end, dislocated his shoulder, I broke my foot, and both the guards were hurt when we played Kansas City in the playoff game, and they beat us, 13-6."

But in 1968 the Jets finished on top of the AFL's East with an 11-3 mark as Namath, Sauer, Maynard, and Pete Lammons all enjoyed fine seasons. Namath threw fewer touchdown passes, 15, but he also had less interceptions, 17. Sauer paced the receiving corps with 66 catches for 1,141 yards and three touchdowns, while Maynard, always the deep threat, caught 57 passes for 1,297 yards while leading the club in touchdowns with 10. Lammons, the tight end, made 32 catches for 400 yards and three touchdowns.

Pete Lammons recalled recently, "Let me say what a pleasure it was to play on the same team with Don. He was truly outstanding as a player and helpful to me in understanding the passing game. Joe Namath, George Sauer, Bake Turner and Don—couldn't ask for more!"

Namath meanwhile had become the league's best quarterback, mixing his bullet passes to Sauer and Maynard with punishing runs by Snell and Boozer. The difference was that New York's defense remained healthy and hung together for the entire season. For example, the Jets allowed 280 points to be scored against them, but the offense produced 419 points, second only to Oakland's 453 points.

Oakland, tied with Kansas City at 12-2, made it to the championship game by bombing the Chiefs, 41-8. But the Jets advanced to the Super Bowl by defeating the Raiders, 27-23, in a game that featured a six-catch, two-touchdown effort by Maynard—and the best catch he ever made.

Playing at Shea Stadium on December 29, 1968, the year that Richard Nixon defeated Hubert Humphrey for the Presidency amid the turmoil of the Vietnam war and student anti-war protests on many college campuses, Namath hit Maynard with three of four passes on the opening drive.

The lanky Texan, coming off a hamstring pull, capped the scoring drive by running a sideline pattern and making a 14-yard touchdown catch. New York's Jim Turner kicked the extra point and later added a field goal, giving the Jets a 10-0 first quarter lead. Oakland's Daryle Lamonica connected with Fred Biletnikoff for a touchdown in the second quarter. Each team kicked a field goal, and the Jets led at the half, 13-10.

Early in the second half, the Jets stopped the Raiders on the 1-yard line, after two Lamonica bombs got them there. George Blanda's field goal then tied the game at 13-all. Late in the period Namath drove the Jets 80 yards, connecting with Pete Lammons for the last 29 and a TD. But Oakland came back with another drive

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and a Blanda field goal, followed by defensive back George Atkinson's pickoff of Namath. When Pete Banaszak scored on a five-yard run and Blanda made the extra point, Oakland led, 23-20.

As recounted in *Football Digest* for May/June 1973, Maynard, while waiting for the ensuing kickoff, told Namath he could beat Atkinson deep. Earl Christy ran the kickoff back to the Jets' 32, and Namath hit Sauer for a 10-yard gain. Looking at Maynard in the huddle, Broadway Joe said, "Now?" Maynard nodded, "Now!"

The Texan flanker took off, made a feint to the sideline, and tried to fly by Atkinson—who kept up with him, shoulder to shoulder. Namath fired the pass, which covered more than 50 yards, but a gust of Shea wind caught the pigskin and moved it from Maynard's inside shoulder to his outside shoulder.

Remembering that championship catch in 2003, Maynard said, "We had to win that game, or it was no Super Bowl for us. It was always a knock-down, drag-out battle with the Raiders.

"When Namath threw that ball late in the game, it came to me at about ten o'clock. But the wind caught it, and my head was up, looking at the sky, and I turned my whole body around to follow it. The ball went from ten to twelve o'clock to two o'clock, and I kept turning and hung onto it, and I went out of bounds at the six-yard line."

"As far as I'm concerned, it was a million-dollar catch," Maynard said in *Football Digest*, "and I know it was the greatest catch I ever made."

Namath ran a play-action on first down, and when Sauer, Lammons, and Bill Mathis were covered, he hit Maynard on a delay route down the right side for the go-ahead touchdown. The Jets intercepted a lateral on the following series, and they ran out the clock for the 27-23 victory.

