

PAT STUDSTILL:

Returning, Receiving, and Punting for the Lions and the Rams

By Jim Sargent

During Pat Studstill's stellar 12-year career in the National Football League, he was one of the great punters of his era. He led the NFL in number of punts for three years and in punting yardage once, kicking for 3,259 yards for the Los Angeles Rams in 1969.

But the speedster (he was timed at 9.8 seconds in the 100-yard dash in college), who was not drafted by any NFL team, also became a fine wide receiver for the Detroit Lions. In the 14-game season of 1966, Studstill, the prime target of rookie quarterback Karl Sweetan, hauled in 67 passes, scored five touchdowns, and racked up a league-leading total of 1,266 yards. Studstill was selected for the Pro Bowl, named AP All-Pro, and voted Detroit's Most Valuable Player for his excellent 1966 season, his first as a regular.

Before that, the talented all-purpose Studstill was a throwback to the 1940s. Depending on who was injured, he played flanker, split end, or running back, plus he returned punts and kickoffs. In 1965 he became Detroit's punter, averaging 42.8 yards per kick and ranking sixth in the NFL.

In 1966 Pat's average gain of 18.9 yards and his five TD receptions easily led Detroit's pass-catching corps. In fact, Studstill's 67 catches were more than one-fourth of Detroit's 239 receptions. Quarterbacks Karl Sweetan and Milt Plum, who went down with mid-season injury, put the football in the air 456 times.

But Detroit, struggling under second-year coach Harry Gilmer, tied the Minnesota Vikings for fourth place in the five-team Western Conference. Both teams compiled records of 4-9-1. Showing a lack of consistent offense, the Lions scored 206 points, only two points more than the league's lowest-scoring team, the Eastern Conference's last-place Atlanta Falcons (3-11).

But Studstill, a wiry, tough, aggressive six-footer who weighed 175 pounds, became an NFL sensation in 1966. The smallest Lion, he became the key to Detroit's passing attack. His biggest day came when he tied the NFL record by grabbing a 99-yard touchdown pass from Sweetan in a 45-14 loss to the Baltimore Colts on October 16.

An all-around athlete who was very confident of his abilities, Studstill led the NFL in several different categories: once in *yardage gained receiving* (1966) and three times in *total punts* (1965, 1968, and 1969). With the Rams in 1969, he led the league in *yards punted*, totaling 3,259 yards for a 40.7 average per kick.

Famous for high, booming punts that featured good hang time, Studstill would give the special team a real shot at tackling the punt receiver. "If he kicks them any higher," commented sportswriter Jim Murray, "they'll have to put strings on them."

Known for his quick release, Studstill never had a punt blocked.

But the native of Shreveport, Louisiana, first led the NFL in another category, *punt returns*. In 1962, his second year with Detroit, when the Lions (11-3) finished second to the eventual champion Green Bay Packers, Pat returned 29 punts for 457 yards, good for 15.8 yards per return. All three were league-leading figures. The only thing he missed was scoring a touchdown on a return.

Those represent major highlights in Studstill's 12-year NFL career. Considering that he played only ten minutes for the Houston Cougars as a senior, it's surprising that such an underrated player could enjoy such a remarkable pro football career. But Studstill, who made the Pro Bowl as an end and a punter for

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 22, No. 4 (2000)

Detroit after the 1965 and 1966 seasons, demonstrated that he possessed the toughness and the versatile skills necessary to succeed during a time when the NFL fielded 14 football clubs.

Studstill, who has been making TV commercials in Los Angeles for 20 years, reflected on his college football experiences: "I was a kid out of Byrd High School in Shreveport, Louisiana. I could run track and play any position in the backfield. Houston brought me in and put me at quarterback. I hated quarterback.

"In my freshman year we couldn't play varsity ball. I was a standout, I guess. The coach was high on me, the alumni were high on me, the city was high on me. But I didn't like quarterback. I wanted to play wide receiver. I played quarterback against Texas A&M in my sophomore year. I threw a touchdown pass and picked up good yardage running. So I went to the coach, Hal Lahar, and said, 'You know, I really don't want to play quarterback. I'm not a good quarterback. I don't have the arm. I know that I could be better at wide receiver and punter.'

"The coach didn't like it, but he made the switch. Then I got married. The coach didn't like that either. He benched me three quarters of the way through my junior season. The coach had said, 'If anybody gets married on this team, I will take him off scholarship.' So he benched me.

"In my senior year, I was the best punter and best receiver they had on the team, but they benched me. I kept my scholarship, but I didn't play 10 minutes as a senior. I never lettered my senior year. That broke my heart. I never forgave that coach. I never said anything bad about him, but I never will forgive him.

"All the letters which I got from NFL teams like the Steelers, the Rams, the Lions, and others, letters that they send out every year to young prospects, they all came to nothing. No team drafted me.

"Finally, one of the assistant coaches, Red Conkwright, called Detroit scout Bob Nussbaumer and recommended me to the Lions. Red said, 'You ought to take a look at this kid. He can play any position. He'd probably help you a great deal at defensive back.'

"Well, I didn't want to play defensive back. I don't mind getting hit, but I didn't want to hit anybody. But I was working for Red Ball Motor Freight at the time. I hitch-hiked to Detroit for a tryout in 1961, and the rest is history.

"When I got to training camp, I met all these big-time players I had read about, like Gail Cogdill, Jim Gibbons, Alex Karras, Roger Brown, and all those guys. I said, 'This is the pros, man. *This is really it. I'm here. I can't believe this.*' I knew I was going to make that team, one way or the other. I saw Karras, and he was *huge*, a big block of a guy. He wore glasses and looked like a professor. I saw Wayne Walker and all those guys. We had a great team.

"They brought me up as a defensive back. But I couldn't cover Jim Gibbons. They'd put me on Jim, and he'd beat me every time. They had to put me somewhere, because I was fast and quick. So they put me at punt and kickoff returns, and they put me at wide receiver. In 1961 in the first exhibition game against Philadelphia, I caught a 78-yard pass. Then I ran a 100-yard kickoff back against Chicago. So that made the team for me."

Studstill excelled in several areas as a rookie. He led the Lions in kickoff runbacks, returning 16 kicks for 448 yards (28.1 avg) and a touchdown. Howard "Hopalong" Cassidy led the club in returning punts, carrying 16 kicks for 159 yards (9.9 avg). But Studstill returned eight punts for 75 yards (9.4 avg). Pat also hauled in five passes for 45 yards, but he did not score.

As the Lions battled Green Bay to the wire in 1962, smashing the Pack on Thanksgiving Day, 26-14, Studstill took over at wide receiver, after Terry Barr injured his knee. During the last five games of the season, Pat caught 36 passes, gained 479 yards (13.3 avg), and scored four times, plus he led the league in punt returns.

Recalling the final game of the season, a 3-0 loss to the Bears on the frozen tundra of Soldier's Field in Chicago, Studstill said, "One of our last passes was thrown to me in the end zone. I dived and stretched out, but my elbow hit the frozen ground, and the ball popped out of my hands. I'll never forget that. I still have a weird-looking elbow because of that play.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 22, No. 4 (2000)

"Green Bay won the NFL title, and we went to the Playoff Bowl in Florida. I think that runner-up game made us \$500."

Studstill continued, "George Wilson was still coaching the Lions. I loved George Wilson. He was a good man. His assistants were Scooter McLean, Les Bingaman, Aldo Forte, and Don Shula. They were the greatest bunch of coaches I've ever met. The coaches were just like one of the guys."

"That's what was so great about pro football. Coming in from college, where I was treated like an idiot, I went to the pros where we were respected. That was really great. Hell, the coaches would drink beer with you, and kid you, and talk to you. It was a wonderful transition for me."

"You could sit down at a bar with Les Bingaman, and they'd bring him a case of Falstaff. He'd sit there and talk to you, and the guys would be sipping their beers. He'd chug a bottle of Falstaff, put it back in the case, and go on talking. Les would go through 24 bottles. He'd be hot and sweating, but he'd pull those bottles out and finish one. In other words, one of our sips was a bottle for him! He was something else."

"But those were different years in the NFL. You had 14 teams. The quality of football in the National Football League has been diluted. Don't tell me that you can field more than 30 teams filled with great players. When you get 30 teams, you're going to have more mistakes than I've ever seen in my life. I've seen a team make as many *mental mistakes* in a game as the Lions used to make in a *season*."

"In 1963 I was injured. I got a bad knee injury. I was blocking the defensive left cornerback and Nick Pietrosante was supposed to run off tackle. All I have to do is stand in front of the guy. I don't even have to block him. Pietrosante cut around Jim Gibbons, our end, and Nick stumbles, and falls, right into my left leg. We were in Omaha, Nebraska, playing an exhibition game against the St. Louis Cardinals. I thought my left knee was ruined."

"They took me off the field, and I've never been in more pain in my life. I never thought I would play again. Doctor Robert Bailey saved my knee. He put it back together. It slowed me down a little bit, but not that much. I returned punts and kickoff until the first part of 1965, and Detroit started to give me a break. They ran my butt off. If I wasn't punting or returning a punt or kickoff, I was playing wide receiver!"

"I had a lot of fun, believe me. It was like playing high school football again."

In 1965, following the retirement of Hall of Famer Yale Lary, Studstill took over Detroit's punting duties, averaging 42.8 yard per kick. He still returned punts and kicks. Also, he played split end when Gail Cogdill suffered a fractured kneecap. In 1966, following the retirement of Terry Barr, Studstill became the regular flanker.

"My greatest season came in 1966 when the Lions got Karl Sweetan," Studstill recalled. "He would stand in that pocket and throw the ball. We just clicked, that's all. We didn't have a lot in common off the field. But on the field, I was his man in '66."

"Gail Cogdill was the receiver on the other side, and he took a lot of heat off me. They would double-team Gail, so I could get open easier. Gail fractured his kneecap in 1965, so in 1966 he didn't have quite the speed that he had before. But I had a lot of respect for him as a receiver."

"I only played 13 games in 1966. I asked Harry Gilmer, the coach, not to play the last game, because I had screwed my knee up against Los Angeles. I said, 'If I go out there today and mess my knee up, I won't get to go the Pro Bowl. I want to play in the Pro Bowl.' Harry said, 'Don't worry about it. Just sit down. I'll play Bill Malinchak or somebody.'"

"We were in last place in 1966, so it didn't matter. But Charley Taylor of Washington passed me for the league lead in receptions. I finished with 67 and he made 72. I led the league in total yardage, but Charley led in receptions."

"That's the year of my 99-yard reception. It's in the *Guinness Book of Records*. We were playing Baltimore, and we were on the one-foot line. Sweetan said, 'Have you got enough speed to run it up on this back?'"

"I said, 'Hell, yes, I can run it up.'"

"Sweetan hit me on a cross pattern, and I just ran over the middle. I caught it and ran about 60 yards for the TD. It totaled out at 99 yards. It's been tied since then, and somebody set it before me. But it can never be broken. You can't have a pass go longer than 99 yards. I think about six of us hold the record."

Unfortunately, Studstill's 1967 season was plagued by a hamstring injury. Missing several games, he caught only 10 passes for 162 yards and two touchdowns. Detroit shifted most of the punting duties to rookie defensive back Lem Barney, who punted 47 times for a 37.4 average. Studstill kicked 36 times for an excellent 44.5 average.

"In 1967," Studstill recalled, "in the third game of the season against the Packers and Herb Adderly, I pulled a hamstring in my right leg. After a week's treatment, they thought I should consider shooting it up and trying to play. By 'shooting it up,' I mean with Novocain. I had the final decision, and I agreed.

"Needless to say, it didn't work. Unfortunately, the club didn't want to wait, so every week I would try to play and I would injure it worse. So after two and a half games and four weeks of trying (seven games total) and re-injuring the hamstring, we realized that it would take much, much longer.

"At my request, Detroit traded me to the L.A. Rams in 1968. I wasn't sure I could even punt when I reported to the Rams' camp that summer. The leg still gave me problems, but I didn't tell anyone. It still gives me trouble occasionally.

"In 1967 I was off to one of my best seasons and in the best shape of my life. I think I could have surpassed the '66 season, but it just didn't happen. So I had played for George Allen in the '67 Pro Bowl. George said he would like to have me as a back-up receiver and punter. I got hold of him in the offseason and asked if he could still use me. Knowing the Lions were not going anywhere with their upper management and front office staff, I saw the handwriting on the wall. Going to the Rams proved to be a great opportunity for me, plus I could play a few more seasons. I'm very happy the way things have turned out. I'm pleased and proud of my life and times."

