

Robert James

This article was written by Budd Bailey

The human knee has many functions, and usually does them well, but it sometimes can't handle the load and gives out. This is particularly true for highly skilled athletes, who ask their knees to do super-human things at high speeds while risking some sort of contact along the way. Medical research has come a long way over the years in repairing that particular joint. But it took us a while to reach that point, and the record book contains a number of players who never fully recovered from knee injuries. A few of them never even could play again.



Photo Credit Robert James

Inevitably, such injuries lead to “What if?” discussions. What if Joe Namath had been able to stay healthy for his entire career? What if Gale Sayers had been able to move like he did as a rookie for the next decade? In Buffalo, the question asked in the 1970s was, what if Robert James had not suffered a career-ending injury in the prime of his football life? Let's take a look at the football career of the last name on that list.

Robert Dematrice James was born on July 7, 1947, in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. His nickname around the house was “Burr,” since a younger sister couldn't pronounce “Brother.” He went to Holloway High School in that city. James is the only pro football player to come out of Holloway, and he probably won't have much company in the near



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future. The school's web site lists bowling, boys' and girls' basketball, a cheer squad, and volleyball as its interscholastic sports. In other words, there is no sign of football.

Once upon a time, though, it was different. James played football for Holloway, and by his senior year he was the co-captain. He also played basketball and ran track.

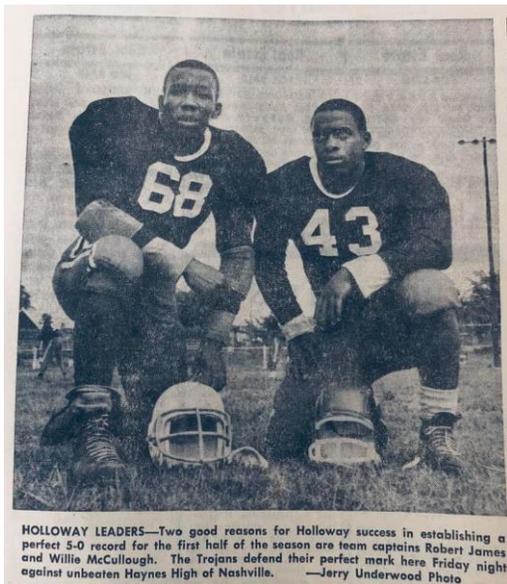


Photo Credit: Murfreesboro Daily News Journal

When it came time for college, James didn't have a great many options if he wanted to play football while getting an education. You have to remember that he graduated from high school in 1965. Then consider that the University of Tennessee had its first African American football player in 1968, a wingback named Lester McClain.

James landed at Fisk University in Nashville, located only 45 minutes up the road from Murfreesboro. He was recruited by coach Eugene Stevenson of the school. Fisk was and is a private historically black university that was founded in January 1866, only months after the end of the Civil War. Its most famous graduate might be W.E.B. DuBois, the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University.

“There was a great demand for men at Fisk University, because they were outnumbered by women, five to one,” James said. “They needed some males to balance the population. It was tempting and encouraging to go there – beautiful girls, very nice young ladies. It was a great academic experience, but it also was a great athletic experience. At that time, there weren't many white schools who were accepting blacks – UT (Tennessee),



Vanderbilt, the state schools (were not). You didn't have too much of a choice. ... Fisk got the cream of the crop."

Still, no one had ever played for the Bulldogs and moved on to the National Football League. James played football at Fisk, and it's easy to wonder how he survived his time on the field there. After all, he weighed less than 200 pounds as he saw action at linebacker and defensive end. James was named the team's Most Valuable Player as a senior, and was an all-conference pick. The 6-foot-2 student-athlete also ran the hurdles on Fisk's track team, winning a pair of conference titles.

In most cases, this would be the end of James' football story. It was not, and it's all because of a man named Elbert Dubenion.

"Golden Wheels," as he was called because of his speed on the football field, played college football at Bluffton College (Ohio), where he was a small college All-American. He landed as a wide receiver with the Buffalo Bills in 1960 in their first year, and was a major part of the teams that won championships in 1964 and 1965 in the American Football League.

Dubenion only played four games in his final year with the Bills in 1968, and then retired. The Bills immediately hired him to be a scout. Somewhere along the way – probably at some sort of workout for scouts, he spotted James. Dubenion looked at the 188-pound defensive end from a small college, and saw someone with the potential for him to be a defensive back in the National Football League. That takes vision, and maybe a bit of luck.

