

CHARLIE JOINER

By Don Smith

Charlie Joiner played for 18 seasons in the National Football League, longer than any other wide receiver in pro football history. When he retired after the 1986 season, he had caught more passes -- 750 -- for more yards -- 12,146 -- than any other player up to that time.

His career began in the American Football League with the Houston Oilers in 1969. He was traded to the Cincinnati Bengals in 1972 and then traded a second time to the San Diego Chargers in 1976. It was during his 11 seasons with the Chargers that Joiner became a major star.

Joiner stood only 5-11 and weighed just 185 pounds -- small by NFL standards even in the 1970s -- but the Grambling graduate was a true giant of pro football by every other standard. His on-the-field intelligence, his dedication to the hard-work ethic and the quiet, unassuming manner that masked his fierce competitive instincts all are integral parts of the Charlie Joiner legend.

Joiner was born in Many, Louisiana, on October 14, 1947. As the only child in a low-income family, there was little reason in Joiner's younger days in rural Louisiana for anyone to predict future greatness for Charlie in any sport, let alone pro football. But even as a youngster, Joiner became quite active in just about every sport.

"In my neighborhood, we played sports a lot," Joiner said. "We played basketball and football and in the spring we played baseball during the day and softball at night. In fact, I once thought baseball was my sport."

It's Football

But Joiner changed his mind when he entered W. O. Boston high school in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Charlie already was aware of how hard his father had worked as a part-time truck driver to earn a living for his family. Because of this, he was able to adjust quickly to the hard-work ethic that his high school coach demanded. "We would practice from the end of school until it was dark every night," he said.

Although he did not go out for football until his junior year, he quickly made the team and wound up as an all-state wide receiver for two years. Since most of the W. O. Boston coaches were from Grambling, they saw to it that Charlie received a scholarship to Grambling, whose coach was the famous Eddie Robinson.

There he teamed up for four years with James Harris, a strong-armed quarterback who later played in the NFL for 13 seasons, the last five from 1977 to 1981 as Joiner's teammate in San Diego. Joiner was a three-time all-Southwestern Athletic Conference selection and was named the Outstanding Offensive Player in the 1968 Little Rose Bowl. "Playing for Coach Robinson was one of the finest experiences I ever had," Joiner said. "He taught you how to be a responsible person in the real world. He taught you not only how to compete on the football field but how to compete for a job, a home, a girl. If you listened to Coach Robinson, it was hard not to be successful."

Although he was basically a wide receiver in college, the Houston Oilers selected him as a defensive back in the fourth round of the 1969 draft. He played some on defense in his rookie season but was getting more time as a wide receiver and a punt and kickoff return specialist until he suffered a broken arm in the seventh game. The next year, his season also ended with the identical injury in the ninth game.

In 1971, Joiner started 13 of 14 games and became quarterback Dan Pastorini's favorite target. He led the Oilers receivers with 681 yards on 31 receptions and seven touchdowns. Just as it seemed Joiner was about to become an established factor in the Houston offense, he, along with linebacker Ron Pritchard, was traded to Cincinnati in 1972 in exchange for running backs Paul Robinson and Fred Willis.

A Learning Experience

In Cincinnati, it was anticipated that Joiner would successfully team up with Ken Anderson, one of the NFL's premier passers. However, the Bengals had several excellent receivers so Charlie's opportunities were limited. Joiner played only five games in 1973 because of injuries and had only 13 catches. He wound up with just 75 receptions in his three years with the Bengals.

However, the Cincinnati leg of Joiner's trip through the world of pro football was not wasted. For one thing, the 1973 season marked the end of what had been an injury-prone career. He missed 25 games because of injuries in his first five seasons. In the next 13 seasons, he played 192 games, 178 as a starter, without a single miss.

In Cincinnati, Joiner got the opportunity to learn from Bill Walsh, the Bengals' quarterbacks-receivers coach, who was universally recognized as one of pro football's superior offensive tacticians.

"I learned a lot from Walsh," Joiner said, "an awful lot. He taught me about patterns, about how to position defensive backs. And the big thing with him was, you've got to threaten the end zone. You've always got to threaten the end zone."

