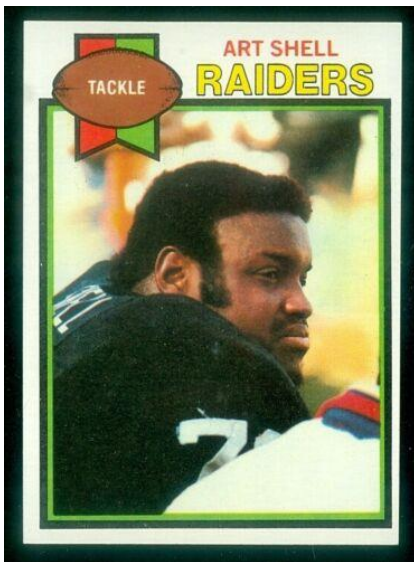


Art Shell

This article was written by Rich Shmelter

Art Shell was the complete package when looking for an offensive lineman. He was big (6-5, 285 pounds), very strong, smart, quick off the snap, and mastered the art of both run blocking and pass protection. He also possessed a quiet, tranquil demeanor, never acted tough even though he was, and let his performance do the talking for him. All these traits earned him the respect of teammates and opponents alike.



Shell refused to allow an opponent to get him mad. Some tried to break his concentration, but all they got out of him was a smile. However, once the ball was snapped, he destroyed any defender in front of him, allowing running backs and quarterbacks to do their jobs efficiently. Off the field, Shell continued to work hard through film study to not only make sure of his assignments, but those of all his teammates as well, thus becoming a true student of the game.

The Raiders made Shell their third-round draft pick out of Maryland State in 1968, and after playing with distinction on special teams for his first two seasons, won a starting job at left tackle in 1970 alongside guard Gene Upshaw. Once Shell and Upshaw were teamed up, they became the greatest pair of offensive linemen in the history of pro football. This duo of destruction tore up defensive linemen for eleven seasons together, and helped Oakland's offense roll to seven division titles, seven AFC Championship Game appearances, and two Super Bowl titles in 1976 and 1980.



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It was during Oakland's first Super Bowl victory that Shell and Upshaw showed their total dominance on the game's ultimate stage. On January 9, 1977, in Super Bowl XI, this duo totally dominated the war in the trenches, allowing Oakland's running attack to gain 266 yards, and prevented quarterback Ken Stabler from getting hassled all day. They controlled the Minnesota Vikings' great All-Pro tandem of Alan Page and Jim Marshall like they did not even exist. They truly performed the most perfect blocking performance in Super Bowl history, and it showed in the final result, with that being an easy 32-14 win.

Shell was bestowed with many honors throughout his illustrious pro career. He earned eight trips to the Pro Bowl (1972-78, 1980), six All-AFC selections (1973-78), and three All-Pro nods (1973, 1974, 1977). Also coming Shell's way were selection to the 1970's All-Decade Team, the NFL's All-Monday Night Football Team, and he was voted the Raiders' Lineman of the Year Award in 1976.

The incredible offensive tackle played in 207 regular season games with the Raiders and 23 playoff contests. He had a 156 consecutive game streak snapped in a 1979 pre-season game that caused him to miss the first five games of the regular season.

Oakland's great head coach and Hall of Fame member John Madden once claimed that Art Shell would be a head coach in the NFL someday. He made that observation in 1984, and five years later, Madden's prophecy came true. He was a good judge of talent during his successful tenure as Oakland's all-time leader in wins. He saw in Shell the characteristics needed to take on the challenging occupation of mentoring fifty different personalities, facing a harsh media, and every other obstacle that the coaching profession was capable of throwing at the special individuals who choose it. Art Shell, at least, did not enter the profession with rose-colored glasses. He knew the trials and tribulations that professional football created for many years, prior to his elevation as the ninth head coach in Raider history.

With his playing days nearing the end, Shell discussed his coaching ambitions with Al Davis. Shell was the complete package regarding knowledge of Raider football, a tremendous demeanor, and respect at being one of the game's best. Davis held the all-pro lineman in his highest regards, and let it be known to Shell that when the time came for him to retire and seek a coaching job, that he would help in the transition.

It is well known that Al Davis' loyalty to his former players runs deep. When Shell retired following the 1982 season, Davis made sure he found a place for him on Tom Flores' coaching staff. Beginning in 1983, Shell entered the coaching profession as the Raiders' offensive line coach. His first season as a coach ended the way anyone in the profession wishes it could. The '83 Raiders ran away from their post-season competition



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and completed their quest by mauling the Washington Redskins in Super Bowl XVIII to rein as world champions and place a third Super Bowl ring on Shell's finger.

The year 1989 was by far, the culmination of Shell's professional life. It started out in January with his selection into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Two months after his Hall of Fame enshrinement on August 5, 1989, he received a late-night call from Al Davis informing him that a coaching change was imminent. Davis was ready to terminate Mike Shanahan and wanted Shell to take over as head coach of the Los Angeles Raiders.

