

# Ozzie Newsome

## Cleveland's Own Helped Revolutionize Tight End Position

**By Roger Gordon**

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Ozzie Newsome has a reason, it seems, to return to Canton every nine years. In the summer of 1981, Newsome began his fourth season as the Cleveland Browns' starting tight end as the Browns defeated the Atlanta Falcons, 24-10, in the Pro Football Hall of Fame Game. In the summer of 1990, Newsome began his final season as the Browns were blanked by the Chicago Bears, 13-0, in the HOF contest. This week, "The Wizard of Oz" will return to Canton once again. But instead of catching passes and making blocks on Pro Football Hall of Fame Field in Fawcett Stadium, the great tight end will be catching praise and making speeches right next door on the front steps of the Hall of Fame.

Newsome is one of five men who will be inducted into the pro grid shrine two days before the "new" Browns tackle the Dallas Cowboys in the Hall of Fame Game, a contest that will be beamed across the country on a special edition of ABC's *Monday Night Football*.

Newsome was understandably excited when he first received the news of his induction. After all, he was beginning to look a lot like pro football's version of Susan Lucci, the star of the soap opera *All My Children*, who went nearly two decades before finally winning a daytime Emmy Award, an honor many thought was absurdly overdue. This was Newsome's fourth year of eligibility, and although he might have been getting a little restless, he was very understanding. He recognized that he is not the only talented player who belongs in the Hall of Fame, and that there are only so many spots available each year.

"There are a lot of good players out there who are deserving to be in the Hall of Fame," he said. "I know that. But my time finally arrived, and I'm going to enjoy every minute of it. Other than the birth of my son, nothing compares to this."

Very few tight ends in the history of the NFL compare to Newsome. His 662 career receptions are by far the most ever by a tight end. He had 7,980 receiving yards and 47 touchdown catches. He caught at least one pass in 150 consecutive games, which ranks second all-time behind the Seattle Seahawks' Steve Largent.

Besides his receptions and receiving yards totals, Newsome also holds the Browns' single-season record for receptions. He caught 89 passes in both in both 1983 and '84. His 191 receiving yards on Oct. 14, 1984, against the New York Jets rank third all-time in Browns annals behind Mac Speedie's 228 on Nov. 20, 1949, against the Brooklyn-New York Yankees, and Dante Lavelli's 209 on Oct. 14, 1949, against the Los Angeles Dons.

Those are just a few of Newsome's accomplishments. Space limitations simply do not allow the Free Press to list them all.

Newsome's presenter will be Calvin Hill, a grizzled veteran running back who had played on successful teams in Dallas and Washington before coming to Cleveland in 1978, the same year Newsome was drafted by the Browns in the first round (Clay Matthews was Cleveland's top pick that year, for the team had two first-round draft picks).

"It came down to (ex-Browns cornerback) Hanford Dixon and Calvin," Newsome said. "It was a tough choice, but I chose Calvin because he was like a mentor to me. He molded me."

Newsome received his nickname "The Wizard of Oz" from legendary University of Alabama head coach Paul "Bear" Bryant, under whom Newsome shined in the mid-1970s, due to his "wizardry" on the playing field - as a wide receiver. Like the "all-powerful Wizard" in the mythical Land of Oz, Newsome, Bryant once said, "made things happen" on a football field.

Did he ever!

Newsome was the Southeastern Conference's (SEC) Offensive Player of the Year in 1977, was a three-time All-SEC selection and was named first-team All-America as a senior and second-team All-America as a junior. By the time Newsome finished his collegiate career, he had accumulated 102 catches for 2,070 yards and 16 touchdowns.

Newsome said it was an honor to play for Bryant, and that "Coach," as Newsome referred to him, was a huge factor in his reaching the lofty heights he did. "It was good for me to play for him at that age," Newsome said. "He was the first person to challenge me to play above and beyond. He was a very detail-oriented person."

"Ozzie was the best end I ever coached," Bryant once said. "Not only was he a great receiver, but he had exceptional concentration, fine speed and great hands."

Newsome's participation - and excelling - at other sports while he was growing up in Muscle Shoals, Ala., had much to do with those great hands Bryant spoke of. Newsome was a three-sport star at Colbert County High School in Leighton, playing baseball and basketball in addition to football. He won high school All-America honors in football and basketball. He said his exploits on the baseball diamond and on the basketball court helped his football skills tremendously.

