

WIZARD

Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 1999

By Joe Horrigan

University of Alabama coach Paul "Bear" Bryant said it was Ozzie Newsome's "wizardry" on the playing field that motivated him to nickname his star receiver, "The Wizard of Oz." And like the "all-powerful Wizard" in the mythical Land of Oz, Newsome "made things happen" on a football field.

The Southeastern Conference's "Offensive Player of the Year" in 1977, Newsome was a three-time All-SEC selection, and was named first team All-America as a senior and second team All-America as a junior at Alabama. By the time the Crimson Tide receiver finished his collegiate career he had accumulated 102 catches for 2,070 yards, and 16 touchdowns.

"Ozzie was the best end I ever coached," said Bryant. "Not only was he a great receiver, but he had exceptional concentration, fine speed and great hands."

In 1978, the Cleveland Browns selected Newsome in the first round of the NFL draft. Although he played end at Alabama, Browns' coach Sam Rutigliano had other plans for the 6-2, 232-pound receiver. "You can be a good wide receiver in this league for a few years," Rutigliano told Newsome following his first training camp. "But if you move to tight end, you can be a great tight end for a long time." Thirteen seasons later, Ozzie retired as the leading tight end receiver in NFL history with 662 receptions for 7,980 yards and 47 touchdowns. He also ranked as the game's fourth all-time leading receiver.

Born on March 16, 1956, in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, Newsome was a talented high school athlete. At Colbert County High School in Leighton, Alabama, he was a three-sport star, in baseball, football and basketball, winning high school All-America honors in football and basketball. An outstanding receiver, Ozzie also played defense – linebacker one year and at safety two others.

A tall skinny kid, he once recalled how picking cotton after school and on weekends in a field behind his home helped him earn a little extra money while helping to keep him in shape. "We got three cents a pound, so for 100 pounds you made \$3," he recalled. "It's tough on your back, but when you've friends picking, too, it's not so bad. Besides, it was more of a community thing to help farmers."

When Ozzie wasn't playing sports or working in the fields, he also helped out in his father's restaurant called "Fat's Café." "He let us count the pennies in the cash register," Ozzie reminisced. "If you got there quick enough and counted fast, you'd probably be allowed to keep them. That meant a dollar or more to put in your pocket."

Although it would be football that would earn him acclaim, Newsome acknowledged that time spent as a baseball catcher contributed to his football skills. "I was a catcher from Little League through high school, and catching curve balls and tipped balls through nine innings had a lot to do with my concentration," he said. "A guy swinging at a pitch and you catching the ball takes concentration, and that's one of my biggest assets."

Basketball also played a part in his football skills development. "Catching balls on the run, going up for rebounds, positioning and timing all helped me," he said. "A lot of it helped my hand-eye coordination. Going up for a football catch is a matter of timing. You have to go up for it at a certain moment of flight."

Going up for the ball was something that Newsome did exceptionally well. Since Alabama wasn't a pass-oriented team under Bryant, Ozzie made every opportunity count. "Because I didn't have many passes thrown at me, every time one was, I had to catch it. That helped me. If the pass was intended for me, I had to get it and I still believe in that," he once said.

Newsome not only preached his "had to catch it" philosophy, he practiced it. During his pro career the sure-handed tight end caught at least one pass in 150 games, the second longest streak in NFL annals at

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the time. He also set team records with 50 or more receptions in a season six times, most 1,000-yard receiving seasons (2), most receptions in a game (14), and the single-game receiving yardage mark (191). Always dependable, Newsome had three or more receptions in 112 games and eight or more catches in a game 13 times.

Rutigliano credits Newsome with revolutionizing the tight end position. He points out that before Ozzie, tight ends were either too heavy to do the light work or too light to do the heavy work. "Ozzie was the prototype because he could play tight end, and he threatened the defense just like a wide receiver. When he came into the NFL, what was vogue at the time was defenses playing what they called 'double zone,' where two safeties would each cover half the field," said Rutigliano. "Ozzie drove that defense out of football because of his ability as a tight end to run like a wide receiver and attack the middle of it."

As a rookie, Newsome demonstrated his versatility when he caught 38 passes for 589 yards and carried the ball 13 times on end-around plays for an additional 96 yards and two touchdowns. He became the first rookie in 25 years to be named the Browns' Offensive Player of the Year. The following season he caught 55 passes for a career high nine touchdowns and was named first-team all-pro and All-AFC.

In 1980, the Browns returned to the playoffs after a nine-year absence. With their high-powered offense and last-second victories the team became known as the "Kardiac Kids." Five players, including Newsome, broke the 50-catch mark. Newsome, however, clearly emerged as Cleveland's main offensive threat. The remarkable tight end was the Browns leading receiver each season from 1981 through 1985.

In 1981 he became just the second player in Browns' history to surpass 1,000 yards in receptions, when he caught 69 passes for 1,002 yards and six touchdowns. His outstanding play earned him his first Pro Bowl invitation.

