

LOU CREEKMUR

by Don Smith

In the 1950s, the blue-and-silver-clad Detroit Lions were one of the dominant teams of the National Football League. They won NFL titles in 1952, 1953 and 1957 and just missed a fourth championship in 1954. The most famous Lions of the day were quarterback Bobby Layne and running back Doak Walker whose penchant for last-second heroics in the big games made them the toast of the gridiron world. Both Layne and Walker are long-time members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

However, even offensive heroes of the Layne and Walker caliber cannot be effective without protection from pro football's Secret Service, the offensive linemen who clear the way. The Lions were blessed with an excellent offensive line but their biggest star was a colorful 6-4, 255-pound lineman named Lou Creekmur. Creekmur played both guard and tackle during his 10 seasons in Detroit and earned a host of all-NFL honors and Pro Bowl invitations.

Creekmur waited much longer -- 32 years to be exact -- for his Hall of Fame recognition. He often wondered if his sport's ultimate honor had passed him by but his concerns were shelved forever in January 1996 when he was elected to the Hall. While every new member is ecstatic about his election, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find someone more truly elated than the big Lion tackle.

The fact that Creekmur played in the era before pro football became universally popular and before television coverage made virtually every player a household name undoubtedly was a factor in his long wait for election. In the 1950s, offensive linemen were relatively-unknown performers who got attention only if they fouled up.

Creekmur, however, did come from a slightly different mold. He was an all-NFL pick six times, as a guard in 1951 and 1952 and as a tackle in 1953, 1954, 1956 and 1957. He missed all-league acclaim in 1955 only because he moved to the defensive line when team needs dictated. He was also named to the Pro Bowl as a starter eight straight years. He even was invited to the post-season classic the year he played on the defensive unit.

Aside from those honors, Creekmur had a way of making things happen on the field and then talking about it that gave him more "ink" than many of his peers. It accurately could be said Creekmur never met a sports reporter or radio or television announcer he didn't like, particularly if he sensed his interview might create some attention not only for himself, but also for his offensive line teammates.

The Life Blood

As unnoticed as the offensive line is by the public, it is the life blood of the quarterback and no one knew this better than Layne. He made certain of two things: (1) that he appreciated everything the tackles and guards were doing for him and (2) that he didn't appreciate it when they slipped up and allowed Layne to be tackled. If such a thing ever did happen, Layne would confront the offender right on the field, pull him out of a crowd and start ranting and raving and shaking his finger at his teammate. Not only did the Lions teammates know of the blown assignment, so too did the entire crowd of 50,000 that regularly watched the Lions play.

Creekmur, however, felt that these antics by Layne played a major role in solidifying the offensive line. "It was so embarrassing that we all made a pact we would never miss a block that would ever disturb Bobby Layne," Creekmur said. "We had guys like Charley Ane, Harley Sewell, Dick Stanfel. it was a good, sound, basic line.

Off the field, Layne's relationship with his line was an entirely different thing. "I'll tell you, the treatment he gave us off the field couldn't have been better," Creekmur insisted. "He would take us out for a steak and really let us know that without the guys blocking for him, he didn't have much. It sounds funny to say this, but the whole team showed such a love and respect for each other we would break our backs for each other. We were a lot of rabble-rousers. We lived high on the hog but on Sunday we were dedicated."

As far as the lack of public attention is concerned, Creekmur said his line mates didn't dwell on it: "We got attention from our offensive line coach, Aldo Forte, and from Buddy Parker and Bobby and our backfield. We were all proud when someone scored and we knew we were all a part of it."

The Road to Detroit

Creekmur was born January 22, 1927, in Hopelawn, NJ. His father James was a delivery service owner. When Lou was young, his family moved to Woodbridge, NJ, where Creekmur played tackle on his high school team. A year later, he won a letter as a freshman tackle for the 1944 College of William and Mary football team. He then spent the next two years in the U.S. Army.

After returning to William and Mary in 1947, Creekmur became a starter on a Southern Conference championship team. William and Mary finished 9-1 before losing 21-19 to Alabama in the Dixie Bowl. Creekmur played in the Delta Bowl as a junior and scored the only touchdown of his career on an arduous 70-yard run following an interception. As a senior in 1949, he won the Jacobs Blocking Trophy and played in the Senior Bowl and College All- Star Game. A track letterman, Creekmur also set a school record in the shot put.

When Creekmur's original class graduated in 1948, the Philadelphia Eagles of the NFL and the Los Angeles Dons of the All- America Football Conference both drafted him. Creekmur, however, stayed in school so that he could earn his master's degree.

By the time Creekmur completed his eligibility, the AAFC had disbanded. He was placed in a frozen player pool. It was from this pool that Creekmur was eventually chosen by the Lions in the 1950 NFL draft.

"I was thrown into the pool with such guys as Bob Hoernschemeyer, Y. A. Tittle and all those other guys who played in the AAFC in 1949," Creekmur explained. "The reason that I probably ended up in Detroit was because I played in the first Senior Bowl game in Jacksonville, FL, in January, 1950. Bo McMillin was coaching the North team but I was playing on the South team. I finally got in the game on the defensive unit and had a pretty good day. Then I blocked a punt going right over Doak Walker.

At the end of the game, McMillin asked Creekmur if he would like playing for the Lions if they could draft him. Lou didn't say no. He was their second pick in the 1950 NFL draft.

Immediate Starter

Creekmur became a starter as the Lions offensive guard in his 1950 rookie season and stayed at that spot for three seasons. He was selected as a starting guard for the NFL West team in the Pro Bowl after his first season. He always insisted that his biggest thrill was playing in that Pro Bowl. "For years, I had been reading in the papers about the great Bulldog Turner, the Bears center. And there I was, playing on the same team with him," Lou explained.

