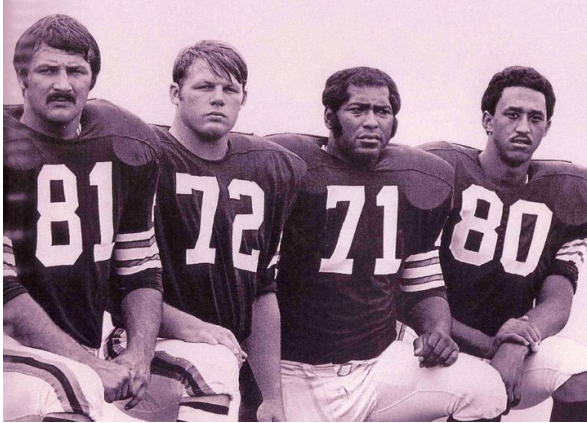


Blast From The Past: Walter Johnson and the Best Browns D Line Ever

Written by {ga=googleeph2}

Wednesday, November 23 2011 12:00 AM - Last Updated Wednesday, November 23 2011 8:25 AM



The Cleveland Browns of the late 1960s and early 1970s were solemnly important to a kid like me. They had recently been at the mountaintop of the NFL. The deep, serious voice of Gib Shanley injected an air of gravitas into the Browns radio broadcasts. And some of the players seemed bigger than life.

One of the pillars of the Cleveland Browns defense was big Walter Johnson.

The Browns' overall defense was okay... The defensive backs were solid; guys like Erich Barnes were giving way to younger studs like Thom Darden (and no, it wasn't a requirement then that you had to insert an "H" into your first name to be noteworthy). The linebackers were smallish and while strength was not their strong suit, they were quick. The defensive line, however, was another story. #81 Jack Gregory. #72 Jerry Sherk. #71 Walter Johnson. #80 Joe Jones. Long-time Browns offensive tackle and announcer Doug Dieken is on record as saying

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this D line was maybe the best the Browns have ever had.

Joe Jones' nickame, "Turkey", was famously given to him by Browns veterans in his second year with the team. Every November, the rookies would be given instructions to go pick up some free turkeys on their off-day. The directions were bogus, and there were no free turkeys. Joe Jones fell for it as a rookie. [He also fell for it his second year.](#)

Turkey Jones was a quick edge rusher, and authored the signature hit of the Browns-Steelers rivalry [when he dumped quarterback Terry Bradshaw on his head at the bleachers end of the home stadium field.](#)

Jack Gregory was the end on the right side, and had the ability to produce sacks as well. He had 14 of them in 1970. Prior to the 1973 season, he was the principal in a trade to the NY Giants for draft picks which netted WR Steve Holden and RB Greg Pruitt.

Jerry Sherk? An all-time Cleveland Brown. Not only was he the NFL Defensive Player of the Year in 1976, and a 4 time Pro Bowler, but he "gets it" when it comes to what the Browns mean to their fans. A separate essay will be needed to do justice to Jerry Sherk. [Sherk continues to be a part of the fabric of Cleveland.](#)



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Walter Johnson followed long-timer Dick Modzelewski as left defensive tackle on the Browns. He was Jerry Sherk's partner on the inside, and together they formed the top defensive tackle combination in the National Football League. The 6'4", 265lb native Cincinnati was tough and imposing yet quick off the ball; he was known to some as "Zoom." He was also durable enough to string together 168 straight games played during the era of the 14 game season. Here's some footage of Number 71 in action- [begin viewing at the 6:20 point](#). (This game marked the first return of Paul Brown to Cleveland, and was controversial due to PB not shaking Cleveland coach Blanton Collier's hand at midfield when it was over -regrettably, the YouTube footage only shows Collier walking off the field. Collier shrugged it off, and PB told the press that they'd greeted each other prior to the game.)

Walter Johnson was not one to back down from a fight on the field.

According to Jerry Sherk, he even intimidated his own teammates. From Sherk, on www.brownsbacker.com

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"When I came (to) the Browns, Walter Johnson...was not only the guy I teamed up with at tackle, but he was the alpha male of the Browns. Guys were in awe of him, because of his strength--he could actually hurt people in practice and in the games. My first game was the first Monday Night Game ever. Each player got 4 free tickets, and I was only going to use 2. Walter knew it and asked if he could buy my other 2. I said yes and gave him the tickets. He didn't give me the money, and I was so intimidated by him that I never asked.

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His strength was legendary on the team. There was a story going around that once Jim Brown called a team meeting, and he was chastising the team for their poor play. During the meeting he said, "And if you don't like what I'm saying I'll kick your ass, and I can kick anyone's ass on the team." Then he looked over at Walter and said in a lower voice, "Except maybe for you, Walter!"



Walter Johnson also mixed it up in the professional wrestling ring. As early as 1968, local crowd favorite Johnny Powers began booking him as a celebrity draw in such venues as the Akron Armory, the Cleveland Arena and Cobo Arena, adjacent to Cobo Hall in Detroit. Johnson would wear his number 71 jersey to his wrestling matches. He sometimes outweighed his opponents by eighty pounds. He moved up the ranks, conquering such foes as the Masked Destroyer and the Love Brothers, moving up to such notables as The Sheik. Wrestlers remembered matches with Johnson as particularly painful. Slaps to the head and being launched into the ropes were a prelude to Johnson's gentlest, yet most agonizing, final move: a bear hug. Powers later lamented Johnson's clumsiness, but noted he was a good guy who didn't cause trouble.

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Walter Johnson died of a heart attack at age 56, in 1999- just days after Browns legend Marion Motley. He lived long enough to see Art Modell move the Browns out of Cleveland. "It's as if someone went into my personal biography and took out 11 years of my life and ripped it right out of my book," Johnson said to NBC's Dick Enberg.

No, they're still there, Mr. Johnson, sir.

Thank you for reading.

