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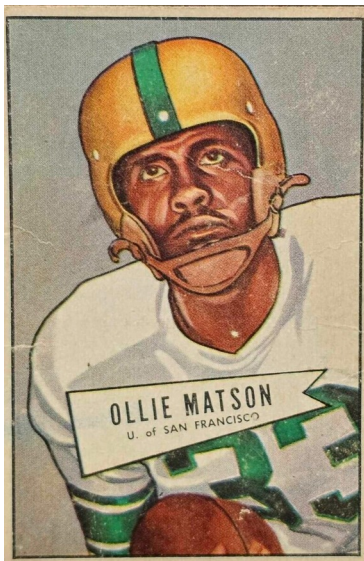
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Ollie Matson

This article was written by W.H. Johnson

Before he was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1972, before he racked up 12,884 all-purpose yards in NFL stadia, before his 73 NFL touchdowns, his six Pro Bowls (including MVP of the 1956 edition), and his status as the No. 3 overall pick in the 1952 draft, Ollie Matson was a star. Matson was the primary offensive weapon on an undefeated 1951 USF Dons football squad in the final season of the program's existence. He once held the national high school record for the 440-yard (quarter mile) dash, and won both silver and bronze medals in the 1952 Helsinki Olympics in that same event.

Despite all of those achievements, each alone defining a remarkable athletic career, his lasting legacy may have come in his death in 2011. His family suspected some degree of mental impairment that had only increased over the final years of his life, and they donated his brain to a group of scientists studying Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). CTE is the same concussion/impact-related brain damage that claimed the lives of Matson's fellow Hall of Famers Mike Webster and Junior Seau, among others.



Matson's brain, upon post-mortem dissection and analysis, revealed a significant presence of the deadly, telltale, brain-ravaging Tau proteins so closely linked to CTE. The condition can only be diagnosed after the potential victim's death, as the brain tissue must be sliced and tested. Matson was 80 years old when he passed away, making him one of the - if not the - oldest players so diagnosed. It is this linkage between concussive



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impacts and the later manifestation of cognitive impairment that Matson's brain underscored. Contrary to the NFL's current narrative, the damage isn't due to the modern player, stronger and generally faster than his predecessor, but to the very nature of a combat simulation like football.

During World War II, the U.S. Navy named football and basketball as the two mandatory team sports to be played by every prospective aircraft pilot at each of the preflight training centers nationally. "Football! Navy! War!" was the opening sentence in a chapter of the Naval Institute's football training manual published in 1943. Collision and risk of concussion, both risks being essential and inherent to the game, cannot be culled from the competition. Matson's damage, while tragic, was in some sense part of the inevitable and unavoidable cost of excellence.

But before the final, bittersweet denouement, Ollie Matson lived a magnificent life on and off the gridiron. Jim Thorpe, Bo Roberson, and a handful of other professional football players form a tiny fraternity within the game that have also earned Olympic track-and-field medals. Matson was a gifted athlete from the beginning, a multi-sport star from his youngest days, but his work ethic and effort, along with his mental approach to excellence, combined in equal parts to turn him into one of the greatest athletes in the history of football. His life outside the lines was equally productive, even exemplary, and his story must be preserved as an example of the "art of the possible" for the generations that will follow.

Ollie Genoa Matson II was born on May 1, 1930, in Trinity, Texas. Less than a year after the stock market crash that triggered what we know as the Great Depression, Ollie Matson I and his wife Gertrude gave birth to twins Ollie (II) and Ocie.

By 1940, Ollie was living with his father and Ocie with her mother. According to the elder Matson's military service records, he was divorced and living with dependents at the time of his enlistment. Ollie's father left the Army at the end of the war, but never reconciled with his ex-wife, and by the mid-1940s Gertrude moved Ollie and Ocie to Houston. Shortly after remarrying, this time to Edmond Gumbs, the couple moved the twins to San Francisco, California. There, Ollie played baseball, football, and basketball, and ran track, routinely excelling at every game or sport he tried. He also met a girl, Mary Paige, at a church function in 1945. Smitten, Matson and Paige would later marry (August 22, 1954) and produce five children in a lifelong love story.

