

LEROY KELLY

By Don Smith, for The Pro Football Hall of Fame

In 1965, the fabled Jim Brown was doing just what he had accomplished throughout his nine-year NFL career . . . making yardage faster than any other player in history. At the age of 30, he seemed set to continue to ravage pro football defenses for another half a dozen years.

But in mid-summer, 1966, Brown suddenly retired to pursue a movie career. The impossible job of replacing the legendary Brown fell to a third-year running back, 205 pound Leroy Kelly, who had rushed only 43 times in his first two seasons. Few young players in history ever had a more ominous assignment . . . and perhaps no player ever responded more magnificently in a similar situation.

Kelly knew he couldn't be the same type of player as Brown and he didn't try to be. But as one national writer was quick to note: "Kelly not only has the same number of letters in his last name, but apparently the same number of yards in his feet."

The Browns' new heavy-duty yardage-maker averaged 5.5 yards on 209 rushes and wound up with 1,141 yards and a league-leading 15 touchdowns in his first season as a regular. The next two seasons, Kelly won NFL rushing championships with 1,200-plus-yard seasons. In 1968, he led the NFL in scoring with 120 points on 20 touchdowns.

When the Morgan State graduate's career ended after the 1973 season, most Browns followers expected he would be elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility. But that ultimate honor didn't happen until 1994, his 16th year of eligibility.

When it is considered that Kelly played primarily on the special teams his first two NFL seasons, his 10-year career statistics are impressive. He rushed 1,727 times for 7,274 yards and 74 touchdowns and also had 2,281 yards and 13 touchdowns on 190 receptions.

Kelly added 990 yards and three touchdowns as a punt returner and 1,778 yards on kickoff returns to finish with a combined net yard total of 12,329 yards. At the time of his retirement, he ranked No. 4 all-time both in rushing and combined net yards. He also scored 540 points on 90 touchdowns.

In addition to his NFL rushing titles in 1967 and 1968, Kelly won the NFL punt return championship in 1965 and the AFC punt return crown in 1971.

His deeds did not go unnoticed by either his playing peers or the press. Kelly won all-NFL acclaim five straight seasons from 1966 to 1971 and played in the last four NFL Pro Bowl games and the first two AFC-NFC Pro Bowls.

Had it not been for a few interested coaches and talent scouts and a break or two along the way, Kelly might never have had a chance to play pro football, let alone become a Hall of Famer. Born May 20, 1942, in Philadelphia, Kelly won three letters each in football, basketball and baseball at Simon Gratz high school in his home town. On the football team, he was the kickoff man, the punter, the kick return man and middle linebacker as well as the quarterback.

"Leroy was the best football player I'd ever seen," his coach, Louis DeVicaris, once said. "Besides being a great runner and a leader, he also was the most vicious tackler on the squad."

Still, college scouts didn't beat a path to the Kelly home in his senior year. One drawback was the fact that he hadn't taken a college preparatory course. His major was mechanics so the scouts were wary about his ability to make it scholastically.

Morgan State in Baltimore made the best offer -- a half scholarship and a job. Kelly accepted.

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Morgan State Coach Earl Banks immediately shifted Kelly from quarterback to running back because he didn't have the strong arm required of a potential pro football passer. Kelly played both offense and defense during his four years at Morgan State, was named the team co-captain and was selected as the Most Valuable Player in the Orange Blossom Classic in Miami even though his team lost.

Some Baltimore Colts players watched Morgan State practices from time to time and one Colt, George Taliaferro, provided Kelly with a most important tip. "He told me to keep my eyes open after getting through the line and always to watch for that avenue of escape," Kelly remembered. "George showed me how to run under control and then to have that burst of energy when the opening appears."

Still, pro scouts showed the same reluctance to accept Kelly as a bona-fide prospect as the college recruiters had shown four years earlier. The trend at the time was to look for the big backs. As a college senior, Kelly weighed only 188 pounds. Many believed his only chance to make it in the pros was as a defensive back.

But Colts Scout Buddy Young was completely sold on Kelly. Since the Colts weren't interested, he talked to the Browns. "This guy is smaller than Jim Brown," he told people. "But Kelly has many of the same moves. He's got speed, can cut and never gives you a full piece of himself. He also keeps those feet close to the ground."

Kelly wasn't drafted by an AFL team but the Browns finally selected him in the eighth round of the 1964 draft. He signed for \$17,000, which included a bonus.

One of the first things that brought the soft-spoken young man to the attention of Browns Head Coach Blanton Collier was his determination to bring down runners on kickoff coverage.

"He immediately showed me that he was a very tough tackler," Collier noted. "I knew that he would be a good man for the specialty teams."

Because of his small-college background, Kelly had many more things to learn than the average first-year player. Later Browns staff members shuddered at the thought of how perilously close they came to cutting their future star that first summer.

The coaches did like his speed and they quickly discovered that he was a dedicated contact player. He really won his spot on the 40-man squad because he liked to knock people down as well as run away from them. Besides winning his punt return title in 1965, Kelly continually demonstrated some of the characteristics that later would prove so valuable to the Browns.

Just once in those first two years did Kelly play as a starter in the same backfield as Brown. The regular running back, Ernie Green, was injured. It was a rainy night and Kelly, noted as a good mudder, rushed for more than 60 yards to help Cleveland to a close victory over the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Then it was back to the bench for the rest of the year, the last few weeks in Kelly's career that he would be thought of as anything but a blue-chip star.

When Brown retired, Coach Collier said: "I don't expect anyone to replace Jim. Runners like him come along only once in a lifetime. I do expect someone from this squad to make a name for himself and Leroy is going to get his chance."

It was only natural that, when Kelly proved himself so quickly as a starter, there would be attempts to compare the two Browns running backs.

"It's impossible to compare them," Collier insisted. "Jim played at 222 to 228 and was a fullback type of power runner. Leroy is 200 pounds and a halfback type of runner. Leroy did a lot of things Jim was never asked to do. He played on our special teams. He is a fine team man -- good tackler, blocker and pass receiver.

"Jim Brown used to say that anyone could run outside, but it took a great one to run inside. Kelly can do that because he has good speed, balance and is quick to sense interior openings and get through."

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With his first three spectacular seasons as a regular, Kelly joined Jim Brown and Jim Taylor as the only three running backs ever to rush for 1,000 yards in a season more than twice up to that time.

Kelly was often compared to the Chicago Bears' Gale Sayers, who had exploded onto the NFL scene in 1965. In his first five seasons from 1965 to 1969, Sayers, went over 100 yards in 20 games. In his first four seasons as a starter from 1966 to 1969, Kelly also had 20 games over 100 yards, including six in his first season as a starter.

Kelly proved to be an extremely durable player. He seemingly had some sort of mystical ability to avoid the injuries that befall so many running backs each season. In 10 years, he missed only four games and never more than one in a season.

"A lot of it is luck," Kelly admitted. "Good physical condition helps, of course."

A more specific reason was that Kelly possessed the same ability that Brown had, to know when to apply the second effort and when to accept the inevitable and to go down.

"I see runners fight long after it's obvious that they aren't going to get away even for a couple of yards," Kelly explained. "There is a time to give that second effort and a time to go down. I guess it's instinct as much as anything."

Although Kelly was excited about his rushing titles, he nevertheless remained a team man, always willing to do anything he could to help. Kelly had not been active as a kick returner since 1966 but when a special team emergency developed in 1971, Collier tapped him for punt return duty. Kelly responded with an AFC-leading 292 yards on 30 returns. He still played full time on the offensive unit, rushing for 865 yards and catching 25 passes for 252 yards.

A good part of Kelly's tenure in Cleveland was punctuated by salary disputes. The first major dispute came in 1967, after he had replaced Jim Brown with so much success in 1966. The salary increase the Browns offered was not what he anticipated. So Leroy along with four other players went on "strike." Their legal advisor was Carl Stokes, who later would become mayor of Cleveland.

The "strike" began at the start of training camp and ended several weeks later with two players being traded. The others reported back to camp but Kelly decided to play out his option. He rejected a raise of \$12,000 and took the automatic 10 percent cut.

It was a big gamble for an injury could have eroded his bargaining power in future seasons. But fortunately for Kelly, he remained healthy all year and won his first NFL rushing title. He was rewarded with a contract worth an estimated \$320,000 over a four year period from 1968 to 1971.

Kelly won his second rushing title in 1968 but his best years were behind him. He had lost a step in speed and maybe a bit of his youthful recklessness as time and physical punishment took its toll on his average-sized body.

Still he accounted for more than 1,000 combined yards in 1969 and 1971 and fell just short with 982 yards in 1970.

In 1972, Kelly signed his final Browns contract, a two-year deal for approximately \$80,000 a year. Nagging knee problems limited his effectiveness in 1973, when he rushed for only 389 yards and averaged only 2.9 yards on 132 carries.

The Browns placed him on waivers in the summer of 1974. He was picked up by the Oakland Raiders but was quickly cut. He then signed with the Chicago Fire of the World Football League but his career ended in mid-season when the WFL folded.

At the time of his Pro Football Hall of Fame election, Kelly was asked his thoughts about Jim Brown.

"I'm just glad he quit when he did," Kelly laughed. "If he had played a few more years -- and he certainly could have done that -- I might never have had the chance I had. All I ever wanted to do was to be Leroy Kelly and do the best job I possibly could."

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There is little question that Leroy Kelly did just that!

KELLY, LEROY

RB 6-00 205 Morgan State

b: 05/20/42, Philadelphia, PA

1964-1973 Cleveland Browns

/ 10 seasons, 136 games

LEROY KELLY'S RUSHING AND PASSING RECORD

YEAR	Team	Lg	RUSHING				PASS RECEIVING			
			ATT	YDS	AVG	TD	PC	YDS	AVG	TD
1964	Cle	N	6	12	2.0	0	-	-	-	-
1965	Cle	N	37	139	3.8	0	9	122	13.6	0
1966	Cle	N	209	1141	*5.5	*15	32	366	11.4	1
1967	Cle	N	*235	*1205	*5.1	*11	20	282	14.1	2
1968	Cle	N	*248	*1239	5.0	*16	22	297	13.5	4
1969	Cle	N	196	817	4.2	9	20	267	13.3	1
1970	Cle	N	206	656	3.2	6	24	311	13.0	2
1971	Cle	N	234	865	3.7	*10	25	252	10.1	2
1972	Cle	N	224	811	3.6	4	23	204	8.9	1
1973	Cle	N	132	389	2.9	3	15	180	12.0	0
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10 years			1727	7274	4.2	74	190	2281	12.0	13