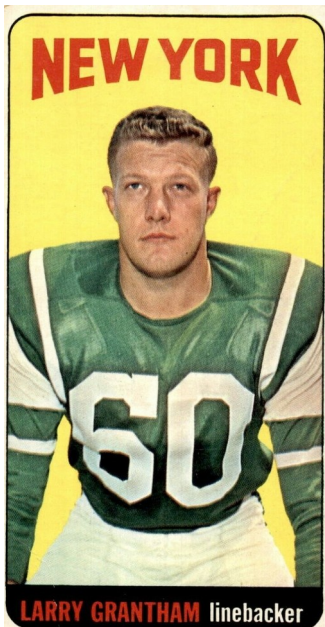




Larry Grantham

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Larry Grantham was a transformative football player for 13 seasons with the AFL's New York Titans/New York Jets. He earned an unquantifiable amount of respect from his teammates through his exemplary style of play and leadership. "I always saw Larry as the captain and the leader. His football knowledge, the way he skirted around blockers and made tackles, he just surprised a lot of people," raved his former teammate Gerry Philbin.¹



There was no greater performance than his effort in Super Bowl III, when the New York Jets shocked the Baltimore Colts. Entering the contest, Baltimore defeated 15 of its past 16 opponents, sported a top five total defense and offense, and employed the reigning MVP in quarterback Earl Morrall.² The Jets were 18 point underdogs. Did they really have a chance? They sure did. To combat the Colts, Grantham called the defensive plays from his linebacker position. He uncannily read the opposing offensive plays, screaming the play out to his teammates. The result? Grantham and the Jets defense held Baltimore scoreless until the final minutes of the game. New York forced five Colts turnovers, including three interceptions of Morrall. Jets defensive tackle Paul Rochester stated, "Larry knew what everybody on the defense was supposed to do on every play."³ Grantham made three tackles, broke up two passes in the game. While everyone remembers Joe Namath pointing skyward with his right index finger, Grantham ran off



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the field holding his helmet above his head after the Jets' final defensive stand.⁴ The Jets victory is still the biggest upset in Super Bowl history.

Grantham enjoyed his time in New York, “I had 13 wonderful years in New York, even with the Titans. Sometimes we didn't get paid, but we had great times, and Sammy Baugh was one of the greatest coaches I ever played for. ... People have been awful good to me in New York.”⁵

Grantham was humble, which allowed him to focus on his game, and not endure the spotlight like other players. At night, he would study film of the next week's opponents using a small projector. This allowed him to learn the tendencies, tip-offs, and weaknesses that he ended up sharing with his teammates. “Pound for pound he was the best player on the Jets,” remarked Philbin.⁶ It's tall praise for a player who shared the locker room with Joe Namath and Don Maynard, who are pro football hall of famers.

Grantham earned All-AFL status in every season from 1960 to 1969 by various media outlets such as the Associated Press, UPI, *The Sporting News*, *NY Daily News*, and the *Newspaper Ent Association*.⁷ He is one of 20 players to have played in the AFL for the league's entirety, and one of just seven players during that span to play for one franchise.⁸

In 175 career games, Grantham intercepted 24 passes, recorded 43 turnovers (still a franchise record), and recorded an unofficial 38.5 sacks.⁹ In his 13-year career he missed only three games. AFL historian Todd Tobias said, “Larry Grantham is one of those guys

1 Judge, Clark. “State Your Case: “There isn't much that Jets' star LB Larry Grantham didn't do”, SportsIllustrated.com, June 2, 2020, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/nfl/why-larry-grantham-deserves-hof-consideration>.

2 Judge, Clark. “State Your Case: “There isn't much that Jets' star LB Larry Grantham didn't do”, SportsIllustrated.com, June 2, 2020, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/nfl/why-larry-grantham-deserves-hof-consideration>.

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4 Judge, Clark. “State Your Case: “There isn't much that Jets' star LB Larry Grantham didn't do”, SportsIllustrated.com, June 2, 2020, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/nfl/why-larry-grantham-deserves-hof-consideration>.

