

# MEL RENFRO

by Don Smith

Mel Renfro, a 6-0, 192-pound speedster from the University of Oregon, joined the Dallas Cowboys as a second-round draft pick in 1964. He played with the Cowboys for 14 seasons until 1977, longer than any other Dallas player in history except Ed "Too Tall" Jones.

Renfro had been an offensive halfback in college but, in the NFL, he was a defensive back of extraordinary versatility and ability, playing six years as a free safety and the final eight seasons as a cornerback. He even had a brief stint as a running back in 1966. Early in his career, he also served as a punt and kickoff return specialist.

Almost immediately, Renfro established himself as one of pro football's premier defensive backs by winning all-NFL acclaim in 1965, 1969, 1971 and 1973 and all-NFC honors three times. He was selected to play in 10 straight Pro Bowls -- he missed one because of an injury -- beginning after his rookie season and continuing until the 1972 season. He also played in four Super Bowls and eight NFL/NFC championship games.

His career ledger included a team-record 52 interceptions, which he returned for 626 yards and three touchdowns. He returned 109 punts for 842 yards and one touchdown and 85 kickoffs for 2,246 yards and two touchdowns. Today, he ranks in a 16th- place tie among NFL career interception leaders and in a 12th- place tie among lifetime kickoff return leaders.

In January 1996, Renfro received the ultimate pro football honor with his election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

## **A Fat Mistake**

Renfro had been a big-yardage running back at Oregon and he was certain the Cowboys would use him either as a ball carrier or a pass receiver. But Coach Tom Landry had other ideas.

"When I came to Dallas, Landry took me aside and explained that he had Frank Clarke as a receiver and he had just made trades for Buddy Dial and Tommy McDonald," Renfro related. "He didn't want me to sit on the bench so he planned to use me as a safety until there was an opening on offense."

But Renfro waited and waited. Dial and McDonald retired but Mel stayed at safety. "I guess I made one fat mistake. I played defense too well," he surmised.

Landry had slotted Renfro for free safety because the position carried less responsibility and provided a natural opportunity for a sprinter such as Renfro to frequently shift from man-to-man coverage and play the ball.

Renfro immediately impressed the Dallas coaches with his grasp of what he was being taught. The rookie reported late to training camp because he had to play in the College All-Star game against the Chicago Bears.

"He had to learn five different coverages in a few days," Dick Nolan, the Cowboys' defensive backfield coach, said. "I gave him a test on Thursday in which he had to learn not only his assignment but the assignments of six other men and he did it with very few mistakes. He had speed, quickness and balance . . . plus the great knack for running backwards, something a great defensive back has to do to maintain position on the receiver.

Renfro had a spectacular rookie season in 1964 when he excelled in three different ways, as a pass defender, a punt returner and a kickoff returner. He contributed 1,545 yards and two touchdowns to the Dallas cause. Renfro led the NFL in both kick return categories -- 418 yards and a touchdown on 32 punt returns and 1,017 yards on 40 kickoff returns. His seven interceptions accounted for 110 return yards

and a touchdown The Cowboys claimed Renfro's tackles from his free safety position saved nine touchdowns that year.

### MOO

Renfro continued to develop as a premier defender. "I once thought of free safety as being pretty free," he explained. "But now we play a more coordinated type of defense This means I am responsible for a certain area and have more to do than just key the quarterback at the snap and go to the ball."

"Put it this way," Renfro continued. "I'm responsible for any pass that comes down the middle. This allows the cornerbacks and even the linebackers to play their outside zones a little tougher."

In spite of his initial success as a defensive back, Renfro still had a desire to play on offense. Dallas fans and writers organized the "MOO Club," an acronym for "Mel on Offense." So Landry decided to give Mel a try on the offensive unit. During the off-season, he redesigned parts of his offensive playbook to take better advantage of Renfro's speed.

But Renfro's venture as an NFL running back in 1966 was short-lived. He injured an ankle in his first game. By the time the ankle healed, Landry had moved Mel back to defense. In his short stint, he rushed eight times for 52 yards and caught four passes for 65 yards.

### An Unusual Switch

However, if that was bad news for Renfro, he got an even greater shock two or three years later when Landry, in an unusual decision, moved him to cornerback. Traditionally it was cornerbacks who were moved to safety when their legs began to go and they lost a step or two. Renfro had neither of those problems.

Late in the 1969 season, Landry noted the Cowboys had given up 22 touchdown passes in the first 12 games, more than any of the other three division winners, the Los Angeles Rams, Cleveland Browns and Minnesota Vikings. "That's too many," Landry concluded. "We're going to shake up the defensive backfield."

"Next week, Renfro will work a half at cornerback against the Colts, then move back to his free safety spot," Landry outlined. "Otto Brown (a rookie) will play one half at each position."

The Dallas defense did give up a touchdown to Baltimore but overall the results were reasonably good. The Cowboys registered four interceptions including two by Renfro, one as a cornerback and one as a safety.

Renfro actually had made the same position shift midway through the 1968 season. "Truthfully, I would rather play safety, but I'll go anywhere to help straighten out our problems back there." he said. "The corner is a real challenge. You're closer to the action and your responsibilities are a little different. For instance, you have to crash and take out the interference on a sweep.

By the time Renfro became a full-time cornerback in his seventh season in 1970, he already had amassed 30 interceptions including a career-high 10 in 1969, when he played both positions. His interception totals declined after he became a cornerback for the one very good reason that opposition passers were reluctant to throw in his direction. For example, the opposition completed only six of the 36 passes they threw in Renfro's area in the first 10 games one season.

"I wish they would throw at me," Renfro complained. "It hurts you when they don't because when you're watching a receiver, you should anticipate what they are going to throw to him on every play. When they just don't throw your way, you tend to get a little complacent."

But there was a positive aspect to the move to cornerback in Renfro's view. "During the six years I was a free safety," Renfro said, "I was almost always beat up after a game and sore for a couple of days later. Since I switched to the corner in 1970, there have been Sundays when I go to the dressing room feeling like I haven't played at all."

Renfro's move to cornerback eventually produced a classic duel between Renfro and the extremely fast and dangerous Paul Warfield that materialized when the Cowboys met the Miami Dolphins in Super Bowl

VI. The Renfro-Warfield match-up was eagerly anticipated and even President Nixon suggested to the Dolphins: "The Cowboys are a good defensive team but I think you can hit Warfield on that down-and-in pattern."

Renfro didn't shut out Warfield, who had four receptions for 39 yards, but he did prevent the super-smooth Dolphin from reaching the end zone. The 24-3 victory over the Dolphins in Super Bowl VI was particularly heart-warming for Renfro because he had been involved in a controversial play a year before that had a direct effect on the outcome of Super Bowl V against the Baltimore Colts.

Dallas was leading 6-0 when Johnny Unitas threw a long pass that was first tipped by a Colts receiver and then by Renfro before John Mackey made a catch to complete a 75-yard touchdown play. The rules in 1971 dictated that a pass could not be legally completed if it were touched consecutively by two players of the same team. Renfro's almost imperceptible tipping of the ball made the catch legal. Baltimore eventually won 16-13.

### On to Oregon

Even though Renfro excelled as an NFL defender, pro football was not something he had envisioned in his younger days. Renfro was born in Houston, Texas, on December 30, 1941, but he and his family eventually moved to Portland, Oregon, where he enjoyed outstanding athletic success both in football and track at Jefferson high school. He was a two-time high school all-America running back. In one track meet, he collected 31-1/2 points with victories in the broad jump, and high and low hurdles and a leg on a winning relay team. He outscored every team in the meet except one.

Renfro, however, never intended to go to college. "I was from a lower middle-class family and we didn't have very much money," he related. "You never thought about the big money sports. A lot of my friends were joining the Army or finding work in grocery stores."

However, the soft-spoken, but multi-talented Renfro was besieged by college scouts. He wound up at Oregon chiefly because his father, who worked in a furniture upholstery factory in Portland, favored a school close to home. "He was the funniest acting kid I ever recruited," Oregon coach Len Casanova remembered. "He was too shy to declare himself, but his dad kept urging him to go to Oregon. I wasn't sure we had him until he arrived."

Although Renfro was a painfully withdrawn young man, particularly at first, his athletic career at Oregon was magnificent by every standard. In track, he ran the 100 in 9.6, the low hurdles in 14 flat, the high hurdles in 13.8 and leaped 25-feet, 11-3/4- inches in the broad jump.

In football, he was equally outstanding. He suffered through an injury-plagued sophomore season but led his team in almost everything as a junior. One big game against Rice, when Renfro gained 229 yards rushing, brought him into all-America focus. Renfro, who was named the Collegiate Back of the Year in 1962 by the Washington, D. C., Pigskin Club, also got married his junior year.

An off-the-field incident in 1963 almost ended Renfro's football career. President John Kennedy was assassinated two weeks before the draft and, when Renfro heard the disastrous news, he impetuously banged his fist on a mirror and severed a nerve in his hand.

After surgery, at least five NFL teams who were considering Renfro as their first draft choice decided to wait until Dallas announced its first-round pick. "If Dallas takes him," the theory was, "then he must be all right. If not, forget him."

Dallas personnel chief Gil Brandt took a calculated risk that was the way his opposition would react and picked tackle Scott Appleton in the first round. In so doing, he convinced the other teams that Renfro was a poor risk. They laid off and Dallas took Mel in the second round.

"I might have wanted to try for the Olympics if I hadn't cut my hand. But that Cowboy bonus was too good to turn down. A married man needs the money, you know," Renfro, whose first child was on the way, explained.

### Memorable Moments

Renfro experienced many exciting moments as a Cowboy but one of his most memorable plays came against Detroit in a 1970 playoff game. Dallas led 5-0 but Detroit was threatening with seconds remaining when Renfro intercepted a pass at the Dallas 11 to insure the victory. A week later in the NFC championship game against San Francisco, Renfro had another interception that helped preserve a 17-10 win.

"Those two victories were so important because they put us in our first Super Bowl," Renfro said. "We were no longer next year's champions."

The Cowboys kept on winning for the next few years but Renfro was not entirely happy. Earlier in 1969, Renfro had filed a civil rights suit when he and his wife were denied housing in certain areas because of their color. He also had continuing salary problems with the Cowboys front office. He felt simply that the size of his salary was not commensurate with the quality of his play. Whenever he took the field, however, Renfro continued to perform superbly.

For the first time since 1965, the Cowboys in 1974 were shut out of NFL post-season play. An injured foot had kept Mel out of three games and he asked himself: Have I lost it? Where are the Cowboys going in 1975 with the departure of Bob Lilly and other key players? Can I still contribute?

Renfro got his answer in an 18-7 victory over the Los Angeles Rams in the 1975 season opener. He picked off a pair of Rams' passes that set up the Cowboys' only touchdown and one of their four field goals.

But time eventually did take its toll. In Renfro's last four years, he missed 14 games -- the equivalent of one full season. As Landry noted before the 1977 season: "With Mel's knees and age, it's going be pretty hard for him to play consistently any more." Renfro stuck it out through the season and then ended his career on a happy note in helping the Cowboys to a 27-10 win over Denver in Super Bowl XII.

When that long-awaited election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame came, Renfro was overjoyed. "I'm just thrilled," he said. "I had to pinch myself to see if I were dreaming. This is monumental, fantastic."

Monumental . . . Fantastic . . . both also accurate descriptions of Mel Renfro's Hall of Fame career!