

Jack Christiansen: Crew Chief

By Don Smith

He always thought his best sport was basketball and yet he couldn't make his college cage team. When he first starred as a varsity athlete at Colorado A&M College, it was as a dash man on the track team. A chance shooting accident when he was a high school senior so severely injured his left arm that he felt the end had come to what he had considered to be a, so-so gridiron career.

Not a bit of this is the kind of thing you would expect to hear about an all-time pro football great tapped for membership in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. But they are true chapters, nevertheless, in the life of Jack Christiansen, one of history's finest defensive halfbacks.

The Christiansen story is a perfect example of the adage that the path to greatness is not always a direct path. Raised in an Odd Fellows Orphanage in Canon City, Colo., Christiansen felt he was too small for college football, even if the shooting accident had not occurred. So he contented himself for more than a year with being a sprint man – and a very good one – on the college track squad.

When he finally tried out for football against the advice of his doctors, he felt that he was a mighty lucky fellow to have made the 44th spot on a 44-man travelling squad when his A&M team journeyed to Denver for a traditional battle. When the regular safetyman faltered early in the action, Christiansen was the most surprised person in Denver when he was ushered into the game. From that time on for the next three years, he was an Aggie regular, setting numerous school records and winning all-conference laurels.

Like he was destined to be in the pros, Chris was a defensive ace and a return specialist at A&M, but in college he was also a standout on offense. Still he realized that his size – 6-1 and 162 pounds at that time – might well cause most pro clubs to look the other way when it came time for the draft. But Dutch Clark, a Colorado native, a Lions alumnus and also destined for membership in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, highly recommended Chris to Lions coach Buddy Parker and so too did rookie tackle Thurman McGraw, who had been a college teammate of Christiansen's.

The Lions drafted him in the sixth round and, right from the start, Jack enjoyed spectacular success with the Detroit team. In one crucial contest against Los Angeles as a rookie, Christiansen scored twice on punt returns of 69 and 47 yards.

Detroit lost out to the Rams that year, but then won divisional titles in 1952, 1953, 1954 and 1957 and, except for 1954, followed up each sectional win with NFL championship victories over Cleveland. During that period, Christiansen was an all-NFL selection six straight seasons!

Even today, Christiansen dominates the punt return record book and he was so effective at this specialty that he caused an entire pro league to change its defensive ways.

"All I know is that, by the time I came into the league, the other teams had gone to the spread punt formation in order to contain Chris," Jim David, Chris' teammate at both Colorado A&M and Detroit, relates. The statistics bear this out. Chris had a record four touchdowns on punt returns as a rookie and then set an average per return record of 21.5 yards his second year. But mute testimony to the premise that an unusual effort was made to stop him is the fact that Christiansen, although an even more seasoned pro, never approached those punt return marks again.

As effective as Jack was on the specialty units, his primary forte was defense and he was a key man for the defensively-strong Lions in the 1950s. "I figure the difference in our 1951 and 1952 seasons was, simply, Jack Christiansen," Coach Parker recalls today. "He was instrumental in the overall development of our defense. He ran it and he was the boss."

He was so much the boss that they called the Lions' deep four "Chris' Crew" and it was a unit that continually thwarted offensive thrusts of the enemy. Christiansen's 46 career interceptions are testimony

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to his talents and it may be that offensive units changed their tactics when playing against Jack just as the punting units had had to do.

"Detroit had the defense and Chris was the leader," one of the leading receivers of the day, Cleveland's Mac Speedie, says. "We had a standard rule when we played Detroit. 'Don't throw in his area and don't punt to him.'"

For a guy who thought his gridiron days were over even before he finished high school, Jack Christiansen went a long way in the football world!