

LEM BARNEY

By Don Smith

Flamboyant, exuberant, friendly, talented and little-known, Lem Barney took the National Football League by storm when he joined the Detroit Lions as their second-round draft choice in 1967.

The 6-0, 190-pound speedster from Jackson State came out of his first pro football training camp as the starting left cornerback of the Lions. Although cornerback is one of the most difficult of football positions, even for a seasoned veteran, Barney made an immediate and lasting impression on friend and foe alike.

In the 1967 season opener against the Super Bowl champion Green Bay Packers, he intercepted the first pass the veteran Bart Starr threw into his territory, did a somersault, regained his footing and traipsed 24 yards for a touchdown. In the season finale against Minnesota, Barney swiped three passes in one quarter. He took one of them 71 yards for a touchdown.

Barney wound up the season tied with Dave Whitsell of New Orleans for the NFL interception championship with 10. Three of his interceptions were returned for touchdowns, a rookie feat matched only by Ronnie Lott of the San Francisco 49ers. Barney permitted only one touchdown in the entire season.

In a runaway vote, Barney was named the Associated Press defensive rookie of the year. He was also selected to some all-pro teams and named to play in his first Pro Bowl.

Barney was destined to play with distinction for 10 more seasons with the Lions before his retirement prior to the 1978 campaign. He decisively proved that he was one of history's premier cornerbacks and he also excelled as a punt and kickoff return specialist who made it impossible for opposing defenses ever to relax whenever Lem Barney was on the field.

As the ultimate tribute to his sensational NFL career, in 1992 Barney was selected for his sport's highest honor, membership in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. He becomes only the fifth cornerback in history to enter the Hall.

Had certain members of the Detroit personnel staff prevailed in their thinking, Barney would never have become a Lion. His credentials were good -- three-times all-conference with 26 interceptions at Jackson State. He also could run the 100 in 9.7 seconds. Still, some doubted if he could have learned enough in a small college to make the grade in the NFL.

But new coach Joe Schmidt recognized that the Lions were in desperate need of a cornerback to replace Dick "Night Train" Lane, the future Hall of Famer who had retired in 1965. Barney was strongly recommended by Lions scout Will Robinson.

The Lions went to the touted UCLA running back, Mel Farr, in the first round and then tapped Barney in the second round. Farr, who became Barney's roommate as a rookie, had the big-school "smarts" to employ an agent who got him a big signing bonus. Barney, without an agent, settled for a three-year deal calling for \$15,000 his rookie season, \$16,000 in 1968 and \$17,000 in 1969. He felt he was just lucky to have the chance to play pro football.

Even though he had reluctantly agreed to draft Barney, Schmidt was quite certain his new cornerback would not play much as a rookie. "Pretty damn slight," Schmidt answered when a reporter asked about Barney's chances of starting in 1967. "It takes a little longer to learn how to play cornerback than almost any other position."

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But once training camp began, Schmidt began to have second thoughts. Barney was so lightly regarded he wasn't invited to play in the College All-Star game and this proved to be a big break because it gave him an opportunity to prove his mettle in the early days of the summer grind.

Defensive coach Jim David, who had been an outstanding safety in the Lions' championship years of the 1950s, pitted Barney against Gale Cogdill, a former all-pro receiver, in the first camp scrimmage. Barney deflected the first pass thrown to Cogdill and made a one-armed interception on the second.

Cogdill screamed: "That's interference," but Barney cockily retorted: "Offensive or defensive?" The rookie cornerback was well on the way to proving he belonged.

Barney's first-game interception against the Packers was just the first of many big plays by the hustling newcomer. He quickly proved he could do much more on defense than just guard against passes. On at least two occasions, he used his speed to prevent almost certain touchdowns by such vaunted stars as Gale Sayers of the Chicago Bears and Don Maynard of the New York Jets. In both instances, Barney used his superior speed to make touchdown-saving tackles.

By nature, Barney was not a violent player. He preferred to level his opponents with a leg tackle instead of with a more vicious shoulder-high "clothesline" stop. And he always offered a helping hand to those he knocked down. On one such tackle of Sayers, he yanked his opponent up and then shook his hand.

"That was our fraternity grip," Barney explained. "We both were in Kappa Alpha Pi when we were in college. But don't tell the coach. He might not like me fraternizing with the enemy."

In addition to his duties as a defender and kick returner, Barney filled in capably when the Lions punter, Pat Studstill, was injured midway into his rookie season. Two years later in 1969, he also was called upon to fill in as a punter.

In a game against Washington, Barney returned a blocked field goal 77 yards for a touchdown and had a 91-yard punt return negated by a teammate's clip. Later in the game, Barney made the spur-of-the-moment decision to run for a much-needed first-down from punt formation.

"I saw Schmidt scratching his head and figured that must be a sign," Barney explained. "Joe was using his left hand so it had to be a sign. But if I don't make it, that's a \$500 fine."

"He's unbelievable," Schmidt said. "No matter what he's asked to do for us, he does it in spectacular fashion. I wish I had two others just like him. I would play one next to him on defense and I'd use the other on offense."

Detroit was perennially beset with offensive problems and Schmidt was often asked if Barney might be more valuable on offense. "The best athletes you have on the team play at cornerback," the coach replied. "The receivers come at you one-on-one and you just can't hide. You either make the play or you don't. It's that simple. Barney makes the plays because of his speed, his quickness, his reactions, his senses."

From his very first game as a rookie, it seemed that everything came easily for Barney. There were touchdowns galore, all-pro honors, the Pro Bowl. There were kick returns when he zigzagged through 11 tacklers, outran them and then waved back at his frustrated pursuers as he neared the goal line. He was even popular -- a real morale-booster -- with his teammates. For Lem Barney in the late 1960s, pro football was a lark.

But in 1970, the same year he was awarded a handsome new \$42,000 contract that made him the highest-paid cornerback in the NFL, it all began to change. Dick Gordon of the Chicago Bears burned him for a couple of touchdowns and Fred Biletnikoff of the Oakland Raiders beat him twice on the same touchdown play in seven minutes.

In 1971, it was even worse. Bob Grim burned him in the opener at Minnesota and Barney failed to try to tackle Grim when he was falling at the 2-yard line. Later, he fumbled on a punt return and the Vikings

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recovered and kicked a winning field goal. A painful injury kept him out of five games. For the first time ever, Barney was booed.

There were reports that Barney had decided to change his gambling ways on defense, ways that had produced some of his most memorable moments as well as his most miserable embarrassments. But Barney would have none of it.

"It came out in the paper that I wasn't going to gamble as much as I had previously," he said. "It said I would just stick to basic defense. But I don't think I ever changed my style and I don't think I will, either. You have to have one style and stick to it and try to improve on what you are doing."

Barney did bounce back in 1972 with another Pro Bowl season and he repeated again in 1973. A disappointing 1974 campaign when Barney had to overcome personal problems was followed by Pro Bowl seasons in 1975 and 1976. Barney finished his career in Detroit in 1977.

Barney, who altogether played in seven Pro Bowls and was named all-pro three times, became widely recognized as Detroit's "offense on defense." He scored 11 touchdowns, seven on interceptions, two on punt returns, one on a kickoff return and one on a blocked field goal return. His longest touchdown came on a 98-yard kickoff return and seven of his defensive touchdowns came on plays of 40 yards or more. In one four-game stretch in 1968, the Lions scored only two touchdowns, both of them by Barney.

With his interceptions and returns, he accumulated 3,972 yards. He had 56 interceptions, tied for 11th most in NFL history, for 1,079 yards. His 143 punt returns netted 1,312 yards and he added 1,274 yards on 50 kickoff returns.

In spite of his great success, Barney often called the cornerback position "the loneliest spot in the world." Lonesome, however, was something Barney never experienced when he was growing up in Gulfport, Mississippi, where he was born on September 8, 1945. He had three sisters for company at home and countless friends to play with and, as Barney admits, "to fight with."

"I tried to run with the older guys. I tried to be in things that were happening," Barney remembers. "I'd get summer jobs like everyone else. I worked on the piers and I carried bananas off the banana boats for \$2.35 an hour."

Barney, who concedes he became known as a roughneck, played quarterback on the 33rd Avenue High School football team in Gulfport. On Sundays, he watched NFL football and studied quarterbacks on black-and-white television. "As I got older, I rooted for Y. A. Tittle and Johnny Unitas," he recalls.

When it came time for college, Barney was not heavily recruited and for a time he thought he would pass up college. But his mother urged him to give college a try for at least one year so he went to Jackson State.

"I recognized that there was no demand for black quarterbacks in the pros back in 1967," Barney says, "so I asked my coach Rod Paige, to change me into a defensive back."

His immediate success as a defender set the stage for an excellent college record which in turn led him to a memorable pro football career.

In the NFL, Barney had to settle for individual acclaim for he never played in a playoff game, let alone win a championship or appear in a Super Bowl. He played under four different head coaches with the Lions, who finished above .500 just four times in his 11 seasons.

"I never had a chance to be a champion in football or basketball from the sandlots to college and on to the pros," said Barney, who now is a public relations counselor for Michigan Consolidated Gas Co. in the Detroit area. "Now I feel like I am a champion," he exclaimed when he learned of his Pro Football Hall of Fame election.

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Lemuel Jackson Barney - DB

6-0 204 Jackson State

B: Sept. 8, 1945, Gulfport, MS

Year	Team	GM	INT	Ret	PUNT RETURNS		
					YDS	AVG	TD
1967	Det	14	10	4	14	3.5	0
1968	Det	14	7	13	79	6.1	0
1969	Det	13	8	9	191	21.2	1
1970	Det	13	7	25	259	10.4	1
1971	Det	9	3	14	122	8.7	0
1972	Det	14	3	15	108	7.2	0
1973	Det	14	4	27	231	8.6	0
1974	Det	13	4	5	37	7.4	0
1975	Det	10	5	8	80	10.0	0
1976	Det	14	2	23	191	8.3	0
1977	Det	12	3	0	0	---	0

11 yrs 140 56 143 1312 9.2 2

Additional: 7 interceptions returned for TDs

Rushing: 5 att., 45 yds

KO Returns: 50 ret., 1274 TD

Punting: 113 punts, 35.5 Avg.