

KELLEN WINSLOW

By Don Smith

Thanks to a last-second trade with the Cleveland Browns, the San Diego Chargers were able to select Kellen Winslow in the first round of the 1979 NFL draft. It turned out to be a masterful move because Winslow, a 6-5, 250-pound consensus all-America tight end from Missouri, became an instant super-star and a powerful contributor to the NFL's most prolific offense in the early 1980s.

Injuries limited his playing time on certain occasions and eventually caused him to retire in 1987 after just nine seasons. But when Winslow did play, he performed so spectacularly that opposition defenders lay awake nights wondering if there was any legal way to stop him. Altogether, he caught 541 passes for 6,741 yards and 45 touchdowns. At the time of his retirement, he ranked fifth in receptions among active players and 12th among the all-time leading receivers.

He is only the fourth tight end to be elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Mike Ditka became the first Hall of Fame tight end in 1988 and he was followed by John Mackey in 1992 and Jackie Smith in 1994.

Winslow's first few years in the NFL were, by his own admission, "like a fantasy." He began his rookie season on a high note with a team-leading 25 receptions in seven games before a broken leg suffered in the seventh game ended his season. But he bounced back a year later as good as ever with a career-high and NFL-leading 89 receptions, best ever for a tight end up to that time.

He won the NFL individual receiving championship with 88 catches in 1981 and had another 88-reception season in 1983. In the five-year period between 1980 and 1984, he had 374 receptions, the best record of any NFL receiver during that period. Winslow had his best start ever in 1984 with 55 catches in seven games -- an average of almost eight catches each week -- before a knee injury ended his surge toward a 100-reception season. He caught 142 more passes in the next three years but, realistically, he was never the same again.

Almost from his first pro game, Winslow made a lasting impact on the National Football League. "Absolutely, he should not be allowed to play in this league," Jack Faulkner, a former AFL coach and long-time NFL scout with the Los Angeles Rams, said with obvious admiration. "We sometimes can stop Fouts but Winslow, no way. There's no other player like him in the league. You just can't replace him." Air-Coryell

It was a lucky break for Winslow that it was the Chargers who sought his services after college. The Chargers, more than any other NFL team of the time, emphasized the forward pass and had the necessary talent to make Coach Don Coryell's offensive philosophy work devastatingly well. To implement his attack he started with Fouts, a premier quarterback who passed for more than 40,000 yards in his career. Fouts in turn had great receivers such Charlie Joiner and John Jefferson, as well as Winslow, who could turn his passes into big yardage and touchdowns.

And the Chargers as a team also were successful. They led the entire NFL in total offense five times in six years from 1980 to 1985 and gained more than 6,000 yards in 1981 and 1985. They were the top passing team seven times between 1978 and 1985.

With a cumulative 33-15 won-lost record, San Diego won AFC Western division championships in 1979, 1980 and 1981 and advanced to the AFC championship game each of the last two years. However, they lost to the Oakland Raiders in the 1980 title game and to the Cincinnati Bengals in the 1981 finale.

Although he was listed as a tight end, Winslow was used in many ways, particularly early in his San Diego tenure when the Chargers were stunning their foes with a seemingly unstoppable attack. Kellen sometimes lined up as a wide receiver, slot back, man-in-motion and even on occasion at halfback or fullback. The defense never knew from where he was coming or where he was going or even what to call him.

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The question around the league was: can Winslow be stopped?

"I think it is more, can San Diego be stopped," Winslow responded. "I'm only as good as the guys helping by running their patterns so I am able to have man-to-man coverage or able to read the zone. Before you can stop me, you have to stop the team first. It starts with the head man, his philosophy that you have to accept to win. The system is really good but any system is only as good as the people executing it."

Winslow also appreciated the help he received from Joiner, his equally-prolific pass receiving teammate. "Charlie is the ultimate professional," he said. "I don't remember a time when Charlie was out of place on the football field. It gave us great advantage. I learned a great deal from Charlie, not only as a football player but as a man and conducting oneself in a proper way."

