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In 1954 Canadian Football League rookie running back Jackie Parker (from Mississippi State) set the record for the highest rushing average in a season. On a minimum of 100 carries, O' Jackie ran the ball 117 times for 925 yards for an unheard average of 7.9 yards per carry, and that put Mr. Parker in third place in the rushing derby that year and only 118 yards behind Howie Waugh of Calgary who set a record as the first 1,000 yard rusher with 1043 yards. Six year later in 1960, the Great Leo Lewis with Winnipeg Blue Bombers, rushed 106 times for 923 yards for an record average of 8.7 yards per carry.

But this story is not about Parker or Waugh but rather the runner who finished fourth in rushing, even ahead of Leo Lewis that year. Willie "the Wisp" Fleming of the BC Lions and his spectacular 1963 season.

He wasn't a big back by today's standards, or even by the standards of his day. At 5 foot 9 inches tall and 175 pounds, Willie Fleming from Iowa University was considered a lightweight but he did have one advantage in playing halfback with the BC Lions. He was the blood relative of the Roman God Mercury and his great speed would be his fame.

That year, 1960, Willie became the first BC runner to go over the 1,000 yard barrier with 1,051 yards and an average of 8.4 yards per carry. But the best was yet to come. For in 1963 Willie would set the standard that all running backs would be measure by in terms of average gain.

There were several factors that allowed Willie to run wild this year as apposed to previous seasons. First of all the the year before, the Lions finished out of the playoffs with 7-9 won-lost record. New BC Lion President Clayton B. Delbridge was not well-versed in the intricacies of football but he knew how to run a business. He delegated authority and created a feeling of harmony and togetherness. Head Coach Dave Skrien and his assistants transmitted the same feeling to the players. Quarterback Joe Kapp (latter of Minnesota Vikings fame) was coming into his own as a passer and the quiet but explosive Nub Beamer, last years western rushing leader, was now considered a threat as an inside runner.

The first game was against the Saskatchewan Roughriders in Regina on August 8th and their stout defence stopped the BC passing attack and kept the game close but they couldn't stop the BC runners. Beamer carried for over 100 yards on 21 carries and Willie kept the Rider defence off balance by rushing around them for 145 yards on 14 carries for an average of 10.4 yards per carry. On the strength of three Peter Kempf field goals, BC won 16 to 7.

Game Two was in Vancouver on August 12 against the Edmonton Eskimos and Jackie Parker. First of all there was a power blackout that delayed the game for 45 minutes and when power was finally restored Edmonton probably wished the game never started. Lions jumped out to a 28-0 lead before the Eskies and Parker could get untracked and won the contest 31-12. Fleming, used sparingly, had a 39 yard touchdown scamper and finished with 7 carries for 68 yards. So far he had gained a two-game total of 21 carries for 213 yards and an average of 10.1 yards per carry.

The third game was a week later at home and the Lions hosted Toronto Argonauts and their star halfback Dick Shatto. In front of 31,589 fans (6th largest at Empire stadium), Argo kept the game close with Shatto scoring on two big plays of 66 and 67 yards. He finished the game with 7 receptions for 187 yards. Beamer ran for 2 scores and Willie added a third and gained 88 yards on 11 cracks as the Lions won their third in a row 22-14. With 301 yards so far, Willie was now averaging 9.4 yards on 32 carries.

The next match was at Calgary on August 26 and the Stampeders jumped out to an 18-8 halftime lead. Willie started to get his yards in the third frame on runs of 57 and 46 yards to set up two Nub Beamer scores as the Lions came back to win their fourth in a row, 22-19. Willie gained 132 yards on 10 carries and was pacing himself with 10.3 yards per run. From this game on, his average would never dip below 9.0.

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Grey Cup Champs Winnipeg was next on August 29 and the game proved to be a battle of the defence. The Bombers lead 3-0 at the half and on the strength of a touchdown pass in the dying moments of the game they gave the Lions their first defeat 16-15. Willie was held to 53 yards on 7 runs but his average had dropped to 9.9 yards per carry on the season.

