

John Stallworth, Class of 2002

Courtesy of Pro Football Hall of Fame

JOHN STALLWORTH WR
Stallworth, Johnny Lee 6-2, 191
Alabama A&M HS: Tuscaloosa [AL]
B: 7 / 15 / 1952, Tuscaloosa, AL

Drafted: 1974 Round 4 Pit

Pro Football Hall of Fame 2002
All-League Teams: All-Pro: 1979 (AP, PFWA, NEA, PW)
All-Pro Second Team: 1984 (NEA)
All-AFC: 1979 (UPI, SN, PW); 1984 (UPI, PW)
Pro Bowls: (4): 1980, 1983, 1984, 1985

| RECEIVING | | | | | | |
|---------------|-------------|------------|------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|
| <u>Year</u> | <u>Team</u> | <u>G</u> | <u>No.</u> | <u>Yards</u> | <u>Avg.</u> | <u>TD</u> |
| 1974 | Pit | 13 | 16 | 269 | 16.8 | 1 |
| 1975 | Pit | 11 | 20 | 423 | 21.2 | 4 |
| 1976 | Pit | 8 | 9 | 111 | 12.3 | 2 |
| 1977 | Pit | 14 | 44 | 784 | 17.8 | 7 |
| 1978 | Pit | 16 | 41 | 798 | 19.5 | 9 |
| 1979 | Pit | 16 | 70 | 1183 | 16.9 | 8 |
| 1980 | Pit | 3 | 9 | 197 | 21.9 | 1 |
| 1981 | Pit | 16 | 63 | 1098 | 17.4 | 5 |
| 1982 | Pit | 9 | 27 | 441 | 16.3 | 7 |
| 1983 | Pit | 4 | 8 | 100 | 12.5 | 0 |
| 1984 | Pit | 16 | 80 | 1395 | 17.4 | 11 |
| 1985 | Pit | 16 | 75 | 937 | 12.5 | 5 |
| 1986 | Pit | 11 | 34 | 466 | 13.7 | 1 |
| 1987 | Pit | 12 | 41 | 521 | 12.7 | 2 |
| TOTALS | | 165 | 537 | 8723 | 16.2 | 63 |

Additional Career Statistics: Rushing: 9-111, 1 TD

In 1974, the Pittsburgh Steelers may have recorded the most successful talent grab in the history of the National Football League's annual college draft. Four of the team's first five selections went on to be elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, including fourth-round pick, wide receiver John Stallworth. Joining Stallworth were wide receiver Lynn Swann, selected in the first round, linebacker Jack Lambert, a second round pick, and center Mike Webster, who was tapped in the fifth.

"I'd like to say the draft was the result of horse sense and intelligence," joked Art Rooney, Jr., the since-retired Steelers' vice president and head of the team's scouting department. "But, it was just good luck. We got some great players."

While refreshing, Rooney's humility is an understatement. The Steelers had done their homework, particularly as it pertained to Stallworth. The Pittsburgh scouting department knew that Stallworth was a blue-chip prospect worthy of being selected in the first round. But the Steelers scouting department was willing to gamble that certain circumstances would cause other teams to overlook the talented receiver.

It was a gamble that Steelers Hall of Fame coach Chuck Noll had to be convinced to take. Noll and his staff actually considered selecting John in the first round. The "circumstances" the Steelers felt might work in their favor began with the belief that some scouts had simply failed to recognize Stallworth's talents since he played at a small school, Alabama A&M. Add to that, scouting combines had timed him at a somewhat unimpressive 4.8 in the 40-yard dash. And finally, the coaches in the 1974 Senior Bowl played him at defensive back, rather than at wide receiver.

"We got real lucky when Stallworth came to the Senior Bowl and they put him at defensive back," recalled Rooney. "We knew

we were going to take Lambert in the second round, and we had no third-round pick," remembered Bill Nunn the Steelers' assistant director of player personnel. "So we discussed Stallworth strongly in the first round. We also knew you either took Lynn Swann in the first round, or you wouldn't get him. So now it gets down to Chuck (Noll). He asked if we thought Stallworth might last. Lionel Taylor, our receiver coach at the time, and I both said yes."

Nunn knew Stallworth's scouting combine times were misleading. He had timed Stallworth prior to his junior season and the slender receiver ran the 40 in 4.5 seconds. A painful hip pointer, it turns out, was the cause of the discrepancy. Taylor, who agreed that Stallworth might be available in a later round, also felt that the scouts overlooked Stallworth's "soft hands."

Whether it was good scouting, luck, or more likely a combination of the two, John Stallworth went on to become the most prolific receiver in Pittsburgh Steelers history. Fourteen years after his retirement, he still leads the team in several significant receiving categories, including most receptions in a career, most yards receiving in a career, most career 100-yard receiving games, most touchdowns receiving in a career, and most consecutive games with a reception.