It was at football and on the racing oval that Matson's pure athletic genius revealed itself. At Washington High School, Matson starred in the shorter sprints, the 100- and 220-yard dashes, and was also the best pole vaulter on the team. The vault, especially in the days before the flexible, fiberglass poles were introduced, was a combined short-sprint and



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gymnastic event. Using the rigid pole, success on any particular attempt was a function of the speed of the approach and the upper body strength of the vaulter. In his junior year, Matson included the longer 440-yard sprint into his repertoire, and in that race, he proved to be extraordinary.

Excellence in the 440-yard race, a quarter of a mile, demands the explosive, fast-twitch muscle fibers of a pure sprinter, as well as the lactic-acid tolerance of a middle-distance runner. As *Sports Illustrated* writer Gary Ronberg described in 1967, “At the [final] turn [the runner] would open up again and drive to the finish, where he would break the string with one final, desperate lunge, utterly spent, his legs like rubber and his lungs fighting for air.”ⁱ It is still an event of speed and efficiency and, most of all, mental toughness, and grit. Matson possessed those traits in excess. So, it was not surprising that he was a natural in the quarter mile. On June 4, 1948, he ran the race for the very first time in his life. In that race, he actually broke the national high school record in the quarter mile with a 47.1 second effort. Although technically the winner of the race, he finished second to an exhibition runner, Herb McKenley of Jamaica, who set a world record that day with a 46.0 time. In 1948, high school records were only awarded to first place finishers. Even though Matson was credited with a win at the meet, the governing body did not allow his national prep record due to the technicality.ⁱⁱ

Of note, in the stands that day was Grover Klemmer, former world 440-yard record holder and a football teammate of Marion Motley during their 1945 season at the Navy Training Center in Illinois. Klemmer was now head track coach at San Francisco City College, and he had already lured Matson there for the 1948-49 school year.

Matson needed fewer than three weeks to formally break the record. On June 26, he broke the 33-year-old record with a 47.8 second effort at the Alhambra Games in southern California.ⁱⁱⁱ While his time was more than half a second slower than the disallowed mark earlier in the month, Matson finally received his deserved recognition. The mark also earned him an invitation to the 1948 U.S. Olympic trials, but he did not participate, instead choosing to get himself ready for the 1948 City College football schedule. Four years later, in 1952, he would make a different choice.

But back on the high school gridiron, Matson was equally spectacular. The *San Francisco Examiner* published a pre-season look at the local high school football scene in September 1947, and specifically noted, “...don’t forget Ollie Matson, tall colored halfback who may well be the scourge of the loop. Matson, AAA sprint champ, was out of action most of 1946 with a broken ankle, but he has shown no ill effects and should be

ⁱ Gary Ronberg. “Tommie in a Breeze” *Sports Illustrated*, May 29, 1967; 24.

ⁱⁱ “Ollie Matson Cheated of 440 Record” *Ventura County Star*, June 10, 1948; 14.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Lloyd LaBeach Sets 220 Record” *Santa Barbara News-Press*, June 27, 1948; 20.



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in for a brilliant season...his forte is tucking [the football] under his arm and turning on the speed.”^{iv} Matson did not disappoint. By the end of the year, he had broken the conference scoring record with 84 points, capping the year by rushing for 204 yards on 20 attempts and scoring two touchdowns.^v In all, his high school athletic career could not have been more successful.

Matson was not widely recruited by large colleges for either track or football, so he enrolled at what is now City College of San Francisco (CCSF), and spent his freshman year showing off his skill and speed to a slightly older slew of opponents. He enjoyed a terrific year, as anticipated, scoring nineteen touchdowns and breaking the national junior college record, and was selected to the national 2-year school All American team by the NJCAA.^{vi} He could have been selected for his defensive backfield achievements alone, but was named to the team as a running back. CCSF was the only 2-year college in the nation to have two players so honored, the other being Burl Toler. Like Matson, Toler was Black. He hailed from Texas, and had earned a tryout at CCSF almost by chance, yet he made the absolute most of his opportunity. The two transferred, together, to the University of San Francisco the following spring, and became part of one of the most impressive college football teams to ever take the field.

