

DAN DIERDORF

By Don Smith

From the time he joined the St. Louis Cardinals as a rookie in 1971 until his reluctant retirement from pro football 13 seasons and 160 games later in 1983, Dan Dierdorf put together a legendary career that from many viewpoints could seem almost "too good to be true."

Making this achievement even more significant is the fact that the 6-3, 290-pound Canton, Ohio, native labored in the comparative obscurity of the offensive line as the Cardinals right tackle with a one-season switch to center when a team personnel emergency so dictated.

To say he did his job well would be an understatement. Dierdorf was a virtually unanimous all-NFL selection for four straight years from 1975 to 1978 and then earned a fifth all-pro nod in his 10th season in 1980. He played in six Pro Bowls in a seven-year period between 1975 and 1981.

Dierdorf was the most respected Cardinal lineman not only of his time, but of all time, and was considered to be a cinch for membership in the Pro Football Hall of Fame when he retired following the 1983 season. The ultimate thrill of being able to return to his home city for his sport's highest honor finally came in the 1996 election.

Large, Strong, Tough

As an offensive lineman, Dierdorf was denied the chance to amass impressive statistics that could dominate the sports pages and the electronic media segments. He never scored a touchdown, intercepted a pass or threw a pass. Dierdorf touched the football in game action only nine times in 13 seasons. He recovered a teammate's fumble seven times, fumbled once himself and received one kickoff with no return. As one writer observed. "What do you say about an offensive lineman? That he's large, strong, tough? And anonymous?"

Dierdorf, who was an all-America tackle at Michigan in 1970, was indeed big, strong and tough in the pros, but he wasn't anonymous. It is often said that offensive linemen get attention only when their quarterback gets sacked. But Dierdorf was an integral part of an offensive front line that was determined to get proper notice by protecting their quarterback better than any one else in the NFL.

From his right tackle slot, Dierdorf set the pace for an offensive line that led the NFL in fewest sacks allowed three of five seasons and the NFC five of six seasons from 1975 through 1980. The only miss for the Cardinals' front line came in 1979, when Dierdorf missed all but two games with a dislocated left knee.

The excellence of the offensive line -- dubbed the Mean Machine by Head Coach Don Coryell -- undoubtedly played a major role in the three winning seasons the Cardinals enjoyed in the mid 1970s. After 4-9-1 records in each of Dierdorf's first three seasons, the Cardinals became serious, although eventually unsuccessful, championship contenders beginning in 1974, when they captured the NFC East title with a 10-4 record before losing to the eventual NFC champion Minnesota Vikings.

St. Louis at 11-3 won the NFC East again in 1975 but again lost in the first playoff round. The 1976 Cardinals won 10 of 14 games but just missed the playoffs. In those three exciting seasons, the Cardinals offense produced 950 points and, except for the 1947 NFL championship and a near-miss in 1948, provided the franchise with its finest years in the post-World War II era.

Dierdorf received a lion's share of individual awards in addition to the all-NFL and Pro Bowl recognition he was accorded every year in the late 1970s. The NFL Players Association named Dierdorf the NFL's most outstanding offensive lineman three straight years in 1976, 1977 and 1978. He was named to the NFL's Team of the 1970s Decade. In 1975, he won the Forrest Gregg Award as the NFL's premier blocker from the Wisconsin Pro Football Writers and pro football's Top Blocker designation from *Football Digest*. He was recognized as the NFL's finest offensive lineman in the Seagram Seven Crowns of Sports computer competition.

Beyond Football

But to the Cardinals organization and the fans of St. Louis, Dierdorf's dimensions ranged far beyond the football field. No athlete ever gave more to a city on or off the field. An intense performer in the rugged action when he was in uniform, he demonstrated wit, candor, intelligence and leadership off the field, plus a strong sense of community responsibility. Included among his many civic contributions was his charity work with the St. Louis Easter Seals, Cystic Fibrosis Society and United Way.

As early as his fourth NFL season, Dierdorf began planning for his career after football. In 1974, he went to work for KMOX Radio doing a talk show with the Cardinals' quarterback, Jim Hart. In addition to other business ventures in St. Louis, he continued as a sportscaster handling a variety of assignments for 14 years. Eventually, he became a member of ABC's Monday Night Football broadcast team.

Dierdorf is quick to point out that he got the job with ABC not because he had been an outstanding football player but because he was a card-carrying member of the working broadcasters. "I survived in the broadcasting business," he reflects, "because I had the tools that were necessary in that environment, something many former athletic stars do not possess.

Ohio Wolverine

The Dan Dierdorf saga began at Aultman Hospital in Canton on June 29, 1949. Seemingly born to be a football player, he weighed in at 10 pounds 13 ounces. As a 10th grader at Glenwood high school, Dierdorf stood 6-3 and weighed 250 pounds. In his senior season, he was named to the All-Stark County team as a tackle. The same year, he also set a shot put record of 60 feet, 8 inches.

The Canton native very likely would have chosen to play his college football at Ohio State but, when Coach Woody Hayes showed only minimal interest, Dierdorf opted for Michigan.

He was nudged toward the Wolverines by Dick Kempthorn, a former Michigan all-America and a Canton businessman for whom Dan did summer work, and Don James, then a Michigan assistant. Dierdorf, a history major in college, did well with the Wolverines. He was named as an all-America offensive tackle his senior year and was honored as Michigan's Amateur Athlete of the Year. It was at Michigan that Dierdorf's future football position was determined.

Many thought that Dan, with his size, speed, strength, aggressiveness and mobility, would be an ideal defensive tackle.

"It wasn't my decision," Dierdorf, who played both ways in high school and as a Wolverine freshman, explained. "The starting offensive tackles my freshman year graduated before my sophomore year but the two defensive tackles were still there. So in spring practice, the coaches worked me at offensive tackle and I just stayed there. It's that simple. I just wanted to play football. If the coaches had told me I was a defensive tackle, that is where I would be today. But I don't have any regrets. I enjoy being an offensive tackle."

The St. Louis Cardinals selected Dierdorf in the second round as the 43rd player taken in the 1971 NFL draft. He also was selected by the Toronto Argonauts of the Canadian Football League but he opted for the better opportunities of the NFL. He played in the College All-Star Game before joining the Cardinals but his rookie season proved to be sort of an obstacle course, as well as an outstanding learning experience, for the young lineman.

Dierdorf's weight and strength were two factors that concerned the Cardinals. His college training both helped him and hurt him as he prepared for the pros. Bo Schembechler emphasized speed over weight for his players and Dierdorf played in college at about 250 pounds. He had beefed up to 270 in anticipation of turning pro but the Cardinals wanted him to add another 20 pounds or so. Fortunately, when Dan finally met the weight requirement, he found he had retained his 4.9 speed in the 40.

Strength was also a priceless commodity but his college experience paid dividends in this area. He often worked out with Michigan's NCAA heavyweight wrestling champion who admitted Dierdorf was the only person at Michigan who could give him a good workout.

Growing Pains

Dierdorf's Michigan teams ran the football about five out of six plays. In St. Louis, the Cardinals passed about half the time so his major technical challenge was to adjust to the pro style of pass blocking, an activity in which he eventually excelled.

During summer camp, Dierdorf won the starting right guard position but a minor knee injury kept him out of the first two regular-season games. When he returned, he was moved from position to position. He saw service at both right guard and left guard, left tackle and right tackle and at tight end on short-yardage situations. He was even used as a messenger lineman in a few games.

But the constant position shifting caused problems for Dierdorf, even though he possessed well-above-average intelligence. "Try to remember something like 78-double-flex right when you're running across the field," Dierdorf said.

In 1973, the St. Louis offensive line coach, Jim Hanifan, correctly decided Dierdorf would be an ideal offensive right tackle. Soon the coach's new tackle became an intimidator, an enforcer every bit as violent and aggressive as the quality defenders -- Jack Youngblood, Jack Lambert, "Too Tall" Jones, Mean Joe Greene, Bob Lilly, to name a few -- he had to face.

"I don't like me having to beat the hell out of my defensive opponent all day long and then once -- just once -- he slips through and gets the quarterback," Dierdorf proclaimed. "There he is, laying on the quarterback. And I'm embarrassed in front of 25 million people."

"Basically, this is a physical struggle but there is also technique involved," he continued. "The way you combat that is with aggression. I look at the first couple of plays as being of extra importance. I try to remove any thought my opponent might have that this was gonna be his day."

Out of the Shadow

Particularly early in his career, Dierdorf did not receive the public attention that would have been expected for a player of his talents. Part of the reason could be that the guard who played right next to him, Conrad Dobler, relished the title of "The Meanest Man in Football" that was thrust upon him. On the field, Dobler and Dierdorf formed one of pro football's premier guard-tackle combinations but Dobler, because of his frequent zany antics and rash proclamations, got most of the attention.

Eventually, Dierdorf's on-the-field achievements more than made up for any early lack of attention. Beginning with the third game of his rookie season in 1971, he started every game until 1977, when he missed two games with a broken jaw. He even played four games with his jaw wired shut.

For the Cardinals, 1978 was a year of big changes. About the only thing that didn't change was that Dierdorf once again was all-NFL and a Pro Bowl choice. But Dobler was traded to New Orleans and the legendary Bud Wilkinson of University of Oklahoma fame replaced Don Coryell, who was fired as head coach after a 7-7 season in 1977. The Cardinals, however, slipped to 6-10-0.

Things didn't go well for the Cardinals or Dierdorf in 1979. The Cardinals won only five of 16 games. Wilkinson was fired after 13 games and Larry Wilson finished up as interim coach. In the second game, Dierdorf suffered the first major injury of his career, torn ligaments in his left knee. He did not play again and some even questioned if his career might be over.

Hanifan, who had been Dierdorf's personal choice to replace Coryell in 1978, returned as the Cardinals head coach in 1980. And Dierdorf returned for a fifth all-pro season in 1980. The only noticeable difference was the metal knee brace -- similar to the more famous Joe Namath knee brace -- that he wore on his left knee when he played. He played every game in both 1980 and 1981 but, by Dan's own admission, he had lost much of the range and mobility he possessed before his injury.

Before the 1982 season began, Hanifan suggested that Dierdorf make the move to the center position. It was a move dictated partially by personnel necessities and the hope that Dierdorf's career might be extended. Dierdorf accepted the move with considerable doubts but did start every game in 1982, a nine-game season shortened by the NFL Players strike.

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The veteran superstar returned to right tackle in 1983 but played in only seven games. In mid-season, Dierdorf announced he would retire at the end of the campaign. "Ninety-five percent of me is very sad," he said. "But the other five percent -- my knees -- are very happy."

The final game of the season was played on a bitter cold day in St. Louis and Dierdorf had no intention of playing. But as the game neared its end, constant urging from the fans, from his teammates and finally a word from his coach prompted his cameo appearance to end a magnificent career. Dierdorf lined up at his right tackle spot for just two plays that netted the Cardinals 14 yards and a first down. "It was all over in about 30 seconds," Dierdorf recalls. "Every year after I started playing football, I had a picture of my last game. But I never saw it snowing and five degrees."

As it turned out, his final appearance became just a prelude to the best that was yet to come.