A native of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Stallworth was born on July 15, 1952. Like every kid at Tuscaloosa High, he dreamed of playing college football at the University of Alabama. So in 1970, when he learned that a member of the Alabama football staff had asked his high school coach for some game films he was understandably excited.

"I would defy any boy to grow up in Tuscaloosa and not want to play for Alabama," he told a Sports Illustrated reporter in 1986. Unfortunately, Alabama coach Paul "Bear" Bryant was unimpressed with the tall, lanky running back who hit the holes standing too upright.

Stallworth hadn't planned on being a running back. Simply put, his high school team just didn't have a quarterback who could throw the ball with any consistency. Thus, Stallworth, with his coach's encouragement, opted to play running back.

Even before his high school days, however, Stallworth knew his hands, not his feet, were his greatest asset. "I was small, playing with a big group of kids," he said of his youth. "And the only way I could play was because I could catch the football. At that time, in pick-up games, it was three passes for a first down. A lot of times, I'd catch all three passes. "It just came natural. I would reach out to catch the ball, and it would just stick. It's always been a God-given talent that I possess."

After being overlooked by Alabama, John took his "God-given" talents to Alabama A&M, the Division II school near the state's northern border. "Looking back, I wouldn't change a thing," he said of his college experience. "Hindsight is always twenty-twenty, but I could have been lost in the shuffle at Alabama. They weren't throwing the ball a whole lot in those days. They had just gone to the wishbone offense. Anything could have happened. Anyway, I met my wife at A&M. There was a lack of publicity, but it just made me a stronger individual."

That personal strength would serve Stallworth well in the coming years. He knew that when he reported to the Steelers training camp, he would not only be measured against the incumbent receiver corps, but against the production of fellow rookie Swann. Stallworth, who arrived in camp with none of the fanfare of the flashy first-round pick, wasn't intimidated by Swann's résumé that included Rose Bowls and a national championship. "I hadn't seen that many pro football players," Stallworth told The Sporting News in 1979. "I wanted to compare their speed and hands. Once I saw Lynn, I thought I could play with him."

"Those two (Stallworth and Swann) came to me and told me they would start," recalled Lionel Taylor. "They told me." Although neither earned a permanent starting berth as a rookie, both impressed their coach. Stallworth played in 13 games that season, starting two, before an illness sidelined him. Nonetheless, his rookie performance earned him a starter's role the following season, but again a series of injuries kept him from permanently locking down the job. However, starting in 1976, he began a streak in which he started all but three games in which he played.

John had flashes of brilliance during his first three seasons in Pittsburgh. In 1975, for instance, he started nine games and tied Isaac Curtis for the AFC lead with a 21.2-yard average per reception. But just as it seemed that his time had arrived, he was again sidelined by a series of foot and leg injuries.

"It was a really tough time for me," he recalled. "It was psychologically damaging. If it hadn't been for my wife and friends, I couldn't have gotten through it." Though frustrated, Stallworth never doubted that he had the necessary tools to be a star in the NFL. His strength of character, mental toughness, and competitive nature kept him focused.

With impressive back-to-back seasons in 1977 and 1978, Stallworth's career finally seemed to have turned the corner. In Super Bowl XIII, following the 1978 season, he dazzled a national television audience with a remarkable first half act in which he snagged three Terry Bradshaw passes for 115 yards, including 75- and 28-yard touchdowns. As it turned out, it was just a prelude of things to come.

Stallworth could no longer be looked at as an emerging star. He had arrived. And in 1979, his star shined brightly as he set a new team record with 70 receptions good for 1,183 yards. As if to add an exclamation point on the season, he again capped it off with playoff heroics. In Super Bowl XIV he caught three passes for 121 yards and a touchdown. The touchdown - a 73-yard beauty in which he picked the ball off his facemask while falling backwards - proved to be the game-winning score. His outstanding season-long performance earned him All-Pro and All-AFC honors and the first of four Pro Bowl berths. It also earned him the ultimate recognition from his teammates as they selected him their Most Valuable Player.

Stallworth was a "big game performer" and was one of just a handful of Steelers to play in each of the team's four Super Bowl victories. As of 2002 when he was elected to the Hall of Fame, John was tied for or held four Super Bowl receiving records and held four post-season records.

In addition to finally earning well-deserved national recognition, Stallworth had also clearly earned the respect and confidence of his teammates including quarterback Bradshaw. Early on, while Stallworth was sharing time at wide receiver with Frank Lewis, Bradshaw tended to look more often in Swann's direction. But that all changed as John emerged from the shadows of both Lewis and Swann. His emergence, however, inevitably caused observers to compare Swann and Stallworth.

