

LEN FORD

By Don Smith

When the Cleveland Browns, who had totally dominated the All-America Football Conference during the four years of its existence, continued to win with the same monotonous regularity after joining the National Football League in 1950, much attention was focused on the explosive offensive unit, powered by such stars as Otto Graham, Marion Motley, Dante Laveili and Lou Groza.

Although the defensive unit received comparatively little publicity, it was just as overwhelming as the attack platoon. In six of their first eight seasons in the NFL, the Browns allowed the fewest points of any team. In the other two years, Cleveland was second in fewest points allowed.

Perennially and universally recognized as the top Cleveland defender, end Len Ford became such a devastating pass rusher that the Browns actually were prompted to change their defensive alignments so that they could take full advantage of his unusual abilities!

"We were using a six-man defensive line at the time that Ford joined our club" Blanton Collier, Cleveland's defensive coach in 1950, remembered. "But he was so outstanding that we knew we had to get him in close where his talents as a pass rusher could be best utilized. So we moved both tackles into the center and dropped the linebackers slightly back and outside. That might even have been the start of the 4-3 defense that everyone uses today."

Len, who died of coronary failure at the age of 46 in March 1972, became the first Browns defender to become a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1976.

Even in his rookie pro football season with the AAFC's Los Angeles Dons in 1948, Ford, who had earned at least some all-america acclaim as a member of the Michigan eleven that slaughtered Southern California, 49-0, in the 1948 Rose Bowl, was considered something special. Dons' Coach Jimmy Phelan predicted flatly and often: "Len can become the greatest all-around end in history. He has everything - great size, speed, strength, great hands."

As it turned out, Phelan's assessment was an accurate one, but it is probable that Ford's pro football career took a turn that the Dons' coach could not have predicted in 1948. With Los Angeles, Ford was a two-way star, a terror on defense but also shining on offense as a spectacular pass receiver.

Ford made a specialty of leaping, one-handed grabs and, in two years with the Dons, he caught 67 passes for 1175 yards and eight touchdowns. When the AAFC folded after the 1949 season, Ford ranked No.13 on the league's list of top career receivers, even though he had played only two years in the AAFC.

When the Dons disbanded, Ford's name was placed in a special draft pool and he was quickly grabbed by the Browns, even though they were already well stocked with outstanding ends, both offensively and defensively. But long hours studying films of Dons' games, coupled with his own observations of Ford in action, had convinced Cleveland coach Paul Brown that the 6-4, 240-pound Michigan grad was worth taking. It is possible, however, that even Brown did not immediately realize Ford's true potential. One thing is certain -- Brown had Ford tabbed for the defensive unit right from the start.

"He had the speed and the hands to be a really great tight end," a Cleveland assistant from the 1950 team reports. "But he was so exceptional on defense that we knew this was his natural spot. Len was very aggressive and he had that touch of meanness on the field that you find in most great defenders."

Right from the first practice session in the summer of 1950, Ford made it clear that he came to play and that, if the Browns coach had tabbed him for the defensive unit, then defense it would be. Lou Groza

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 6, Nos. 7 & 8 (1984)

recalls that Ford always went all out in practice.

"Paul Brown used to always say: 'You play like you practice,'" the Hall of Fame tackle-placekicker reminisces. "Well, Lenny used to delight in running over guys. He and Abe Gibrion always would clash in practice. Abe prided himself on his pass-blocking and Lenny was always hell bent for leather."

Fate in the form of a serious injury almost ended Ford's career in his very first NFL season. In a mid-October game with the Chicago Cardinals, Ford suffered a broken nose, two fractures of the cheek bone and several lost teeth when he was struck in the face by the elbow of Chicago fullback Pat Harder.

Controversy over whether dirty play had been involved or whether Harder or Ford had precipitated the incident still continues to an extent even today. Ford later would tend to minimize the incident: "You just have to expect some of the rough stuff every game. I just didn't duck, that's all."