In Super Bowl III, Maynard, rumored to have a sore leg, did not catch one pass. However, the Colts had to respect his speed. Early in the first quarter Namath sent Maynard streaking long, and he threw a bomb into the end zone that Don barely missed. Namath didn't throw to him again, but Don lined up very wide—forcing Baltimore to play a zone defense and cheat his way.

"I call that smart football. I learned that as a rookie from Gifford and Rote. Kyle taught me once, 'There's lots of times you're not supposed to catch the ball. You entertain the corner and the safety, weave at 'em, and make one commit and then the other, and you can make 'em play your game. Take 'em deep, and the tight end, or the swinging halfback, or the fullback, can catch the pass underneath.'

"I knew right away in the Super Bowl that I wasn't going to catch any balls. All I had to do was run, and stride, and clear out, and have a good day in that respect.

"I had a sore hamstring, but I stayed out the last game of the season against Miami. I lost the yardage receiving title by 15 yards to Lance Alworth. But I tell people, 'I traded 15 yards for the yardage title for \$15,000 in the Super Bowl.'

"If I'd played in that Miami ball game, instinct takes over, and maybe I would have put too much stress and pressure on the hamstring, and hurt my leg again—and then missed the AFL championship game. Bake Turner caught a 65-yard pass for a touchdown against Miami. If I'd been in the game, I could have had the same thing. But I didn't suit up, and I told Weeb, 'I want to play, naturally. But I'm looking down the road.' It turned out I was right."

The long-haired Jets went on to upset the establishment Colts, 16-7. Namath called a conservative game that saw Matt Snell run for 121 yards on 30 carries, repeatedly hitting the right side for five or six-yard gains, and George Sauer caught eight aerials for 133 yards. Snell scored the Jets' only TD on a short run, and Jim Turner kicked three field goals. But all afternoon the Colts' secondary played two or three men on the strong side toward Maynard, because they feared he and Namath could kill them deep.

In 1969 Maynard enjoyed another stellar season until he was injured and missed the last three games. He recalled that a linebacker stepped on his foot and broke two bones:

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"I was having a great year. I was leading the league in catches, and yardage, and touchdowns, and yardage per catch. I worked out two weeks later, and I played in the playoffs against Kansas City, but they beat us, 13-6."

In 1970 and 1971 the Jets and Maynard suffered subpar seasons, thanks in part to a series of injuries to both men. For example, in 1970 and 1971 Don caught a total of 52 passes for 933 yards, but those figures would normally be subpar for a single Maynard season. Remarkably, he scored only two touchdowns—both of which came in 1971.

In 1970 the Jets drafted Richard Caster and in 1972 they picked Jerome Barkum, both out of Mississippi State. "We have to start seeking a replacement for Maynard," Weeb Ewbank was quoted as saying. "He takes care of himself, but he's getting pretty old."

Maynard, now thirty-six, had a good season in 1972 (29 receptions, 510 yards, 2 TDs), but he was cut after training camp in 1973. He signed with the St. Louis Cardinals, caught one pass in two games, and decided to move beyond pro football.

A former teacher of high school math and industrial arts, Don, a longtime member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, has sold a variety of products and also worked as investment counselor. Never one to sit still for long, he continues to work with teachers on Roth IRAs.

The first player to produce 10,000 yards receiving, Maynard finished his career with 633 receptions, 11,834 yards gained, and 88 touchdowns—a scoring mark then second only to Packer Hall of Fame great Don Hutson.

The leading pass receiver in pro football history when he left the game, Maynard enjoyed five seasons of more than 55 receptions and over 1,000 receiving yards. Despite his appearance of nonconformity, the Jets' speedster was the most consistent wide receiver and the best deep threat of the 1960s. He was selected as the AFL's all-time team as end. Finally, Don was selected in the Class of 1987 for the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

A down-to-earth fellow, the Texan is proud of his accomplishments, notably the great catch he made in the 1968 championship game against the Raiders. Don Maynard may not have exemplified what establishment coaches looked for in a wide receiver, but he excelled in his own way. Finally, "Country" Don helped the Jets win Super Bowl III, and he has the ring to prove it.

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