

EMLEN TUNNELL: A GIANT OF DEFENSE

By Bob Carroll

In 1942, doctors told Emlen Tunnell he would never play football again; twenty-five years later, he became the first Afro-American to be named to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Tunnell was born March 25, 1925, in Bryn Mahr, PA. After his graduation from Radnor (PA) High School, he entered the University of Toledo in 1942 but soon suffered the broken neck that seemed to end his football career. Although he was able to play basketball and help Toledo reach the finals of the National Invitational Tournament, he wore a neck brace for a year and was turned down in his attempts to enlist in the army and navy. Undaunted, he joined the U.S. Coast Guard where he served until early 1946.

Upon his return to civilian life, Tunnell enrolled at the University of Iowa and went out for football along with 300 other candidates. He began as the 21st halfback but soon became one of the Hawkeyes' most important players, excelling on defense. In 1947, he asked Coach Eddie Anderson for more time on offense, but surprisingly, he was demoted to the third team. The coach felt his skills would best be used in spot situations. Tunnell fumed, and considered not returning for his senior year. Then an eye operation forced him to drop out of school.

In the summer of 1948, Tunnell hitch-hiked 150 miles to the offices of the New York Giants and asked for a tryout. The Giants had never employed an Afro-American player and none of the coaches had ever heard of Tunnell, but team owner Tim Mara told him, "Since you had enough guts to come over and ask for a tryout, we'll give you one."

He so impressed the Giants coaches, he earned a \$5,000 contract along with a \$1,000 bonus. There were only a few Afro-American players in the National Football League at the time and the Giants' roster was heavily laden with players from southern schools, but Tunnell always insisted he had no racial problems with his new teammates. In part that was because of his own personality; he quickly became one of the most popular players on the team. However, most of his acceptance no doubt came from his teammates' realization that he could help them win. In his first appearance in a Giant uniform, an exhibition game against Green Bay, he intercepted four passes.

Although he continued to lobby for time on offense, New York coach Steve Owen quickly decided he was too valuable on defense to waste. At 6-1 and weighing nearly 200 pounds, Tunnell was bigger than most defensive backs of the time, yet he was also faster and a devastating tackler. His greatest attribute was his ability to "read" his opponents and put himself in the right place to make a tackle or interception. He spent long hours each week studying film until he knew exactly what to expect from each opponent. Teammate Frank Gifford said of Tunnell's knack for being in the right spot, "At first I thought he was just lucky. Then I realized he was just great."

Tunnell was a key member of Coach Owen's "Umbrella Defense," a strategy that revolutionized pro defenses in the early 1950s. Owen's scheme called for the defensive ends to drop off the traditional six-man line and become linebackers while four defensive backs formed a near impregnable umbrella against passes. In its 1950 unveiling, the defense shut out the high-powered Cleveland Browns for the first time in their history.

Tunnell also became the NFL's top kick returner, combining exceptional hands, good speed, remarkable toughness, and marvelous elusiveness. Although kick returners live on the edge in the NFL and injuries are common, Tunnell ignored the bruises and a few broken bones to play in 158 consecutive games.

Known as the Giants' "offense on defense," he scored three touchdowns on punt returns and a fourth on a kickoff return in 1951. His runbacks of interceptions and kicks in 1952 gained 924 yards, thirty more than the league rushing leader. The next season, his 819 return yards were topped by only two offensive backs.

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He starred on the Giants' 1956 NFL championship team and on the 1958 Eastern Division champs. In 1959, he went to Green Bay where he helped former Giants assistant coach Vince Lombardi win a division title in 1960 and a championship in 1961.

At his retirement after the '61 season, Tunnell held NFL career records for interceptions with 79, yards gained on interceptions with 1,282, punt returns with 258, and yards gained on punt returns with 2,209. He played in nine different Pro Bowls, and, although All-NFL selections did not include defensive backs until 1951, he was subsequently chosen at safety four times.

After retiring as a player, Tunnell served as a Giants assistant coach and scout from 1962 through 1973. He was the first Afro-American to serve as a regular fulltime coach in the NFL since the early 1920s. In 1974, he became New York's assistant director of pro personnel, but a year later, he suffered a fatal heart attack in training camp. He was survived by his wife Patricia whom he married in 1962.

In 1969, he was picked at safety on the All-Time NFL Team covering the league's first 50 years. Two years earlier, he was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, not only the first Afro-American to be so honored but also the first player to be elected for purely defensive contributions. When informed of his election to the Hall by then-curator Dick McCann, the modest Tunnell asked, "Who should I thank?"

"Thank yourself," McCann told him.

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EMLEN LEWIS TUNNELL - (Emlen the Gremlin)

Defensive Back

6-01 187 Toledo, Iowa

b: 03/29/25, Bryn Mahr, PA - d: 07/22/75, Pleasantville, NY (50)

YEAR	TM	LG	GM	-INTERCEPTIONS-			-PUNT RETURNS--			KICKOFF RETURNS						
				NO	YDS	AVG	TD	NO	YDS	AVG	TD	NO	YDS	AVG	TD	
1948	NYG	N	8	7	116	16.6	1	12	115	9.6	0	1	21	21.0	0	
1949	NYG	N	12	10	251	25.1	*2	26	315	12.1	1	2	26	13.0	0	
1950	NYG	N	12	7	167	23.9	0	31	305	9.8	0	-	-	-	-	
1951	NYG	N	12	9	74	8.2	0	*34	*489	14.4	3	6	227	37.8	*1	
1952	NYG	N	12	7	149	21.3	0	30	*411	13.7	0	15	364	24.3	0	
1953	NYG	N	12	6	117	19.5	0	*38	223	5.9	0	17	479	28.2	0	
1954	NYG	N	12	8	108	13.5	0	21	70	3.3	0	5	98	19.6	0	
1955	NYG	N	12	7	76	10.9	0	25	98	3.9	1	-	-	-	-	
1956	NYG	N	12	6	87	14.5	0	22	120	5.5	0	-	-	-	-	
1957	NYG	N	12	6	87	14.5	1	12	60	5.0	0	-	-	-	-	
1958	NYG	N	12	1	8	8.0	0	6	0	0.0	0	-	-	-	-	
1959	GB	N	12	2	20	10.0	0	1	3	0.0	0	-	-	-	-	
1960	GB	N	12	3	22	7.3	0	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
1961	GB	N	13	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
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14 yrs				165	79	1282	16.2	4	258	2209	8.6	5	46	1215	26.4	1

1948-58 NYG; 1959-61 GB