

2,105 !

Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 1999

By Joe Horrigan

The most frequently asked question of Eric Dickerson following his 1983 rookie season with the Los Angeles Rams was, "What will you do for an encore?" After all, he established rookie records for most rushing attempts (390), most rushing yards (1,808) and most touchdowns rushing (18), earned All-Pro honors, was selected to play in the Pro Bowl, and was named the National Football Conference's Most Valuable Player by The Sporting News and the United Press International.

"Last year I set goals of 1,400 yards and 10 to 12 touchdowns," Dickerson offered. "I thought if I did that I had a good year. I've got figures in my mind for this season, but I don't want to say what they are because it might come out sounding bad," he cautiously confessed.

Whatever figure the two-time All-America choice from Southern Methodist University had in his mind, it became apparent late in the 1984 season that he had a realistic shot at becoming just the second running back in NFL history to rush for more than 2,000 yards. With three games remaining, he needed 372 yards, or an average of 124 yards, to surpass O.J. Simpson's record of 2,003 yards set in 1973. Two games was all he needed.

In a week-15 game against the Houston Oilers, with three-and-a-half minutes remaining and Dickerson needing just six yards to pass Simpson, the Rams' offense huddled. "We got together in the huddle and said, 'This is for you, Eric. Go get it.' And he did," said lineman Dennis Harrah.

On a play called 47-Gap, Rams' quarterback Jeff Kemp handed off to Dickerson, who burst around the right side of the line for a nine-yard gain and a permanent place in pro football history. The carry gave him 215 yards for the game and 2,007 for the season. The following week he gained an additional 98 yards against the San Francisco 49ers to finish his amazing record-breaking season with 2,105 rushing yards.

Born on September 2, 1960, Dickerson grew up in Sealy, Texas, a small farming town with a population of 4,418. His great-great aunt Viola Dickerson, whom he calls "Mamma," adopted him as an infant because his birth mother, who also lived with Viola, was too young to care for him adequately. Although he and his birth mother remain close, it was Viola that made the key decisions in Eric's early life.

As a freshman at Sealy High, he once walked off the football field because he felt the coach was treating him unfairly. Viola told him to go right back. "She told me I wasn't playing for the coach, I was playing for myself," Dickerson recalled. It was good advice. By his senior year Eric was a Texas high school football legend. In the state high school football title game, he gained a record 311 yards rushing, and the attention of nearly every major college recruiter.

One recruiter to pay Dickerson a visit was John Robinson, then the coach at the University of Southern California. Robinson traveled to Sealy in an attempt to convince the young high school star to attend USC. He was unsuccessful. However, four years later Dickerson and Robinson would be reunited as a player and head coach with the Rams.

Although Eric initially wanted to attend Oklahoma, he once again followed his great-great aunt's instincts and advice, and chose to attend SMU where he gained 4,450 yards on 790 carries to break Earl Campbell's Southwest Conference record for yards and attempts. His 48 career touchdowns tied Doak Walker's SMU total for career scoring. In his senior year, despite splitting time with running back Craig James, Dickerson finished third in the Heisman Trophy voting.

In 1983 both the NFL's Los Angeles Rams and the Arizona Wranglers of the upstart United States Football League drafted Dickerson in the first round. The Wranglers offered a lucrative contract, but again

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Viola Dickerson cast the deciding vote. "Go with the NFL," she cautioned. "They've been around longer." Dickerson listened and signed with the Rams.

With an offensive line that included Jackie Slater, Harrah, and Doug Smith, John Robinson's Rams were committed to the run.

An immediate success, Dickerson gained more than 1,000 yards each of his first four seasons with the Rams. In three of those seasons he gained more than 1,800 yards and led the NFL in rushing each time. "If you were blind," Robinson once commented, "he could run right by you, and you wouldn't know it unless you felt the wind. He's unique that way. He's the smoothest runner I've ever seen."

The only season the smooth-running Dickerson missed the 1,800-yard mark was in 1985 when he sat out the first two games because of a salary dispute with team management. However, he still finished the season with 1,234 yards, set five team rushing records, and led the Rams to the playoffs.

In the Rams' 20-0 win over the Dallas Cowboys in the 1985 NFC Divisional Playoff game, Dickerson gained a postseason record 248 yards and scored two touchdowns on runs of 55 and 40 yards. Still, for the first time in his short career he was not selected to play in the Pro Bowl.

The following year, Dickerson again led the league in rushing with 1,821 yards and was named league offensive MVP.

A graceful yet powerful runner, Dickerson simply befuddled opposing defenses. The more he carried the ball, the better he seemed to play.

"I can't define a weakness in Eric Dickerson," stated then-TV sports analyst and former Philadelphia Eagles coach Dick Vermeil. "Although all great backs are multi-talented, most have one thing they do extremely well. But this guy can plow through a pile of bodies like (John) Riggins and then put on the moves like (Tony) Dorsett."

Dickerson was a seemingly tireless runner. He would wait and then take advantage of a defense that showed even the slightest bit of fatigue. "You could see it," he said. "When they have their hands on their knees, that's when they're tired. If I get the ball enough times, something's going to give -- me or the defense." Nearly always, it was the defense.

"You keep hearing about burnout," Dickerson once offered, "but what you don't hear is that a runner doesn't have the feel of the offense until after the fourteenth carry and he doesn't have the feel of the defense until after the eighteenth carry. It takes that long to feel out a defense."

Nineteen eighty-seven was a tumultuous year for Eric Dickerson and the NFL. After playing just three games in the strike-shortened season, the Rams, unwilling to renegotiate Dickerson's contract, traded their all-time leading rusher to the Indianapolis Colts.

The Colts, in order to get Dickerson, traded the rights to rookie linebacker Cornelius Bennett, a number one draft choice out of Alabama that they were unable to sign, to the Buffalo Bills. In exchange, the Bills sent running back Greg Bell to the Colts as well as their first round picks in 1988 and 1989 and their second round pick in 1989. The Colts then sent all they had received from Buffalo, along with their own first round draft pick in 1988, their second-round choices in 1988 and 1989 and running back Owen Gill.

In all, the Colts gave up eight players -- if you count the draft picks as players -- for Dickerson. Although that seemed like a steep price to pay, Colts coach Ron Meyer, who coached Dickerson at SMU, didn't think so. When asked what he thought of the trade Meyer simply replied, "I love it."

"Eric the Great" wasted no time in justifying the high price the team paid. Although he played in just nine games with the Colts that year, he managed to gain 1,011 yards to finish second in the NFL rushing derby with 1,288 yards. He also reached a career milestone of 8,000 career rushing yards, which he reached in his 74 games, besting Hall of Famer Jim Brown's record of 80 games.

His efforts earned him All-Pro recognition for the fourth time and a fourth Pro Bowl bid.

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The following season it was more of the same. His 1,659 yards rushing was a Colts' single-season high, it also made him the club's first player to lead the league in rushing since Alan Ameche in 1955. He was also the first back in NFL history to rush for 1,000 yards in his first six seasons.

"I think the Colts use my skills well," Dickerson offered. "If it's a team we feel we can run against then we run the ball to death. If it's a team we feel we can't run against then we just go out and mix the plays up a little bit."

Many, by 1989, were hailing Dickerson as the greatest running back in NFL history. With his 1,311 yards rushing, he became the first player in league history to gain more than 1,000 yards in seven consecutive seasons. He also became the seventh back to gain more than 10,000 yards and the fastest ever to do so, reaching the milestone in just 91 games.

Even though he proved to be an extremely durable runner, Dickerson's upright running style was thought by some to be more "dangerous" than the more conventional low to the ground style. "I don't give players a chance to hit me," he once offered. "I run upright mostly when I see daylight, so if you watch film you'll see I don't get hit in the chest much. Most of the hits I take come on top of the shoulder pads. I believe if I stay tall and run up high, I can see better."

Dickerson's final two seasons in Indianapolis, however, were marred by confrontations with the team's front office. In 1990 he was suspended for four games after refusing to take a team physical. In 1991 he missed six games, three due to a suspension for supposedly refusing to practice, and three due to injury. He finished the season with a career-low 536 yards. Frustrated, he asked to be traded.

"Some of the things I've done," he said, "I've been wrong in doing". I've been hasty, you lose your cool and say things you don't really mean. I think it's out of frustration, out of anger. I think mine was out of frustration. It's not fun losing a lot of games. It's not fun going 1-15."

During the off-season, Dickerson got his wish and was traded to the Los Angeles Raiders. Although he started fifteen games in 1992, his ball-carrying responsibilities were considerably reduced from his earlier years with the Colts and Rams. Still he added a respectable and team-leading 729 yards to his career total.

Finally, in 1993, after a brief stint with the Atlanta Falcons, Dickerson called it a career. After 11 seasons, the prolific runner from Sealy, Texas had amassed 13,259 career-rushing yards, which was second all-time at the time of his retirement. Six times he was selected to play in the Pro Bowl and five times he was named first-team All-Pro.

"He was the finest running back I ever had the opportunity to look at," reflected Jack Faulkner, a long-time Rams' executive and former NFL coach. "I remember Jim Brown and some of the other great ones. Jim Brown ran over people. This guy (Dickerson) made you miss."

In 1983, a reporter, like so many others, asked Dickerson what the Rookie of the Year's goals were for the future. "I'd love to be in the Hall of Fame one day and win Super Bowl rings, or even one...and stay healthy," was his reply.

Although he stayed relatively healthy throughout his career, Dickerson never played on a Super Bowl team. However, on January 30, 1999, in his first year of eligibility Eric Dickerson was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

RUSHING	ATT	YARD	AVG	TD
1983 LARm	390	1808	4.6	18
1984 LARm	379	2105	5.6	14
1985 LARm	292	1234	4.2	12
1986 LARm	404	1821	4.5	11
1987 LARm-Ind	283	1288	4.6	6
1988 Ind	388	1659	4.3	14
1989 Ind	314	1311	4.2	7
1990 Ind	166	677	4.1	4
1991 Ind	167	536	3.2	2
1992 LARd	187	729	3.9	2

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1993 At1	26	91	3.5	0
11 years	2996	13259	4.4	90