Walsh must have been impressed with Charlie because when he left to become the offensive coordinator in San Diego, he strongly recommended that the Chargers acquire Joiner if they possibly could. The Chargers agreed and, on April 2, 1976, they sent defensive end Coy Bacon to the Bengals for Joiner.

The 1976 campaign proved to be a breakthrough season for Joiner. With Walsh providing the game plan and quarterback Dan Fouts throwing the ball with precision, Joiner had big numbers for the first time with a 21.1-yard average on 50 receptions that netted 1,056 yards and seven touchdowns.

Walsh left San Diego after the 1976 season but he later commented: "Charlie is the most intelligent, the smartest, the most calculating receiver the game has ever known."

Air Coryell

Two years later, Don Coryell, the head coach noted for his lethal "Air Coryell" passing offense, took over the Chargers. From 1978 until midway through the 1986 campaign, San Diego enjoyed some of the franchise's finest and most exciting years. Another offensive coaching specialist, Joe Gibbs, joined Coryell's staff in 1979. Gibbs lauded Joiner as "a totally dedicated guy who was just a great producer."

While the Chargers' defense may have had some holes, there was never anything wrong with the "Air Coryell" offense. In Coryell's eight full seasons in San Diego, the Chargers scored over 400 points four times, over 300 points three times and even tallied 288 points in the abbreviated nine-game season in 1982. The 1981 Chargers scored a team-record 478 points.

Throughout Coryell's stay in San Diego, Fouts and Joiner were fixtures on the offensive unit. Both played with the Chargers before the arrival of Coryell, who used San Diego's next two No. 1 draft picks, John Jefferson in 1978 and Kellen Winslow in 1979, to complement Joiner's production. The triad was altered in 1981 when Jefferson was traded to Green Bay only to be immediately replaced by Wes Chandler in a trade with New Orleans. For the next six seasons, the Joiner-Winslow-Chandler triad caused opposition defenses untold problems and amassed monstrous reception totals.

Joiner's biggest years came in 1979, 1980 and 1981 when the Chargers won three straight AFC West titles. Each year he caught 70 or more passes for more than 1,000 yards. His individual record of 72 catches was set in 1979 and his 1,188 receiving yardage in 1981 was a career-high. In 1980, Winslow, Jefferson and Joiner all accumulated more than 1,000 yards on receptions.

"The most memorable game for me is when we won the AFC West championship in a Monday night game against Denver in 1979," Joiner recalled when asked about any special moments in his football experience. Although Charlie twice was taken to the dressing room with injuries, he returned to catch a 32-yard touchdown pass that gave San Diego its first of three consecutive division titles.

Joiner played one of the finest games in his career in a 34-27 loss against Oakland in the 1980 AFC championship game. He scored two touchdowns on passes of 48 yards and eight yards and wound up with six receptions for a game-leading 130 yards. The next year, Joiner's career-long desire for an AFC

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title once again was thwarted, this time with a 27-7 loss in Cincinnati in a game played on the coldest day in NFL history.

Accolades! Accolades!

Although Coryell worked the longest with Joiner, Walsh and Gibbs also regarded Charlie as a special talent. It is doubtful that anyone spent as much time as Joiner did in listening, absorbing and refining his skills under three such pass masters. Still, all the coaching and hard work might not have meant anything had it not been for a unique personality trait, Joiner's obsession with precision.

When Joiner's number was called in the huddle, he attacked the opposing secondary in the same precise manner he approached the accounting books in his off-season job in Houston as an oil-company accountant. His patterns had to be precise, the bursts had to be exact and the concentration could never waver.

Fouts was one of Joiner's biggest fans: "I know where he will be on any given play. I know what he will do. He will do the right thing. I know if I get the ball to him, he'll catch it. What more can you say?"

"Without question, he is the finest technician -- running routes and reading coverages -- in the National Football League," Ernie Zampese, the Chargers' receiving coach, said. "I love to see the young guys watch him. He runs his routes very hard in practice, even when he's running the other team's plays."