Back home on September 7, the Lions and Calgary gave the 36,659 fans (a CFL record) a high scoring game as each team matched the other in scoring. Finally, in the 4th quarter, on the blocks of linemen Lonnie Dennis and Pat Claridge, Fleming broke loose for a 97 yards touchdown run to ice the game 37-21 for the Lions. Willie had set a new club record with 189 yards breaking his old mark of 153 yards set against the same team one year earlier. Willie was now averaging 11.9 yards per carry, and had gained 676 yards on only 57 carries.

Game 7 was back in Regina two days later. The Lions were still nursing their wounds from the Calgary game, failed to generate any offense but managed to hold a 3-1 halftime lead. Even in the second half neither Willie nor the Lions could pile up any yardage. Somehow the Lions struggled out a win but just. The final score was more like a hockey match, 8 to 2 for the Lions. The Iowa halfback finished with 40 yards on 8 carries and his average had dropped slightly to 11.0 on the season.

The September 16 game had Montreal at home and George Dixon, the 1962 Rushing leader for Montreal, turned out to be the star of the game. He gained 190 yards rushing on 25 carries compared to 122 for the entire BC team. But it was the BC Lion defence that won the game. They gave ground, held Montreal to one touchdown (by Dixon) and won the gruelling match 20-9 for the seventh BC win of the season. Fleming, somewhat lost in the excitement of the game managed only 27 yards on 7 runs and his average dropped down to 10.3 yards per carry.

The next game, on September 21, was the battle of the Cats. Hamilton Tiger-Cats and the BC Lions. Hamilton proved to be too strong for the Lions and built up a 20-0 lead before Joe Kapp got the visitors on the board. Joe threw two strikes to Willie, one for 38 yards and the other on a spectacular 106 pass-and-run play. Although Willie gained 144 yards on two receptions his runs into the line proved ineffective and was held to 17 yards. Oh yes, Hamilton won 38 to 21.

With only one day of rest, the Lions travelled to Ottawa and found them just as tough as Hamilton. Ottawa managed a slim 15-14 lead at the half but it took an onside kick to win the game 23-17. Willie was again used sparingly, 10 yards on 3 carries. but he had gained a respectable 769 yards on the season and was still averaging over 9 yards a carry.

At the end of the month, BC was home to Calgary. Lovell Coleman, who was to win the rushing title, broke loose for a 51 yard score and finished with 113 yards on 13 runs. BC failed to find their running game but Joe Kapp found he could pass on the Stamps and completed 19 of 33 passes for 333 yards and 4 touchdowns enroute to a 32-14 Lion win. Fleming managed to break one play for 42 yards but other than that, Calgary confined him to 47 yards for the game. Willie's seasonal rushing total was over 800 yards and his average was 9.6 yards per carry.

The October 5 visit to Edmonton would be considered an all-time low for Willie in terms of yards rushing as he gained a total of 1 yard on three carries. It wasn't that he couldn't run or his line couldn't open up holes for him but rather that Joe Kapp had a hot passing hand. Passer Joe had the Lions up 36 to nothing at the half and finished the game completing 15 of 19 attempts (a 78.9% completion average) for a club record 365 yards and 3 td's passes including a 63-yarder to Willie. There was no scoring in the last quarter as the Lions posted their 9th win of the season 40-1.

The next game was on October 12 and at home against the Roughriders who proved little opposition. Regina's fullback George Reed, who would eventually become the CFL's career rushing leader, was into his first season, and managed to rush for 73 respectable yards. BC found they could pop Willie loose on the halfback draw and the mercurial halfback found his game as he finished with 162 yards on 13 carries. But the most spectacular play was when Rider quarterback, Ron Lancaster tried a pass into the endzone only to have defensive back Neal Beaumont turn the play into a record 120 yard interception return. BC won 26 to 6 for their 10th win in 13 starts.

Against Edmonton on October 19, Willie rushed for only 47 yards on 6 carries but it was enough to put him over the 1,000 yard mark for the second time in his career. That gave him 1026 yards on 107 carries for an average of 9.6 yards per carry. Kapp had a productive day going 21 of 31 throws for 270 yards.

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The 32 to 6 win clinched first place for the Lions and a bye into the playoffs.