While competitive, the two young receivers developed a good rapport with each other. "The rivalry doesn't get to the point where it's a jealousy type thing," Stallworth explained when asked in 1979. "I think we both have big egos, but we're able to subdue them a little bit for the team effort."

But the two definitely competed. "A lot of times we weren't competing against the opposing team," he once lightheartedly confessed. "We were competing against each other to see who'd catch the most passes. To see who'd make the great move to get open, that we could look at later (on film) and say 'Ooooooh'."

Getting open was something Stallworth seemed to do with ease. Time and again he would reach over a defender to pull down a pass and then just out-muscle and maneuver his way down field. The Bradshaw-to-Stallworth combination grew as the two All-Pro performers developed a strong comfort zone. Stallworth's blend of deceiving speed, soft hands, and perfect pass patterns made him a Bradshaw favorite. He even perfected a new move - the hook slide catch - a move he used frequently in pressure situations.

"It's my own invention," Stallworth told a reporter. "I don't know why I started to do it, it just sort of happened." As rewarding as the 1979 season was for Stallworth, the 1980 season brought only angst and disappointment as injuries (a cracked fibula and later a broken bone in his foot) limited his play to just three games.

Still hobbling at the start of the 1981 season, there was some question as to how effective he might be. When he opened the season with an impressive 3-catch, 82-yard performance that included a 56-yard grab and a five-yard touchdown reception, coach Chuck Noll was all smiles. "He's good," laughed a relieved Noll. "Even when he limps." Stallworth finished the season with 63 receptions for 1,098 yards.

Just as Stallworth had emerged an elite receiver in the NFL, his peers recognized him for his leadership and dedication to the game. At times, his on-the-field accomplishments were overshadowed by his inspirational hard-fought comeback battles from nagging leg injuries. His most impressive demonstration of his work ethic and determination to succeed came in 1984.

After missing much of the 1983 season due to injury, some observers began to suggest that John's most productive days were behind him. "A remnant of an empire, an artifact from kingdoms past," was how one writer described him prior to the start of the 1984 season.

"I knew better than that," Stallworth said. "I knew that I could come back and have a very good season if I was healthy." That year, at age 32, he not only had a "very good season," he had his greatest season ever, catching 80 passes for an AFC-leading 1,395 yards and 11 touchdowns - and all without Bradshaw, who had retired. It was a banner year, one in which he shattered five team records and was named the NFL Comeback Player of the Year.

Stallworth's performance may have been a surprise to some observers, but not for the future Hall of Famer. "I felt I had the talent and could still play the game," he professed. "As you get older you have to do more things to maintain your health. The key to returning to form was good health." For Stallworth, returning to good health meant altering his workouts, concentrating on leg strength. It was an adjustment that worked, as he ran the fastest 40 time since his rookie year.

Stallworth's "comeback" continued for three more seasons, during which he averaged 50 receptions per year. Finally, following the 1987 season, the soft-spoken former fourth-round pick out of Alabama A&M announced his retirement. "My goal when I came to the NFL was to gain the respect of my peers and a certain amount of self respect," he once remarked. "I was never really interested in publicity or notoriety."

Twice selected as his team's Most Valuable Player and four times named to the Pro Bowl, is evidence enough of the respect his peers felt for him. And, his election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2002 assures him of the notoriety he so often shunned but unequivocally deserves.

IN THE NFL RECORD BOOK

(at the time of his 1987 retirement)

Super Bowl Records

[1st] Highest Average Gain per Reception, Career - 24.4
[1st] Highest Average Gain per Reception, Game - 40.33 (Super Bowl XIV)
[Tied for 1st] Most Touchdowns Receiving, Career - 3
[Tied for 1st] Most Touchdowns Receiving, Game - 2 (Super Bowl XIII)
[2nd] Most Yards Receiving, Career - 268
[Tied for 2nd] Most Touchdowns, Career - 3
[Tied for 2nd] Most Touchdowns, Game - 2 (Super Bowl XIII)
[Tied for 3rd] Longest Reception - 75 yards (Super Bowl XIII)

Post-Season Records

[1st] Most Touchdown Receptions, Career - 12
[1st] Most Consecutive Games Scoring Touchdowns - 8 (1978-83)
[1st] Most Games 100 or More Yards Receiving, Career - 5
[1st] Most Consecutive Games Touchdown Passes Caught - 8 (1978-83)
[Tied for 2nd] Most Consecutive Games 100 or More Yards Receiving,
Career - 2 (1979-82)
[Tied for 2nd] Most Touchdowns, Career - 12
[3rd] Most Consecutive Games Pass Receptions - 17 (1974-1984)
