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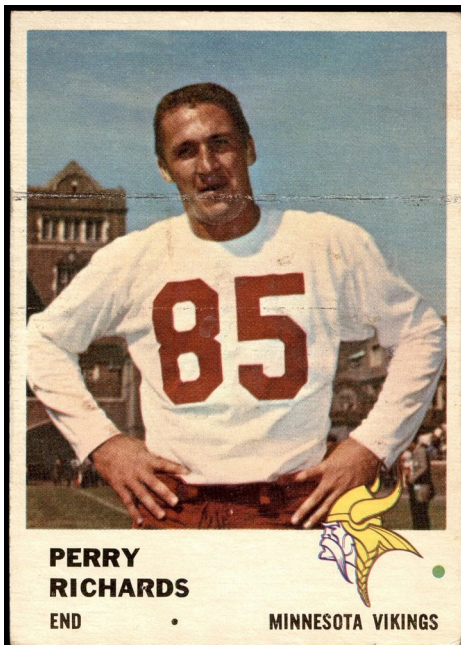
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Perry Richards

This article is by Budd Bailey.

Perry Richards certainly was consistent. He figured out a way to have a six-year career in pro football, and somehow never played a home game in the same city twice. The wide receiver was rarely a starter, but still had a couple of nice moments during his playing days.

Perry Walter Richards was born on January 14, 1934, in Detroit, Michigan. He apparently stayed there for all of the early portion of his life, attending St. Rita High School. On a tribute page to Perry, St. Rita teammate Al Trudeau remembers how Richards scored every point (caught a touchdown pass, ran for a touchdown, and kicked a field goal) in a victory for the school's football team. Trudeau called Perry "without a doubt the greatest athlete to come out of St. Rita High School." The facility was open from 1926 to 1972, when it closed due to shrinking enrollment. Richards was the only NFL player to come from that educational institution, graduating in 1953.



Richards opted to stay close to home in his college days. He played for the University of Detroit, which later became Detroit Mercy. Today's sports fans might recognize the university mostly for its basketball program, but it had a football team that started in



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1896. The Titans even shared a mythical national championship in 1933. The school gave up on football after the 1964 season due to mounting financial losses.

Perry was listed as an All-Missouri Valley Conference selection for 1955 (the Titans were 5-3-1), although it was difficult for an end to make a big impression on a team that didn't have much of a passing game. For example, Detroit only completed four passes during a September 23 loss to Toledo. Richards received some praise in a newspaper article for a leaping 11-yard touchdown catch that was the Titans' only score of the game.

Sports Illustrated listed him as the top returning player for the Detroit team in a preseason article in 1956, and his coach, Wally Fromhart, thought he was the team's top pro prospect. Perry's only available collegiate statistics are from the 1956 season – three catches for 34 yards. It should be noted that Richards' teammates, Dick Chapman and Albert Korpak, led the conference in pass receptions with only 20 and 16 respectively. It was a different era for offense. Perhaps injuries were an issue for Richards. The Titans went 2-8 that season and were 0-4 in MVC play. The school dropped out of the conference after that season.

Richards must have impressed someone in Pittsburgh during his college career. He was drafted in the fifth round by the Steelers in February, 1957. It was their first pick in the second portion of the draft; the first four rounds were held in November. Henry Jordan, a defensive lineman who eventually became a Hall of Famer, was selected three picks before Richards. At the time of his selection, Steelers' end coach Bill McPeak compared Richards to Mac Speedie, who was an outstanding receiver for the Cleveland Browns from 1946 to 1952.

When Richards arrived at training camp, the 6-foot-2 pass catcher was greeted by what turned out to be a very impressive group of quarterbacks. Earl Morrall was the starter, and he was backed up by Jack Kemp and Len Dawson. Not too many teams have had three different quarterbacks on one roster who went on to make their mark on pro football like that.

Those passers completed passes to 11 different players that season. The leader was Jack McClairn, who had 46 receptions and was a Pro Bowler. Richards was at the bottom of the list with one catch for 15 yards. It came on December 22 against the Chicago Cardinals in a 27-2 win for Pittsburgh. That victory moved Pittsburgh to 6-6 on the season, as the team was generally mediocre throughout the year.

Richards was traded by Pittsburgh to the Philadelphia Eagles during training camp. Since he never played a regular-season game for the Eagles, it's safe to assume that he was cut before the season started. However, Perry did sign with the Detroit Lions later in the



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1958 season as an injury replacement. It was a nice hometown story that didn't really work out. Richards only started one game and finished with seven receptions for 90 yards for the year. The receiver had one game to remember on November 27. On a day when Tobin Rote only completed seven passes, Perry caught four of them for 71 yards including a 30-yarder. He helped Detroit defeat the lowly Packers.

The Lions were coming off a championship season in 1957, but the wheels fell off in 1958 mostly due to injuries. Detroit went 0-3-1 to start the season and finished 4-7-1. It was a disappointment to a franchise that had won titles in three of the previous six seasons. 1958 was something of a turning point for the franchise; the Lions didn't even win another division title until 1983.

Richards cracked his cheekbone during training camp for the Lions in 1959, and eventually he was cut by Detroit. It took a couple of months, but Perry eventually landed with the Chicago Cardinals as a free agent in mid-November. He saw spot duty there, as he caught five passes for 89 yards during the season. Richards did catch a touchdown pass in a November 29 loss to the Bears by a score of 31-7. The Cardinals lost their last six games to finish 2-10, and decided to move the franchise to St. Louis for the 1960 season. The relocation meant that two Chicago teams would never meet again, so Richards became the last Chicago Cardinal to score a touchdown against the Bears.

