

# SPIDERMAN

## The Jimmy Allen Story

By John Bennett

If one play can sum up a football career, then a single punt return did so for Jimmy Allen. In a November 1973 rout of California, Allen recklessly picked up a punt in the end zone and ran 101 yards for a touchdown. Thirty years later, this is still a UCLA record and although it has been matched, it is unlikely to ever be broken. Today his trophies and awards, along with a pair of Super Bowl rings, lie tucked away in storage, ignored and forgotten. Their owner now has drifted far away from his days of football glory, to a life filled with hardship and isolation. Yet the present makes only part of a compelling story of the man who called himself "The Spiderman."

Jim Allen was born in Clearwater, FL on March 6, 1952. In his early teens, he moved to Los Angeles to live with his aunt and uncle. Jim grew up big for his age, with unusually long arms. These physical traits made him an exceptional athlete, especially in swimming. During his days at Los Angeles City High School, Allen shattered all city records in several swimming events and in 1972, he even tried out for the Olympic team.

The presence of Mark Spitz unfortunately put an end to his Olympic dreams, but Allen had other athletic options. He played both offense and defense for his high school football team and was All-City his senior year. He also found time to meet his future wife Cora Scott. After graduation in 1970, he entered Pierce College. His large 6'2" frame and his extended reach made him a great tight end, as well as a top-notch defensive back. In 1971 he was named a juco All American at both positions, and this earned him recruitment to UCLA. Joining him on the Bruins was another Pierce teammate, quarterback Mark Harmon, whose greatest fame lay ahead as a successful television actor.

Allen played for UCLA during the two years of Pepper Rodgers' tenure there. During this time, UCLA was overshadowed by great USC teams (which featured future Steeler WR Lynn Swann), but both the team and Allen enjoyed great seasons. Along with his record setting punt return, he intercepted 10 passes in two years and graduated as the school's 5th all time leading interceptor. In 1973, Allen made the all PAC-8 team and was named to several All-American teams. A captain his senior year, he received two team leadership awards and finished out his career playing in the All Star Hula Bowl. He also earned the nickname "Spiderman" due in part to his coverage abilities.

On what would prove to be one of the greatest drafts in NFL history, the Pittsburgh Steelers would draft Hall of Famers with its first three choices-Swann, Jack Lambert, and with an early 4th round pick acquired in a trade, John Stallworth. With its regular choice, the Steelers were eyeing Wisconsin center Mike Webster, considered a real sleeper by draft chiefs Dan and Art Rooney, Jr. However, the draft team also saw Allen hanging around, and took him with the 100th selection. As they had hoped, Webster lasted until round 5 and gave the Steelers their fourth drafted Hall of Famer that year. Allen was the seventh defensive back drafted that year. Only one of the prior six, Bill Simpson, would intercept more passes in his career. True to his confident and reckless nature, Allen celebrated his draft status by neglecting to attend classes for the rest of the term and thus failing to get his college degree.

The 1974 preseason gave NFL rookies several advantages. The new World Football League had signed away some NFL talent, giving new playing opportunities. A brief players strike also gave rookies added exposure, and the strike settlement gave teams the ability to carry 47 players on the roster, 4 more than in the past. The Steelers had also cleaned house in the off-season, ridding themselves of several veteran starters including cornerback John Rowser. Allen took advantage of these chances to earn a spot on the roster, largely based on his ability to play on special teams. Injuries gave Allen the first start of his NFL career in the season finale against Cincinnati, but he still expected to sit on the bench during the playoffs. However, an unlikely turn of circumstances and coaching decisions would bring about an unexpected turn of events, thrusting him into the forefront of the most crucial game in team history.

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The Steelers defeated the Bills handily in the playoff opener, but went into the AFC Championship game as a decided underdog to the Oakland Raiders. The Raiders had whipped the Steelers in the postseason in 1973, 33-14, and hung a humiliating 17-0 shutout on them at Three Rivers earlier in the season. Coming off a 12-2 regular season, they defeated the defending champion Dolphins in the first round and fully expected to roll on to the Super Bowl with home field advantage on their side.

However, the Steelers met them with a ferocious run defense that completely shut down the Raiders' ground game. The Steelers themselves stuck to a conservative ball control attack, and the game was tied 3-3 until late in the 3rd quarter. Raiders WR Cliff Branch was beating Steelers CB Mel Blount regularly, catching 8 passes against him and setting an AFC playoff yardage record that still stands. In the 3rd quarter, Branch beat Blount on a long touchdown pass, putting the Raiders ahead 10-3. The Steelers came back with a strong drive to tie the game on the first play of the 4th quarter, and then went ahead 17-10 with another touchdown set up by a Jack Ham interception. Raiders QB Ken Stabler came back with an impressive drive, twice hitting Branch with big gains that were only stopped by 2 big tackles by Jack Lambert. The Raiders got a first and goal, but could not score, and then opted for a field goal for a 17-13 Steelers lead. With 4 minutes left in the game the Steelers punted the ball back to the Raiders, giving them the ball back at the 20.

