

LARRY BROWN

By Michael Richman

Larry Brown epitomized toughness when he carried the Redskins offense in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At 5-foot-11 and with weight that fluctuated between 180 and 200 pounds, small for an NFL running back, he relied on power just as much as finesse. He played with injury after injury.

His fearless style made him one of the greatest rushers in Redskins history. He amassed 5,875 yards, the team's second-highest total ever behind John Riggins (7,472), and rewrote the record books in other categories.

But his undersized body eventually succumbed to the pounding. After gaining more than 5,000 yards in his first five seasons, then only the second player in NFL history to do so besides the great Jim Brown, an injury-plagued Larry Brown was little threat for the rest of his eight-year career. He retired after the 1976 season.

Was Brown his own worst enemy?

"Maybe, because I ran with such a reckless abandon," he told *Redskins Weekly*. "But the career span of a running back was so short, only three-and-a-half years, regardless of the pounding you could take and despite whether you ran with a reckless abandon or not."

Brown cited two factors for the source of his toughness. One involved where he was raised – on the mean streets of Pittsburgh.

"Everybody fears and talks about the big backs," he said in 1972 in the prime of his career. "But I came up from the ghetto and started running when I was small. I didn't come from a wealthy family. I played football on the concrete streets in Pittsburgh. I've had to work for everything I've gotten, and now I want to be on top."

Growing up, he also developed a tenacity by observing a running back who played only two hours from Pittsburgh: Cleveland's Jim Brown. Larry Brown often watched Jim Brown, one of the top rushers in NFL history, on television, admiring his toughness, durability and strength. Through the first half of his career, in fact, the Pittsburgh native was often compared with his namesake.

"I want to be my own man, but any comparison to Jim Brown I consider a compliment," Larry Brown once said. "Any kid, anywhere, would consider being compared to him a childhood dream."

Although he led Kansas State in rushing for two seasons, Brown was not expected to evolve into one of the top NFL rushers when the Redskins chose him in the eighth round of the 1969 draft. But he raised eyebrows in training camp in Carlisle, Pa., and impressed coach Vince Lombardi, who was also new to the burgundy and gold. The rookie also had a run-in with his legendary coach.

Brown once placed the ball on the ground quickly after running a play. Lombardi charged over and berated him for fumbling, but Brown argued that it wasn't a fumble, talking back to the coach in the process. Lombardi, a strict disciplinarian, made Brown carry a football with him everywhere he went, except to bed, for the next week.

The way Brown remembers it, Lombardi was sending a different message to the rookie. "I was getting a lot of favorable press, and I guess he didn't want me to get out of control mentally because of the publicity," Brown said.

Lombardi also looked out for Brown's physical well-being. The coach saw that Brown was slow getting off the ball and learned that Brown was totally deaf in his right year. Lombardi thus had him fitted with a hearing aide, so he could hear the quarterback's signals better.

Brown proceeded to gain 888 yards rushing, the league's fourth-highest total, helping lead the 7-5-2 Redskins to their first winning season since 1955.

He was runner-up to the Cowboys Calvin Hill in rookie-of-the-year voting.

Brown was one of many Redskins who admired Lombardi. "The old saying that he treated us all like dogs was absolutely true," Brown said. "He treated us all the same way, be it good or bad. He was very fair. There was not a discriminatory bone in his body."

Lombardi died in September 1970, and the Redskins finished 6-8 in a disappointing season under interim coach Bill Austin. Brown, though, became one the league's premier rushers, leading the NFL with 1,125 yards. It was the first time a Redskins back had exceeded 1,000 yards.

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George Allen came on board as Redskins coach in 1971, when Brown gained 948 yards. His finest season was the following year. He rushed for 1,216 yards in 1972, second in the league to Buffalo's O.J. Simpson, and was named NFL player of the year.

That year, Brown crafted the best single-game performance of his career. In a Redskins 23-16 victory over the New York Giants on Oct. 29, he rushed for 191 yards on 29 carries, caught two passes for 42 yards and scored two touchdowns. His rushing total was then the team's second-highest all-time mark behind Cliff Battles' 215 yards in 1933.

Afterward, teammates and coaches praised Brown.

"On this team, I'm lucky," quarterback Billy Kilmer said. "Some teams don't have a running game to go to like I do. I got Larry Brown."

Offensive line coach Mike McCormick told *The Washington Star*: "I've always said up until yesterday that Jim Brown was the greatest running back I've ever seen. I've got to qualify that statement. I don't think anybody has a bigger heart, is a better competitor or plays with more desire or toughness than Larry Brown."