5 Lange, Randy. “Jets/Titans Great Larry Grantham, No. 60, Dies,” NewYorkJets.com, June 18, 2017, <https://www.newyorkjets.com/news/jets-titans-great-larry-grantham-no-60-dies-18979015>.

6 Judge, Clark. “State Your Case: “There isn't much that Jets' star LB Larry Grantham didn't do”, SportsIllustrated.com, June 2, 2020, <https://www.si.com/nfl/talkoffame/nfl/why-larry-grantham-deserves-hof-consideration>.

7 “Larry Grantham,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/G/GranLa00.htm>.

8 Troup, TJ. “Larry Grantham: “The Heart of Their Defense”,” NFLFootballJournal.com, March 2, 2022, <https://nflfootballjournal.blogspot.com/2022/02/larry-grantham-heart-of-their-defense.html>.



that kind of flies under the radar. There isn't much he didn't do. He just didn't make a lot of noise doing it.”¹⁰

Versatility defined Grantham's abilities: He could rush the passer, drop into coverage, and make the textbook tackle. His abilities more than accounted for his size (he was listed at 6'0” and 215 pounds), which was not ideal for a linebacker.¹¹ His coach Weeb Ewbank pointed out, “If Larry Grantham were judged only on his size, no coach in his right mind would pick anyone so small as a linebacker. But once that coach saw Larry in a game, he'd grab him in a hurry because he has such quickness, such instinctive reactions and such an acutely developed sense of anticipation that he ranks with the very best.”¹² Grantham remarked that he never touched 200 pounds, stating his true weight was closer to 193 pounds.

He was born on September 16, 1938 in Gatesville, just outside of Crystal Springs, MS.¹³ Grantham was a conference football champion at Crystal Springs High School, then he attended Ole Miss on a half baseball, half football scholarship.¹⁴

His years at Mississippi from 1957 to 1959 were among the best in its history under the legendary coach Johnny Vaught. The Rebels earned a 28-4-1 mark, making two Sugar Bowl appearances and one in the Gator Bowl.¹⁵ One of his former teammates in college at Ole Miss, Bobby Franklin, described Grantham, “I never saw anyone on a football field as tough as Larry Grantham. He was the toughest football player I ever saw.”¹⁶ Interestingly enough, his athleticism was discovered during a baseball game when he

9 “Larry Grantham,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/G/GranLa00.htm>.

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1 1 Cleveland, Rick. “Larry Grantham: 'Toughest football player I ever saw',” MississippiToday.org, June 20, 2017, <https://mississippitoday.org/2017/06/20/larry-grantham-toughest-football-player-i-ever-saw/>.

1 2 Cleveland, Rick. “Larry Grantham: 'Toughest football player I ever saw',” MississippiToday.org, June 20, 2017, <https://mississippitoday.org/2017/06/20/larry-grantham-toughest-football-player-i-ever-saw/>.

1 3 Smith, Edwin B. “Larry Grantham Memorialized on Highway 27,” OleMiss.edu, August 12, 2018, <https://news.olemiss.edu/larry-grantham-memorialized-highway-27/>.

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tagged out Lance Alworth, another AFL star at the time, on a play at home plate. “He didn't look like you expect a football star to look. He never trained much and he smoked more cigarettes than anyone. But you just couldn't block him. Nobody could in college or in the pros.”¹⁷

Because of his talent, Grantham played two-ways: end on offense and defensive end on defense. Charlie Flowers played alongside him, who is a member of the College Football Hall of Fame, recalled that tackles were not recorded during those days. He said, “I played linebacker on Larry Grantham's side, so I never got a chance to make any tackles. Grantham always got there first. All I got to do was jump on a few piles.”¹⁸ It was thought that Grantham not only led the team in tackles, but the entire nation, because he was constantly on the ball. On offense, he scored Ole Miss' only touchdown in the 1958 Gator Bowl, thrown by Franklin, “When we beat Florida 7-3 in the Gator Bowl, Larry caught a pass that led to our only touchdown. I threw it, and he had to go up and make a great catch.”¹⁹