In the strike-shortened 1982 season, Newsome was the second leading receiver in the American Football Conference with 49 catches. Three times he recorded 100-yard receiving games during the nine-game season.

The following year, Ozzie had his biggest single-game performance when he caught 14 passes for 191 yards in a game against the New York Jets. His 89 receptions that season were a Browns' single-season record. In 1984 he led all receivers in the AFC by duplicating his single-season best performance. His outstanding play earned him the second of his three Pro Bowl invitations.

"Every single game we played during those Kardiac years," Rutigliano recalled, "the number one thing that every defense did first was try to stop Ozzie Newsome. So as a result they would double him every play with the safeties or a linebacker and a safety. That allowed guys like Reggie Rucker, Dave Logan, Mike Pruitt, Gregg Pruitt, and Calvin Hill to have great years."

Still, as his individual achievements and honors began to mount, the Wizard remained the consummate team player. "I set team goals rather than personal goals," he stated. "The first is to get to the playoffs and contribute all I can along the way."

Newsome did more than contribute to the Browns' playoff runs. He was a vital cog in Cleveland's offensive machine that took the team to three AFC championship showdowns in a four-year stretch between 1986 and 1989.

In 1986, the Browns finished 12-4 enroute to their second consecutive AFC Central crown. Throughout the season, Newsome was nagged by painful shoulder and ankle injuries. Still, the always-dependable team captain refused to let the injuries keep him out of the lineup. Although he caught just 39 passes during the regular season, his inspirational leadership earned him special recognition from his teammates. They presented him with the Ed Block Courage Award for exemplifying courage both on and off the field.

When a game was on the line or a critical third-down situation existed, Newsome was the Browns' go-to-guy. "I've seen a lot of great players," Rutigliano proclaimed, "but nobody caught the ball inside better than Oz on third down."

In Cleveland's 1986 Divisional Playoff victory, a double-overtime thriller against the New York Jets, Newsome, in a clutch performance, led all receivers with 6 catches for 114 yards. "This is as close to the

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Super Bowl as I've had. I'm going to go all out next week. I may not get this opportunity again," exclaimed the nine-year veteran after the win.

Unfortunately, the next week, the Denver Broncos ended Newsome's dream of a Super Bowl by defeating the Browns 23-20 in overtime in the AFC Championship Game. While Ozzie and the Browns did advance to the championship game two more times, both times they fell victim to the magic of John Elway and the Broncos.

"My biggest disappointment," Newsome once said, "was in the 1986 AFC Championship Game against the Broncos. We were up with two minutes to go, and they were 98 yards away from a touchdown. And I was helpless on the sidelines. To be that close to the Super Bowl and lose it, and then lose again to Denver the following year, was really tough."

As tough as the losses may have been, Newsome didn't dwell on the past. "I've always been a person who looks forward to what's next in life, the next challenge," he said. "That's why I've never been a guy that celebrates a touchdown or anything like that, because I think the next one is more important than the one I've already done."

Always popular with his teammates, Newsome led by example. "I think he (Newsome) has shown a lot of leadership over the years, and it's not necessarily by talking out," said teammate Clay Matthews, who was the Browns' other first-round draft pick in 1978. "It is by his work ethic. He always practices hard. He always works hard in the weight room. He's always working on his conditioning. He does all the right things."

Marty Schottenheimer, a Browns assistant for 4½ years until he was named to replace Rutigliano in 1984, was also impressed by Newsome. "When I came in 1980, I marveled at the skills he exhibited," Schottenheimer said in a 1990 interview. "In the later years he didn't have the speed, but made up for it with guile and experience. Even now there's no better tight end in the league at getting off the ball. He has that ability to escape a linebacker in front of him."

Although he had been considering retirement for several years, Ozzie kept coming back hoping for another chance at playing in a Super Bowl. However, when the team dropped to a 3-13 finish in 1990, he realized the dream was not to be. After 13 seasons, Newsome announced 1990 was his last.

"It's the fact that I danced every dance," he said when asked his most memorable accomplishment. "I was there every time. Every time the ball was kicked off, I showed up for that. That's what I'll try to continue to do."

During his remarkable career, Newsome played in 198 of a possible 201 games. Seven times he was named either a first or second-team all-pro, and he was named to the All-Decade Team of the 1980s.

"I always think of the person first," Schottenheimer said. "There are a lot of performers, but few people who are quality individuals like Ozzie Newsome. He's got very high standards, great integrity. He's the type of individual whose team is far more important than any success he might have in the arena."

Prior to his Hall of Fame selection, Newsome was asked how special it would be to be elected the same year that the Cleveland Browns resumed play in the NFL. Newsome, in typical fashion, put it all in perspective. "I've had one special day in my life," he said, "and that's when my son Michael was born, and I got the chance to hold him. Being inducted this year with the Browns playing would rank right next to that day. It wouldn't be bigger, because no catch I ever made, no game I played in would ever be bigger than my son being born."

Newsome is the fourteenth long-time Cleveland Brown to be elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.