The next year, he was named all-NFL for the first of six times. He played in 150 straight games and did not miss a regular-season, NFL championship or Pro Bowl game until his final season in 1959, when he sat out the first four games before ending a premature retirement.

Creekmur's consecutive-game string was threatened only once and that was in 1952 when he suffered a severely bruised thigh in a Sunday game with the Bears, four days before a Thanksgiving Day clash with Green Bay. Doctors told Lou that he would be out for some time but, determined to play, he opted instead for steady treatment and was in the starting lineup against the Packers.

Later that year, Creekmur played a major role in Detroit's 17-7 victory over the Cleveland Browns in the NFL championship game. With the Lions leading 14-7 but with the Browns threatening at the Lions 10, Creekmur broke through to nail Browns quarterback Otto Graham for a 12-yard loss that effectively ended the Browns' threat.

It didn't take Coach Buddy Parker long to realize just how truly valuable Creekmur was to the Lions. He used his prized lineman every way possible, at tackle, at guard and even on the defensive line in short-yardage situations.

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The affable Creekmur had only one complaint about Parker's switching him back and forth between offensive tackle and guard. "If I am going to play offensive tackle, I'd like to weigh about 255 pounds," Creekmur insisted. "But if I'm to play guard, I should get down to 240 pounds to increase my speed. I sure wish Coach Parker would let me know in advance so I'll know how much to eat the week before a game."

Creekmur played offensive tackle more than any other position. Thus, he always was bumping heads with some of the NFL's top defensive ends, behemoths like Lou Michaels of the Los Angeles Rams, Len Ford and Don Colo of the Cleveland Browns and the Chicago Bears' Ed Sprinkle.

Creekmur remembered one curious incident in an NFL championship game against Ford: "The Browns were playing in a 6-1 defense and Lenny was playing way outside. I had no nobody in front of me to block. I kept yelling at him to come in closer but he wouldn't come near me. I never did find out what was wrong until Lenny and I played together in the Pro Bowl and he told me that I broke his thumb during the regular season and that is why he played the way he did that day."

While he was a hard-hitting, aggressive competitor on the field, Creekmur was a likeable, easy-going, fast-talking person off the gridiron. But one year against Green Bay, Creekmur got embroiled in a heated battle with end Stretch Elliott. After the game, Elliott rushed Creekmur and swung a haymaker that missed, but Lou just ambled on toward the dressing room. When asked later as to why he didn't retaliate when Elliott swung at him, Creekmur calmly replied: "I get paid for playing football . . . not fighting."

Slick Artist

Lions observers of the 1950s remember that Creekmur was known as an absolute artist in the slick trick of holding an opponent. He could lock a rival's arm under his own, twist and twirl him around and dump him so quickly the poor guy never knew how it happened. Creekmur never bothered to deny the charge.

Known as the "Smiling Assassin," Creekmur also knew how to use his elbows, a necessary technique in the no-holds-barred interior line play of the 1950s. He remembers both Sprinkle of the Bears and Leo Nomellini of the San Francisco 49ers as particularly adept elbow-throwers. "I used to throw a few," Creekmur admitted. "I think one of the reasons I made it to the Pro Bowl was the coaching I received from Marvin Bass when he was my line coach at William and Mary. He was a firm believer in throwing that elbow."

Creekmur's one departure away from the offensive line came in 1955 when he moved to defensive guard. "The Lions were 0-6 and we didn't have any one to replace Les Bingaman, who had retired. That was the year that Coach Parker started experimenting with the man over the middle dropping back and covering a zone against the pass. But I just couldn't do it. I wasn't fast enough moving backwards or laterally." Creekmur admitted.

The entire Lions organization was stunned just before the 1957 season when Parker announced at the "Meet the Lions" banquet: "I can't handle you guys and I quit." "We were in total shock," Creekmur recalled. "Buddy liked to feel that this was his team. He didn't like the interference we used to get from owners. I think it was a spontaneous reaction on his part."

But under George Wilson, who hurriedly took over the coaching reins, the Lions won the 1957 NFL West title and then demolished the hated Browns 59-14, to win their third NFL championship in six years. The Lions have not won an NFL title since that year.

Winding Down

Creekmur excelled again in 1958 but missed his ninth straight Pro Bowl because of a business conflict. He was working for a Detroit trucking company at the time and his boss told him he was needed on the job and there wouldn't be any time for the Pro Bowl.

For Creekmur, the decision was an easy one. "The most I ever made in football was \$1,000 a game," he said. "In 1959, I made \$15,000 as the terminal manager at the Saginaw Transfer Company. When the boss said I couldn't, there was no decision to be made. It was a no-brainer."

Then in 1959, that same boss played a role in Creekmur's return to the Lions. The two had been invited to a downtown luncheon where a photo session with some Lions was scheduled. During the luncheon, Coach Wilson sidled over to Creekmur's table and said: "Hey, Lou, we sure could use you out there."

Creekmur paid little attention but, after Lou and his boss returned to work, Wilson telephoned and was more insistent: "I want you to come back." Creekmur replied that it was up to his boss, who in turn responded: "Hell yes, go back and play."

The veteran Lion signed a contract on Wednesday, practiced and scrimmaged on Thursday, had a light workout on Friday and then flew to Los Angeles on Saturday. On Sunday, Creekmur started against the Rams and played the entire game.

"I was so sore. I just crawled off the field," Creekmur recalled. "But it probably was the most important season of my ten years because, if I had not played in 1959, I wouldn't be covered by the NFL Players pension."

Creekmur is the sixth member from the Lions' glory years to enter the Pro Football Hall of Fame, joining Layne and Walker from the offensive unit and Jack Christiansen, Yale Lary and Joe Schmidt from the equally-excellent defensive team.