

Hometown Hero

If You Knew Motley, You Knew a Great Man

By Roger Gordon

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It may come as a shock to some that Marion Motley once played for the Pittsburgh Steelers. That is about the only bad thing he ever did.

Motley, who passed away earlier this summer after a long illness, was a member of the Steelers in 1955, mostly as a linebacker. He had been traded by the Cleveland Browns on Sept. 8 that year for running back Ed Modzelewski. With the Browns from 1946-53, Motley was a bruising fullback. He retired in 1954 but decided to give it one more try in 1955. Motley thought returning to the NFL as a linebacker would be easier on his legs. It was, but it wasn't easy enough. His comeback attempt lasted just one season. He called it quits for good following the '55 campaign.

A 1968 Pro Football Hall of Fame inductee, Motley was the kind of running back who would literally run over, and through, defenders. He was like a freight train, with size (6-foot-1, 232 pounds) and good speed considering his size. "Marion was one of the best football players to ever play the game," said Pete Elliott, the former Hall of Fame executive director and president who actually played against Motley in college when Elliott played for the University of Michigan. "I played my first game in college against him when he was playing for Nevada-Reno. He was a great runner, but also a good blocker, too. They'd also stick him in there as a linebacker in goal-line situations."

Dante Lavelli was Motley's teammate during the glory days of the Browns in the late 1940s and early 1950s when they were dominating the All-America Football Conference (AAFC) and unleashing an all-out air assault on the NFL. Lavelli, a Hall of Famer himself, said it was nearly impossible for one defender to tackle Motley. "It took two, three guys to bring him down," Lavelli said. "He was a force, no doubt about it."

Motley led the AAFC in rushing yards all four years the conference existed, from 1946-49. In '46, he averaged an incredible 8.2 yards per rush on 73 carries for 601 yards. He ranks sixth in all-time Browns rushing yards with 4,712. He gained 188 yards on the ground on Oct. 29, 1950, against the Steelers. He also holds the second- and fifth-best rankings in team history for most yards in a postseason game (133 against Buffalo on Dec. 19, 1948, and 109 on Dec. 14, 1947, against New York).

Hymie Williams, a broadcast and print media legend in these parts, went to McKinley High School with Motley in the mid-1930s. Williams remembers Motley as being "the big man on campus." "I remember Marion would be walking down the hall with a big 'M' on his sweater," Williams said. "All the girls were in awe. ... Actually, all the guys were in awe, too. Everyone wanted his autograph. He wasn't conceited about it, either. He was really kind of a quiet guy in high school."

Williams recalled one of Motley's finest performances coming in a game between McKinley and Alliance on Oct. 29, 1938, in Fawcett Stadium, during the first season at Fawcett. "Alliance had a great player named Hillis Hume," Williams said. "Everybody was wondering who was going to score more touchdowns that day, Motley or Hume. Hume scored three touchdowns, one a 90-yard run, but Motley scored four. McKinley won (33-26). It was a heck of a game."

That year, Motley led the Bulldogs in scoring for the second straight season with 113 points on 17 touchdowns and 11 extra-point kicks (yes, Motley even kicked!). McKinley

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finished the season with an 8-1 record. The year before, Motley scored 61 points on 10 touchdowns and an extra-point kick during another 8-1 season.

Motley's career rushing-yards-per-attempt average was an unbelievable 17.2, which ties him for first in school history.

Not only was Motley a winner on the football field, he was a winner in the game of life.

"Marion was a great person," recalled McKinley football historian Charlie Bowersox. "He was just a joy to be around."

"Marion was a unique guy," said Elliott. "I didn't know anybody who didn't love him or respect him. He was intelligent and had good common sense, too. He was also a good leader, not necessarily by words always, but by his actions."

Motley played a monumental role in the influx of African-Americans into pro football. He and ex-Browns middle guard and HOF member Bill Willis were the first blacks to play pro football since 1933.

Lavelli remembered Motley as being an even-tempered individual - at least until an opponent got him riled up. "He had a real mild way about him," he said. "But when someone infuriated him, he more than stood his ground."

Lavelli recalled more than a few times when Motley's mild-mannered ways got him into trouble with a gentleman named Paul Brown, the former Browns coach who expected nothing less than full attention from his players at all times, especially during team meetings. "Marion fell asleep easily," Lavelli laughed, "and would do it during meetings at times. Coach would hit him with a wet towel and make him sit up front." Dozing off, however, did not keep Motley from attaining greatness on the football field and respect off it.

"Marion Motley was not just a Hall of Famer," Elliott said, "but a great Hall of Famer."

MARION MOTLEY

FB-LB

6-1, 232

South Carolina State; Nevada-Reno

HS: McKinley [Canton, OH]

B: 6 / 5 / 1920, Leesburg, GA

D: 6 / 27 / 1999, Cleveland, OH

RUSHING

YEAR	LG	Gm	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD
1946 Cle	AAC	13	73	601	8.23	5
1947 Cle	AAC	14	146	889	6.09	8
1948 Cle	AAC	14	157	#964	6.14	5
1949 Cle	AAC	12	113	570	5.04	#8
1950 Cle	N	12	140	*810	5.79	3
1951 Cle	N	11	61	273	4.48	1
1952 Cle	N	12	104	444	4.27	1
1953 Cle	N	12	32	161	5.03	0
1954	Voluntarily retired					
1955 Pit	N	7	2	8	4.00	0
9 Yrs		107	828	4720	5.70	31

- Led AAFC; * - Led NFL