

Ray Renfro: Speed Story

By Bob Barnett & Bob Carroll

You can almost see the late night TV host as he says, "Ray Renfro was so fast that ..."

"How fast was he?" the audience screams in anticipation.

A touch of the tie, a cocked eyebrow. "He was so fast that he averaged a touchdown for every 5.6 passes he caught over a twelve year NFL career!"

The host's chubby sidekick guffaws, but the audience yawns. Not funny?

Well, it certainly wasn't funny to the defenders who tried in vain to catch Renfro as he raced under a nicely arched Otto Graham or Milt Plum pass. He caused a lot of defensive backs to lose their senses of humor.

If you want funny, say he was so fast he could yell "I'm open!" when he lined up and run into the end zone to hear himself. Or say, as Satchel Paige once did about his teammate, Cool Papa Bell, he could turn out the light and be in bed before it got dark. But if you want truth, just say he averaged 19.6 yards for every pass he caught. Say that from his first year in a Cleveland Brown uniform back in 1952, they called him "The Rabbit" and no one meant his ears.

Ray Renfro was diseased with speed.

Of course, it took more than speed to make Renfro one of the great offensive weapons during pro football's so-called "Golden Age," the 1950's. When he first joined the Browns in 1952 from North Texas State, they were already a championship team loaded with superstars. Coach Paul Brown wasn't quite sure what to do with a raw rookie who had so much to learn and was just a tad small. Still, the youngster liked contact, and he had all that speed.

Ray spent a year stumbling around as a kick returner and substitute halfback, impressing everyone with his potential, but disappointing them with his performances. He fumbled nearly every tenth time he handled the ball. Nevertheless, he was learning.

His second season – 1953 – was better. He caught 39 passes and even led the Browns in rushing with a modest 352 yards when Marion Motley's knees gave out. The fumbling problem all but disappeared; in his remaining ten seasons he bobbled only twice. Despite a so-so running attack, Cleveland won its division again but lost the championship game for the third straight year and the second in a row to Buddy Parker's Detroit Lions, featuring Bobby Layne and Doak Walker.

The Browns continued their divisional dominance in 1954, but Ray had a terrible season. Injuries kept him on the sideline half the time and his rushing and receiving stats shrank to miniscule levels.

In a scheduling quirk, the Lions, again Western champs, met the Browns at Cleveland in the season's last regular game. For the fourth time in three years, including the two championships, Parker's Lions defeated the Browns. The 14-10 verdict looked like a preview of the championship game, also slated for Cleveland, the following week.

The Lions were 2½ point favorites, but when Graham's first pass was intercepted, Walker kicked a 35-yard field goal to put Detroit in front by three. Cleveland fans readied themselves for chapter five of the same old story. On the ensuing kickoff, the Browns were stopped, but Detroit roughed punter Horace Gillom to give Cleveland a first down.

Paul Brown decided it was time to do something a little special with the now-healthy Renfro. In viewing films, Brown had noticed that Lion defender Bill Stits played up close to the line when Cleveland lined up in a straight-T with no flanker. There was no way he could do that and cover Renfro coming out of the

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backfield, Brown reasoned. Graham brought the team up to the line with a full house backfield, Renfro in close at halfback. Stits obligingly moved in. At the snap, the Cleveland ends crossed downfield, siphoning off the safeties. Renfro burst past Stits, who was lost in one-on-one. Graham lofted the football, and Renfro took it down the middle for a 35-yard touchdown.

After that, the Browns could do nothing wrong and the Lions could do very little right. For Renfro, it was a personal triumph after his injury-plagued season. He caught four more Graham aerials, including a 31-yard TD bomb to put the game out of sight at the half. The final 56-10 "upset" was sweet revenge for the Browns. "I remember that as my biggest thrill in pro football," said Renfro recently, "not just because I had such a good day catching the ball, but because we beat the Lions, the team that had beaten us in two previous championship games."

From then on, for the next nine seasons he was the Browns' home run hitter, a TD specialist. Ray was too valuable to waste running the ball or on nickle-and-dime possession catches. When Graham or later Milt Plum aimed one in Renfro's direction, it was for all the marbles.

