

# LYNN SWANN

By Joe Horrigan  
Courtesy of the Pro Football Hall of Fame

Lynn Swann was more than a great athlete. He was a performing artist whose stage was a football field. His weekly Sunday recitals were showstoppers that left audiences awestruck and cheering for more. His leaping fingertip catches were made with the grace of a ballet dancer. His pass patterns across the middle were run with the fearlessness of a circus highwire walker. And, like other great entertainers, his finest performances often came in the final act, when it meant the most.

Although truly a performing artist, Swann's performances didn't earn him Oscars or Emmy Awards, he was instead rewarded with his profession's equivalent – All-Pro, Pro Bowl, and Most Valuable Player accolades. And now topping the list of his career honors, is the one bestowed upon him in January 2001 – pro football's highest honor – election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Born on March 7, 1952, in Alcoa, Tennessee, Swann grew up in San Mateo, California. His father, Willie, was an aircraft maintenance worker and his mother, Mildred worked as a dental hygienist.

It was Mildred Swann who encouraged "Lynn the performer," who as a youngster had a seemingly endless source of energy. His mother enrolled him in dance classes in an effort to harness some of his exuberance.

"When I was in grammar school," he recalled, "I felt more comfortable on the dance floor than the football field." From the age of four until his senior year in high school Lynn studied various forms of dance including ballet, modern dance, and tap.

While it was his mother that introduced him to dance, it was his older brother Calvin that nurtured Lynn's interests in sports. Always willing to try whatever sport his older brother was playing, Lynn was invariably one of the smallest players. He quickly learned, however, not to be intimidated by his smallish size.

"I was always smaller and younger than the other kids," he remembered. "My game had to be a mental one. I had to outsmart and out quick the other kids and take advantage of mistakes." He later realized that it was that attitude combined with many of the skills he learned from dance and later gymnastics that helped develop "Lynn Swann the athlete."

Swann, a Baptist, won an academic scholarship to the Catholic all-boys Serra High School. There, Lynn set a school record for the long jump, played on the basketball team, and starred on the football team as a wide receiver for two seasons and as a quarterback in his senior year.

While Lynn had many good experiences in high school, not all were pleasant. As one of just nine African Americans in a school of 900, he found some white classmates treated him differently off the basketball court or football field. At the same time, some of his black friends ostracized him for attending a white school and for taking on what they considered white airs. It was a perplexing situation for the good-natured Swann. "I learned very young the games people play," he said in a 1979 *Sports Illustrated* interview.

Swann earned high school All-America honors and was recruited by several colleges and universities. He even visited Notre Dame, where Coach Ara Parseghian talked about making him a quarterback. His first choice, however, was UCLA, but unfortunately, it wasn't one of the schools that called. When UCLA didn't offer a scholarship, Lynn decided on the school's cross-town rival USC.

UCLA's oversight was a blessing for USC as the slender wide receiver went on to set a then-school record of 96 receptions and was second in receiving yardage with 1,562 yards and finished as the third leading punt returner in the school's history. He also played in two Rose Bowls, on a national championship team, and in 1973 was a unanimous first-team All-America choice.

Still, even with all his successes, Swann really didn't consider the pros until after his junior season when the Trojans won the 1972 national championship. When it became apparent to him that he was going to be a high draft pick, he hoped to be selected by a West coast team. He thought at the time that the Oakland Raiders might call his name. "I figured they were going to have to replace Fred Biletnikoff eventually," he said.

But Oakland took offensive tackle Henry Lawrence as the nineteenth choice of the first round. The Pittsburgh Steelers chose two picks later and grabbed Swann, the first wide receiver selected. About the only thing he knew about Pittsburgh was that “they had a guy named Franco (Harris) and how cold it would be.”

When Lynn joined the Steelers, he joined a team that was already well into its transformation from cellar-dweller to one of the NFL’s truly powerful dynasties. Already in place were defensive stars and future Hall of Fame members Joe Greene, Mel Blount, and Jack Ham, as well as Terry Bradshaw, Mike Webster, and Harris on offense. What the team seemed to lack was a true game-breaker at the wide receiver slot. Swann was the answer to their prayers.

By most accounts, Swann had a great rookie season. His gutsy play particularly as a punt returner established him as a tough competitor. He led the NFL in punt returns with 577 yards on 41 returns, which at that time was a club record and fourth best in league history. Out of his 41 returns, he called for a fair catch just three times, and his 64-yard punt return against the New Orleans Saints was the Steelers’ longest scoring play of the season.

As a receiver, he shared playing time with veteran wide out Ron Shanklin, but did earn a starter’s berth in two games. In the AFC championship game against the Oakland Raiders the rookie receiver scored the go-ahead touchdown as the Steelers advanced to their first Super Bowl.

“I didn’t catch a pass that day as a wide receiver,” Swann recalled of Super Bowl IX. “But late in the game, Terry Bradshaw called a reverse with me as the ball carrier. Franco Harris was on his way to rushing for 158 yards...as a team we had already set a rushing record. When the reverse was called, Franco starred at me. ‘Don’t lose any yards,’ he said. When we broke the huddle and lined up, an official stopped play momentarily to change the ball. Standing there, I heard Carl Eller of the Vikings yell, ‘Look out for the reverse.’ Franco and Terry looked at me and laughed.... Somehow I got back to the line of scrimmage.”

The next year, Shanklin was traded and Swann was inserted in the starting lineup. Even though the Steelers were a running team, Lynn managed to record 49 catches for 781 yards and a league-high 11 touchdown receptions.

In the 1975 AFC Championship Game, a rematch against the Raiders, Lynn suffered a concussion after being wracked by the Raiders’ safety George Atkinson. Although the Steelers went on to win, it initially appeared unlikely that Swann would be able to play in the Super Bowl. But with two weeks off before the big game, a well-rested Swann recovered sufficiently to play.

Not only did he play, he grabbed four passes for 161 yards, scored one touchdown and set up the other. Three of his catches, as one veteran reporter noted, were of the “break-out-the-thesaurus variety.” The first was a 32-yarder down the sidelines with tight defensive coverage. Three plays later the Steelers scored. On his second reception, a circus grab, he dived, tipped the ball, did a midair twist, and caught it while lying the ground – a 53-yard gain. His biggest catch of the game, however, came with just minutes remaining, when he burned the Dallas defense with a 64-yard touchdown catch that put the Steelers ahead 21-10.

“My big catches that day are what people remember,” Swann said. “But in coming back from my concussion, my biggest catch occurred on the first pass that Terry threw to me. I went up for a high, graceful reception that gave me the confidence I needed to make the other catches later on.” The Steelers went on to win 21-17 and Swann was named the game’s MVP.

“I’d like to say that we developed Lynn Swann,” said Chuck Noll, the usually reserved head coach of the Steelers. “But the truth is he was perfectly developed as a football player the first time he stepped on our practice field.”

The following season began with the assumption that Swann would continue his ascent into the limelight as one of the game’s premier wide receivers. But, in the first game of the season, disaster – or rather George Atkinson – struck again.

In a now notorious play Atkinson walloped an unsuspecting Swann in the back of the head with a forearm smash sending him to the turf. Swann, who was clearly not involved in the play, lay motionless with another concussion. The concussion caused Lynn to miss two games, and that coupled with a foot injury sustained later in the season, resulted in a statistically disappointing season for the young receiver.

Despite his injuries though, the gutsy Swann still led the team in receptions and finished strong down the stretch. He caught 12 passes and scored three touchdowns in the last three regular season games, including a remarkable

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five-reception outing in the snow in Cincinnati. In the postseason, he added to his growing reputation as a big-game performer by hauling in eight receptions for two touchdowns in two games.

Swann, however, concerned about his concussions, seriously considered retiring from the game after just three seasons. Ultimately, he decided that he still enjoyed playing too much to call it quits. He did decide, however, to take a vocal stand against the unnecessary violence that existed in the game. His sometimes unpopular and courageous stance against unsportsmanlike play eventually resulted in rules changes.

In 1977, Lynn returned to full form. His 50 receptions again were the most by a Steelers player. His outstanding play earned him Pro Bowl and All-Pro honors for the second time in three years.

While 1977 was a terrific season for the fourth-year veteran, 1978 was a breakout year. That season Swann recorded 61 catches for 880 yards, both career highs, and consistently demonstrated an uncanny ability to deliver in the clutch. He also had his best postseason performance with 13 catches for 274 yards and three touchdowns. His per catch average in the playoffs was an impressive 21.1 yards. The Steelers, like Swann, also had a great season and again advanced to the Super Bowl.

Super Bowl XIII was a déjà vu game for the Steelers. Just as they had in Super Bowl X, they faced the Dallas Cowboys. It was the same teams in the same Orange Bowl Stadium, the same coaches, and many of the same players. Happily for the Steelers, their star receiver again turned in a sterling performance, catching seven passes for 124 yards and a touchdown.

John Stallworth, the Steelers other outstanding receiver, and Swann's close friend, caught two touchdown passes in Super Bowl XIII. The first was on a pass play that Swann convinced Bradshaw to call, assuming his quarterback would call his number.

"People tell me that John (Stallworth) caught two touchdowns in the Super Bowl and I only got one. But if they want to nitpick, I got one and a half because I put that play in," Swann joked.... "Terry called it in the huddle and looked at me and smiled and then called it to John's side. We were doing things like that all year."

Swann and the Steelers pressed on to a record fourth Super Bowl in 1979, a 31-19 victory over the Los Angeles Rams. Lynn caught five passes for 79 yards, including a 47-yard touchdown grab that put the Steelers into the lead after trailing 13-10 at halftime.

At the time of his retirement from pro football, Swann, who was named to the All-NFL Team of the 1970s, held five Super Bowl records, including career receptions, career receiving yards, career touchdown receptions, yards in a game, and the highest punt return average in a game. In 1991 he was named to the NFL's Super Bowl Silver Anniversary Team.

Nine seasons Swann performed with the Pittsburgh Steelers. His career portfolio shows that he recorded 336 receptions for 5,462 yards and 51 touchdowns. It also shows that at the time of his retirement, he was the Steelers career leader in receptions, receiving yards, and touchdown receptions. What it doesn't show is the tremendous impact those receptions and yards had on the fortunes of one of pro football's all-time great teams.

For nine seasons there was simply no such thing as a Lynn Swann-dropped pass. "I don't care if they only throw one pass to me the whole game," Swann once said. "I'll make sure that I catch that one." And as his legions of fans can attest, when he made one of his trademark spectacular game-winning catches, it was a thing of beauty. He was an impact player whose exciting play and career achievements earned him rave reviews and a permanent place in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

**LYNN SWANN**                      **Wide Receiver**  
 Swann, Lynn Curtis    5-11, 180    College: USC    High School: Serra [Foster City, CA]  
 Born: March 7, 1952, Alcoa, TN  
 Drafted: 1974 Round 1 Pit

Year	Team	GM	PC	YDS	AVG	TD						
							1979 Pit	13	41	808	19.7	5
1974	Pit	11	11	208	18.9	2	1980 Pit	13	44	710	16.1	7
1975	Pit	14	49	781	15.9	11	1981 Pit	13	34	505	14.9	5
1976	Pit	12	28	516	18.4	3	1982 Pit	9	18	265	14.7	0
1977	Pit	14	50	789	15.8	7						
1978	Pit	16	61	880	14.4	11	9 yrs	115	336	5462	16.3	51