At this point, Steelers coach Chuck Noll and defensive coordinator Bud Carson made a fateful decision- to switch coverages by replacing the future Hall of Famer Blount with the untested rookie, Jimmy Allen. The gamble proved successful, as Branch caught only one pass on three possessions, and the confused Stabler threw a costly interception to J.T. Thomas that clinched a 24-13 Steelers victory. When viewing the game films, one can clearly see the unsung hero, Jimmy Allen as part of the mob scene at the end of the game, raising his index figure in victory.

Allen played on special teams and made 2 tackles in the Steelers first Super Bowl win against the Vikings. His most memorable moment during the 16-6 win actually came at the final gun, when he was in the group of players who lifted Chuck Noll and carried him off the field. In the off-season, he returned to Los Angeles with his wife and son, as he would do immediately following every year of his career.

Despite the Steelers drafting a defensive back, Dave Brown, in the first round of the 1975 draft, Allen increased his playing time in his second season. Along with playing on special teams, he became the nickel back on passing downs. In consecutive games in November, he made his first two career interceptions in games against the Jets (on a pass by Joe Namath) and Browns. Allen's key role on the team was on punt returns. He became the swingman, dropping back to coverage in a return situation, and moving up as the outside rusher in a block formation. It would be in this role that he would play a key part in one of the most critical plays in Steelers history.

The Steelers again won the AFC Central title and won tough home games against the Colts and Raiders. In the Super Bowl, they faced an upstart Dallas Cowboys team that had come to the game as a wildcard team. Despite being decided underdogs, the Cowboys took a 10-7 lead into the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter. Although the Steelers had moved the ball much better than Dallas thus far, special team's breakdowns had helped the Cowboys stay ahead. On the opening kickoff, a reverse runback had given them great field position, and resulted in an injury to Steelers kicker Roy Gerela, who would later miss two short field goals. In addition, problems with the punt team led to a fumble and set up the first Dallas touchdown. Ironically, it would be a special teams play that would turn the game in their favor.

With the Cowboys pinned back deep in their own territory, the Steelers called for a punt block formation. Allen moved up as the outside rusher, with teammate Reggie Harrison coming across from the center. Allen made a great move and beat his blocker, rushing at Cowboys punter Mitch Hoopes from the outside. Hoopes hesitated, then stepped inside -and punted the ball directly into Harrison's face. The ball bounced into the end zone, with Allen in pursuit, but went past the end line for a safety..

The Steelers then rallied for two field goals and Terry Bradshaw hit Lynn Swann on an epic touchdown pass for a 21-10 Steeler lead. Throughout it all, Allen was the Steelers' prime cheerleader on the sidelines; he was the first to congratulate Gerela after his field goal and embraced his old college rival Swann after his touchdown. After the Steelers held off the Cowboys last comeback and won 21-17, Allen again was in the forefront of the mob scene around Noll in the post game celebration.

Allen continued in his nickel back role in 1976. After a 1-4 start, the team won its final nine games, included six shutouts. Allen missed four games due to appendicitis but played more than either of his first two seasons, often coming in as a fifth defensive back on passing downs. The team would again meet the

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Raiders in the AFC Championship game, but this time Oakland would defeat a depleted Steelers squad and end Pittsburgh's two year reign.

The most notable part of Allen's 1976 season came off the field, in a confrontation that still leaves his teammates in disbelief. During the preseason, Joe Greene, one of the most feared players in NFL, arranged for a team party. Allen did not attend, and Greene felt that he was not showing him the proper respect. In the cafeteria the next day, Greene confronted Allen and began eating food off his plate. After Greene dumped a bowl of red sauce in his lap, Allen responded in shocking fashion. He took the bowl and smashed it against the side of Greene's head, nearly tearing off his earlobe. A furious fight ensued which only ended when several of their teammates pulled the pair apart. After being stitched up, Greene went to Allen's room that evening and apologized.

As the 1977 season began, Allen felt his Steelers' career was at a crossroads. He appreciated the teams' success, but wanted a chance to start. In an interview with the Sporting News, Allen commented "I've spent three years watching and I can't get any better watching". With his contract due to run out at the end of the season, Allen wondered if he might be better off starting elsewhere- "I want a chance to start, and I don't want to spend my whole career on the bench behind two super All Pro cats (Blount and Thomas). I think I am an All Pro too".

Allen would get his chance to start in two positions that season. Mel Blount's hold out in preseason moved him into a starting spot at cornerback. After Blount's return, Allen moved over to start at safety in place of the injured Mike Wagner. He would make the most of his starting chances, intercepting 5 passes and making key plays in Steelers wins over Cleveland and Dallas, where he narrowly missed scoring his first NFL touchdown after a long interception return. Still, the season ended on a disappointing note for the Steelers, as they were bounced from the playoffs in the first round by Denver in a game noted for their penalties and turnovers.