"Teams signed a lot of free agents after the draft," James said about that era. "They drafted a lot of guys, but no one from Fisk ever got drafted. I felt bad. They had 17 rounds, multiply it out by 26 teams – that's a lot of players. I wasn't going in the early rounds, but I thought I might get picked in a late round. In the spring of the year, scouts were searching for talent. (Elbert) Dubenion of the Bills came down, and I ran a 40 (his time was 4.4). He was quite impressed, as they didn't have anyone who had exceptional speed. We didn't think it was exceptional speed. We thought it was normal."

After James was bypassed in the draft, he was signed by the Bills as a free agent. Dubenion said later that James was the biggest find of his scouting career. He probably wouldn't have believed that statement if someone had predicted it when James arrived at training camp. The odds against the rookie were still very long. Here is a sign of his chances: James was not even listed in the team's media guide under rookies and free agents. A total of 34 such players are listed with biographies, but James wasn't one of them.



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Admittedly, every rookie but one in the Bills' training camp was anonymous. The exception was O.J. Simpson – the Heisman Trophy winner from Southern California in 1968, the first overall pick in the NFL draft, and someone considered to be a superstar-in-waiting. Buffalo also had an interesting prospect in eighth-round pick James Harris, a quarterback from Grambling with a big arm and the same birth date as Robert James.

James' track background showed he could be fast enough for the position of defensive back, and after playing around the line of scrimmage at Fisk, James might be happy to hit someone his own size. Still, he got off to a rocky start. James didn't like the world of professional football, perhaps because of John Rauch, the team's new coach. Rauch had guided the Raiders to Super Bowl II in 1968, but he had lots of rules and wasn't well liked by the players.

James packed up during camp and went back to Murfreesboro. (Maybe this is when the media guide was printed.) Cornerbacks Butch Byrd and Booker Edgerson followed him there to talk to him, and Dubenion flew to Tennessee to make the closing argument. It worked; James returned to the Bills.

After all that, James made the 1969 Bills roster. There he served as a backup defensive back, and did some good work on special teams.

“Really, my first year there was kind of a learning experience,” James told author Jim Gehman. “I had to develop defensive back skills, work on increasing my speed and coverage skills. I focused a whole year just on that right there. Once I developed those skills, then I was able to make the transition. It was easy in terms of being physical and making contact. The problem was the agility skills of being able to cover some of the fastest guys in football. That's where I had to make an adjustment. I had exceptionally good speed even though I was a lineman; it's just that I didn't know how to use that speed and apply it to my skills.”

Care to guess who James roomed with on the road? Simpson. They were something of an odd couple.

“They say opposites attract, and I was low-key,” James said. “O.J. was a flamboyant person – kind of boastful, but not in athletic areas, but about other things. For some reason, they thought I could calm him down a little. We ended up as roommates in our rookie year on the road when we traveled. I later invited him down to Murfreesboro for a banquet here. ... We had a pretty good relationship.”



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The Bills had 15 rookies play for them in 1969, when they went 4-10. James at least had the chance to sit and learn from two clever veterans from the team's glory days in Byrd and Edgerson. That combination was broken up the following offseason, though. Edgerson was traded to Denver and was reunited with his former coach of the Bills, Lou Saban. The reunion didn't last long, as Edgerson suffered a knee injury and saw his career end.

In the meantime, though, James had an opening for the 1970 season. He grabbed a starting job on the other side of Byrd, and went to work. James started 13 of the 14 games that season. He didn't have an interception, but did recover a fumble. More importantly he gained some experience at the position. He may have been a quiet guy off the field, but his actions spoke louder than words on it.

“On a football field you have to have a different personality; there's no love lost out there,” James said. “That's the good part of playing football. That nature that's within you, it can come out of you. When you step off the field, you have to take on your other personality. That drive, competitiveness, that drive to win is still there. It comes out in a different form off the field.”

By the time, the 1971 season arrived, the Bills were deteriorating quickly. Rauch made some remarks on a television talk show about some the team's veterans, and that led owner Ralph Wilson to show him the door. Rauch was replaced for the time being by Harvey Johnson, who had stepped in during a similar situation in 1968 and won only one game. Starting quarterback Dennis Shaw threw 26 interceptions. O.J. Simpson ran for a team-best 742 yards despite an offensive line that was leaky.