Grantham spearheaded the defense in the 1960 Sugar Bowl win over LSU, and according to Franklin, who won the Sugar Bowl MVP, “It just as easily could have been Larry.”²⁰ The Rebels defense shut down Heisman trophy winner Billy Cannon, when he rushed for eight yards on six attempts. The win exacted revenge on LSU, who beat Ole Miss, 7-3, during the regular season.²¹

Grantham was an All-SEC selection in 1959, and named to the SEC Team of the Decade (1950s). Later, he was inducted to the Ole Miss Athletics Hall of Fame and named to the Ole Miss Team of the Century.²² Following his four years at Mississippi, Grantham was

1 7 Cleveland, Rick. “Larry Grantham: 'Toughest football player I ever saw',” MississippiToday.org, June 20, 2017, <https://mississippitoday.org/2017/06/20/larry-grantham-toughest-football-player-i-ever-saw/>.

1 8 Cleveland, Rick. “Larry Grantham: 'Toughest football player I ever saw',” MississippiToday.org, June 20, 2017, <https://mississippitoday.org/2017/06/20/larry-grantham-toughest-football-player-i-ever-saw/>.

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drafted in the second round of the 1960 AFL draft by the New York Titans, and in the 15th round by the Baltimore Colts in the NFL draft.²³

Grantham chose to play for the Titans because, “everyone in it [the AFL] would be as green as I was.”²⁴ He made a quick impact, hauling in five interceptions as a rookie, starting in all 14 games.²⁵ Grantham was the only Titans defensive player to earn first-team All-AFL honors. He was a unanimous first team All-AFL selection four consecutive years from 1961-64. Statistically, his strongest seasons were 1964 and 1967, when he recorded a career best 8.5 (unofficial) sacks, and intercepted five passes, respectively.²⁶

Grantham retired from the NFL in 1972. He came out of retirement in 1974 to play one season for the WFL's Florida Blazers, prior to moving to San Antonio. The team enjoyed success, earning a 14-6 record, playing in World Bowl 1.²⁷ The Blazers lost, 22-21, to the Birmingham Americans, in a contest that saw Florida nearly win, coming back from a 22-0 deficit. Grantham stayed on with the San Antonio Wings as a coach for one season.

Among his proudest achievements, he was named to the All-Time All-AFL Team, and inducted into the New York Jets Ring of Honor in 2011, and an enshrinee in the Mississippi Sports Hall of Fame (1980).²⁸ He was also named to the Professional Football Researchers Association's Hall of Very Good in 2014. Upon his induction into the Jets Ring of Honor, which he much appreciated, he said, “That probably climaxes a career and doesn't take second place to anything. I'm not in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, and sure, that's a great big honor, but to me this honor with the Jets is unbelievable. Just think of all the players they've had up there from 1960 til now. It's something I can't put into words.”²⁹ He was enshrined during halftime of the Jets-Dolphins game on October 17, 2011.

2 2 “Larry Grantham,” MSFame.com, accessed May 23, 2022, <https://msfame.com/inductees/larry-grantham/>.

2 3 “Larry Grantham,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/G/GranLa00.htm>.

2 4 Cleveland, Rick. “Larry Grantham: 'Toughest football player I ever saw',” MississippiToday.org, June 20, 2017, <https://mississippitoday.org/2017/06/20/larry-grantham-toughest-football-player-i-ever-saw/>.

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2 7 Troup, T.J. “Larry Grantham: ‘The Heart of Their Defense’,” NFLFootballJournal.com, March 2, 2022, <https://nflfootballjournal.blogspot.com/2022/02/larry-grantham-heart-of-their-defense.html>.

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2 9 Lange, Randy. “Jets/Titans Great Larry Grantham, No. 60, Dies,” NewYorkJets.com, June 18, 2017, <https://www.newyorkjets.com/news/jets-titans-great-larry-grantham-no-60-dies-18979015>.



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End Notes: