

MEL BLOUNT

By Don Smith

Mel Blount joined the Pittsburgh Steelers as a third-round draft selection in 1970. He played for 14 seasons before retiring after the 1983 campaign. During his career, he was hailed as the prototype cornerback of his era and a major reason why the Steelers were the dominant team of the National Football League in the 1970s.

Throughout his pro football career, Blount's goals were quite simple. "I didn't want to be second to anyone," he said recently. "I wanted to set the standards for my position."

Proof that Blount accomplished what he set out to do came with his election in his first year of eligibility to the Pro Football Hall of Fame's class of 1989.

The 6-3, 205-pound Blount without question was one of the finest athletes on a team loaded with outstanding talent. He could run the 40 in 4.5 and outlast everyone on the treadmill test every day. One day in camp, Olympics hurdling star Renaldo Nehemiah performed an excellent standing vertical jump. Even though he was wearing wing-tipped shoes and a three-piece suit, Blount leaped several inches above Renaldo's mark.

"When you create a cornerback, the mold is Mel Blount," Steelers linebacker Jack Ham, a 1988 Hall of Fame enshrinee, marveled. "I played in a lot of Pro Bowls. I never saw a cornerback like him. He was the most incredible athlete I have ever seen. With Mel, you could take one wide receiver and just write him off. He could handle anybody in the league."

"Size, speed, quickness, toughness -- that's what Mel had," quarterback Terry Hanratty said. "If you gave Blount free rein to hit you, you were in trouble because, if he missed, he had the speed to catch up. A lot of receivers got short arms when they were in Mel's territory."

Success, however, did not come immediately for Blount. He started his rookie campaign on the kickoff return team, with which he averaged 29.7 yards on 18 returns, the third best mark in Pittsburgh annals. When John Rowser was injured in the fifth game in 1970, Mel was forced into the regular line-up for the rest of the year.

He was a semi-regular again in 1971 but his play left much to be desired. Miami's Paul Warfield burned him on touchdown receptions of 12, 86 and 60 yards in a 24-21 Dolphins' victory. Many other receivers were having similar success against Blount. Impatient Steelers fans gave him a hard time and even Mel admitted: "Yeah, I thought about quitting. I thought a whole lot about it."

After the season, Blount went back to the family farm near Vidalia, Ga., where he was born on April 10, 1948. This was the home from which Mel, one of nine children, migrated to Southern University in Baton Rouge, La., to play college football. At Southern, he starred as both a safety and a cornerback and was his team's Most Valuable Player his junior and senior seasons. In 1949, he was named to all-America teams by The Sporting News, Pro Scouts and Pittsburgh Courier."

"As I had time to sort things out," Mel remembers, "I realized that the football I had played at Southern hadn't given me the background I needed for pro football. In college, the game was so much less complex, but more physical. It was played on natural ability and very little else."

Once Blount recognized the reasons for his slow start in the NFL, his attitude changed. "I had to realize every mistake I made was a lesson," he explained. "Instead of thinking about how many times I had been beaten, I decided to think of how many lessons I had learned."

A groin muscle tear limited his playing time in the 1972 pre-season but the Steelers' defensive backfield coach, Bud Carson, decided Blount was ready to take over as the starting right cornerback. "I know Mel

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is an outstanding prospect," Carson said. "He has great ability and speed. He shows all the physical requisites to be as good as anyone in the league."

The turnabout in Mel's play was phenomenal. He didn't let a single receiver beat him for a touchdown in 1972.

"I owe it all to Bud Carson," Blount acknowledged. "He gave me something no one else on the staff ever did -- he helped me believe in myself."

Once he was established on the first team, Blount began to contribute in a major way. In 1975, his fourth year as a starter, he was named the NFL's Most Valuable Defensive Player by Associated Press. He was a consensus all-pro and selected to play in his first Pro Bowl. Even though he missed all of the 1977 pre-season because of a contract dispute, Mel was all-pro that year and again in 1981. In the seven-season span between 1975 and 1981, Blount played in five Pro Bowls and was all-AFC four times. With two interceptions, he was named the Most Valuable Player in the 1977 Pro Bowl.

Blount, who had at least one interception in each of his 14 seasons, wound up with 57 steals, best ever for a Steeler and tied for seventh highest in the all-time records. With 11 interceptions in his banner 1975 campaign, Mel became the first Steeler to win an interception championship since Bill Dudley in 1946. He also recovered 13 opponents' fumbles and scored four touchdowns, two each on interceptions and fumble returns. He saw only sporadic duty on the kickoff return team after his rookie season but wound up with 36 returns for 911 yards.

In spite of his rugged, aggressive style, Blount enjoyed a relatively injury-free pro football tenure. He missed just one regular season game, that in 1974, in 14 seasons and just one playoff contest, the first-round game against Denver in 1977. Altogether, Mel played in 200 regular-season games, highest total ever for a Steeler up to that time. He also played in six AFC championship games on winning Steelers teams in Super Bowls IX, X, XIII and XIV.

Statistics, however, tell only part of the Blount saga. When Mel first entered the NFL, it was legal for a defensive back to maintain contact with a receiver until the pass was thrown. Blount did the job with awesome efficiency. He regularly stymied Oakland's ace receivers, Cliff Branch and Fred Biletnikoff, held off Cincinnati's Isaac Curtis so long his quarterback had to eat the ball and broke the ribs of the Cowboys' Golden Richards.

Frustrated by the way Blount and other talented defensive backs were shutting down the offenses, the NFL's competition committee simply changed the rules, outlawing Mel's favorite "bump-and-run" tactics more than five yards beyond the scrimmage line.

The rules-makers insisted they were only trying to increase overall scoring all around the league but Steelers coach Chuck Noll disagreed: "They ganged up on us and are trying to win the championship through legislation. But whatever the rules, you have to adjust to them and play with them."

Nobody adjusted more quickly or effectively than Blount. No longer able to usher receivers downfield on his terms, Mel merely played behind them, appearing to be beaten, before swooping in like a starved vulture to deflect the pass or gobble up an interception.

Ironically, when the Steelers were steamrolling toward their first Super Bowl appearance in 1974, Blount became briefly embroiled in a heated controversy with Carson, the coach who had provided the breakthrough boost to his career. In the AFC championship game against Oakland, Blount was having a bad day against Branch. When the Raiders speedster slipped behind him for a 42-yard touchdown, Carson pulled Mel out of the line-up.

"I really didn't think a smart coach would do something like that in a championship game," Blount fumed. "The touchdown pass to Branch was only the third I have given up all season and the other two came in one game against Atlanta. Taking me out of the game was the worst thing he could have done."

Blount got himself further in the Steelers doghouse by not only criticizing Carson publicly but by insisting several AFC quarterbacks were superior to the Minnesota Vikings' Fran Tarkenton, whom the Steelers were going to face in Super Bowl IX. "I hope to get a lot of action," Mel said. "I went the whole season without much action because they didn't throw to my side that much."

The mini-feud died down, however, and in the Super Bowl against the Vikings, Blount intercepted a pass at the goal line to kill the Vikings' most dangerous drive as the Steelers won, 16-6.

In the summer of 1975, Mel reported to training camp with his head shaven clean. The reason was that Mel was going bald anyway and he just wanted to keep cool. Some, however, interpreted it as a ploy to appear more sinister and menacing on the field. Even if that were his purpose, it wouldn't have been necessary. He already was a major headache for every opponent.

"A lot of cornerbacks want to be intimidators," Steelers tackle Jon Kolb said. "They go through all kinds of things to be intimidating. Mel could just walk out there, look down on the guy and then run side by side with him. That would be intimidating."

By 1975, Blount was at his absolute best. Always superb as a man-to-man defender, he had adapted to zone coverages and he continued his already-effective defending against running plays. When he learned he had been named the NFL Defensive Player of the Year, he was predictably enthused but with some reservations.

"I knew I was getting local publicity," he said, "but this is a national award and it makes you feel good about being recognized all over the country. I feel I played just as well the past two or three seasons as I did this year. But to most people those years, I was just another ball player."

Blount, always confident that he ranked at the very top of his profession as a defensive back, still was never satisfied and he worked tirelessly to improve himself. He was a fierce competitor even in practice, where he had the good fortune to have to work against a pair of the game's premier wide receivers, Lynn Swann and John Stallworth.

As the defensive and offensive units lined up, Blount would whisper to the other Pittsburgh cornerback, Donny Shell: "Just watch, no one on my side is catching a pass."

And no one would catch a pass. By the time Sunday came around, Blount, as well as Swann and Stallworth knew they were in effect playing the "B" team compared to the caliber of their practice opposition.

When he was notified of his election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Blount, who now serves as director of player relations for the NFL, reflected on his playing career.

"If the scales were balanced, there was nobody I couldn't cover," he said. "That's what motivated me, drove me to be as good as I was. I was in front of 50,000 people in the stands and millions on TV. I didn't want to be embarrassed."

He rarely was.

Mel Blount

Hgt: 6-3 Wgt: 205

School: Southern

Born: April 10, 1948, Vidalia, GA

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INTERCEPTIONS							
YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	IN	YDS	AVG	TD
1970	Pittsburgh	N	14	1	4	4.0	0
1971	Pittsburgh	N	14	2	16	8.0	0
1972	Pittsburgh	N	14	3	75	25.0	0
1973	Pittsburgh	N	14	4	82	20.5	0
1974	Pittsburgh	N	13	2	74	37.0	1
1975	Pittsburgh	N	14	*11	121	11.0	0
1976	Pittsburgh	N	14	6	75	12.5	0
1977	Pittsburgh	N	14	6	65	10.8	0
1978	Pittsburgh	N	16	4	55	13.8	0
1979	Pittsburgh	N	16	3	1	0.3	0
1980	Pittsburgh	N	16	4	28	7.0	0
1981	Pittsburgh	N	16	6	106	17.7	1
1982	Pittsburgh	N	9	1	2	2.0	0
1983	Pittsburgh	N	16	4	32	8.0	0
14 seasons			200	57	736	12.9	2