

JACKIE SLATER

By Joe Horrigan
Courtesy of the Pro Football Hall of Fame

In 1976, Jackie Slater, like many rookies reporting to their first National Football League training camp, held a very lofty personal goal. His overall objective was, "to become the best offensive tackle in the history of the game." But his more immediate goal, he confessed, "was just to make the team."

Obviously, Slater did more than just make the team. The 6-4, 277-pound tackle went on to become the mainstay of the Rams' offensive line for two decades. His 259 regular-season games played, at the time of his retirement, were the most ever by an offensive lineman, and his 20 seasons with one team is an NFL record. And, his election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility is evidence that he is, in fact, one of the very best to ever play the game, at any position.

Drafted by the Los Angeles Rams in the third round, Jackie Ray Slater was born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi. He attended Jim Hill and Wingfield High Schools where he competed in football, track, and basketball. An impressive physical specimen, at age 13 he was 6-1 and weighed 245 pounds. By his senior year in high school he grew to 6-4 and 260 pounds.

The oldest of five brothers, Jackie was the first in his family to be introduced to legislated desegregation in high school. "I remember having kids bused into our neighborhood my tenth-grade year and then getting bused out to their neighborhood in eleventh and twelfth grades," he stated. "It was a different time in the South. A lot of young people back there now take it for granted that they'll go to school here, or go to school there, do this or do that. It makes me feel real good to see the positive change that has taken place."

Following high school, both Texas Southern and Jackson State offered Slater football scholarships. He chose Jackson State partly because "it was only five minutes from home."

Walter Payton, who went on to a Hall of Fame career with the Chicago Bears, was in his second year at Jackson State when Slater was recruited.

"I was coming off my freshman year at Jackson State, Payton told *Sports Illustrated's* Paul Zimmerman in a 1995 feature on Slater. "All they were talking about was this big tackle here in town, in Jackson, at Wingfield High – 6-4½, 285 pounds – agile, great basketball player. They sent me to his house to pay a visit..."

"Of course a lot of my interest was selfish. Nothing better than recruiting another good offensive lineman," related the NFL's all-time leading rusher. "He was not at all cocky, always seeking information, kind of amazed at everything that happened. And dedicated. You could tell that right away."

Eager to play on both sides of the ball as he did throughout high school, Slater was disappointed when his coaches at Jackson State informed him that he would play on offense only. He was a tackle his sophomore year and again as a junior – with the exception of one game – and was switched to guard his senior season. The one game exception in his junior year was in a game against Grambling when he was moved to the guard position to block the highly touted Gary "Big Hands" Johnson. Although Johnson went on to a successful career with the San Diego Chargers, on that day, Slater was the more dominant player.

"Johnson was averaging about three sacks a game that season. So my coach moved me to the inside to handle him," Slater remembered. "He never got a sack that day. I think he had maybe one tackle."

"We lost that day, but afterwards, the writers were asking my coach (Robert Hill) what kind of game plan he used to stop Gary Johnson. He pointed right at me and said, 'That was my game plan.' That probably was the best thing that happened to me while I was in college. I was really proud."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 23, No. 3 (2001)

Slater, following his senior season, was named first-team All Black America, first team All-America by the Pittsburgh Courier, was named to the Southwestern Athletic Conference All-Star Team for the third consecutive year, and played in the College All-Star Game. It was in that game that Jackie got his first taste of the NFL as he and his all-star teammates faced the NFL champion Pittsburgh Steelers.

Slater lined up against future Hall of Famer Joe Greene. "I started cutting him, hitting him around the shins and calves, to take him out of his game," he told *Sports Illustrated*. "He said, 'Listen, Slater, this is the All-Star Game. Chill it, O.K.?' I figured I've got him now. So I tried to cut him again, and I fell flat on my face. Then I felt a tug on my shoulder pad. It was Joe, helping me up. I got halfway up, and – boom, boom – two knees to the chest. I didn't cut him anymore."

By the time the NFL draft came around, Slater knew he had a real chance to play in the pros. "I had seen the scouts over the years, coming around Jackson and checking out different players," he said. "Leon Gray, Donald Reese, Robert Brazile, and of course, Walter Payton. I remember my junior year, all of a sudden I was one of those guys and the encouragement I got made me feel that I could play in the NFL."

His raw talent, size, and speed made Slater a perfect pick for Coach Chuck Knox's Rams. Under Knox's watchful eye, he would have time to mature and move to the next level.

"It was such a veteran team," Slater said. "It was really unbelievable watching these real pros work. There was Jack Youngblood and Jim Youngblood and Fred Dryer and Larry Brooks and Merlin Olsen and Cody Jones and Mike Fanning.

"These guys were committed. They were in the middle of six or seven division championships. They were students of the game. And I remember the biggest feeling I had was one of inadequacy."

Still, Slater remained focused and absolutely determined to succeed. "I had the pleasure of being there when Jackie arrived," recalled Olsen, who was himself inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1982. "Even then I remember he was very serious about the quality of his football, trying to be as good as he could be."