"I was a catcher from Little League through high school, and catching curve balls and tipped balls through nine innings had a lot to do with my concentration," he once said. "A guy swinging at a pitch and you catching the ball takes concentration, and that's one of my biggest assets."

"While I was playing basketball, catching balls on the run, going up for rebounds, positioning and timing all helped me. A lot of it helped my hand-eye coordination. Going up for a football catch is a matter of timing. You have to go up for it at a certain moment of flight."

Since Alabama did not utilize a pass-oriented offense under Bryant, Newsome made every opportunity count. "Because I didn't have many passes thrown at me," he recalled, "every time one was, I had to catch it. That helped me. If the pass was intended for me, I had to get it ..."

And get it Newsome did - but as a tight end for the Browns. "When I was drafted by the Browns, (first-year Browns coach) Sam Rutigliano told me, 'I think you can be a good wide receiver in this league, but I think you can be a *great* tight end.'"

Rutigliano credits Newsome with revolutionizing the tight end position. He said that before Newsome entered the league, tight ends were either too heavy to do the light work or too light to do the heavy work. "Ozzie was the prototype because he could play tight end, and he threatened the defense just like a wide receiver," Rutigliano said. "When he came into the NFL, what was vogue at the time was defenses playing what they called 'double zone,' where two safeties would each cover half the field. Ozzie drove that defense out of football because of his ability as a tight end to run like a wide receiver and attack the middle of the field."

Newsome was a huge part of the Kardiak Kids years of the Browns in 1979 and '80, seasons in which the Browns left their fans gasping for air as 12 games in each of those two seasons were not decided until the final moments. Newsome recalled a Monday night game in September 1979 in which the Browns so dominated the defending NFC Champion Dallas Cowboys that they put 20 points on the board before the Cowboys even got a *first down*, including a bomb from Brian Sipe to Newsome that made it 13-0. The Browns won, 26-7, in front of an electric Cleveland Stadium crowd. That same year, The Wizard was on the receiving end of a long pass from Sipe that forced overtime in a game the Browns eventually won, 30-24, over the Miami Dolphins.

On Nov. 27, 1983, Newsome scored on a 66-yard catch-and-run from Sipe, fending off several Baltimore defenders to stay in bounds, that lifted the Browns to a big win over the Colts. Newsome's performance in an AFC Divisional Playoff game on Jan. 3, 1987, landed him on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. He caught six passes from Bernie Kosar for 114 yards as the Browns came back from the dead to defeat the New York Jets that day in a double-overtime thriller on the lakefront.

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Those plays are just a thumbnail sketch of the many memorable moments Newsome delivered in his fabled career.

Newsome said, although Kosar had a stronger arm than Sipe at the time he played with them, he would have to flip a coin to decide who was the better quarterback. "Both were very smart quarterbacks," he said. "They both got their teammates to play above and beyond."

Newsome said that out of The Interception in an AFC Divisional Playoff loss to Oakland in 1980, The Drive in the AFC Championship loss to Denver in 1986, and The Fumble in the AFC Championship game defeat by Denver in 1987, John Elway's "Drive" to Pasadena was the one that hurt the most. "That was the one time I thought we were good enough to go to the Super Bowl and win it," Newsome said.

Newsome said playing for the Cleveland fans was very similar to playing for the Alabama fans in college. "Whereas Alabama fans live Saturday-to-Saturday," he said, "Browns fans live Sunday-to-Sunday. Football is a very big part of both Alabama and Browns fans' lives."

Of the Browns' move to Baltimore three years ago that resulted in his current position of vice president/player personnel with the Ravens football team and the consequent suffering by Browns fans that left them with no team for three seasons, Newsome said he believes once the "new" Browns take the field for the first time, fans will forget about the past and concentrate on the future. "I think most fans will be able to push Art Modell aside and root for the new team."

However, what the ever-humble Newsome, who resides in Cockeysville, Md., with his wife, Gloria, and their son, Michael Ryan, does not realize is that those same fans will never forget about the past when it comes to Newsome's exploits on the playing field. He made so many spectacular catches - some so acrobatic that one could have easily mistaken him for a gymnast - that many fans wondered if he was human, or perhaps a gifted visitor from a distant galaxy!

That is why Ozzie Newsome will always be remembered as "The Wizard of Oz."

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