Matson’s 3-year career at USF started in 1949, and under new coach Joe Kuharich the team logged a 7-3 record. The next year, 1950, they again reached the 7-win plateau, including strong games against national powers Stanford and the University of California. It was in 1951, what proved to be the final year of football at the university, that the Dons rose to national prominence with Matson leading the charge.

The gifted running back, receiver, defensive back, and kick returner may have been the best player on the team, but he was abetted by some amazing talent. Given that USF was, in contrast to some of the eastern and midwestern football powers, relatively small, the roster was loaded with good-to-outstanding players. Notable teammates included future Pro Football Hall of Famers Geno Marchetti and Bob St. Clair, as well as his junior college teammate, linebacker Burl Toler. Toler was sufficiently talented to be drafted into the NFL, but after a leg injury ended his career before it even really began, he began a life of public service while also acting as an NFL official. Later, he became the first Black official in Super Bowl history.

The team with a 9-0 record was purportedly offered a slot in the Orange Bowl (at the time there were only eight bowl games played, so this would have been a significant step for

^{iv} Don Selby. “Matson-Sparked Eagles Ready to Surprise Foes”, *San Francisco Examiner*, September 8, 1947; 18.

^v Don Selby. “Ollie Sets TD Mark; Eagles, Lowell Win” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 1, 1947; 17.

^{vi} “2-Year Schools Get All-America” *The Norman (OK) Transcript*, December 12, 1948; 21.



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the USF football program), but only if they left Matson and Toler, the two Black players on the team, in California. Florida at the time was racially complicated, and there were parts of the state in which Black people were not permitted to drive. By lore, the team voted to decline such an invitation unless the whole team participated, but there exists no formal record of any such offer from the Orange Bowl committee. It has been speculated that the offer was a verbal one, a preliminary phone call from the game staff, but again there is no record. There is counter speculation that there might have been a conversation about the game between USF and the committee, and that USF's bright young sports information director (before such a thing existed), one Pete Rozelle, enhanced the nature of the discussion to make it sound like an offer. Regardless, USF did not go, and three months later the entire football program at the University was dissolved.

After leading the nation with 1566 rushing yards (averaging over 170 per game), Matson finished ninth in the Heisman balloting for 1951, but that did not deter the NFL's Chicago Cardinals from selecting him third overall in the 1952 draft. Matson was one of eight future Hall of Famers from the draft although, to be fair, one of the group was George Young. Young was taken as a lineman in the 26th round, but achieved his football notoriety as a premier executive for the New York Giants.

Matson, while excited and eager to play, put football on hold while he worked himself back into sprinting form. Under the tutelage of Cal (and of USA's 1952 Olympic track and field team) head coach Brutus Hamilton, Matson was ultimately chosen to represent the United States in the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, Finland. There, to the surprise of many and the shock of some of his teammates, Matson not only earned a silver medal as part of the U.S. 4 x 400-meter relay, which finished one tenth of a second behind the victorious Jamaican team, but also the individual bronze medal in the 400-meter sprint.

Not wasting any time basking in media attention upon his return to the United States, Matson reported to the Cardinals for preseason camp in July. In the 1952 NFL season, Matson carried the ball only 96 times, and caught but 11 passes. In just his second professional game, on October 5 against the rival Chicago Bears, he not only returned a kickoff 100 yards for a touchdown, but also recovered a fumble and ran it back 34 yards for another score in the 21-10 victory. He led the team in kick returns that season, including two for touchdowns, and was named to the Pro Bowl and to the All Pro (first team) squad as a defensive back. In all, his first professional season was somewhat like his final college year. Unlike Matson, though, the Cardinals were not a good team, and they finished with a 4-8 record and tied with Washington in the cellar of the American division.

His 1953 season was lost to military service. Matson enlisted in the Army and was assigned not to the stalemated front in Korea, but to sunny Fort Ord (California) where he



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starred on the post's athletic teams. While Matson had no part in choosing his assignment, he came under congressional scrutiny later, as there was a small movement to accuse, he and several other athletes of malingering and accepting preferential treatment in not being sent to war. The controversy eventually died out, as in 1953 the Korean War was ending and thousands of soldiers were being returned home. There was no demand for additional soldiers, so the Army put Matson to use as it determined most appropriate.