Slater served what he called "a good apprenticeship" for three years backing up linemen Doug France and John Williams. His apprenticeship ended, however, in 1979 when he stepped in and started every game at right tackle. That year the Rams made their first Super Bowl appearance. Although the game ended with a disappointing 31-19 loss to the Pittsburgh Steelers, Slater had an outstanding individual performance, holding the Steel Curtain's L.C. Greenwood in check throughout the game.

The following season, Slater, fully entrenched as a starter, was a key component of an offensive line that surrendered just 29 sacks and helped the Rams' offense finish second in the NFL in total yards gained with 6,006. Although in just his second season as a starter, pundits were already referring to Slater as "overlooked" when post-season honors were announced.

It wasn't until 1983 that Slater was finally named to his first of seven Pro Bowls. That season, Jackie and his offensive line mates demonstrated their power and versatility. Together they allowed a league-low 23 quarterback sacks while also paving the way for Eric Dickerson's rookie rushing record of 1,808 yards. Slater also earned All-NFC honors and was a second-team All-Pro selection.

After a great start, a knee injury put Jackie on the injured reserve list after seven games in 1984. He returned to full form in 1985, and from that season on, the honors and accolades seemed automatic. He was named second-team All-NFC 1985 and first-team All-NFC 1986 through 1990. He was also a first- or second-team All-Pro selection 1986 through 1989, and was named to six consecutive Pro Bowls from 1986 through 1991.

Twenty-four different quarterbacks and 37 different running backs played behind the powerful lineman during his Hall of Fame career. A terrific drive blocker, Slater blocked for seven different 1,000-yard rushers, including Lawrence McCutcheon, Wendell Tyler, Eric Dickerson, Charles White, Greg Bell, Cleveland Gary, and Jerome Bettis. He also blocked in 107 games in which a runner gained 100 yards or more.

Slater was a quality pass blocker as well. Twenty-seven times Rams quarterbacks threw for 300 yards or more in a game with Jackie in the lineup.

"This guy is incredible. He never slows down," said Doug Smith the Rams veteran center when talking about the-then 16-year veteran Slater. "Whenever I start feeling down about myself, I just look over at Jackie and say 'You're amazing.' He keeps me going too."

Of course, playing until he was 41-years-old meant that he was subject to a fair share of abuse from his younger teammates. Over the years he'd been called "Grandpa", "Old Man River", and worse. It wasn't uncommon for a rookie to call him "sir" and reflect that he was a veteran when they were in grade school.

"Jackie Slater is proof that they were playing football in the prehistoric days," offered quarterback Jim Everett. "I've seen the calluses on his feet where he used to have to stop his car like Fred Flintstone."

In more serious moments, however, teammates were likely to add that Slater was not only a great player, but also a team leader. "You inherit that leadership, due to the fact that you've been there that long, and you have the character and attributes to be an example," explained fellow Class of 2001 Hall of Famer Jack Youngblood.

With his unique brand of quiet confidence, Slater accepted the role of team leader. "I remember looking at Merlin Olsen and Jack Youngblood and Fred Dryer and saying, 'If these old guys can do it, I know I can.' And now I know there are a lot of twenty-two and twenty-three-year-old guys looking at me and saying, 'If this old guy can do it, I know I can,'" Slater related in 1991.

Even after hundreds of games and years of monotonous and sometimes painful preparation, Slater never lost his competitive edge. When asked how he managed to meet the psychological challenge of "getting up" for a game year-in and year-out, he offered a simple explanation. "I say to myself, 'I'm doing something I absolutely love to do: playing pro football.' And I know that if I show up on Sunday, it doesn't matter if its Reggie White or Howie Long or Joe Blow, if I'm not prepared to play, then whoever it is I line up in front of is going to embarrass me. He's going to have a great day at my expense."

A humble and deeply religious man, Slater is always quick to share the credit for his successes with those around him. "I've been blessed with a mind and an attitude that I feel you just have to have to compete with guys who are ten years or twelve years your junior. I've also been blessed with an excellent support group in my family, and good coaching, and good guys on either side of me."

A veteran of 18 playoff games, including five NFC championship games and Super Bowl XIV, Slater was a model of consistent, superlative play. Three times *USA Today* named him Lineman of the Year. And, as late as 1992, his seventeenth year in the league, he was named the Rams' Most Valuable Player, an honor traditionally bestowed upon a younger "skilled position" player.

Walter Payton summed up his evaluation of Jackie Slater by saying, "Of all the people I played with or against, he'd be one of the first three I'd pick if I were starting a team."

As a member of the Class of 2001, Slater joins Payton and the other 209 elite members of the game's greatest team, in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

JACKIE SLATER

Offensive Tackle - Offensive Guard

Slater, Jackie Ray 6-4, 277

College: Jackson State High School: Wingfield [Jackson, MS]

Born: May 27, 1954, Jackson, MS

Drafted: 1976 Round 3 LARm

Year Team GM

1976 LARm 14	1983 LARm 16	1990 LARm 15
1977 LARm 14	1984 LARm 7	1991 LARm 13
1978 LARm 16	1985 LARm 16	1992 LARm 16
1979 LARm 16	1986 LARm 16	1993 LARm 8
1980 LARm 15	1987 LARm 12	1994 LARm 12
1981 LARm 11	1988 LARm 16	1995 StL 1
1982 LARm 9	1989 LARm 16	