

RONNIE LOTT

Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 2000

By Joe Horrigan

If you were to choose one word to describe defensive back Ronnie Lott, it would have to be “passionate.” One of the hardest hitting players ever to take the field, Lott played every down with a fearless winner-take-all attitude. A throwback to another era, he often spoke of his admiration for past bone-jarring greats like Dick Butkus, Ray Nitschke, and Sam Huff, and his desire to achieve their level of play.

A consensus All-America choice at the University of Southern California, Lott was the Trojans’ 1980 Most Valuable Player. He led the Pac 10 with eight interceptions his senior season and registered 250 tackles during his four-year collegiate career.

As a result, the San Francisco 49ers made him their No. 1 choice – the eighth pick overall – in the 1981 National Football League draft. Lott, as advertised, was the complete package. He had speed, strength, and knowledge of the game that set him apart from most other defensive backs. And, as hoped, the 6-0, 203-pound defensive back went on to become a defensive mainstay on a 49ers’ team that dominated the National Football League in the 1980s.

His 14 years of near-unparalleled play not only earned him the right to be compared to the likes of Butkus, Nitschke, and Huff, it also accorded him the privilege of joining them as a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

During his remarkable career with the 49ers (1981-1990), the Los Angeles Raiders (1991-1992), and the New York Jets (1993-1994), Lott earned 10 Pro Bowl invitations at three different positions – cornerback, strong safety, and free safety. Twice he led the league in interceptions. He ranks fifth on the all-time interception list with 63 steals. He surpassed the 1,000-career tackle mark in 1993, and he had five seasons of at least 100 tackles. In 20 playoff contests (all starts), he recorded nine interceptions, 89 tackles, one forced fumble, one fumble recovery, and two touchdowns.

Born on May 8, 1959 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Lott was raised in a military family. His father served more than 20 years with the U.S. Air Force. “My dad served our country through two wars,” Ronnie said. “I was always kind of proud of him, I wanted to be like him.”

Lott wasn’t simply awe-struck by his father. His parents were real influences in his life. “My parents could have been disciplinarians only, but they weren’t,” he said. “They were much more than that.” He remembers as a youth being taught the importance of seeing both sides of an issue. “Most kids are taught ‘right, right, right,’” Lott recalled, “they are never taught why something is wrong. My dad was able to teach me that something is right because something else is really wrong. He would always make me understand why something was wrong.”

When Lott was five years old, the Air Force reassigned his father and the family moved to Washington, D.C. Not too surprisingly Ronnie became a big Washington Redskins fan. “When you live there, you wind up being a Redskins nut, you can’t help it – and that’s what happened to me,” he said. But football wasn’t his only love. He also followed basketball, especially the Boston Celtics, baseball and hockey. From an early age, he dreamt of being a pro athlete. “I used to dream that I was Charley Taylor carrying the ball, or Sonny Jurgensen, or Frank Howard of the Senators. I was K.C. and the Big O,” he said.

“When I played as a kid, there were no limitations, I never had the sense that, ‘You have to do it this way and only this way,’” he recounted in a 1994 *Sporting News* interview. “At home I used to love practicing by myself. You know most kids never do that. I loved it. I was constantly throwing a ball up in the air and catching it; I’d imagine myself running for a touchdown or making a great play, whatever came to mind. Same thing when I was shooting baskets or even reading about great players. I’d imagine I was them.”

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The Lott family eventually moved to Rialto, California. Ronnie attended Eisenhower High School where he played football, baseball and basketball. He earned all-league honors in each of his three varsity seasons in football and basketball, and twice in baseball. It was primarily for football, however, that the “big-name” colleges and universities recruited him.

Lott had a stellar career with the Trojans. His 14 career interceptions were fourth best in the school's history. His eight interceptions in 1980 were second most in the nation. In addition to his MVP honors that year, he was voted the team's Most Inspirational Player.

THE BEST ATHLETE

Understandably, expectations ran high when the 49ers drafted him. He was even hailed as the “finest athlete” on the team's roster as early as draft day. “He may just be the best athlete this club has at this point in time,” then-49ers' coach and general manager Bill Walsh said upon Lott's selection.

The talented rookie was named the starting left cornerback from his first day in training camp. Two other rookie defensive backs, cornerback Eric Wright and strong safety Carlton Williamson also earned starting berths. The rookie trio, along with veteran safety Dwight Hicks, soon established itself as the cornerstone of a much-improved San Francisco defense. But, without a doubt, it was Lott who emerged as the true leader. “Ronnie is a perfectionist and he demands that everyone plays at his level,” Wright stated.

The 1980s were a remarkable decade for the 49ers. After having won only 10 games during the previous three seasons, the surprising 1981 San Francisco team posted a Cinderella-like 13-3-0 record in 1981. They defeated the Dallas Cowboys 28-27 in the NFC championship game and then squeezed out a 26-21 victory over the Cincinnati Bengals in Super Bowl XVI.