When Renfro retired following the 1963 season, he had in his twelve years amassed a modest total of 281 career receptions. It was his near twenty-yard average per catch and his 55 touchdown receptions which demonstrate how valuable he was to the Browns.

"I thought about retiring after my tenth year (1961)," said Renfro, "but Coach Brown talked me into staying two more years as a player-coach. I had had some knee injuries. If you play pro football, you have knee injuries, particularly running backs and receivers. I had my share. Finally you wake up one morning, and you can't get out of bed. That's why I retired."

Following a retirement from the Browns, Renfro returned to Cleburne, Texas, a suburb of Fort Worth, to operate a dry cleaning business. "I was well prepared to retire because I had wanted to get out a couple of years earlier, so I really didn't miss playing. I did miss the fellowship of my teammates," Renfro added, "but it was just like someone in your family gets married. It's a change you learn to live with."

The NFL quickly called Renfro back. In 1965 he became an assistant coach with the Detroit Lions. The next two seasons (1966-67) he was persuaded to sign on as an assistant coach with the Washington Redskins under his former teammate Otto Graham. "That worked out all right for a while," remembers Ray, "because I could come back after the season and work in the cleaning business. But the second year it was just too hard to be away from the family for six months."

"When I left Washington, Coach Landry called and wanted me to come over and work the passing game as an assistant coach with the Dallas Cowboys," Renfro continued. "Of course, I had to go full time because with Coach Landry's system there was too much work to be done just on a seasonal basis. I was with the Cowboys from 1968 to 1972. When I left the Cowboys, I went with the Tarrant Concrete Company in Fort Worth as sales manager. I have been in the ready-mix concrete business ever since."

Married with three sons, Renfro lives in Fort Worth. His oldest son Mike is a member of the Cowboys. "Society and pro football have both changed from when I played pro football," observed Renfro. "The coaches, me included, have made the game more complicated. Now every position is a key position. We had small squads – only 33 players on the team – when I played so we were closer, almost like a family. But we didn't make the big money they do now. We had to find off-season jobs, and it was hard to get anything other than being a common laborer. The players today earn every cent they get. The game is more complicated and the teams don't have that closeness to support each other. The players also have more temptations, everything from fast women, to booze, to drugs. It is harder for them when they retire too, because it is hard to adjust to not having that big money coming in on a regular basis."

"There certainly is life after pro football," Renfro continued. "Life is the most enjoyable thing we have, but life is hard. The ones who aren't having a life are the ones who aren't working at it. A lot of the ones having problems now had trouble playing their positions when they were in football. Any of us who have raised a family have had financial and family problems, but most of us have handled them. I don't know if it's chemistry or what."

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RAYMOND RENFRO

Born: November 7, 1930, at Whitesboro, Texas

Died: August 4, 1997, Ft. Worth, TX

Hgt: 6-1 Wgt: 192

School: North Texas State College

Selected by Cleveland in 7th round of 1952 NFL draft

SCORING=		RUSHING =====						PASS RECEIVING ==				
Year	Team	GM	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD	PC	YDS	AVG	TD	TD	PTS
1952	Cleveland	11	10	26	2.6	0	1	8	8.0	0	0	0
1953	Cleveland	12	60	352	5.9	4	39	722	18.5	4	9	54
1954	Cleveland	7	29	151	5.2	0	13	228	17.5	1	1	6
1955	Cleveland	12	29	90	3.1	0	29	603	*20.8	8	8	48
1956	Cleveland	12	4	24	6.0	0	17	325	19.1	4	4	24
1957	Cleveland	12	2	22	11.0	0	21	589	*28.0	6	6	36
1958	Cleveland	12	3	17	5.7	0	24	573	23.9	6	6	36
1959	Cleveland	12	-	-	-	-	30	528	17.6	6	6	36
1960	Cleveland	12	-	-	-	-	24	378	15.8	4	4	24
1961	Cleveland	14	-	-	-	-	48	834	17.4	6	6	36
1962	Cleveland	14	-	-	-	-	31	638	20.6	4	4	24
1963	Cleveland	12	-	-	-	-	4	82	20.5	1	1	6
12 years		142	137	682	5.0	4	281	5508	19.6	50	55	330

* - Led league

Pro Bowl following 1953-57-60 seasons