

ROGER BROWN:

All-Pro Defensive Tackle for the Lions and Rams

By Jim Sargent

Hard-hitting Roger Brown centered his National Football League career on outstanding performances for the Detroit Lions from 1960 through 1966. After being traded during the 1967 preseason to Los Angeles, he resumed his stellar play for three seasons with the Rams. As a result, Roger is the only player to star on the "Fearsome Foursome" defensive lines of both clubs.

One of Brown's greatest games came during the annual Thanksgiving Day contest at Tiger Stadium between the Lions and the Green Bay Packers on November 22, 1962.

Although Green Bay, coached by Vince Lombardi, went on to win the championship of the National Football League in 1962, the Lions dumped the Packers on Turkey Day, 26-14, and Brown was a major factor.

For Detroit it was a grudge match because in game four of the season, the Packers defeated the Lions, 9-7, on a Paul Hornung field goal with 27 seconds left. But on Thanksgiving, Detroit's defense sacked quarterback Bart Starr 11 times--which was the key to snapping Green Bay's 10-game winning streak.

Strong, agile, and fast, Brown was the biggest part of Detroit's *Fearsome Foursome*, a front four which featured Alex Karras at left tackle and Darris McCord and Sam Williams at ends.

The "Foursome" nickname for an NFL defensive front four was first used in Detroit in 1960 by sportswriter Bruno Kerns of the *Pontiac Press*, although most fans believe that the name came from the Rams.

"Brown led a vicious, unstoppable Lion rush," wrote George Puskas of the *Detroit Free Press*, "which completely overpowered, then brought to frustration and collapse a Packer offense which stood as the very best in pro football."

That afternoon Brown was supposed to be blocked by All-Pro guard "Fuzzy" Thurston, but that plan didn't work.

"Honestly, I don't think 'Fuzzy' put a good block on that Brown all day," Green Bay assistant coach Red Cochrane told sportswriter Benn Dunn of the *Detroit News*. "He murdered us."

In 1997 Brown was inducted into the Virginia Sports Hall of Fame, an honor merited by his excellent football career. Although he has been listed on the ballot as a senior nominee for the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Brown has not been selected for enshrinement.

But the big guy, who is friendly, personable, and witty, enjoyed an excellent career. A six-time selection, he played in the Pro Bowl for every season from 1962 through 1967, the last with the Rams. Among linemen in the history of Detroit's franchise, only Hall of Famer Lou Creekmur earned more Pro Bowl selections (8) than Roger's five.

The Virginia native was also named

- first team All-Pro in 1962 and 1963
- second team All-Pro in 1961, 1964, and 1965
- *Sporting News* All-Conference in 1965 and 1966.
- *Los Angeles Times* NFL Defensive Player of the Year in 1962

However, after winning the NFL Championship in 1957, the fourth title for Detroit's franchise, the Lions have yet to win another. The club came close, finishing in second place in 1960, 1961, and 1962, the first three years of Brown's tenure.

Detroit fell to fourth place in 1963 and 1964, then to sixth in 1965 and 1966. The Lions were still exciting to watch, especially on defense. Roger remained an anchor on that great front four.

Later, Brown earned further honors. In 1994 the Detroit media picked an *All-Golden Era Team* covering Lions' first thirty seasons, from 1934 through 1963. The four defensive linemen named to the first team were Brown, Darris McCord, Thurman "Thum" McGraw, and huge Les Bingaman. The media's *All-Modern Era Team* (1964-93) includes Brown on the second team.

Why has Brown been overlooked for Canton's Hall of Fame? It might be that he was quietly efficient and never flamboyant, a consistent performer who lived to play his best game every time he walked on the gridiron. Also, a fact of football life is that offensive and defensive linemen seldom get the recognition accorded to quarterbacks, running backs, or pass receivers.

Roger was not fortunate enough to play on a championship team. Instead, the black college All-American experienced the irony of playing in the Runner-up Bowl, which was held during the 1960s, five times in his 10-year pro career.

"Green Bay was number one and we were number two when we beat them on Thanksgiving Day of 1962," Brown recalled recently.

Asked about his sacks that Thanksgiving, he replied, "I believe it was six sacks that I got personally, and one was for a safety.

"It was just a situation where we were *really upset* after losing the first game up in Green Bay, because we should have won it. We were just bound and determined to show that we were the better team. We went out and really beat them soundly. It's too bad that we didn't win the first one, because we may have been in the championship game."

Detroit finished 11-3 in 1962, which would have been good enough for first place in most seasons, but Green Bay's record was 13-1. Later, the Packers won the NFL Title over the New York Giants under frigid conditions at Yankee Stadium, 16-7.

"They went on to win the NFL Championship," Brown explained, "and we went to the Runner-up Bowl, the league called it. That game matched the second-place finishers in the Eastern and the Western Divisions. The league held the game for ten years. Mostly the revenues from the game went toward the Bert Bell Retirement Plan.

"Out of ten years of the Runner-up Bowl's existence, I played in it five years," he said. "That was my career. I came in second five times, no Super Bowl, no championship."

Brown continued, "I have to tell you something that's ironic that a lot of people didn't realize. But it was after the 1962 Thanksgiving Day game--and the Lions used to be the only game on Thanksgiving Day--Vince Lombardi decided that he did not want to play in the Thanksgiving game again. It was after 1962 that other teams were invited in on Thanksgiving."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 22, No. 1 (2000)

That famous contest occurred in Brown's third season after being drafted out of Maryland State College in Princess Anne, Maryland. At that time Maryland State was an all-black school with an enrollment of about 280 students.

"We had championship teams in baseball, football, and basketball," Roger recollected. "Believe it or not, we had quite an array of stars make it in the NFL out of a school of less than 300 students. There was Johnny Sample, Sherman Plunkett, Emerson Boozer, Art Shell, Gerald Irons, Bob Taylor. I mean, I could go on and on."

One of three children, Roger was born on May 1, 1937, in Surrey, Virginia, to Altemus and Nancy Brown (his mother passed away when Roger was four). The Browns--with Roger, Altemus, Jr., and Laura--moved to Newport News and then to Nyack, New York, where Roger grew up and attended high school.

The youth didn't play sports until the ninth grade, when he began his growth spurt. In junior high he liked the safety patrol. One time the group patrolled at a football game, and Roger enjoyed it. The next year he made the freshman, junior varsity, and varsity teams.

Before the season ended, the 6'2" 230-pounder was playing fullback on the varsity. Fast for his age, Roger could run 100 yards barefoot in ten seconds on a cinder track. When he signed with Detroit in 1960, he was clocked at 5.4 seconds for 50 yards.

"I was drafted out of Maryland State," he reflected. "I was supposed to go to Michigan State, and I was supposed to go to Syracuse. But my grades out of high school weren't that strong. So they said if I went to a junior college and obtained a C average, they would accept me as a transfer."

Coached by Skip McCain, Brown liked Maryland State, where he worked his way through school as a disc jockey. He earned a 3.0 average, was shifted from fullback to defensive tackle as a sophomore, and decided not to transfer. Excelling at football, he earned black All-American honors in his junior and senior seasons.

"I was drafted in 1960 number four, which at the time was the highest draft of any black athlete at an all-black college or university.

"Some writeups say that I came from Pittsburgh to the Detroit Lions. What happened was that the Lions got an extra fourth-round pick from the Steelers when they traded Bobby Layne to Pittsburgh. So they used that extra draft choice to draft me."

Roger won a starting position at defensive right tackle in Detroit's first regular season game, beating out veteran Gil Mains. Despite a knee injury in 1966, Brown was a regular for seven straight years.

With the Rams in 1967, Brown took the slot of injured tackle "Rosie" Greer, and he held that position for three years. But in the 1969 preseason, Roger suffered a broken hand. During the regular season he split playing time (usually the second and fourth quarters) with rookie Coy Bacon.