Equally remarkable was the play of the USC rookie. Seven times he picked off passes from opposition quarterbacks. He returned three for scores, a feat that only one other rookie, Detroit Lions Hall of Famer Lem Barney, ever accomplished. His outstanding play earned him All-Pro honors and the first of his 10 Pro Bowl selections. He also finished as runner-up for NFL Rookie of the Year honors behind Hall of Fame linebacker Lawrence Taylor. “If anything, I think the key to my rookie year was that as the season went on, my confidence level increased proportionately,” Lott said.

Although the 49ers, in the strike-shortened 1982 season, never quite found their stride, finishing just 3-6, Lott was again selected to play in the Pro Bowl. In just his second season, the talented defensive back established a San Francisco team record with his fourth career interception returned for a touchdown. It was a record he would increase to five in 1986.

The 49ers roared back in full force in 1983, advancing all the way to the NFC championship game. Lott, for his part, led all defenders with 108 tackles, which were nearly 30 more than any other Niners' defender. And, with each tackle, his hard-hitting reputation grew, reaching near legendary status.

“Nobody's ever tried to hit a guy harder than he does, and he does it on a regular basis,” remarked then-Jets head coach Pete Carroll. “It's an extraordinary facet of his game – his courage and warrior-like attitude.”

Lott was proud of his reputation and unapologetic for his physical style of play. In the book *Total Impact: Straight Talk From Football's Hardest Hitter*, which he co-authored with Jill Lieber, Lott described what it would be like to have to absorb one of his hits. “If you think you want to play in the NFL, and if you want to find out if you can handle being hit by Ronnie Lott,” he wrote, “here's what you do: Grab a football, throw it in the air, and before you can catch it, have your best friend belt you with a baseball bat. No shoulder pads. No helmet. Just you, your best friend and the biggest Louisville Slugger you can find.”

ICK!

In Super Bowl XXIII, Ickey Woods, the Bengals' powerful running back, found out just how hard a Ronnie Lott hit could be. Early on, Woods was running for big gains against the San Francisco defense. After the Bengals' first series, Lott came to the sidelines and announced, “Don't worry about Ickey, I'm going to put his fire out.” According to Ray Rhodes, who coached San Francisco's secondary, Lott hit Woods with such force that “it just knocked Ickey's spark right out of him. The game turned right then because Ickey just didn't run with the same authority after that.”

Of course it wasn't simply a matter of his trademark big hits that made Lott so effective. His game went deeper than just the physical aspect. He was a student of the game. His competitiveness and intensity were unparalleled. He even studied the Korean martial art form tae kwon do, in an effort to improve his flexibility and self-discipline.

A versatile player, Ronnie always put the good of the team before his own considerations. "Ever since I was a kid, it had never been I, always we," he said. "The word team has always been so sacred to me that I'll go toe-to-toe with anybody just to let them know that's all that matters to me on Sunday."

It was his unselfishness and versatility that enabled the 49ers coaches in 1984 and again in 1985 to play Lott at both cornerback and free safety. In 1985, he made the switch prior to the fifth game of the season. He went on to record an impressive 80 tackles and team-high five interceptions after the switch. Still, Lott was not satisfied with his performance.

"Playing free safety takes a different type of discipline," he explained. "You have to be more disciplined and more patient, you can't vacate the middle as much. The 1985 season was like on-the-job training for me."

Apparently, the on-the-job training worked. The following season, Lott, playing free safety, led the league with 10 interceptions. He was again named All-Pro and voted to the Pro Bowl.

Always a student of the game, Lott had the uncanny ability of being able to sense the direction a play was about to take and then somehow disrupt it. "To break a play down," he said, "you have to see it in slow motion."

TO THE RAIDERS

Remarkably, Lott earned All-Pro honors at yet a third position in 1991 as a member of the Raiders, who signed him as a Plan B free agent. This time the veteran defensive back – who again led the league in interceptions with eight – earned the post-season honor as a strong safety, a position he hadn't played since his days at USC.

Ronnie played two seasons with the Raiders before joining the Jets as a free agent for two final seasons. Still effective as a player, Lott was the starting free safety both years in New York. Although his numbers were not equal to those he accumulated during his heyday, Lott's leadership both on and off the field was immeasurable. In fact, in 1994, his final season, he was awarded the club's Dennis Byrd Award, as the team's most inspirational player. That same year, Lott was named to the NFL's 75th Anniversary All-Time Team.

Hall of Fame coach Tom Landry once said of Lott, "He's like a middle linebacker playing safety. He's devastating. He may dominate the secondary better than anyone I've seen."

"That guy's going to Canton on roller skates," commented then-New England Patriots head coach Bill Parcells. "I've seen my share of him first-hand. He's one of the best guys that has ever played . . . He epitomizes what a defensive player should be and he has an effect on everyone on his team."

Throughout his career Lott was more than just a great player. He was a student of the game, a teacher, and a team leader. He loved and had a respect for the game. Ronnie Lott played hard. He played clean. And most importantly, he always played with passion.

Former 49ers in the Pro Football Hall of Fame

Hugh McElhenny
Leo Nomellini
Bill Walsh

Joe Perry
Bob St. Clair
Ronnie Lott

Y.A. Tittle
O.J. Simpson
Joe Montana

John Henry Johnson
Jimmy Johnson
Dave Wilcox