

TOM FEARS

By Don Smith

The Los Angeles Rams have won only one National Football League championship since moving to the West Coast in 1946 and, in that one title victory in 1951, Tom Fears scored the winning touchdown on a spectacular 73-yard pass-run play. One play doesn't make a successful career, but in Fears' case, such heroics were standard achievements for nine seasons with the Rams.

Fears was born in Los Angeles on December 3, 1923. An All-Southern California end for Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles, Fears spent two seasons at Santa Clara in 1941 and 1942 before joining the Air Force in World War II. He was captain of the famous Second Air Force Superbombers team in 1944 and 1945 and then finished his college career with two all-America type seasons at UCLA in 1946 and 1947.

Interestingly, Fears was considered to be a defensive specialist when he was drafted by the Rams in the 11th round in 1948. But after intercepting a couple of passes in the season opener, he was shifted to offensive end and he responded by becoming one of the first rookies ever to win NFL pass-receiving honors.

Fears, in fact, won the league title his first three seasons and no one except another Hall of Famer, Don Hutson, has ever won more consecutive titles at any point in his career. Altogether, Fears caught 400 passes in his nine campaigns.

The rugged, 6-2, 215-pounder caught a then-record 84 passes in 1950. He caught 18 passes in a 1950 game against Green Bay and that record may stand for some time.

The fact that that record-breaking performance came against a Green Bay team that in 1950 was a tailender is somewhat out of the Fears mold because Tom, as a rule, saved his biggest games for the strongest opponents. For example, only two weeks later, the Rams defeated the Chicago Bears in a playoff for the NFL's Western crown and Fears scored all three touchdowns in a 24-14 game. His TDs all came from Bob Waterfield on 43, 68 and 27-yard plays and, altogether, he caught seven for 198 yards, a divisional playoff record. A year later in the NFL title game with Cleveland, it was Norm Van Brocklin who tossed a short one to Fears, who then raced almost 60 yards for the title-clinching six points.

Fears wasn't the first to run specific routes on a pass play, but he was one of the most precise pattern-runners the game has seen. A terrific competitor, Fears made up for his lack of unusual speed with the fierce determination to do something with the ball after he caught it.

Tom specialized in the button-hook pass, which meant he exposed himself to frequent blind-side abuse by the defense. As a result, the latter part of his career was injury-plagued, so much so that he could play in only two games in his final season in 1956.

But Fears had already made an indelible mark on the pro football world. He won the praise of his contemporaries, friend and foe alike, and some even tried to emulate his style. Billy Howton, himself destined to rank as one of the all-time leading receivers, is typical.

"When I came to the pros, I got every film I could on the Rams and I studied every move Tom made," Howton relates. "His finesse was tops! He was the all-time greatest for maneuvering and getting loose. Whatever success I've had I owe to Tom Fears!"

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 6, Nos. 9 & 10 (1984)

Fears' Receiving Record

Year			PC	Yds	Avg	TD
1948	LA Rams	NFL	51*	698	13.7	4
1949	LA Rams	NFL	77*	1013	13.2	9*
1950	LA Rams	NFL	84*	1116*	13.3	7
1951	LA Rams	NFL	32	528	16.5	3
1952	LA Rams	NFL	48	600	12.5	6
1953	LA Rams	NFL	23	278	12.1	4
1954	LA Rams	NFL	36	546	15.2	3
1955	LA Rams	NFL	44	569	12.9	2
1956	LA Rams	NFL	5	49	9.8	0
9 Years			400	5397	13.5	38