

Lance Alworth's 96 game receiving streak ended at 92 games!

By Paul Lovett

With the possible exception of Joe Namath, nobody epitomized the old American Football League like Lance Alworth. Excitement, flair, and the wide-open passing game that characterized the AFL fit Alworth like a glove with coach Sid Gillinan at the controls. Although many of Alworth's receiving stats pale next to records receivers set in the 90's due to the late 70's rule change that emphasized the passing game. Alworth's TD receptions, yards gained, and average yardage per catch still shine when compared to today's NFL pass catchers.

Tops among Alworth's records emphasize his durability. Although slight in build in an era when receivers could be hit anytime on the field of play, Alworth, whose career with the San Diego Chargers matched the AFL's emergence from 1962 to 1969, had seven consecutive years with 1,000 yards receiving! Yet as remarkable as that streak is, another record caught the fans' and media's fancy during the AFL's last days in 1969. That streak involved consecutive games played with at least one catch.

Although broken later on by other receivers, as the 1969 season came to its conclusion much was made of the streak and Alworth's pursuit of the record. Don Hutson had the record at 95 games, and if Alworth could remain injury-free and continue catching passes in every game the rest of the year he would break the record in the season finale against the Buffalo Bills in San Diego. Alworth stayed on schedule, and in a 45-6 rout of the Bills that featured former Charger Jack Kemp's last game, Alworth caught a short pass over the middle early in the first quarter that broke Hutson's record. The game was stopped momentarily as Hutson came out on the field to congratulate the Charger receiver. Alworth, or so it seemed had the consecutive game record of catching at least one pass at 96.

Further research, however, shows that the record keepers had been a bit hasty. Alworth's streak had only reached 92 games by the 1969 Bills contest since Alworth appeared in a 1962 contest after his thigh injury against the Boston Patriots without catching a pass. Alworth, in his rookie year played in 4 games catching 10 passes before sustaining a thigh injury while placekicking after a practice. Subsequent treatment failed to improve the injury and it was assumed that Alworth only played in those four games which meant that those four contests could be included in any future streak. Yet with Alworth's appearance in the Boston game not catching a pass meant that Alworth's "streak" started anew in the season opener in 1963 against the Bills. Since Alworth was also shut out in the 1970 season opener against the future Super Bowl champion Baltimore Colts, Alworth's streak ended at 92 preserving Hutson's mark (which is also in dispute!).

Three steps led to this discovery.

The first involves a book published in 1990 titled *The Pro Football Chronicle* by Dan Daly and Bob O'Donnell that has records and information still unique to the pro football researcher. Various Hall-of-Famer's game-by-game records are displayed in the back of the book. This information is very rare and hard to come by, usually only available through diligent and frustrating newspaper research. Alworth's career is shown, and looking through his game-by-game records you can see how his consecutive game receiving streak grew. Alworth missed a few games due to injury during his career, yet if he did not appear in the contest the streak would still be intact.

Secondly, when researching newspaper accounts of the 1962 mid-season Charger-Patriot clash, one article did comment that Alworth **did** appear, played badly, and left the game still feeling the effects of the thigh injury. (Interestingly the *Chronicle's* game-by-game record claims Alworth did not play in the contest.) This newspaper note, however was probably dismissed by the record keepers since many of pro football's newspaper statistics before the 1966 merger contain many omissions and errors that make work very difficult for any game-by-game researcher.

Clearly, further research was needed to confirm this newspaper claim and the proof was provided by a Patriot coaches film that was discovered in an auction house and won by the author. This film had the Charger offensive plays in the first half of that 1962 game. Probably not seen for 35 years, the film shows Charger QB Dick Wood having a fine first half mixing plays well with fellow offensive mates Keith Lincoln

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and Dave Kocourek. (Jack Kemp had been waived to the Bills due to erratic play and Gillman's waiver mix-up while Paul Lowe had suffered a broken arm causing him to miss the entire 1962 season.)

Most notable were Wood's passing attempts to a young, lanky end wearing number 24. (Alworth started wearing his familiar 19 in 1963.) All the attempts failed and as the half neared its end, Wood heaved a long pass to Alworth that fell incomplete. The long pattern may have stretched the muscle. For the rest of the film Alworth was replaced by end Jerry Robinson, who wore number 29. Alworth did not catch a pass, ending his "streak" at four games. (It is not known if Alworth played in the second half.)

So although Alworth's 96-game streak did not occur, this in no way diminishes his legacy and the records he set. Alworth's speed and grace gave many defensive coaches sleepless nights, and anyone who was lucky enough to see Alworth play remembers his ability to jump and grab the pass over startled defenders and use his speed to take the long pass into the end zone. In the words of fellow AFL receiver Charley Hennigan, Alworth was one of those rare players that alone "was worth the price of admission."