Joiner's excellence on NFL gridirons did not go unnoticed. He was selected for three Pro Bowls following the 1976, 1979 and 1980 seasons. He was named all-AFC by Associated Press in 1976 and second-team all-AFC two other times. He led Chargers in receptions three years, caught 50 or more passes seven times, 60 or more passes five times and 70 or more passes three times during his 11 years in San Diego. Counting post-season, he had more than 100 yards in receptions 28 times during his career.

Charlie was named the Chargers' Most Valuable Player in 1976 and 1983 and the team's Most Inspirational Player every year from 1980 to 1986. He was the Chargers team captain the last four years of his career.

Off the field, he was as much a class act as he was in game action. In 1980, he was one of five finalists for the NFL Man of the Year award, which recognizes the community services of NFL players. He endeared himself to the San Diego community which proclaimed two Charlie Joiner Days in the city, one in 1984 and the other in 1986, when his retirement was near at hand.

In 1984, he became the leading lifetime receiver in pro football, when he caught his 650th pass to move ahead of Charley Taylor as the all-time leader. Two years later, he became the all-time reception yardage leader, surpassing Don Maynard's mark of 12,146 yards.

In the same game, Seattle's Steve Largent established a new record for catching passes in consecutive games.

Largent was on his way to holding every significant career receiving record and Joiner knew his records would soon belong to Steve. "I'm just glad my name is up there for two or three years," Joiner said modestly. Largent reciprocated that he "would always remember being on the same field when Charlie broke the reception-yardage record."

Joiner himself accepted all of his accolades in his typically quiet, unobtrusive style. His wife, Dianne, probably understood better than anyone: "Around the house, my biggest problem is getting him to talk. Sometimes it's ridiculous."

As Joiner edged toward his late 30s, he often thought of retirement. He always was concerned that he never wanted to just hang on. "If I ever get to the point where I can't make a contribution to the team, I'll know it and I'll retire."

A pair of worn-out knees finally helped Joiner to make the retirement decision late in the 1986 season. In his final year, the 39-year-old Joiner always was the last player out of the trainer's room, moving slowly with giant ice packs taped to both knees. An assistant coaching job was awaiting and Charlie knew it was time to move on.

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"There's no way I would have had the success I had if I hadn't been traded to San Diego," Joiner said. "When Coryell became head coach in 1978, that's when my career took off. I caught fire when they started throwing me passes."

The record book substantiates Joiner's claim. He caught 164 passes in his first seven seasons with Houston and Cincinnati and 586 in his 11 seasons in San Diego. He had 530 catches after the age of 30, a remarkable achievement.

"The receiving records are the ones I am most proud of, even though Steve Largent broke them," Joiner modestly reflected. "But the one I still have that he doesn't is the most games by a wide receiver."

Today, Joiner could point out that all of Largent's career records have since been surpassed. But Charlie's single record remains his! it is not likely to soon be broken.

YEAR	TEAM	LG	Gm	PASS RECEIVING			
				NO	YDS	AVG	TD
1969	Hou	A	7	7	77	11.0	0
1970	Hou	N	9	28	416	14.9	3
1971	Hou	N	14	31	681	22.0	7
1972	Hou-Cin	N	12	24	439	18.3	2
1973	Cin	N	5	13	214	16.5	0
1974	Cin	N	14	24	390	16.3	1
1975	Cin	N	14	37	726	19.6	5
1976	SD	N	14	50	1056	21.1	7
1977	SD	N	14	35	542	15.5	6
1978	SD	N	16	33	607	18.4	1
1979	SD	N	16	72	1008	14.0	4
1980	SD	N	16	71	1132	15.9	4
1981	SD	N	16	70	1188	17.0	7
1982	SD	N	9	36	545	15.1	0
1983	SD	N	16	65	960	14.8	3
1984	SD	N	16	61	793	13.0	6
1985	SD	N	16	59	932	15.8	7
1986	SD	N	15	34	440	12.9	2
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18 yrs			239	750	12146	16.2	65