Battles, a Hall of Famer, called Brown perhaps the Redskins best draft choice ever in a 1972 article in *The Washington Star*. He assessed Brown's talents. "For openers, he's got great balance, maybe as good as I've ever seen," Battles said. "Balance, body control, whatever you want to call it, Larry's got it. He's almost an acrobat."

Meanwhile, the carries continued to pile up for Brown, who averaged more than 20 per game. Although he was taking a constant beating from defenders, Allen called his number over-and-over in the Redskins run-oriented offense. But the indefatigable running back, who the late sportswriter Morrie Siegel once tagged as "the greatest foot soldier in football today," welcomed Allen's intent to keep him as the focal point of the offense.

"If you don't touch the ball at all you're not recognized or respected as a running back," Brown said, "so you have to touch the ball to prove that you're the person who deserves to be in that position. [Allen] was very conservative about changing running backs and quarterbacks, and putting other people in the game, all of which could destroy the chemistry that exists at that particular time."

Brown's production plummeted after the 1972 season. He rushed for 860 yards in 1973, 430 in 1974 and 352 in 1975. He underwent surgery on his right knee after the 1975 season and returned as a blocking back in 1976. But he gained only 56 yards and called it quits.

He finished with 1,530 career carries, the Redskins second-leading all-time mark behind Riggins. He's also tied with Riggins for most 100-yard career rushing games (19) and is second for most such games in a season (six; 1970 and 1972). He holds third place for most career rushing touchdowns (35).

Today, the 53-year-old Brown is a vice president for the Michael Companies, a commercial real estate firm in Lanham, Md. He lives in Potomac, Md., with his wife, Janet, and watches Redskins games on television. When doing so, he sees a running back, Redskins star Stephen Davis, who reminds him of the special qualities he once showed.

"He's a pretty tough running back and, once he gets up a good head of steam, he's very difficult to bring down," Brown said. "He has demonstrated that he can break tackles, and it takes more than one person to bring him down."

LARRY BROWN **RB**
 Brown, Lawrence Jr. 5-11, 195
 College: Dodge City City College (Kansas); Kansas State
 High School: Schenley [Pittsburgh, PA]
 B: 9 / 19 / 1947, Clairton, PA
 Drafted: 1969 Round 8 Was

Year	TeamGm	RUSHING				RECEIVING				
		ATT	YDS	AVG	TD	No	YDS	AVG	TD	
1969	Was 14	202	888	4.4	4	34	302	8.9	0	
1970	Was 13	237	1125	4.7	5	37	341	9.2	2	
1971	Was 13	253	948	3.7	4	16	176	11.0	2	
1972	Was 12	285	1216	4.3	8	32	473	14.8	4	
1973	Was 14	273	860	3.2	8	40	482	12.1	6	
1974	Was 11	163	430	2.6	3	37	388	10.5	4	
1975	Was 14	97	352	3.6	3	25	225	9.0	2	
1976	Was 11	20	56	2.8	0	17	98	5.8	0	
8 years		102	1530	5875	3.8	35	238	2485	10.4	20

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The NFL should have known from the very beginning that the AFL was here to stay right after their inaugural draft in 1960. For in an irony that was lost on everyone at the time, the AFL was able to sign its first ever draft pick, Houston Oiler halfback Billy Cannon.

Cannon was the Heisman Trophy winner at Louisiana State University in 1959 who ended up being drafted not only by the Oilers, but the Los Angeles Rams of the NFL and made the mistake of signing contracts to play for both teams. First the Rams, then the Oilers. When the two teams went to court to see who would win the rights to Cannon, Houston won on the simple basis that owner Bud Adams offered more money than his counterpart, Dan Reeves. This helped the new league lock up its first ever draft pick and marquee player, something that the NFL had been unable to do back in 1936 when they held their first player draft.

Then the Philadelphia Eagles held the first pick and used it to draft another Heisman Trophy winner, halfback Jay Berwanger of the University of Chicago, the first man to win the award. The Eagles traded the rights to Berwanger to George Halas and the Chicago Bears. But Berwanger declined to play pro football after his contract demand of \$1,000 per game was not met. Thus, the NFL's first ever draft pick never played a down of professional football.

In another small twist, the two men who drafted Berwanger and Cannon for the Eagles and Rams respectively, would later become commissioners of the NFL. Bert Bell, who was Owner-General Manager of the Eagles when Berwanger was drafted, was given the job in 1946 and held it until his death in 1959, the year before the emergence of the AFL. The man who replaced him was the Rams General Manager who signed Cannon in 1960. One Alvin "Pete" Rozelle.

---Tim Holland