On defense, the Bills gave up at last 19 points to every opponent on their schedule. James at least had his first career interception on October 10, 1971, and he added three more during the rest of the season. But he wasn't surrounded by much talent. Buffalo stumbled to a 1-13 record, the worst in the NFL.

It was time for a massive change in the organization. Owner Ralph Wilson reached back into the past and re-hired the coach of the 1964 and 1965 AFL champions, Saban. The old/new coach had resigned from the same job with the Denver Broncos earlier in the season, and was back for a second go-around in Buffalo.

“I never got over the losing,” James told author Randy Schultz about his early pro years. “I wasn't used to that, and it was something I didn't want to get in the habit of doing. But that all changed when Lou Saban arrived.”



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It took a year for Saban to go through the roster and find some players he liked. Saban's first draft didn't work out so well, and he and first overall pick Walt Patulski didn't get along and the Notre Dame defensive lineman never blossomed in Buffalo. But Saban did get help on the offensive line by taking guard Reggie McKenzie in the second round. Saban also was smart enough to give O.J. Simpson the ball – often – and he responded by winning the rushing title with 1,251 yards.

On defense, the Bills had made a few subtle improvements but still gave up a lot of points. Somehow, people noticed that James had taken a big step forward. He was named to his first Pro Bowl, no small task with a team that finished 24th out of 26 teams in the league in points allowed.

James' most memorable play of the season might have come on December 2 in Baltimore. It was an open secret that Johnny Unitas' days as a Colt would be coming to an end following the 1972 season. He had been reduced to backing up Marty Domres, who had been acquired before the season from San Diego. But Domres was injured in a game against the Bills, and in trotted Unitas to a roar from the fans in Memorial Stadium. Unitas reached back to the past and hit Eddie Hinton with a 63-yard scoring pass. Yes, James was the defender on the last touchdown pass of the 287 Unitas threw as a member of the Baltimore Colts. The roar that day must have been monumental.

The Bills finished 1972 with a 4-9-1 record – a step up, but not good enough. The front office supplied more help in the draft, taking a couple of players at the top – Paul Seymour and Joe DeLamielleure – who knew how to block. That would only help the team's top asset, Simpson. They also grabbed a quarterback in Joe Ferguson of Arkansas, a third-round pick who turned out to be a bargain. On defense, James picked up some new playmates in the secondary. Dwight Harrison moved from wide receiver to become a starting cornerback. Veteran Ernie Kellerman was signed early in the season and joined holdover Tony Greene at safety.

If Simpson and the Bills wanted to send an immediate signal to the rest of the league that they would be better in 1973, they succeeded. Simpson ran 80 yards for a touchdown in the first quarter, and went on to run 250 yards – a league record – in a win against the Patriots on opening day. The team total in rushing yards was 360. The defense held New England in check, and the Bills were 31-13 winners.

That was the type of season it was for the Bills, as they tried to run the ball throughout the game. Simpson had the best season of his career with 2,003 yards, and he and the rest of the offense kept the defense off the field for long stretches of games. Ferguson and Shaw weren't quite ready yet to provide much passing help if the ground game came up short, but the approach worked to the tune of a 9-5 record. That fell short of a playoff



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berth, but it represented a huge step forward. If nothing else, the Bills were relevant again.

James continued to improve, and was voted a first-team All-Pro selection in one poll. The other two defenders who received All-Pro picks that year were Willie Brown of Oakland and Mel Renfro of Dallas, who would both go to the Hall of Fame. James was a key player on a defense that moved up to 10th in points allowed in the NFL. He had become a lockdown corner – even before the term was popular - who could stay with opponents in speed and not be pushed away by opposing players.

“I had an advantage, because in college I never played defensive back,” James said. “I played defensive end, I played middle linebacker, I played offensive guard. I was in the trenches for all four years. When they put me at cornerback, I had the speed. ... When it came to hand-to-hand combat, when it came to challenging a wide receiver, that was routine for me.”

