

E-Rock: POW!

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Saturday, March 15 2008 7:00 PM -

About a month ago, Braylon Edwards, third overall pick in the 2005 NFL Draft, became the first Browns draftee of the new era to play in the Pro Bowl. The last before Braylon was Eric Ray Turner, safety, UCLA. In Jesse's latest, he talks about the man we all called "E-Rock", and the frightening potential the hard hitting safety displayed before injuries derailed his career and then illness took his life. A great read.



On autumn Sundays in Browns town, it's easy. He's out there in the secondary, menacing in an oversized facemask and hulking shoulder pads, wearing the brown jersey with the number 29 that didn't seem so exclusively Hanford Dixon's when ET inhabited it. He's roaming the field, seeking out an unsuspecting receiver or a wayward back he can put into la-la land. Number Two-Nine, always looking to lay a lick on someone. Yup, he's still out there.

About a month ago, Braylon Edwards, third overall pick in the 2005 NFL Draft, became the first Browns draftee of the new era to play in the Pro Bowl. The last before Braylon was Eric Ray Turner, safety, UCLA.

Eric Turner was Bill Belichick's showcase pick, the number-two overall selection of the 1991 NFL Draft. He'd driven himself up the ladder with a spectacular Combine performance, and it was just as well- Coach Mumbles was planning on re-building the Browns around defense, and a fast, athletic, teeth-rattling presence at safety seemed just what the doctor ordered for a Cleveland D that had gotten old, slow, and small.

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But it took a while for the prize player to gain proper footing in the league. His first three years, E-Rock always seemed to be a step behind greatness- flashing from brilliant to stumbling and back week to week, play to play. Like a microcosm of Belichick's Browns teams, Turner played just well enough to disappoint. His athletic gifts were undeniable, his work ethic impeccable- but he just hadn't quite put it all together. He would lose himself in the desire to hit, to fulfill the ultimate promise of his career- Eric Turner, assassin extraordinaire.

One play in particular that seemed to encompass the entirety of E-Rock's early Browns career. A snowy November afternoon at the Lakefront, fourth quarter, Cleveland holding a tenuous 13-7 lead over the Chargers. On 3rd-and-8 with just over two minutes remaining, Stan Humphries sent a bomb in the direction of Anthony Miller. Turner went for the big hit, misjudged the man and the ball, and missed both. The resulting long touchdown put San Diego ahead to stay.

Cleveland's record in Eric Turner's- and Bill Belichick's- first three seasons was 20-28. But finally, in 1994, the pieces finally fell into place for the Browns. As they did for their young safety.

The 1994 Browns went 11-5, their most wins since 1986. They also started the season 6-1, their best start since 1965, and ripped off an early five-game winning streak that marked them as one of the league's elite teams. Like the inverse of the offensive-minded 2007 Browns, the '94 team made its breakthrough on the defensive side of the ball.

Right in the middle of it all was Eric Turner. In three of the wins in the crucial five-game streak, #29 made critical, game-turning interceptions, including a 93-yard pick-six that salted away a 32-0 shutout of the Arizona Cardinals. For the season E-Rock had 105 tackles, one fumble forced and one recovery, a sack, and a league-high nine interceptions

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for 199 yards in returns, including the 93-yard marathon against the Cardinals. He also made the goal-line tackle on Jay Novacek that preserved the 19-14 upset of the Cowboys in Irving- one of the greatest regular-season victories in Browns history. According to Scott Pioli in Tony Grossi's *Tales From the Browns Sideline*, Turner "made plays that changed the course of games." The assassin had become a ball-hawking, play-making assassin, the beating heart of one of the stingiest defenses of the sixteen-game era.

The Browns made the playoffs for the first time since 1989, and once there, Eric Turner helped make sure they didn't go home early. With the Browns clinging to a 17-10 fourth-quarter lead in the Wild-Card playoff against New England on January 1, 1995, E-Rock hauled in a deflected Drew Bledsoe pass and returned it 28 yards, setting up the field goal that put the game away. Cleveland hasn't won a playoff game since that day.

Here are just a few of the highlights of Turner's memorable '94 season, captured in an outstanding Youtube clip:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mq9ViOq43bY>

I've watched the Browns for about twenty-five years now. Eric Turner's 1994 is the finest season I've ever seen from a Cleveland defensive player.

The ex-Bruin's heroics did not go unrecognized. Turner was voted

All-AFC by the Associated Press, UPI, and Pro Football Weekly, and he was the AFC's starting free safety in the 1995 Pro Bowl. It looked like E-Rock was the league's next great defensive player, and the Browns were its next great team.

The promise never materialized. Turner spent much of the '95 season on the shelf with the variety of injuries- including a fractured vertebrae- watching as the Browns slumped to 5-11. In November of that year, Art Modell announced that he was moving the team to Baltimore. Turner spent one season in the hideous black-and-purple of the Ravens, making his second Pro Bowl, then in 1997 signed a free-agent contract with the Oakland Raiders.

E-Rock had grown up a Raiders fan as a California youth, and the Raiders were the team he had always wanted to play for. He spent three seasons in Silver and Black, played solid, played smart, commanded a deep respect in the Oakland locker room for his wisdom, his leadership, and his even temperament, but he was never the same dominant force that had dazzled the league in the magical year of 1994. His last two seasons in Oakland were sabotaged by recurring foot and leg injuries. It seemed his body was breaking down as a result of the hard-hitting years in the league. But the truth was far more sinister.

In the spring of 2000 reports began to filter out that Eric Turner was deeply sick, that he had lost 70 pounds and was in and out of the hospital, suffering from cancer. In mid-May he issued a statement through his agent denying the reports. Why, only Eric Turner knew. Even his closest friends in the game- Eric Metcalf, Stevon Moore, Roman Phifer, Charles Woodson- didn't learn of his condition until it was too late. The reports were true. On May 28, 2000, Eric Turner died

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from complications of intestinal cancer in a southern California hospital. The day was a Sunday. Eric Turner was 31 years old.

Walter Payton, another man who died far too young, was fond of saying, "Tomorrow is promised to no one." Tonight, if you're watching the Pro Bowl, enjoy the impact of our dynamic young stars. Savor it. Remember Eric Turner, and understand that we can't see the shades of light and dark that the future holds.

But you can still see E-Rock, if you look hard enough. And if you do, keep your head on a swivel.