Perry was used to switching home cities by this point, although in this case he had the chance to go with people he knew from the previous season. Oddly, Perry had a new uniform number in his new location, moving from No. 83 to No. 85. Still, he was on the bottom of the Cardinals' depth chart for the 1960 season. He had one catch that year, a 10-yarder against Philadelphia on December 4. That left him at a total of 99 yards of receiving distance in his two years with the franchise. At least the Cardinals picked up their play in their new home, improving to 6-5-1 to move up to fourth in the East Division.

A month after the end of the 1960 season, Richards' NFL rights were on the move again. He was selected by the Minnesota Vikings in the expansion draft, one of three picks from the Cardinals' roster. A brand-new team seemed like a good opportunity for a player who hadn't been given much of a chance to play in the pros, but it didn't work out. He was released by the Vikings before playing a game. One image of his stay in Minnesota does live on. Richards is shown on a 1961 Fleer football card in which he is identified as a member of the Vikings – although the photo looks like it was taken in his days with the Cardinals.

Richards went from Minnesota to the Houston Oilers of the AFL but was placed on waivers without suiting up for a regular season game. Then the Buffalo Bills signed him



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on September 26. “I called (Bills’ coaches) Bob Dove and Buster Ramsey because I was at the Lions with them,” he said later. “I told them my situation, and they said, ‘Come on down.’ At the time I was really down and out – this was a miracle to me because of the things that had happened and the time of the season. I was really depressed, so I was glad to go to Buffalo.”ⁱ

That move worked out better than any of the others in the career of the wide receiver ... who also saw time as a member of the Bills at tight end and defensive back. Buffalo was forced to scramble in midseason due to the unexpected retirement of cornerback Richie McCabe, who never completely recovered from a knee surgery.

ⁱ Miller, Jeffrey, “Rockin the Rockpile,” Toronto: ECW Press, 2007, 131.

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While on offense Richards set a career high in receptions (19), reception yardage (285), and touchdowns (3) – all in the time between his AFL debut on October 8 and his final game on December 3. His initial impression was a good one, as he made a great catch that gave Buffalo the go-ahead touchdown in the fourth quarter of a win over Houston.

Richards had his greatest individual day as a pro on October 22 in what was one of the biggest losses in Bills' history. He caught eight passes for 107 yards and a touchdown. However, the rest of his team was dismantled by the Boston Patriots. The Bills fell behind by a score of 45-0 through three quarters and scored three very meaningless touchdowns in the fourth quarter.

The game was the low point of Buffalo's second straight mediocre season. The Bills finished 6-8 under head coach Buster Ramsey, who was fired at the season's conclusion. Lou Saban was hired for the 1962 campaign, but Richards never had the chance to play for him. He was traded on June 2 to the New York Titans for defensive tackle Tom Saidock. "The acquisition of Richards gives us the most versatile ends in the American Football League," head coach Clyde "Bulldog" Turner said. "We hated to give up Saidock, but we needed another man of Richards' versatility."

Richards had been in some tough situations before, but this one might have been the worst of his career in some ways. The Titans were owned by Harry Wismer, who had achieved some fame as a broadcaster. The problem was that deep pockets were needed to overcome the inevitable financial losses that come with a new sports league, and Wismer didn't have them.

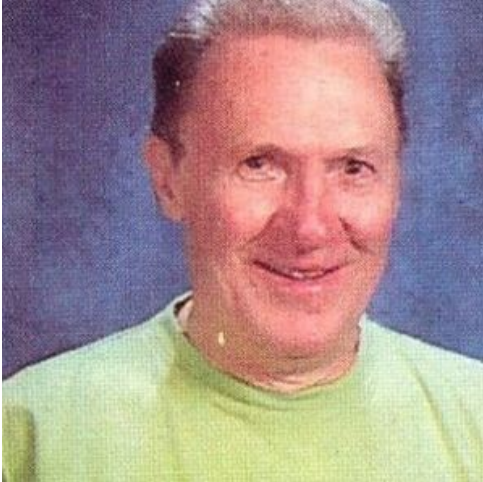
The Titans were 7-7 in their first two seasons and took a step backward to 5-9 in 1962 under Turner. As for Richards, he played in all of the Titans' games that year – the first time he had ever done that for a pro team – and started in three of them. But his reception total was a mere six catches for 69 yards. Part of the problem was a sore elbow that limited his ability to be effective. He also was unable to beat out two excellent receivers in Don Maynard and Art Powell for playing time.

The Titans were sold to new ownership and became the Jets in 1963, but still played their games in the ancient Polo Grounds. Richards wasn't a part of that team, as new head coach Weeb Eubank cut him on September 3. His pro career ended at that point. That left Perry's career records in pro football at 47 games played, with 39 receptions for 558 yards and four touchdowns.



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Richards went back to the Detroit area at some point, although there is little information on his life after football. One source said he worked with young men with behavioral or abuse-related problems at St. Peter's Home for Boys in Detroit. The facility was founded by Father Ecker, who was a pastor at St. Peter's Church right across the street from Tiger Stadium – where Perry had played some NFL games.

Richards died in Taylor, Michigan, in the Detroit suburbs on July 16, 2008. Perry had been married to wife Martha for 39 years, and they had six children. As another friend put on his legacy page, "He was always a light and a smiling gentle giant."

End Notes