It took plastic surgery to repair Ford's face and he was counted out for the rest of the 1950 campaign. However, Len began a rehabilitation program at a Cleveland YMCA as soon as he was released from the hospital and when another Browns' defensive end was injured the week before the NFL title game, Ford pronounced himself ready. Team doctors had given their OK as long as Len would wear a helmet with a specially-designed cage on the front to protect his face.

Brown was dubious about Ford's effectiveness after such a long layoff but Len played as though he had never missed a game. Brown credits furious pressure by Ford on the Rams' quarterbacks with upsetting their offensive timing through the latter part of the game. It may have been just the edge the Browns had to have as they won, 30-28, on Groza's field goal with 28 seconds to play.

During the next seven years, Ford was everyone's all-NFL pick five times and he was also named to four Pro Bowls. Perhaps a Lions' scouting report issued in the mid 1950s explains best the unusual respect all Cleveland opponents held for Ford. The report read:

"LEN FORD – Really blows in. Does a lot of jumping over blockers. Does not predetermine this – if he sees a fellow going very low to block, he will jump over. Plays inside very tough. Must be blocked or he will kill the passer. He claiiss there is no one in the league who can take him out alone."

Ford enjoyed one of his finest days against the Lions in the 1954 NFL championship game. He intercepted two Detroit passes, returning one of them 45 yards for a championship game record, as the Browns buried the Lions 56-10.

Len was always on the alert for the football – maybe a holdover from his passcatching days – and, when he retired after the 1958 season he had spent with the Green Bay Packers, he held the NFL reoord for opponents' fumbles recovered with 20 during his career.

Ford is the first Washington, D. C., native to become a Pro Football Hall of Fame member. At Armstrong High School in Washington, Len was a three-letter star in football, basketball and baseball. In each sport, he was a team captain one yaar and in each sport he was an all-city performer.

Had someone like Jackie Robinson come along a few years earlier to open up major league baseball to blacks, Ford might well have opted for a pro baseball career. Since that avenue was still blocked to blacks in 1944, Len instead turned his attention toward football. The first step thus was college.

At the urging of his high sohool coach, Theodore McIntyre, Len enrolled at Morgan State in February, 1944. He joined the basketball team his first day in college and became the regular center on a championship quintet. That fall he played football at Morgan State and won all-league honors.

After a short stint in the U. S. Navy, Len opted to transfer to Michigan where he hoped "to get a shot at playing in the Rose Bowl some day." Ford got his wish after his star-studded senior season. Before joining the Dons, he also played in the 1948 College All-Star game in Chicago.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 6, Nos. 7 & 8 (1984)

Superlative comments about Ford's play soon became common in pro football and they continued throughout his career. About the only argument you would ever hear was whether Ford or Gino Marchetti, the Baltimore Colts' super-ace, was the finest defensive end in the business.

LEONARD (Len) FORD

Defensive End * -- Michigan* Played offensive end in AAFC

.Year	Team	Season Record	Division Finish
1948	Los Angeles Dons (AAFC)	7-7-0	3rd
1949	Los Angeles Dons (AAFC)	4-8-0	Tie 5th
1950	Cleveland Browns	10-2-0	Tie 1st*
1951	Cleveland Browns	11-1-0	1st
1952	Cleveland Browns	8-4-0	1st
1953	Cleveland Browns	11-1-0	1st
1954	Cleveland Browns	9-3-0	1st
1955	Cleveland Browns	9-2-1	1st
1956	Cleveland Browns	5-7-0	Tie 4th
1957	Cleveland Browns	9-2-1	1st
1958	Green Bay Packers	1-10-1	6th

Eleven playing seasons

* Defeated New York in playoff

COMPLETE STATISTICAL SUMMARY

Year	Pass Receptions			Fumbles		Interceptions	
	No.	Yds.	TD	No.	Yds.	No.	Yds.
1948 *	31	598	7	0	0	1	0
1949 *	36	577	1	0	0	1	45
1950				1	0	0	0
1951				4	16	0	0
1952				2	0	0	0
1953				3	0	1	0
1954				5	0	0	0
1955				1	54	0	0
1956				2	0	0	0
1957				1	4	0	0
1958				1	5	0	0
TOTALS	67	1175		20	79	3	45

*AAFC