With LA, Studstill enjoyed four fine seasons. Used occasionally as a fourth receiver, he peaked in 1970 with 18 catches for 252 yards and two scores. During that time he led the NFL with 81 punts in 1968 and 80 punts in 1969. He averaged 39.6 yards per punt in 1968, 40.7 yards in 1969, 39.1 yards in 1970, and 41.4 yards in 1971.

Studstill remembered, "George Allen said to give him 40 yards a punt, but to kick it a mile high so there could be no runback. That's what I tried to do for the Rams."

He added, "In 1970 I had enjoyed a nice highlight. It was one of the best teams I ever played for, and it was the last year George Allen coached in LA.

"We played the New York Giants in Yankee Stadium on the last day of the season, and I caught two TD passes there. That was my 'last hurrah.'

"To catch two TD passes in Yankee Stadium, with all those fans up in the stands, that was quite a thrill. It seemed like *millions* of people were looking at me!

"In 1971 I punted for the Rams. Tommy Prothro wouldn't play me at wide receiver. I don't know why.

"I finished my career punting for New England in 1972. By then I just wanted to get out of football, and I did it graciously. I didn't hang in there when I wasn't supposed to. I feel good about leaving when it was time to go.

"It was like getting a monkey off my back. You had to go up and make it at training camp. You don't know whether you're going to make the team. You think, 'What am I going to do if I don't make the team?'

What did Studstill do in the off-season?

"In Detroit, as I said, I worked for Maritz. In LA I worked in real estate. I did the same thing in New England, working with real estate, pensions, and profit-sharing plans for closely-held corporations. I worked in those areas for 10 years.

"I met my wife Rita in 1979. After a while, she would say, 'Why don't you try the movies? You were in *Paper Lion*.'

"I would tell her, 'I'm not an actor.'

"Rita said, 'You don't have to be an actor. Why don't you try commercials?'

"In 1981 I tried out for a commercial with Chevrolet, and I got it. They put me in a big ol' Stetson hat and a suit. I'm driving this Chevrolet Impala down some road. I look out the window, and the camera's right there, and I say, 'This is it.'

"That TV commercial ran all year long and I made about \$20,000. I said, 'This is what I want to do!'

"Since then I've made over 300 commercials. I get a better retirement from that than I do with the NFL."

Studstill also appeared in three TV movies and several hour-long programs, including *Dukes of Hazard* and *Magnum, P.I.*

I saw Studstill perform in an episode of *Magnum* called "Past Tense." In that program James Wainwright played a prisoner while Studstill and Drew Snyder played "muscle from the mainland."

The two hoods broke Wainwright out of prison after kidnapping T.C. and his helicopter. Wainwright, who planned to escape with a cache of weapons hidden on a deserted island, attempted to kill Magnum, that is, Tom Selleck. Before that, the ringleader shot Snyder and Studstill in a tunnel where the weapons were hidden.

Laughing about the memory, Studstill recalled, "James Wainwright called the night before the show aired and said, 'Don't go in the tunnel—don't go!' We all watched it happen on TV and had a good laugh."

What are some of his favorite highlights?

Studstill recalled, "One was a pass I caught against the Rams in 1962. I caught the winning touchdown. Then I got traded to Los Angeles in 1968, and we beat Detroit. I caught the winning touchdown in that game, too.

"So I caught the winning touchdown for one team against the other. I've got both the game balls. I've got those in a trophy case.

"That's a highlight. My 100-yard kickoff return was a highlight. My 99-yard reception is another one. Leading the league in punt returns is another highlight."

Studstill enjoyed an outstanding career. The all-around athlete from Shreveport led the NFL in several categories: once in receiving yardage, three times in number of punts, once in punting yardage, and once in punt returns.

"I had a great career. I really did," Pat commented. "I wish I could give something back to the National Football League. But I don't know how I could, or where to start. But I'd like to give something back to football."

A two-time Pro Bowler and Detroit's MVP in 1966, his career shows how far a strong combination of talent and self-confidence, despite a lack of size, can take a tough, aggressive, determined athlete.

As a punter, Studstill booted 560 kicks for a total of 22,764 yards. In other words, he punted almost 13 miles and averaged 40.7 yards per kick.

Now a member of the NFL Alumni and the NFL Players Association, he was inducted into the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame in 1999. Considering his impressive accomplishments, Pat Studstill should have been given that recognition years ago.