

GALE SAYERS: ROOKIE

by **Chris Willis**

Rookie. The word has several meanings, by definition it means to be inexperienced, a novice to whatever it is engaged in. In professional football a rookie receives no respect, they are high paid, unproven talent that have unbelievable pressure put upon them to perform or find a spot on the bench. In the 75 years of the NFL there have been many outstanding rookie performances, but one rookie set a standard that has been forgotten over the years, one that truly is the greatest first season by a novice. In 1965 Chicago Bears running back Gale Sayers put together a rookie season that many veterans only dream about. His unique running style and phenomenal all-around statistics, combined with the Bears winning record (9-5 after going 5-9 in '64) earned this rookie instant respect from a league not very generous in giving out compliments. This season marks the 30th anniversary of Sayers' special rookie season and the following pays tribute to the games and achievements of that particular season.

Sayers was a first round draft pick of both the Chicago Bears of the National Football League and the Kansas City Chiefs of the rival American Football League. Sayers, an All-American from Kansas, chose to sign with the Bears because he thought the established NFL was where the best football players played and he wanted to compete against the best. The Bears also had two other first round picks that year, one was Steve DeLong who signed with the AFL's San Diego Chargers and the other was a linebacker from Illinois, future Hall of Famer Dick Butkus. Not a bad first round for the Bears.

Sayers' rookie year started to resemble the novel Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, he was good and he was bad. He showed up late to training camp because of the College All-Star Game, where college head coach Otto Graham accused him of prolonging an injury and didn't play him much. Sayers did have a hamstring injury he was trying to rest because he didn't want to jeopardize his rookie season. Although Sayers didn't have a great pre-season Bears head coach George Halas knew he had something special in Sayers. Talk about instant respect.

Halas was very quiet about his rookie running back, the press thought Sayers was a wasted first round pick who was injury prone. But Halas wanted to make sure his new weapon didn't get any attention of the other teams in the league. He was so discrete about this that Sayers only had 12 carries for 44 yards in the first game, a 52-24 loss to the San Francisco 49ers, and only 1 carry in week two, a 30-28 loss to the Los Angeles Rams. That carry went for 18 yards and a touchdown. Week three was against the Green Bay Packers and Halas was waiting for this particular game to show off his star back. The Packers were the Bears' and Halas' chief rival and who better to showcase your prized rookie than against those hated Packers.

Sayers gained 77 yards on 17 carries (4.7 avg.) and 1 touchdown run, he also had a 65-yard touchdown reception. Despite Sayers' heroics the Bears lost to the undefeated Packers 23 to 14. Halas was very concerned about his 0-3 start and decided to make a change. His first decision was to start Gale Sayers and Ronnie Bull in the backfield and from then on the Bears' fortunes turned for the better.

Week four was the rematch with the Rams. Sayers only gained 9 yards on 12 carries, but he contributed in other areas. He took a screen pass 80 yards for a touchdown and threw a 26 yard touchdown pass to fellow rookie Dick Gordon. Sayers' first start ended with a 31 to 6 Bears victory and a game ball from Halas.

In week five the Bears played the Minnesota Vikings in Minnesota and Sayers put on a one-man show good enough for SportsCenter. By scoring touchdowns three different ways, Sayers tallied four second-half touchdowns in leading the Bears to a 45-37 come from behind win. Sayers' first touchdown was a 18-yard reception early in the 3rd quarter

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to give the Bears a 24-23 lead. After Vikings' quarterback Fran Tarkenton scored on a 1-yard sneak, Sayers came back with his second touchdown catch, a 25-yarder, to give the Bears a 31-30 lead. After a short touchdown run, the Vikings took a 37-31 4th quarter lead. That lead didn't last long as Sayers took the ensuing kickoff 96 yards and the Bears regained a one point lead, 38-37. After a Dick Butkus interception, Sayers capped his fantastic performance by rushing the final 10 yards for his fourth touchdown and sealing the win for the Bears.

"Red Grange, George McAfee, and Gale Sayers – not necessarily in that order," Coach Halas would say, "Sayers rates with them all." Despite Sayers' game-saving heroics, he didn't even receive the game ball. "They wanted to give two game balls," said Halas, "but I have a rule nobody gets more than one a season and Gale got one last week." The game ball went to fullback Ron Bull and Sayers gave all the credit to Bull and his fellow teammates, because they deserved it.

After the Vikings game NFL coaches took notice of the Bears prized rookie and the next five weeks Sayers became a marked man. Even though his rushing statistics, 59 attempts for 226 yards and 3 touchdowns, weren't making headlines, the Bears rookie was making a big impact in the win column. After a 0-3 start the Bears went 4-1 in their next five games.

During that streak the Bears played their finest game in week seven, when they upset the unbeaten Green Bay Packers 31 to 10. Sayers led the way with 66 yards rushing on 16 attempts and one touchdown. He also had an electrifying 62-yard punt return that thrilled the Chicago fans and made a serious believer of Packers head coach, Vince Lombardi.

"Sayers just outran us. He has great speed. He makes a lot of plays for himself," said Lombardi. "He's a great one." Unbelievable praise for a rookie playing only his seventh game as a pro and considering the source the praise wasn't taken lightly.

Lombardi's praise was just the beginning of many accolades for Sayers, who finished his rookie season with the best four game stretch of any rookie running back in pro football. In back-to-back weeks against the Giants and Colts, Sayers had his first two one-hundred yard games; gaining 113 yards and 2 touchdowns versus the Giants, and 118 yards and 1 touchdown versus the Colts. His biggest accomplishment might have been averaging eight yards a carry during the two games, because he only had 13 carries against the Giants and 16 against the Colts. But Sayers' best performance was still one week away.

During week 13 while playing on a muddy Wrigley Field in Chicago, Sayers tied a NFL record by scoring six touchdowns in a 61 to 20 rout of the San Francisco 49ers. A feat only accomplished by two other players in NFL history, Ernie Nevers of the Chicago Cardinals in 1929 and Dub Jones of the Cleveland Browns in 1951. Coincidentally both players set the record while playing against the Bears. "The greatest performance by one man on a football field," Bears coach George Halas would say about Sayers' record. He should know better than anybody, he was present when all three set the record.

Sayers' Six Touchdowns:

- 1) 1st Quarter – 80-yard reception
- 2) 2nd Quarter – 21-yard run
- 3) 2nd Quarter – 7-yard run
- 4) 3rd Quarter – 50-yard run
- 5) 3rd Quarter – 1-yard run
- 6) 4th Quarter – 85-yard punt return

Nevers telegraphed Sayers to praise his performance, "Congratulations on the greatest one man performance I've ever witnessed on a football field. Your brilliance will long be remembered in this sport." Sayers' brilliance accounted for 336 total yards (113 rushing, 89 receiving, and 134 punt returns), 36 points and 2 NFL records. Besides tying the record for most touchdowns in a game, he also broke the record for most touchdowns in

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a season, 21 breaking Lenny Moore's old record of 20.

After setting all kinds of records on the field, Sayers broke a Bears tradition off the field. For the first time in Bears history a player was awarded a game ball twice in one season. "It isn't often that the Bears break a tradition but this was the greatest football exhibition I have ever seen by one man in one game," Halas said. Strong words from a man who had been around professional football for over fifty years.

Sayers went on to lead the league in touchdowns, with a NFL record 22 and scoring with 132 points, while being named UPI Rookie of the Year, All-NFL and a spot in the Pro Bowl. A truly magical rookie season was almost capped with a surprising playoff berth since the Bears started the season 0-3. In the thirty years since Sayers' rookie year nobody has come close to making a more impressive debut than Gale Sayers.