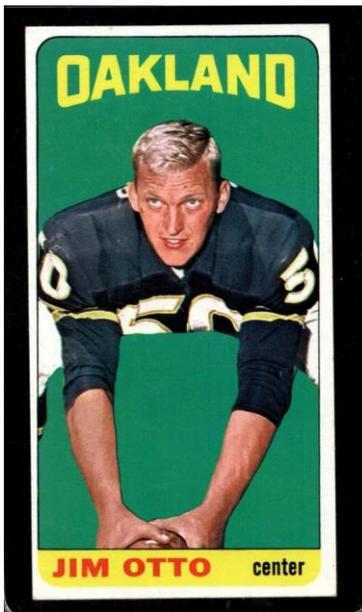




Jim Otto

This article was written by Rich Shmelter

For 15 seasons, the “00” on Jim Otto’s uniform stood out like a beacon. Through hard work, dedication, intelligence, a high threshold for pain, and outstanding leadership skills, he became a symbol of excellence for all those who ever wore the silver and black of the Oakland Raiders. Without a doubt, Otto was the greatest center of all time, and served as the anchor for the best group of trench warriors assembled during the late 1960’s and 70’s.



No play can start without the center snapping the ball. Once that happens, he is usually lost in a collision of bodies punishing each other for control of the line of scrimmage. Meanwhile, all eyes become focused on the quarterback, running back, or receiver. Otto was different. Through flawless blocking in either running or passing situations, he made the position one of star quality.

The man later referred to as “Mr. Raider” was born in Wausau, Wisconsin. While at Wausau High School, Otto established himself as a gifted athlete in football, hockey, and baseball. He began winning awards for his performance on the football field, earning All-State honors as both a center and linebacker. His All-State selections did not go unnoticed, as scholarship offers came in from all over the country. He decided on the



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

University of Miami in Florida. While in the “Sunshine State”, Otto continued to dominate, setting a career school record for most tackles by a linebacker.

Up to this point of his athletic career, things looked great for Otto. After a stellar collegiate career, it seemed apparent that Otto was going to be selected in the National Football League’s annual draft for the 1960 season. During the 1959 season, Otto was regarded as a punishing tackler who loved to hit. Along with all the good things being said about the Wisconsin native, there were also negative ones as well. The pro scouts felt that he was too light at 205 pounds to take a chance on him despite his aggressive play. The scouts also found out that Otto had suffered some shoulder injuries, and that finalized their decision to pass on him come draft day.

Otto’s spirits were crushed when no team decided to take a chance on a player who performed equally well on both sides of the ball. He refused to give up and set out to find a team willing to at least give him a tryout. He felt that once he was on the practice field, his talents would prove to any doubters that he belonged among the game’s best. Unfortunately, no NFL team even wanted to give him a free agent tryout.

It appeared that good fortune came Otto’s way when a new professional football league made up of eight teams called the American Football League was formed in 1959, and he was drafted by the Minnesota franchise. Just when things seemed to be looking up once again, the franchise ownership group decided to join the established NFL instead of taking a chance on a new league, and was not allowed to bring along any of the players they had drafted. However, Otto got another chance when the AFL decided to take all the players drafted by Minnesota and send them to other teams throughout the league. It was then that he became a member of the Houston Oilers, but his journey did not end there.

To fill the void left by Minnesota’s departure, the city of Oakland, California, was awarded a franchise to balance out the league at eight teams once again. In an attempt to quickly fill the roster of this last-minute entry, Otto was shipped off yet again to another team. This time, however, his traveling days were over.

Otto reported to Oakland’s first-ever training camp along with 100 other players that it seemed nobody wanted. It looked like the Oakland team was truly the land of misfits. Now surrounded by other players that nobody else seemed to want, Otto’s dreams looked to once again be headed for a crash landing. For it seemed that the Oakland coaching staff thought he was too light at 205 pounds to play center.

All he ever asked for was a chance, and Oakland head coach, Eddie Erdelatz, gave it to him. After all, there was not much talent to choose from in the early days of the Raiders,



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

which was bad for the team, but provided an excellent opportunity for Otto. He began to impress the coaching staff during training camp, and despite his size, he earned the starting center job in Oakland's first season.

The main question regarding Otto was how long could a 205-pound center last? It did not take Otto long to answer that question. With the center position firmly his, he immediately began to bulk up his frame. With the help of high-protein milk shakes and a regimented weight-lifting program, he became a 245-pounder with power and finesse. With a passion seen in only a handful of players, Otto quickly proved that he belonged in the pros. He mixed speed, competitiveness, and technique to overpower men much bigger than him, and never stopped working even when near perfection was achieved. Otto loved the contact that football provided and destroyed anyone on the opposing team looking to get past him.

From 1960 until 1971, no other center beside Otto was selected to the All-Pro first team. Despite the physical wear and tear that a center's body goes through, he managed to remain tough and dedicated to his craft, refusing to give in to the pain, and never missed one game during his long career. Counting pre-season, regular, and post-season competition, Otto played in 308 straight games. The toll on his body added up to eventually having 38 major surgeries, with 28 of them coming on his knees. He had six artificial knee replacements, as well as both shoulders replaced. After one of those knee operations failed to respond to treatment during the latter part of his career, his body had finally had enough punishment, and he was forced to retire prior to the 1975 season.

During his illustrious career, the Raiders compiled 115 wins against a mere 42 losses and 11 ties. They won seven divisional titles, one league championship, and played for a league or conference title six other times.

The man who proudly and deservingly bears the title of Mr. Raider is a lasting symbol to the greatness that is the Oakland Raiders. He was a charter member of the American Football League, an original Raider, and on August 2, 1980, he was the first member of the organization to earn his place among pro football's immortals with his enshrinement into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility. He was a true warrior that totally dominated his position, and his likes will never be seen again. The Raiders' motto of "Commitment to Excellence" is best exemplified by the greatness that Jim Otto displayed.