On October 3, 1989, Art Shell officially became the ninth head coach in Raider history. The appointment was the fulfillment of his coaching aspirations, and it also allowed Shell to become the first African American head coach of the modern era. Fellow Hall of Famer, Fritz Pollard, was the first in the NFL's formative years of the early 1920's.

The color of Shell's skin never made a difference to Al Davis and should not have. The only colors that mattered with his hiring were silver and black. In that regard, Shell was more than qualified, and was a Raider through and through. Like John Madden and Tom Flores before him, Shell understood the philosophy and mystique of the Raiders. His hiring also helped to restore the Raiders of old, which were lost under Mike Shanahan's suit and tie approach.

Shell inherited a 1-3 team upon his hiring and turned things around right from the very beginning of his appointment. Upon his introduction as head coach, Shell stated that the Raiders were about winning, and he looked to place players in positions that he felt would give the team its best chances at achieving and continuing the proud tradition that was Raider football. He not only talked the talk, but backed it up as well, right out of the gate.

In his first game as head coach on October 9, 1989, Shell's Raiders defeated the New York Jets, 14-7, in front of a sold-out Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum crowd on a Monday Night Football telecast. From that point on, the Raiders finished the season at 7-5 under Shell, which included a 6-0 mark at home, and just missed out on a playoff spot by one game.

In his first full season at the helm, Shell guided the 1990 Raiders to a 12-4 record, an AFC Western Division title, and came within one game of reaching the Super Bowl. For his yeoman's effort in turning around the team's fortunes, Shell was selected as the 1990 NFL Coach of the Year.

Shell had the Raiders back in the playoff in 1991, and after slipping to 7-9 in 1992, he once again had the Silver and Black back on track. In 1993, the football experts did not



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give the Raiders much of a chance to be successful. However, Shell's team proved them all wrong by posting a 10-6 record and won their first playoff game. That season also saw the Raiders become the first team to reach the 300-win plateau in the years from 1960 to 1993.

In 1994, the Raiders once again had a winning record at 9-7, but failed to make the playoffs, and did not reach the expectations that Al Davis felt they should have. In what Davis later claimed to be one of the hardest things he had to do throughout his career, and one he would regret, he terminated Shell on February 2, 1995.

After 27 years as a Raider, Art Shell was out of the loop. However, a man with his vast knowledge was not going to sit on the shelf for long, and in no time, was hired by the Kansas City Chiefs as their defensive line coach. After two seasons, he went to the Atlanta Falcons, and was on their staff when the team won the 1998 NFC championship. It was then on to corporate headquarters, where Shell became senior vice president for the NFL in charge of football operations and development. His silver and black roots run deep, and within a few years, the opportunity to return to the scene of his glorious past presented itself once again in 2006.

The old adage of "what was once old is new again" definitely applied to the Oakland Raiders on February 10, 2006 when Al Davis announced to the football world that Art Shell was back at the helm of the Silver and Black after a search that saw Davis interview seven other candidates.

While working as senior vice president for the NFL, Shell received a phone call from Al Davis informing him that he wanted the former Raider to interview for the vacant head coaching position. Shell was intrigued and got on a plane in Tampa and flew into Oakland immediately. A lengthy meeting the following day with Davis produced Oakland's new head coach. For it was Art Shell, who was once again back in the Raider fold after an 11-year absence.

This time around, Shell started in a hole. Due to a month lapsing between coaches, Shell had to scurry about trying to assemble a staff before the scouting combine was set to begin 12 days after his appointment. However, that was the least of his problems. Looking back on his second stint as the Raiders' head coach, Shell might have wondered why he ever came back.

Within one month after his hiring, he got into a very intense disagreement with receiver Jerry Porter, and the repercussions festered throughout the season. Shell even suspended him for "conduct detrimental to the team". After the two-game suspension, Porter found himself sitting the bench. Randy Moss, never one to back away from a good conflict,



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also began attacking the coach. In a sullen mood throughout the year, Moss whined on a regular basis about how Shell conducted practice sessions, and the way he treated veteran players.

Shell decided to hire Tom Walsh as his offensive coordinator. They were long-time associates with the Raiders, going back to 1982. Walsh was there in Shell's final season as a player, and all through his coaching days in Los Angeles. Out of pro football since 1995, Walsh was operating a bed-and-breakfast in Idaho before coming back to assist his friend once again. This was another area in which Shell got lambasted. It seemed that time had passed Walsh by, and his game plan was not working at all. Shell was forced to demote Walsh to tight ends coach after 11 games.

The actual 2006 season was a total abomination. The Raiders finished at 2-14, which gave them the most single-season losses in franchise history. They scored a league-low 168 points, only had 12 offensive touchdowns, and gave up the most sacks in the league with 72. Al Davis claimed at the end of the season that it was a tough year for the Raiders. Also, the Art Shell experiment did not work out, and eleven months after being re-hired, the long-time Raider was once again relieved of his duties on January 4, 2007. It was a sad way to end an incredible career, but the legacy that Art Shell created over 28 seasons with the Raiders will never be tarnished. He was, and always will remain, one of the greatest legends to ever don the Silver & Black.