The situation didn't exist very long but, early in his Chargers career, Winslow was third on the totem pole when it came to drawing defensive attention. At that time, San Diego opponents tended to double up on Joiner, Jefferson and Wes Chandler and go single coverage with the tight end. "We really took advantage of that," Winslow remembers.

"Then it got to the point they were trying to decide whom to double. Those were the headaches we gave our opponents in the early 1980s."

Winslow did not go along with the trend just coming into vogue in the early 1980s of pass receivers wearing gloves. "I don't like gloves," he said. "I think you drop more balls than you catch with them."

He did, however, wear gloves twice in his career. The first time was in the 1981 AFC championship game played in 59 degree- below-zero wind chill weather. Winslow did score San Diego's only touchdown on a 33-yard reception. "I had two pairs of gloves on that day and still got a touch of frost bite in my right thumb. I used them that day just out of a basic survival instinct. The only other time I wore gloves was in a season- ending blizzard in Denver."

It wasn't long after Winslow arrived on the pro football scene that the nation's sports media began giving the Chargers sensational newcomer the same kind of attention he was getting from opposition defenders. Winslow was a consensus all-pro choice three straight years from 1980 to 1982. United Press International picked him on its all-AFC team those same three years and again in 1987. His selection to the NFL's 75th Anniversary team in 1994 preceded his Hall of Fame election a few months later.

Winslow was selected as the AFC tight end in five Pro Bowls following the 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983 and 1987 seasons. In his second Pro Bowl in February, 1982, his six receptions for 86 yards earned him Offensive Player of the Game honors.

THE Game

The young super-star enjoyed many great days, such as his five-touchdown-catch performance against Oakland on November 22, 1981, and his 15-reception day against Green Bay on October 7, 1984. But when the average fan recalls the Kellen Winslow career, his epic performance in the Chargers' 41-38 overtime victory over the Miami Dolphins in a 1981 divisional playoff game is the first thing that comes to mind.

The game was televised nationally by NBC and, before the night was over, the broadcast team was calling Winslow "the all universe tight end" for good reason. The Chargers raced to a 24-0 first-quarter lead but the Dolphins tied the score at 24-24 in the third quarter. Winslow countered with a 25-yard touchdown catch but the Dolphins fought back to eventually tie the game at 38-38. With only second left, the Dolphins lined up for the winning field goal but Winslow broke through to block Uwe von Schamann's kick. Rolf Benirschke eventually kicked the winning field goal in overtime.

Winslow's heroic performance was even more remarkable because of the way the sauna-like conditions in the Orange Bowl affected him. A naturally heavy perspirer, Winslow at first drank water every time he reached the bench. By the third quarter, he was on oxygen. He also was being battered at the line and gang tackled every time he touched the ball. Three times, he had to be helped off the field. Each time he returned to catch a pass. At game's end, Winslow blocked for the winning goal but he didn't see it. He assumed the Chargers had won because the stands were quiet. Dead tired, he dropped on the turf and lay motionless until two teammates helped him to the dressing room.

A Belated Beginning

Winslow, who was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on November 5, 1957, grew up in East St. Louis, Illinois, in a family of seven children. "We were a very close family," Kellen says. "We got our inspiration from our parents. To raise seven kids at a time when they did in East St. Louis, to be that close-knit, they did a great job in raising us."

Kellen, however, was not allowed to play football until his senior year in high school because his mother feared he might get injured. Instead he was a member of his high school chess team and he was on the baseball team as a sophomore. But football always was in the back of his mind. "I wanted to go out for football in seventh grade," he remembers. "The physical education instructor also was the junior varsity football coach. I could throw the ball really far. The coach wanted me to try out for quarterback. I ran home all excited with a permission slip. My father said 'yes' but mother said 'no.' My mother won."

Winslow did try out briefly for the high school football team in both his freshman and sophomore years but each year decided not to pursue the sport any further. However, in his senior year, his P.E. instructor, Cornelius Perry, told Kellen one day: "Son, you belong on a football field whether you know it or not." Thus, a sensational football career was born.

East St. Louis High School had an excellent football team that year. With 20 of the 22 starters being seniors, East St. Louis advanced to the state finals before losing to Chicago Glenbrook North in sudden death overtime.