There was two things on the line for the October 27 at Winnipeg. First of all, with first place in the basket, there was talk of Willie breaking Nub Beamer's club record of 1161 yards rushing with two games to go. And also it was a must do-or-die game for the defending Grey Cup Champions Winnipeg Blue Bombers. They now had to win both games of a home-and-home series against the new Western leaders as there was the possibility that they might be out of the play-offs for the first time in 13 years. The Bombers struck quick and often, had the Lions completely off balance and controlled the tempo of the game. On one punt Winnipeg kicked the ball to the BC 13 yard line and then history was made. Bombers blitz Kapp on first down and the Lions executed their famous halfback draw to Fleming. So perfect was the blocking that by the time Willie got to his own 45-yards line (he still had another 65 yards to go) the Bombers gave up the chase. Nobody was going to catch Willie "the Wisp" Fleming that day.

Winnipeg held off the BC lion comeback attempt and won the first game 34 to 20 to improve their play-off chances. But Willie was the real story of the game. In only 10 carries he had gained 164 yards, second most for a Lion running back, set a club record with 1190 yards for the season, and sported an incredible 10.2 rushing average!

The return game with Winnipeg was on November 3. This time the Lions dominated: Bomber were held to 36 total yards rushing by the BC defence. Kapp was 10 of 21 for 238 yards (a gain of 23.8 yards per completion) and veteran Sonny Homer caught 7 receptions for 158 yards. Willie was watched by the Bombers very carefully but managed 44 yards on 10 runs. Of course BC won 28 to 10. Fleming's final total for the season was 127 carries for a club record 1,234 yards and a new CFL record for the highest average in a season, 9.7 yards per carry!

He finished third in rushing behind George Dixon's 1,270 yards and Lovell Coleman's 1,343 yards. Willie also carried the ball fewer times too. Coleman had 237 carries for the season and Dixon had 189 carries. If one were to project Fleming's 1963 season with an 8.0 yard average on 189 carries, Willie would have won the rushing title with 1,512 yards. And if he had carried the ball as much as Coleman had with an 8.0 average he would have gained a CFL record 1,896 yards.

But Willie was a lightweight. He was strong in mind and spirit but his body couldn't take the constant pounding by the defence had he carried the ball 200 or more times in a season. He was the son of the winged God Mercury and he made his yards around the end up the middle or on a Joe Kapp pass in the flat.

AFTERMATH:

BC Lions defeated Saskatchewan in the play-off finals two games to one but they were a battered, tired and decimated club when they met the powerful Hamilton Tiger-Cats. Two of their top receivers were hurt when the game started, and Willie Fleming was forced out with an injury early in the game in the famous Angelo Mosca tackle incident. With no effective running or passing game, Lions lost to a superior team 21 to 10.

AFTERMATH 1964:

At the beginning of the 1964 season, Head Coach Dave Skrien looked at the schedule and said it would take 11 victories for the Lions to win the west. So the Lions won 11, tied three and lost twice, beating the Stampeders in a close race. BC again made it to the Grey Cup and this time were healthy and ready for the re-match with Hamilton. With the defence controlling the game, Kapp passed brilliantly, Fleming broke loose for a great 46 yard touchdown run (on film one sees Fleming breaking down field with Hamilton defensive back Garney Henley leading interference. Actually, Henley was trying to stay just ahead of Willie as had he tried to turn around and make the tackle, Fleming would have turned the other way and be gone. Every time Henley zigged, Willie would zag and this continued right into the end zone). Even the field goal unit chipped in for a touchdown as the Lions won their first Grey Cup ever 32-24.

Willie had a great year by normal standards but nothing like his 1963 rushing totals. He was a watched player this time, gained 750 yards on 129 carries for a low 5.8 average. But there was one bright moment for him at Edmonton on October 17. On the famed halfback draw, Willie "the Wisp" broke up the middle for one memorable record-tying 109-yard touchdown run. He finished that game with a club record 186 yards on 10 carries and the second highest rushing average in a CFL game at 18.6 yard per carry.

When Willie retired he held another CFL record. The highest career rushing average in CFL history, 7.1

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yards per carry.

Willie's gift was his great speed and in 1963 he displayed his gift to the best of his abilities.