1954 proved to be one of the more significant years of Matson's life. Not only did he return to the football field after completing his Army hitch, but he married long-time girlfriend Mary Louise Page (nee: Lewis) on August 29, 1954. Page had grown up in Gulfport, Mississippi during the Great Depression, one of the daughters of Willie and Ernestine Lewis, and by 1950 she was living with her sister in San Francisco. Matson met her while he was attending USF, and the couple not only remained married until her death in 2007, but produced four children (two boys and two girls) as well.

The football season began shortly after the wedding, and the new groom enjoyed what may have been the finest season of his NFL career. The fleet, multipurpose back was now used almost exclusively on offense (although he did snag one interception and recovered three fumbles on defense) and special teams, and racked up 1117 total yards from scrimmage to accompany the 549 yards he accrued returning kickoffs and punts. That All-Purpose Yards total led the league, over 400 more yards than second place Joe Perry's total of 1252. Matson finished second in the UPI's MVP voting, and was a unanimous first-team All Pro and Pro Bowl selectee. By any measure, 1954 was a very good year in the Matson household.

If there was one negative associated with the season, though, it was the Cardinals' 2-10 record and 6th place [of six teams] in their division. Their record was also the worst mark in the entire league. The following seasons showed improvement, but not enough to win their division. Chicago posted a 7-5 record in 1956, just a game and a half behind the Giants, but the 1957 season marked a descent back into irrelevance, and by 1958 only the 1-10-1 Packers had a worse record.

For his part, Matson was the one bright spot on the Cardinals' roster, and he was again chosen first team All-Pro in 1955, 1956, and 1957, and made the Pro Bowl each year between 1955-1958 (in addition to his two previous selections). On a talent-scarce Cardinals team, Matson was the one, bright shining light of excellence. That status, that standing, made the 1959 trade to the Los Angeles Rams all the more shocking.

Los Angeles, under General Manager Pete Rozelle, the former USF Sports Information apprentice and future commissioner of the NFL, made an offer for Matson to the



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Cardinals that the latter simply could not refuse. In exchange for the superb, multi-purpose star, Los Angeles would send Chicago eight players. The latter received offensive tackle Ken Panfil, defensive tackles Frank Fuller and Art Hauser, defensive end Glenn Holtzman, running backs Don Brown and Larry Hickman, and end John Tracey, and two draft choices. Those picks were used in 1960 to select guard Mike McGee (from Duke) and end Silas Woods (Marquette). McGee played three years in Chicago, while Woods failed to make the team.

While the move did not have quite as many moving picks/players as the 1989 Herschel Walker swizzle, nine-for-one remains one of the largest two-team trade imbalances in NFL history. Even so, Los Angeles may well have gotten the better end of the deal. Still, 1959 ended with the Rams in sixth place in the West Division [despite the work of head coach Sid Gillman] and, in an interesting twist, Chicago also finished with a 2-10 record, and a sixth place finish in the East. For his part, Matson started at fullback and rushed for 863 yards [5.4 yards per attempt], the second highest single season total of his career, while also returning thirty punts and kicks for another 428 yards. The 1959 season turned out to be the first year on the 'backside' of the player's career.

Matson remained with the Rams through the 1962 season. The team finished with a dismal 1-12 record that year, and Matson was moved to the Detroit Lions. After just one season in what would become Motown, he was reunited with coach Joe Kuharich in Philadelphia for 1964. That season his old boss reinserted the 34-year old star into the offense, and Matson rushed for 404 yards, caught 17 balls for another 242, and scored five touchdowns for the Eagles. After a quiet 1965 campaign, Matson suited up for Philly in 1966 and he enjoyed the best team-season of his career. That year his Eagles finished with a 9-5 record in a tie with Cleveland for second place in the East division. Matson's final game came on December 18, 1966 in Washington, D.C. That day he ran the ball nine times for 19 yards and a fourth quarter touchdown, and caught three passes for a scant five yards. The touchdown marked a fitting end to the great back's career, and Philadelphia won the game by nine points (37-28). Playing for his old college coach, Matson closed out his playing career a winner.

