

# JOHN RIGGINS THE DIESEL

By Don Smith

John Riggins was an all-America running back at the University of Kansas where he surpassed most of Gale Sayers' rushing records. He was the No. 1 draft choice of the New York Jets and the sixth player chosen in the 1971 NFL draft. Yet he wasn't at all sure he would make it in the pros.

"I wasn't a very good player in college, to tell you the truth," he insisted. "I thought I might be the first No. 1 draft choice to be cut. I'd seen a few big names flop just ahead of me."

But Riggins was not cut. Instead he launched a 14-year pro career that saw him play five seasons with the Jets and nine years with the Washington Redskins. In 14 seasons, he rushed for 11,352 yards, the sixth highest total of all time, and he accounted for 13,435 combined net yards, ninth most ever. His 116 career touchdowns and 104 rushing touchdowns are both No. 3 in the record book. Those achievements were recognized for posterity in 1992 with his election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Riggins was a 6-2, 240-pound workhorse who could always be depended upon for an all-out performance on the field. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on the view point of those who were affected, his off-the-field antics were just as dependable -- they could be counted on to make the kind of news that tended to overshadow his excellent contributions as a player.

## THREE-PART CAREER

Two of his off-the-field actions in effect partitioned Riggins' pro football experience into three separate careers. First came his five seasons with the Jets which was concluded when he by choice became a free agent after the 1975 season.

Riggins signed with the Washington Redskins in 1976. But after putting together back-to-back 1,000-yard seasons in 1978 and 1979, he walked out of training camp in July, 1980, and announced his retirement a month later. He spent the next year on his farm in Kansas.

The next spring, Redskins coach Joe Gibbs made a trip to Kansas to meet Riggins and to "see if he was the kind of guy I wanted on my football team." Riggins was out hunting when Gibbs arrived so the coach talked to John's wife and told her that John would be welcomed back if he wanted to come. Shortly after Gibbs' visit, Riggins returned to the team with the pronouncement: "I'm bored, I'm broke and I'm back!"

Thus his second tenure with the Redskins began. It lasted for five seasons from 1981 to 1985 and enabled Riggins to achieve the kind of success that would lead him to an eventual niche in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

## SUPER RIGGO

Riggins' most memorable performance was against the Miami Dolphins in Super Bowl XVII. The big moment came in the fourth quarter. The Redskins were behind 17-13, but they had the ball, fourth-and-one, on the Miami 43. The call went to Riggins, who slashed off left tackle, eluded the grasp of a Dolphin defender and raced 43 yards for the winning touchdown. In leading the Redskins to their first Super Bowl victory, Riggins rushed 38 times for a then-record 166 yards.

Riggins, who had surprised everyone by appearing in a tuxedo at a pregame party the night before, proclaimed after the game: "Ron (Reagan) may be president, but tonight, I'm the king!"

Those Super Bowl heroics climaxed an exceptional run of Redskins playoff victories that saw Riggins play the game-breaker role every game. In round one of the playoff tournament, the big running back rushed for 119 yards in a 31-7 win over the Detroit Lions. Minnesota came next and Riggins, with 185 yards, more than doubled the Vikings' rushing yardage in a 21-7 victory. After the game, a banner left on his car proclaimed: "Riggins runs on diesel power, high octane."

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In the NFC championship game against Dallas, Big John again prevailed with 140 yards and two touchdowns in a 31-17 triumph. In four playoff games climaxed by the Super Bowl, Riggins gained 610 yards and surpassed the 533 yards he accumulated in the strike shortened regular season.

"Yes, it is a little amazing," Riggins responded when someone mentioned to him that, just two years earlier, he was still in retirement. "Then, I was camping out in my car some place in Kansas. If you had told me that now I would be in the Super Bowl, I wouldn't have believed it."

Riggins followed his 1982 playoff successes with his finest season in 1983, when he rushed for a career-high 1,347 yards and an NFL-record 24 touchdowns. He scored at least one touchdown in a record-tying 13 straight games and fumbled only three times out of the 468 times he handled the ball all season, including the playoffs. He was named to everyone's all-NFL team and was selected as the NFL Player of the Year by the prestigious Maxwell Club.

He continued to merit his new title, "Mr. January," with three more sterling playoff performances. First was a 119-yard output against the Los Angeles Rams followed by a 123 yard burst in the NFC title game against the San Francisco 49ers. "The Diesel Named Desire," as he was called by many Redskins worshippers, did his part by leading the Redskins with 64 yards rushing against the Los Angeles Raiders in Super Bowl XVII. It wasn't enough, however, for the Raiders won 38-9.

### **RIGGO, THE LEADER**

The Redskins missed the next Super Bowl but Riggins enjoyed his second-best campaign in 1984 with his fifth 1,000-yard rushing season. He gained 1,239 yards and led the NFC with 14 rushing touchdowns.

The Redskins of these years were basically made up of young players who looked up to their veteran ball-carrier for leadership. Throughout his career, Riggins was a tireless worker both in practice and in games. In that sense, he led by example.

But there was another side to Riggins. "He's relaxed and fun," teammate Nick Giaquinto said. "He keeps us loose by just being himself. He is a unique person."