Because he only played one year in high school, Winslow received offers only from four schools -- Kansas State, Kansas, Missouri and Northwestern. Winslow chose Missouri because it was the closest and it offered everything he wanted to do. "It was big-time football and I really wanted to play in the Big Eight Conference," he relates.

Winslow caught 71 passes for 1,089 yards and 10 touchdowns in four seasons at Missouri. He averaged 15.3 yards per catch. His best season came as a senior when he led Missouri in receiving and yards with 29 receptions for 479 yards and six touchdowns.

The Chargers scouting department knew all about Winslow and Coach Coryell in particular was keen on getting Kellen. "He can certainly help us right away," he said. "He is a very outstanding receiver who can move around like a basketball player. He has the speed and ability to go deep."

The draft-day trade San Diego engineered proved to be a blockbuster deal for the Chargers. They gave the Browns their first-round pick (No. 20 in the draft order) and a second-round pick, (No. 47 in the selection line). Neither of the players, wide receiver Willis Adams and tackle Sam Claphan, the Browns took with their Chargers picks became stars. Ironically, Claphan never played for the Browns but did play four seasons with the Chargers from 1982 to 1985. Winslow had hoped he could play for Coach Coryell because of his passing philosophies so everyone in the San Diego camp was happy.

A New Breed

Some learned gridiron observers felt that Winslow was not a true tight end or at least that there never before had been a tight end quite like Kellen Winslow. Until the early 1960s, the tight end was mostly called upon to block, to be sort of a mobile offensive tackle. But Ditka with his good receiving instincts helped to start the trend toward the modern tight end who was expected to catch the ball first, then block. Being thrown into the Chargers' aerial offense was the perfect way for Winslow to showcase his talents.

Some wondered if Winslow would be as effective in any other offense but Ernie Zampese, the Chargers' receivers coach, was adamant: "If Kellen went to another team, no matter what kind of offense it had, he simply would be the best tight end in football, that's all."

Kellen's string of seemingly-endless successes came to a sudden halt in the eighth game of the 1984 season when Los Angeles' Raiders' linebacker Jeff Barnes smashed Winslow to the turf just as he caught a pass. It was a clean hit, "an occupational hazard" according to Winslow, but two major ligaments in his knee were badly damaged. He did not play again for almost a full year, until the seventh game of 1985.

Rehabilitation was extremely hard for Winslow, both physically and psychologically. When he did come back, Kellen put out a maximum effort but his pass receptions production dropped sharply from his vintage years. "It was a culmination of things," Winslow said.

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"Learning how to play the game over completely is basically what I had to do when I came back."

Winslow showed glimpses of his earlier form in 1986 when he had a 64-reception season. But his playing time and his reception total sagged in 1987, which proved to be his final season.

In August 1988, he announced his retirement. "It is a combination of my knee still bothering me and the fact I am getting on in age," he explained. "It is just time for Kellen Winslow to move on."

"The one thing I always wanted to do was to give my parents a reason to be proud of me, outside of the fact that I was their son." Winslow said. "I tried very hard to do that on things I did on the field and off the field."

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KELLEN WINSLOW

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Missouri

East St. Louis High School, IL

b: 11/05/57, St. Louis, MO

Consensus All-America 1978

All-NFL 1980, 1981, 1982, All-AFC 1987

Pro Bowl after 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1987 seasons

NFL 75-Seasons Team 1994

Pro Football Hall of Fame 1995

---PASS RECEIVING---							
YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	NO	YDS	AVG	TD
1979	San Diego	N	7	25	255	10.2	2
1980	San Diego	N	16	*89	1290	14.5	9
1981	San Diego	N	16	*88	1075	12.2	10
1982	San Diego	N	9	54	721	13.4	6
1983	San Diego	N	16	88	1172	13.3	8
1984	San Diego	N	7	55	663	12.1	2
1985	San Diego	N	10	25	318	12.7	0
1986	San Diego	N	16	64	728	11.4	5
1987	San Diego	N	12	53	519	9.8	3
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	9 yrs		109	541	6741	12.5	45