As they had done after a first round loss in 1973, the Steelers looked to do some veteran housecleaning. Three starters from their Super Bowl championship teams- Ernie Holmes, Glen Edwards, and Jim Clack- were traded after the season. The reasons for these deals varied, and rumors abounded that they were related to salary demands, off the field disciplinary issues, drug problems, or a combination of all of them. Allen, still demanding more playing time, boiled the waters publicly in a contract dispute, making his days in a Steeler uniform numbered.

After turning in his playbook and making a public "play me or trade me" ultimatum, Jimmy Allen became the fourth key member of the team to be dealt away when he was traded to the Detroit Lions for the Lions' fourth round draft pick in the 1979 draft. Given a chance to start, Allen flourished as a leader in the Lions secondary. Moving over to free safety for good, he relished in his persona of the "Spiderman", a moniker used by both teammates and frequently by himself, and even fashioned a special belt buckle made in the shape of a spider. On the field, Allen became legendary around the NFC Central for taunting and trash talking, with Vikings Hall of Fame quarterback Fran Tarkenton a favored target. Allen did back up his talk by leading the Lions in interceptions all four years he played there, and scored his first and only NFL touchdown in 1978.

However, the Lions did not surround him with the cast of Hall of Famers that he had enjoyed in Pittsburgh. His first two years there were losing ones, but a horrible 1979 season proved to be a blessing in disguise. The Lions 2-14 record earned them the first pick in the 1980 draft, and with it the arrival of Heisman Trophy winner Billy Sims brought a new winning attitude to the franchise. To celebrate, Allen recorded an early rap version of Queen's hit "Another One Bites The Dust", with teammates James Hunter backing him up. The single was a local hit in Detroit and containing such deathless lines as "last year we were 2-14, but this year it's New Orleans". (Allen's son Jimmy Jr. today is an aspiring rap artist in California). With Sims having an excellent rookie season, the Lions rebounded to a .500 record, and better things appeared to be in the future.

The 1981 season was a study in contrasts for the Lions. The team won its first seven games at home, but was awful on the road. Allen, despite suffering a concussion late in the season, had a career high of 9 interceptions, second in the NFC behind Everson Walls. However, the Lions secondary was depleted by other injuries and ranked near the bottom in the league in passing yards allowed. Still the team came into the last game of the season needing only to win at home against Tampa Bay to make the playoffs for the first time in eleven seasons. Unfortunately, it was not to be. A series of mistakes and turnovers allowed the Buccaneers to rally and win the game in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter, sending a disappointed Lions team home for the playoffs. The loss also compelled the Lions' front office to consider serious personnel changes in the off-

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season, including making the secondary younger and faster. These moves led to a series of events that would make the Tampa loss the last game of Jim Allen's NFL career.

A younger player, Alvin Hall, was waiting in the wings in the Lions secondary. Just prior to the start of training camp in 1982, the Lions made for Hall by trading a surprised Allen to the Kansas City Chiefs, in exchange for a conditional draft choice. The round of the choice varied on how much Allen played for the Chiefs, but it was believed that the Lions would be willing to settle for as low as a 9<sup>th</sup> round pick. Allen reported to the Chiefs, but was revealed to have an irregular heartbeat. The Chiefs decided to keep the draft pick and waived Allen just prior to the start of the season. After 8 seasons, 31 interceptions, and 2 Super Bowl championships, his playing career was over.

The abrupt end of his career left Allen embittered and unprepared to meet the challenges of life after football. Returning to Los Angeles, he opened a laundromat, but the business went under after a few years, forcing the Allens to sell their family home and move into an apartment. As the years passed, he grew more distant from his football career, falling out of touch with his teammates and struggling with personal and substance abuse issues. In 1992, he and Cora separated. He found some temporary work by returning to his athletic roots, working for the city of Los Angeles as a lifeguard.

Finally, in 2000 Allen left his home and became a transient on the streets of Los Angeles, occasionally turning up at the home of a friend or a relative. His current residence remains unknown, and his family can only guess to his exact whereabouts. "I know Jimmy likes the beach," Cora softly wonders. In early 2004, Allen's situation became known to a number of his former Steelers and Lions teammates. Greatly concerned, several players are standing ready, willing and able to come to his aid- if and when the Spiderman chooses to return.

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### JIMMY ALLEN

Defensive Back

Allen, James Lee 6-2, 194

College: Pierce JC CA; UCLA

High School: Los Angeles [CA]

Born: 3 / 6 / 1952, Clearwater, FL

Drafted: 1974 Round 4 Pit

1974 Pit 14	1977 Pit 12	1980 Det 15
1975 Pit 14	1978 Det 14	<u>1981 Det 15</u>
1976 Pit 10	1979 Det 16	Games 110