Riggins solidified his leadership responsibilities by recognizing the contributions of his teammates, particularly the "Hogs" offensive line that cleared the way for him.

"It's the blockers that make us go," he said. "It's no surprise to the defense as to who is going to carry the ball. You say it's tough on me but it's just as tough on the guys up front because the defense knows we're coming."

Coach Gibbs also was enthusiastic about Riggins' intangible contributions to the Redskins. "You see his personality, his sense of humor," he said, "and then you look at how he produced on the field and you see why he's a leader. He's bright, smart, has a great outlook on life, plus he can do it all on the field."

### **FROM A KANSAS FARM**

"Doing it all on the field" has been a Riggins trademark ever since his earliest years of athletic competition. Born August 4, 1949, in Seneca, Kansas, John was reared on a farm near the small town of Centralia. In high school, he was a football quarterback and a two-time Kansas state high school 100-yard dash champion. His father, Gene Riggins, felt he was best at basketball.

In three years in college, he rushed for 2,706 yards, including a record 1,131 yards as a senior. Riggins led the Big Eight in rushing and scoring. He never missed a practice or a game in his Kansas career. The New York Jets, sensing he had outside speed to go with his inside power, rated him the best collegiate back in the nation in 1970.

Riggins did not disappoint Weeb Ewbank, the Jet's coach-general manager who drafted him. As a rookie, he became the first player in Jets history to lead the team in both rushing and receiving. However, for the first time in his life, Big John ran into injury problems in 1972. He rushed for 944 yards but had to sit out the last two with minor knee surgery. A shoulder injury cost him five games in 1973 and six in 1974. Riggins' finest season in New York came in 1975, his last year in the Big Apple. He played all 14 games, had 1,005 yards rushing, caught 30 passes for 363 yards and was named to play in the Pro Bowl for the first and only time in his career.

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Riggins signed with the Redskins in 1976, but he had only a so-so season with his new team. He gained just 572 yards in a full 14-game campaign. A knee injury sidelined him for nine games and essentially wiped out his 1977 season.

Jack Pardee replaced George Allen as the Redskins coach in 1978 and, under Pardee, Riggins began to solidify his image as a workhorse ball carrier. In 1978, he rushed 248 times for 1,014 yards. In 1979, he did slightly better with 1,153 yards.

### **PERPLEXED, IF NOT ANGERED**

Although his attitude on the field was always above reproach, Riggins' activities off the field often perplexed, if not out and out angered, management. Early in his days with the Jets, Riggins, who called himself a "blue collar fullback" and a "simple country boy," attracted public attention and the dismay of coach Ewbank with his unconventional hairstyles. One year it was an afro-style cut and the next it was a Mohawk with a neat arrow down the middle of his scalp.

"I actually grew the Mohawk for the fun of it. I wanted to show everybody I was my own boss," he explained. "I always wanted one as a kid but my folks wouldn't let me have it."

Each of Riggins' three "careers" were terminated under controversial conditions. With the Jets, he simply grew tired of their losing ways -- they never had a winning season while he was there. "I don't care too much about individual acclaim," he said, "but I do care about our team winning. I want my contributions to mean something."

To solve the situation, Riggins asked the Jets for a contract that matched Joe Namath's. He knew that the Jets wouldn't agree to his demands. He played without a contract in 1975 so that he could sign with a team of his choice the next season. In spite of the reported \$300,000 contract he received, Riggins insisted he chose the Redskins because of their winning record.

A heartbreaking 35-34 loss to the Dallas Cowboys on the last day of the 1979 season triggered Riggins' termination of his first tenure in Washington. "I played as well that day as I ever played and we still lost," he said. "The game knocked us out of the playoffs. It was very frustrating."

Riggins also was becoming increasingly concerned about injuries and he wasn't happy when the Redskins refused to renegotiate his contract. So in July, 1980, he walked out of the Redskins training camp and six weeks later announced his first retirement.

His return to the Redskins a year later marked a turning point in his football life. The 1982, 1983 and 1984 seasons provided Riggins with the attention that most big-yardage runners receive early in their careers. He became a great runner through consistency, endurance and prodding. And he amassed his big yardage totals because he carried the ball so many times. He had 375 rushes in 1983 and 327 in 1984.

But in 1985, Riggins no longer was the dominant force he had been in previous years. After the season, Gibbs suggested it was time for Riggins to quit. "If John can't average 30 carries per game, I don't think we can use him as just a short-yardage man," he announced. "And I don't think John would want that job anyway."

When Riggins refused to retire, the Redskins reluctantly released him. For Riggins, the transition from football hero to average citizen was especially difficult. "Playing football for as long as I did can give you a distorted view of life," he reflected. "I've often thought that a pro career should never go more than four years, like in college. Then you would be forced to get on with your life and into something else."

Riggins retired with no marketable skills outside the football world and he was just getting over a divorce. For about a year, he lived by himself in a trailer along the Potomac River, trying to decide what to do. Now he has decided that he wants to be an actor and he has signed on with a New York agent.

"I often thought I played football just to please my father," he ponders. "I know he wanted me or one of my brothers to be a pro athlete. I think I wanted to make my dad's dream come true. But now I feel acting is for me ... and me alone."