

Marion Motley

Some Say He Was “Greatest Football Player Ever”

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During their first decade, beginning in 1946, when the Cleveland Browns dominated two pro football leagues, the most visible element in their deadly effective attack was the pin-point passing of Otto Graham. Yet many experts will tell you that neither Graham nor the Browns would have been nearly so successful had it not been for the contributions of a 238-lb. fullback named Marion Motley.

Marion was a devastating pass-protecting blocker, perhaps the best ever at his position. From this key element of a successful aerial attack, the Browns invented the “trap” play which was to prove a back-breaker for numerous Cleveland opponents over the years.

The play called for Graham to drop back to pass but to hand off to Marion when the enemy rush line drew close. Motley in turn would barrel straight ahead and, if necessary, over opponents who stood in his way. Once the Motley reputation was established, defenses could never concentrate solely on Graham again.

Blessed with speed as well as power, Motley did much more than just serve as Graham’s bodyguard. He was the leading rusher in the four-year history of the All-American Football Conference (AAFC) and the NFL ball-carrying champion in 1950. When Otto had trouble finding receivers, he knew Marion would be close at hand to catch a short pass and turn it into a big gain. He even returned kickoffs, particularly in his AAFC years.

It was no accident that Motley wound up in Cleveland because he had crossed paths often with coach Paul Brown. Marion played his high school football just across the street from the present site of the Pro Football Hall of Fame. His Canton McKinley teams lost only three games, all to Brown-coached Massillon high school elevens, in three seasons. In the Navy during World War II, Motley was a member of the Great Lakes Navy team that upset Notre dame, 39-7, in 1945. His coach was Paul Brown.

“Our club was badly hit by transfers and discharges in 1945,” Brown recalls. “The only reason I still had Motley was that no one realized how good he was.”

With the Cleveland Browns, people – fans, teammates and opponents alike – quickly found out just how good Marion really was. Motley, who was one of the only two blacks – the other was teammate Bill Willis – to play in the AAFC in 1946, also played linebacker as well as fullback his first two season. When he settled down to playing only on the offensive unit, he became even tougher.

Blanton Collier, a Cleveland assistant in the 1940s, insisted Motley was “the greatest all-around football player I ever saw.” Four decades later, many qualified observers still unhesitatingly second that assessment.

Motley Also Excelled On Defense

Though best known for his powerful running and devastating blocking, Marion Motley is also remembered by many as an outstanding linebacker. “This man was a great, great linebacker,” Motley’s backfield coach and later Browns’ head coach Blanton Collier once remarked.

On September 16, 1950, in a game against the reigning NFL champion Philadelphia Eagles, Motley, in a command performance, demonstrated his tremendous versatility.

The game marked the first time the Browns, four-time champions of the All-America Football Conference, met an NFL opponent since the merger of the two leagues following the 1949 season. For the Eagles and the thousands of die-hard NFL fans who had scoffed at the Browns and the rival AAFC as being minor leaguers, the game was a chance to prove their point.

“The press and the public were saying we were going to get whipped 50-0,” recalled former Browns’ head coach and Hall of Famer Paul Brown. “We knew,” he continued, “this would take a little doing.”

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In the second quarter, trailing 7-3, the still confident Eagles drove to the Browns' six-yard line. Sensing a go-ahead touchdown, the Eagles hardly noticed Motley being inserted as a linebacker. Four plays later, they sat stunned and disappointed as Motley made his fourth consecutive tackle. For their four-down effort, the Eagles gained just three yards. The Browns went on to defeat the Eagles by an embarrassing 35-10 score. For Motley, who that day played halfback, fullback and linebacker, this was just another of many superior performances that assured him a spot among the pro football immortals.