When Ollie Matson retired from the NFL, he had played in 171 games, rushed for 5173 yards, caught 222 passes for another 3285 yards, returned 65 punts for 595 yards, and ran back 143 kicks for 3746 yards (26.2 average per return). He also recovered 15 fumbles [one resulting in a touchdown] and picked off three passes. Those feats resulted in 73 career touchdowns, five first-team All-Pro selections, and six Pro Bowls. When he retired, he had the second highest all-purpose yards total in league history. Matson left pro football after retirement, and became a coach and educator in the Los Angeles school system. In 1972, he was inducted into the Professional Football Hall of Fame in Canton,



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Ohio and in 1976 the National Football Foundation enshrined him in the College Football Hall of Fame as well.

As one writer observed:

“Matson was a runner whose style was difficult to forget. Coupled with his speed was an almost awesome power, and when he ran over defenders at the line of scrimmage, he had the quickness to bolt by the secondary. In addition, he was almost impossible to ride out of bounds. Matson simply lowered his shoulder and punished the defender.”^{vii}

It was that ferocity and mental engagement with the game, then, that made the final years of his life so frustrating to his family and, doubtlessly, him. Around 2005, family members began noticing a decline in the great player’s cognition. Matson’s son, also Ollie Matson, recalled that for the final four years of his life, the elder Matson hardly spoke. “I’d show up and he would say ‘Hi’. And he’d say ‘Bye’ when I left. That was it.” The same source noted that Matson would be up most days grilling chicken at 6:30 in the morning, and that every day he would wash the family’s four cars. Matson’s son said, “At first, we thought it was kind of funny because we didn’t know about concussions or CTE. Nobody knew...we kind of laughed it off, but then it got a little worse.”^{viii}

Ollie Genoa Matson II died on February 19, 2011, at home in Los Angeles, claimed by respiratory failure. He was fewer than three months shy of his 81st birthday. His nephew, Art Thompson, told a reporter that Matson had been confined to his bed for several years and that he had not uttered a word since 2007.^{ix} In 2012, a cadre of experts at Boston University released their findings after post mortem examination of 85 human brains from people who had suffered multiple concussions (Matson suffered a number of head traumas in his career, including several that caused him to leave games).^x The markers of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy were observed in the brains of both Matson and fellow Hall-of-Famer, tight end John Mackey.^{xi} Matson may well be the oldest known NFL case of the irreversible, crippling condition. It is no small irony that a man

^{vii} “Ollie Matson: The Hall of Famer Traded for 9 NFL Players”. *The Sports History Network*, online: <https://sportshistorynetwork.com/football/nfl/ollie-matson/>. March 29, 2021

^{viii} “Faces of Concussions: Football families share lives with CTE” *Associated Press*, April 21, 2021. Online: <https://apnews.com/article/nfl-football-super-bowl-football-sports-joe-namath-f24de31db5c743f29d1a5c280aa72037>



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considered almost gentle, certainly gentlemanly, off the field would be taken by such a brutal consequence of his athletic greatness.

Ollie Matson was a dedicated family man, an educator, and one of the greatest athletes who ever lived. Two Olympic medals and a bust in Canton attest to his competitive greatness, just as the record of his death attests to the worst-case possibilities attached to his professional fame. Still, few have ever built a life-resume like that of Ollie Matson, and it is that life en toto that is well worth remembering.

End Notes:

^{ix} “Former Cardinals, Rams star Ollie Matson dies in Los Angeles” *Associated Press*, February 19, 2011.

^x Matson suffered several head blows over his career that caused him to depart the field and exit games. Notably, though, a 2013 paper in the journal *Brain* notes that CTE is associated with repetitive mild traumatic brain injury. Concussions alone, the paper reasons, do not necessarily cause CTE, but the condition is almost always linked to the sub concussive impacts suffered by every professional football player in the 1950s and 1960s. Source: Ann C. McKee, et al. “The spectrum of disease in chronic traumatic encephalopathy.” *Brain*, 2013: 136; 43-64.

^{xi} Melissa Healy. “Aggression, explosivity linked to multiple concussions in new study.” *Los Angeles Times*, December 4, 2012; online: <https://www.latimes.com/health/la-xpm-2012-dec-04-la-heb-aggression-concussions-20121203-story.html>