The team's records and Brown's honors can be seen from the following table:

1960	Lions	7-5-0 2 nd	Runner-up Bowl
1961	Lions	8-5-1 2 nd	All-Pro 2 nd Team; Runner-up Bowl
1962	Lions	11-3-0 2 nd	Pro Bowl; All-Pro 1 st Team; Runner-up Bowl
1963	Lions	5-8-1 4 th	Pro Bowl; All-Pro 1 st Team
1964	Lions	7-5-2 4 th	Pro Bowl; All-Pro 2 nd Team
1965	Lions	5-7-1 6 th	Pro Bowl; All-Pro 2 nd Team; <i>Sporting News</i> All-Conf.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 22, No. 1 (2000)

1966	Lions	4-9-1	6 th	Pro Bowl; <i>Sporting News</i> All-Conference
1967	Rams	11-1-2	1 st (T)	Pro Bowl; Runner-up Bowl
1968	Rams	10-3-1	2 nd	
1969	Rams	11-3-0	1 st (T)	Runner-up Bowl

Roger was also drafted by the old New York Titans of the American football League and recruited by the Saskatchewan Rough Riders of the Canadian Football League. Despite being offered more to play in the CFL, the Maryland State All-American dreamed of playing in the NFL. He signed with Detroit for \$8,000.

He was impressive from his first day. Defensive coach and former Lion standout Les Bingaman told reporters, "Brown has everything needed to be great in this league, size, speed, quickness, and real desire, and if he works hard at improving himself, he can become a great tackle."

After three seasons of observing Brown, Bingaman reported, "Roger had one of the greatest days any tackle ever had against the Packers last year [1962 Thanksgiving game], but while he is not always that spectacular, he has turned in consistently outstanding games for us since `60."

Bingaman added, "He never stops trying to improve himself."

"It was an honor to play with Roger," observed end Gail Cogdill, another Lions' rookie in 1960 who became Detroit's top receiver for several seasons.

"Roger was one of the best in the league. He was a fun guy to be around, but he was very serious when he suited up to play a game."

Brown set a then NFL record in 1962 by scoring two safeties, the second coming against Bart Starr. Roger's first safety came when he sacked Johnny Unitas of the Colts for two points.

Against Chicago in 1965, Brown scored his third safety. Asked about a play where he picked up the opposing guard, Ted Karras (brother of Alex) and heaved him into the quarterback in the end zone, Roger recalled, "That was against the Bears.

"We played the Chicago Bears, and I couldn't get to Billy Wade, so the only thing I could do," Brown said, with a laugh, "was throw that guard at him!"

In the 1962 Thanksgiving Day victory over Green Bay, Detroit jumped to a 23-0 lead in the first 18 minutes and 16 seconds of play. Milt Plum threw touchdowns passes of 34 and 27 yards to Gail Cogdill for the first two Lion scores.

With Brown and the swarming defense pressuring Starr and the Packer backs, nine more points resulted. Starr fumbled after a terrific hit by Brown inside the ten-yard line, and Sam Williams scooped up the pigskin and scored. Within minutes Brown tackled Starr in the end zone, boosting Detroit's lead to 23-0.

The Lions added a field goal to go ahead 26-0 in the third quarter. Finally, the Packers scored twice late in the fourth period, after a pair of Detroit turnovers. The final score was 26-14, but the game was never close, thanks to Detroit's outstanding defense. Longtime NFL observers consider it the worst physical beating ever suffered by a Lombardi-coached Packer team.

In fact, Brown's greatest effort led to a victory which is today ranked as the second greatest game in the history of the Lion franchise.

However, Roger, usually a voracious eater (he paid several fines during training camps for reporting at more than 300 pounds), encountered difficulties in Detroit in 1966 and 1967.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 22, No. 1 (2000)

Before the 1966 season he held out briefly for a renegotiated contract. But after two days, Roger decided that his future was with Detroit, where he owned a recording business.

For most of the '66 season Brown endured bone chips in his left knee, but he played despite the pain. The Lions finished sixth at 4-9-1. Still, according to the 1967 Super Bowl Program, Detroit's "most spectacular players today are defensive tackles Alex Karras and Roger Brown."

Roger underwent surgery in February of 1967 to correct the problem. But his knee was still sore during Detroit's training camp at Cranbrook. Evidently the Lion coaches doubted the big tackle's ability to regain his old form.

Suddenly, on September 7, 1967, new coach Joe Schmidt, the former Lion linebacker and now a Hall of Famer, decided to trade the 30-year-old Brown to George Allen's Rams. Detroit received three 1968 draft choices, including L.A.'s number one pick.

"Roger has been a standout for us for many years," Schmidt told the *Detroit News*. "But we are looking to the future and feel our younger players are adequate."

At first Brown was hurt. Before Roger learned about the trade, assistant Coach Carl Brettschneider told him that Coach Schmidt had a *deal* for him. Brown thought he meant an endorsement.

"I've got a good deal for you, Roger," Schmidt told Brown when he broke the news in the coach's office. "I've traded you to the L.A. Rams."

"I mean I was floored. I couldn't believe it. I had just gotten married and just bought a house, and I wanted to think about it.

"It turned out to be a better deal for me. I got more money and more notoriety. I went out there to play with a group of guys who were on the verge of winning a championship."

Rosie Greer was out for the season with a torn Achilles tendon, and Coach George Allen loved a team built on veterans. As a result, Brown joined the Rams' other Fearsome Foursome members, Merlin Olsen, Deacon Jones, and Lamar Lundy.

"I was really elated to go out there and play with these guys," Roger concluded. "They were great."

Brown's standout play helped Los Angeles enjoy three fine seasons. In fact, the Rams won Coastal Division Titles in 1967 and 1969. However, they lost both Western Conference playoffs, 28-7 to Green Bay in 1967 and 23-20 to the Minnesota Vikings in 1969.

Following the '69 season, the first time he ever missed starting a regular-season game, Roger's weight rose above 320. In 1970, rather than go through another rigorous training camp at age 33, he decided to retire from the game.

Talking about the Rams, Roger observed, "Like I said, it was a thrill-and-a-half to go and play with that group of guys. It was the highlight of my life.

"To play on two of the greatest defensive lines in the history of pro football, that was the biggest highlight. To play for Detroit and then to play for George Allen and the Rams, that was another highlight.

"I liked the camaraderie in L.A.. I liked the whole team spirit. It was a situation where everybody played as a unit. It was like, 'Let's all pull together, let's all do it, we can do it, we're gonna get it done.'

"The individual highlights in L.A. were many, with the TV shows, with cutting records with these guys. We did a couple of records, with Rosie Greer as the lead singer. We used to appear on the talk shows, the variety shows, like Milton Berle and Operation Entertainment. I think we sold one copy of the record. Each one of us bought one copy!"

By then Brown had invested in the restaurant business in inner-city Chicago. In 1969 he started a chain of fried chicken restaurants called Afri-Kingdom. He expanded to eight restaurants before he sold out. In 1977 Roger began working for McDonald's, first as an operations manager trainee. Later, he became the human resources manager for California and the West. In 1991 the former All-Pro moved to Portsmouth and bought a McDonald's franchise, and later he bought another.

Reflecting on his years with Detroit, Brown said, "The things I remember most about Lion highlights is that we had a great *defensive* team. We had the `Four L's' in the backfield and the best front four in football at that time. The four L's were Dick LeBeau, Yale Lary, Dick `Night Train' Lane, and Gary Lowe."

He continued, "We [the defense] used to have the biggest film to review on Monday, because we played on the field quite a bit. In Detroit we used to have some pretty good offenses, but they weren't quite good enough. In other words, our offense wasn't as strong as other teams' offenses."

Asked about the difference in today's NFL and the league when he played, Brown observed, "There were twelve teams when I broke in. We had 34 or 35 players on the team. There was no such team as `injured reserve' or `taxi squad.'"

"You either played football, or you went home. I remember that like it was yesterday.

"Back in those days if you were hurt or bleeding, you didn't complain. You played. When you got a sack and knocked somebody down, you didn't dance or do the boogie. You didn't wave your hands all over the place when you made a tackle. Sometimes someone else got the credit. You had a job to do and you went out and did it.

"You played the whole game, hurt or not hurt. Nothing kept you out of the game. I don't see that real '*m-gonna-play-regardless*' attitude that we had, and they're getting an awful lot of money to play today."

Brown is proud of his accomplishments:

"The unique thing is that Roger Brown played on both of these great defensive lines for ten years, and I made an impact."

The former black college All-American made a major impact with the Lions and the Rams. An exceptional and sometimes spectacular defensive player for 10 rugged seasons, Roger Brown's football career deserves recognition by the Pro Football Hall of Fame.