The approach didn't figure to change much in 1974, and it didn't. The draft choices didn't have much of an impact on the team, but there was a new safety on the roster that certainly grabbed James' attention. He was Neal Craig, a former Cincinnati Bengal. More to the point, Craig played his college football at Fisk University. The Bills, then, had two Fisk players in their defensive lineup at the same time. It's the only time in history that's happened, and it's not likely to ever happen again. James finished 1974 with three interceptions, while Craig had one that he returned for a touchdown against the Colts.

The running offense wasn't as good in 1974 as it was in 1973, but Ferguson's play improved to somewhat compensate. James three interceptions raised his career total to nine, as he was All-Pro for the second straight year in leading the defense. Imagine how many he could have had if he was a better receiver.

“He had all of those interceptions despite the fact that he had really bad hands,” DeLamielleure wrote in a book after his career. “Balls would hit him in the hands all the time, but they would just bounce off. We used to joke with him that he had blocks for hands, but we really didn't mind. He was so good at coverage that it didn't make any difference. He was excellent at knocking down passes before they got caught, and his shadow-like coverage could shut down top-notch receivers of the day like Isaac Curtis and Cliff Branch.”

As a result, the Bills again finished 9-5 – again behind the powerful Miami Dolphins. But this time, 9-5 was good enough to reach the playoffs ... and a date with the Pittsburgh Steelers. The Bills stayed with the Steelers for a quarter, but then were buried under a 26-



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0 blast by Pittsburgh in the second quarter. The Steelers won the game, 32-14, and went on to capture the Super Bowl championship.

The loss was disappointing for James, of course, but he had reason to be optimistic for his football future. He had established a reputation as one of the best defensive backs in the game, and had shown he was durable by missing only one game in his six-year career. Buffalo had taken a couple of Nebraska linebackers, Tom Ruud, and Bob Nelson, with their first two picks in the draft. The Bills had hopes that they would improve the defense.

That brings the story to August 23, 1975. The Bills were playing a meaningless preseason game with the Rams in Los Angeles. They won the game, 31-24. It was a contest that should only have been of interest to Buffalo-area fans because Ron Jaworski – a Lackawanna native – suited up at quarterback for the Rams.

Then, disaster.

“Jim Harris threw a long pass to Harold Jackson, and I intercepted the ball,” James told Gehman. “I was running it back and really was just trying to score. I should have just gone ahead, and fell down, slid down like quarterbacks do today. I was pushed, and I started stumbling, and I tried to regain my balance, and in the process of trying to regain my balance, Lawrence McCutcheon hit me on the outside of my right knee and tore all the ligaments.”

Surgery was needed, and his season was done even before it started. Just to add to the nightmare of a day in L.A., Bills safety Doug Jones also was lost for the season because of an injury in that game.

Tony Greene moved from safety to cornerback to replace James for the rest of 1975. The Bills still had a good offense; Simpson returned to All-World form and Ferguson teamed up with receivers J.D. Hill and Bob Chandler to create a good passing attack. But the Bills couldn't outscore everyone, especially with James out and Ruud and Nelson contributing little thanks in part of long contract holdouts. Buffalo finished 8-6 – first in the league in scoring and 21st in points allowed, and out of the playoffs.

James worked hard during his rehab in the hopes of coming back for the 1976 season. He still wasn't ready, though, so the cornerback set his sights on 1977. In all, James had three more operations in attempt to fix his right knee. They didn't help. In training camp, James gave it one more try, realized he wasn't going to be good enough, and retired.

“I really loved the game, really wanted to play the game,” James said. “I felt like if I could have got back, I could have played 16, 17, 18 years. It was something I felt like I



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was able to do. At the level I was at, I did not see myself regressing. I saw myself progressing. ... This is why I really, really wanted to get back to see what I truly could accomplish. But once again it was just not there.”

At that point, James had reached the moment that some athletes dread – getting on with the rest of their lives. Luckily, he always had shown an interest in education, and decided it was time to pursue that goal. James went back and received his Master of Arts degree at Middle Tennessee State University. He went on to become a teacher and the Assistant Principal of Riverdale High School in Murfreesboro. James also added a title along the way: Pastor.

Still, the people in Buffalo didn’t forget him. James was placed on the Bills’ Wall of Fame in 1998 – the first defensive back to be so honored. He had a good run in Buffalo – but it wasn’t a long one. James accepted his fate without asking “What if?”

“I’ve dealt with the options that life has dealt me,” he said. “I’ve accepted them and just moved on. That’s what we all have to do.”



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